

# Transitioning out of Foster Care With Dignity: Lived Experts' Recommendations to Strengthen Housing Support Systems

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## Introduction

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The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's Foster Youth Initiative (Initiative) aims to promote the well-being and future success of young people who have experienced foster care in Atlanta, Los Angeles (LA), New York City (NYC), and nationally.<sup>1</sup> As part of the Initiative, Child Trends—the Initiative's evaluation partner—convenes an Evaluation Advisory Board (Board) comprised of young people with lived experience in foster care from Atlanta, LA, and NYC to play an important role in interpreting findings and developing recommendations for the Initiative.

When the Evaluation Advisory Board convened in 2023, we discussed key issues such as education, housing, child welfare, and mental health. When we were asked about topics of interest for future meetings, our passionate dialogue revealed housing to be our central concern and interest for 2023-2024—especially the significant challenges to meeting housing needs. In this brief, we share our interpretation of housing barriers identified in Child Trends' evaluation activities and propose recommendations to address these challenges. Each section shares members' individual voices and reflections on the challenges and opportunities uncovered through Child Trends' evaluation. Some Board members also chose to share their personal experiences, presented in the call-out boxes. The brief concludes with members' recommendations for the Initiative and its partners to ensure all youth with foster care experience have access to safe and stable housing.

## About the Evaluation Advisory Board

The Evaluation Advisory Board is facilitated by interns who also have lived experience in foster care: Alexis Bell and Eyhdi Osorio. Daniel Bisuano, Alejandra Guerrero, Jamie Kelley, Nilsa Morales, and Tonia Ramsey all contributed their perspectives and insight as members of the Board.

Members remain on the advisory board for a minimum of one year, attending at least four meetings focusing on building community with one another, being introduced to research, interpreting qualitative and quantitative data, and preparing to write this brief. The members bring their unique perspectives to the Board shaped by their personal experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the Initiative, please see <https://www.hiltonfoundation.org/programs/foster-youth>

As the Initiative’s evaluation partner, Child Trends assesses progress toward the Initiative’s goals and disseminates learnings to inform the work of the Initiative and its partners.<sup>2</sup> Alyssa Liehr and Amy McKlindon provided Child Trends staff support throughout the development of this brief.



## Barriers to Accessing Housing

In its evaluation, Child Trends identified several barriers to safe and stable housing for youth with lived experience in foster care. Barriers included eligibility requirements and program rules that make it difficult to access or maintain housing, high cost of living, and challenges navigating housing vouchers. In this section, we interpret these findings by drawing from our lived expertise.

### Restrictive housing requirements

By examining qualitative data and hearing the voices of those with lived experience, we have seen a huge disconnect between young people with lived experience in foster care and access to the resources they need, including housing. Some eligibility requirements can create barriers to obtaining housing, including requirements related to education, work, age, and/or mental health evaluations. For example, Independent Living Placements (ILPs) in Georgia have requirements around education and employment, unless a young person has a verified medical condition.

Once young people obtain housing, some housing programs limit their autonomy due to requirements around visitors and lack of privacy. Many young people have had to choose between employment opportunities and having a place to live due to income restrictions, preventing them from creating long-term changes in their lives. We, as young people with lived experience, have faced countless barriers as well as struggles within our lives. While experiencing the trauma inflicted by a system designed to help us,

“Restrictive barriers to getting adequate help and resources was a constant battle in my life. Being impacted by both the foster and juvenile justice system meant I did not qualify for a lot of the resources including age requirements and many other barriers. I found myself struggling for years to find stable living in and out of college and trying to navigate this world. No job skills and a lack of education made it difficult for me to take one step in front of the other. If the resources had less restrictions, it would allow people to navigate life with more ease as well as be able to help and serve countless more people. Why do we need so many rules and requirements to help people?”

<sup>2</sup> For more information on Child Trends’ 2023 evaluation, please see <https://doi.org/10.56417/4147w1801f>

we were also thrown into a world with a lack of resources or guidance, and even a lack of community for many, all vital things to keep us moving forward in life and to hopefully one day thrive. A one-size-fits-all approach no longer works and is creating more harm than good.

## High cost of living and lack of affordable housing

Foster youth and former foster youth face daunting challenges as they navigate the transition to independence, with some of the most significant hurdles being the cost of living and the lack of affordable housing options. In LA, the recent increase in Supervised Independent Living Program (SILP) payments<sup>3</sup> demonstrates a recognition of the heightened cost of housing for youth. Additionally, advocacy efforts led by grantees like John Burton Advocates for Youth have resulted in a significant budget increase to the Transitional Housing Program (THP).<sup>4</sup> NYC has also seen efforts to tackle housing insecurity among transitioning youth, with an increase in housing subsidies from \$300 to \$725 per month.<sup>5</sup>

“Securing stable housing and meaningful employment without pursuing grad school has been both challenging and empowering. Despite the rising cost of living, community-based organizations have been instrumental in providing crucial support, enabling me to transition from care into a life of stability and career growth. This journey has not only strengthened my resilience but also underscored the importance of community and mentorship in achieving personal and professional success.”

Despite these advancements in LA and NYC, challenges persist. The general lack of affordable housing, inadequate options for expectant/parenting youth and those with special needs, inflation, and poor coordination between county agencies continue to burden youth. Child Trends’ qualitative data collection underscores the difficulty in finding safe, affordable housing units in communities where young people want to live and have access to school, jobs, and transportation. Finally, while the housing crisis in Atlanta may be less visible compared to LA and NYC, it remains a significant concern for foster youth and former foster youth. While progress has been made in increasing housing support and advocacy efforts, systemic barriers and policy gaps persist, exacerbating housing insecurity for vulnerable youth.

<sup>3</sup> John Burton Advocates for Youth. (2023). 2022-23 State Budget: Higher Monthly Payments for Foster Youth in the Supervised Independent Living Program (SILP). <https://jbay.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/2023-Implementation-Fact-Sheet-SILP-Housing-Supplement.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> John Burton Advocates for Youth. (2022). 2022-23 State Budget: Expansion of Transitional Housing for Former Foster Youth. <https://jbay.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/2022-Implementation-Fact-Sheet-THP-Expansion.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> New York State Office of Children and Family Services. (2024). Administrative Directive: Preventive Housing Subsidy. 20-OCFS-ADM-16-R1. [https://ocfs.ny.gov/main/policies/external/ocfs\\_2020/ADM/20-OCFS-ADM-16-R1.pdf](https://ocfs.ny.gov/main/policies/external/ocfs_2020/ADM/20-OCFS-ADM-16-R1.pdf)

## Challenges navigating vouchers

Housing vouchers are one form of housing support available to former foster youth; however, numerous barriers obstruct young people’s ability to maneuver the housing market adequately. For example, a prominent challenge lies in landlords’ resistance to rent to youth with no rental history and low/no income (which can also be a challenge for youth obtaining housing without a voucher). Voucher holders may also face discrimination. Many safe and affordable housing options do not use or accept vouchers, and the places that do are far away from public transit, especially in places like LA and Atlanta that are car dependent.

Moreover, bureaucratic challenges (such as varying requirements across different voucher types) pose hurdles for housing specialists to stay current on requirements and help young recipients. Voucher application processing times can stretch up to a year with little communication about timelines, which may exclude some youth in need, along with stringent eligibility criteria. Overall, while vouchers offer an important potential pathway to housing, these systemic issues—as well as others like understaffing of public agencies and a general lack of available housing—can hinder their effectiveness.

“When I was first leaving college, months before graduation, I was denied for several apartments because I didn’t have a guarantor and I lacked the money or credit to apply to places alone. The only way I was able to secure my first apartment was through a one-time COVID-19 relief lump sum that was shown as proof of funds for the apartment that eventually allowed me in after I fronted the first and last month’s rent and had a large deposit.”

## Evaluation Advisory Board Recommendations

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As the Evaluation Advisory Board interpreted the data gathered by Child Trends, we identified two recommendations for the Initiative as it aims to address these challenges and increase access to safe and stable housing: (1) Support research and advocacy efforts around universal basic income for transition-age foster youth, and (2) invest in efforts to remove barriers to housing resources for youth who have achieved permanency.

### **1. Support research and advocacy efforts around universal basic income for youth with foster care experience.**

Foster youth and former foster youth are often subjected to barriers that prevent them from using resources in ways that would most benefit them in the moment. Life is not predictable, and many youth would be at a loss for how to handle emergencies such as a car repair. According to the U.S. Federal Reserve, adults were asked in 2022 whether they could pay a \$400 expense: 37 percent said they would not be able to pay it or

would need to borrow or sell something to cover the expense.<sup>6</sup> This study was done on the general population, and it does not factor in the unique issues associated with having been in foster care and transitioning into adulthood. The needs of transition-age foster youth are nuanced and multifaceted. When we think about what youth really need, they may not need direct housing resources like a voucher, but they may have competing costs such as expensive medical bills that could eventually lead to losing their current housing. While current housing resources, such as vouchers, can help in very specific situations, they leave youth with foster care experience boxed into very vulnerable situations where they have few options to work with. Current and former foster youth are often unable to use the aid to the fullest extent because of restrictions like those outlined above.

Universal basic income can be used to knock down these barriers and give autonomy to transitioning youth. In recent years, many pilots have been started all over the country, including with the Initiative's support. Funds administered each month on a loadable bank card that can be used at youth's discretion can help youth remain stable and on the path of independence without having to leave school, quit work, or lose housing. This would foster autonomy for youth and help them become more independent by fostering an environment of stability and security. UBI would ultimately get around the restrictive requirements of housing programs and the challenges youth have in using vouchers in everyday life.

## **2. Invest in efforts to remove barriers to housing resources for youth who have achieved permanency.**

Removing barriers to housing supports for youth who have exited foster care is an important step in improving housing for former foster youth. One of the biggest issues with our current system is that we assume that, once youth achieve permanency, they are able to continue to navigate the world independently.

However, many youth who return to the care of their parents or families or are adopted face housing challenges and may not be aware of or eligible for available resources. While the child welfare system assumes that youth are fully supported and stable in their new family structures, this is not always the case. Child welfare agencies often do not account for reoccurrence of maltreatment when it comes to addressing housing for young people. On the other hand, adopted youth may have other needs after being adopted that are also not accounted for. Besides the possibility of ending up back in a situation that would require more support, they are experiencing similarly challenging and complex situations as those who are actively in the foster care system. For example, in addition

“Youth with families dealing with mental health or substance abuse issues have a high likelihood of falling back into the same situation. Speaking from firsthand experience on this issue, being unable to access certain resources as result of my case closing and not knowing about many of the things out there made me question the way we continue to support youth in precarious situations.”

<sup>6</sup> Consumer and Community Research Section of the Federal Reserve Board's Division of Consumer and Community Affairs. (2023). Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2022. Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. <https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/2023-economic-well-being-of-us-households-in-2022-expenses.htm>

to housing needs, youth who come from impoverished families may still need assistance seeking resources to pay for school. Making resources available to youth who have spent time in foster care, regardless of whether they have aged out or not, can lead to better outcomes among foster youth as a whole.

To learn more about housing resources for youth with foster care experience in Atlanta, Los Angeles, and New York City, please see the following resources from the local child welfare agencies:

**Atlanta:** <https://www.garyse-ilp.org/programs/housing-support>

**Los Angeles:** <https://dcfs.lacounty.gov/youth/teens-16/#Housing>

**New York City:** <https://www.nyc.gov/site/acs/child-welfare/housing-support.page>

### **Suggested Citation**

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