

A Roadmap to Career Services That Meet Foster Youth Where They Are: One Size Doesn't Fit All

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Introduction¹

The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's [Foster Youth Initiative](#) (the Initiative) aims to promote the well-being and future success of young people who have experienced foster care in Atlanta, Los Angeles, New York City, and nationally. 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. As part of this evaluation, Child Trends convenes an Evaluation Advisory Board (the Board) composed of young people with lived experience in foster care from Atlanta, Los Angeles, and New York City. The Board plays a critical role in interpreting evaluation findings and developing recommendations grounded in lived experience.

The 2025 Board members include Daniel Bisuano, Cheyanne Deopersaud, Abby Rubtsova Henderson, Reginald Holloway, Nilsa Morales, and Tonia Ramsey. The Board is supported by a Child Trends intern, Ogechi Ukaeje, who also has lived experience in foster care.² Board members commit to at least one year of participation and attend a minimum of four meetings focused on building community, introducing the research process, interpreting qualitative and quantitative data, and preparing to write briefs. Critically, Board members bring unique perspectives shaped by their personal experiences, strengthening the relevance and usefulness of the evaluation's findings and recommendations.

About this brief

As members of the 2025 Evaluation Advisory Board, we chose to focus on career development and employment because these issues consistently shape the opportunities, stability, and long-term success of young people with foster care experience. We reviewed findings from Child Trends' evaluation activities and reflected on the barriers youth face when trying to explore career interests, access job opportunities, and/or secure sustainable employment.

In this brief, we interpret those findings through our own perspectives and lived expertise. Each section highlights the challenges we discussed as a Board, as well as the insights that guided our recommendations for how the Initiative and its partners can better help youth build meaningful, long-term careers. We also include creative elements (a poem and video) to illustrate the themes that emerged in our conversations. Together, our goal is to elevate

¹ This section is largely verbatim from the introductory sections of the brief authored by a previous Evaluation Advisory Board: <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/transitioning-foster-care-lived-experts-recommendations>

² Amy McKlindon, Alyssa Liehr, and Karlee Naylon provided Child Trends staff support throughout the development of this brief.

youth voice and encourage systems to create pathways that allow young people with foster care experience to thrive in the workforce.

Barriers to Career Development

Child Trends' evaluation activities and our Advisory Board discussions highlighted several challenges that young people with foster care experience face when pursuing meaningful career paths. In this section, we interpret those findings through our own lived perspectives and summarize three key barriers that shape access to employment for young people with foster care experience: (1) limited career services and supports to explore interests; (2) scarcity of job opportunities and reliable information, along with logistical challenges that make work difficult to obtain or sustain; and (3) financial insecurity that arises when available jobs do not provide a livable wage. Together, these barriers reflect systemic obstacles that youth with foster care experience must navigate as they work to build stable and fulfilling careers.

Limited career services and support are available for foster youth to explore their career interests, especially outside of child welfare.

Foster youth often enter early adulthood without the foundational preparation needed to explore their interests and identify meaningful career paths. When survival and the need to navigate instability take priority, it becomes difficult to form a sense of identity or envision long-term goals, and many young people with foster care experience move through school without exposure to information on how to navigate education and employment. Limited access to mentors, inconsistent staff support, and a lack of guidance on professional norms such as networking, follow-up etiquette, or understanding different career fields can prevent youth from building confidence in their abilities.

In addition, meaningful skill-building opportunities are often out of reach. Many career fields require technical or hard skills such as data software, digital tools, or industry-specific systems, yet youth with foster care experience rarely have access to programs that teach and reinforce these skills over time. While lived experience in foster care is often valued in child welfare-related careers, not all youth want to pursue those pathways. For youth who are interested in child welfare-related careers, most available opportunities are direct service positions, rather than policy and research positions that may be of interest to youth.

This lack of meaningful preparation shows up clearly in outcomes. National research shows that nearly one in three youth who age out of care are unemployed by their mid-20s.¹ It is easy for outsiders to assume this indicates a lack of motivation, but the deeper problem is structural. Many young people never receive training or exposure to real career pathways. They are rarely connected to professional networks, long-term skill building, or opportunities in fields like technology, policy, sales, office administration, writing, or research. Instead, they are pushed toward survival jobs without access to the foundational experiences that their peers often get from family support, mentors, or early internships. The result is a system where information is scattered, often gatekept, and dependent on whether a caseworker or another young person happens to hear about an opportunity. Youth end up missing chances, becoming underemployed, or taking whatever job is easiest to access, rather than one aligned with their skills, goals, or aspirations.

Youth with foster care experience face a scarcity of job opportunities and information, particularly for long-term careers, combined with logistical and other challenges.

Finding stable, long-term job opportunities is challenging for many young people transitioning out of foster care because information about available roles, required qualifications, and reliable pathways into careers is often scattered or difficult to access. Even when youth are motivated to work, youth-serving systems rarely provide a clear, trustworthy place to explore opportunities that align with their interests or long-term goals. Instead, many youth rely on word of mouth, inconsistent guidance from caseworkers, or chance encounters that limit their ability to plan effectively. While child welfare agencies sometimes attempt to fill the gap with short-term “internships,” these opportunities often connect youth to positions at retail stores or grocery chains. While some of these roles can be helpful, many young people report feeling boxed into low-wage, low-growth work that does not match their interests or potential. Instead of launching youth into stable careers, these short-term job placements leave them feeling overlooked and underprepared when they begin searching for opportunities beyond what the system has exposed them to.

This lack of opportunity is compounded by the fact that early adulthood is a uniquely overwhelming period during which mental health, school demands, and financial pressures collide. Logistical barriers such as limited transportation, lack of internet or devices, and conflicting work and school schedules further restrict the types of opportunities youth can pursue or maintain. These barriers can be especially pronounced for youth in foster care. For example, a young person may be placed far away from job opportunities and may not have access to transportation for job interviews or to commute to/from work. Board members shared that this challenge is especially prevalent in Atlanta and Los Angeles.

Available jobs do not financially sustain youth with foster care experience.

The Board consistently stressed that most jobs available to youth with foster care experience do not provide a livable wage, leaving foster youth stuck in a cycle of financial instability even when employed full-time. While this barrier affects all young people, it is especially pronounced for young people with foster care experience who are navigating early adulthood independently without family support. Because many postings withhold salary information, youth often discover too late that opportunities do not cover basic costs of living, especially for those paying for their own housing, food, and transportation. Unpaid internships, although positioned as valuable experience, can feel exploitative and unrealistic for youth who cannot forgo income. Economic pressures are intensified for students balancing work with school, since earning slightly more can jeopardize essential income-based benefits.

Board members shared that many young people are forced to accept jobs outside their interests simply to survive, delaying progress toward long-term career goals. Ultimately, low wages and hidden costs of participation create structural barriers that undermine career mobility and the ability to build financial security.

Recommendations

The recommendations in this section are based on the data Child Trends gathered throughout its evaluation of the Foster Youth Initiative, and on our reflections and insights. Together, these sources highlight several opportunities to strengthen how young people with foster care experience are supported in preparing for, accessing, and sustaining meaningful employment. We identified three areas where philanthropic investment could improve career development outcomes for youth with foster care experience:

1. Funding career development services and supports that focus on building relationships and mentorship
2. Funding organizations to build youth skills in their areas of interest
3. Leveraging the Foundation’s relationships and connections to create a portal with job opportunities

“If Opportunity Had a Key”
by Ogechi Ukaeje

I grew up learning to survive,
not learning where I could go.
People asked what I wanted to be,
but no one showed me the doors.
So I carved paths out of questions,
out of mentors who left too soon,
out of dreams bigger than the jobs I
was offered.
We don’t lack ambition
we lack access.
Give us opportunity,
and we’ll show you what potential
looks like
when it finally has room to breathe.

We developed these recommendations in our meetings; they were further refined by individual members who interpreted these needs through their own experiences and wrote about them in their own voices.

Fund career services and supports that focus on relationships and mentorship first, building confidence for youth with foster care experience before providing more individualized career supports.

Why it matters

System-impacted youth have unlimited and unmatched potential. However, they often lack the proper resources and support to realize it. The most integral resource for foster youth to achieve the success they deserve is having a strong support system. Recently, child welfare organizations have made efforts to develop college and career readiness programs. However, many of these programs focus on long-term goals and quantitative metrics of success (e.g., graduating college, finding a job), rather than beginning where the young person is. When the primary emphasis is on meeting those hard-set goals, it signals to staff that youth must follow a step-by-step plan toward success, ticking boxes along their way. However, this approach does not account for the nontraditional upbringings of youth with experience in foster care. Instead, success should be redefined in the unique context of the

youth's experiences and needs, and programs should focus on formulating smaller, qualitative measures of success over time.

When transitioning from the foster care system to education or the workforce, youth often do not have the knowledge—and more importantly, the confidence—that other youth have during this life transition. System-impacted young people have often needed to focus their youth on survival and accommodating their needs and interests to whatever situation they happened to be in at that stage of their lives. With constant changes in homes and schools, and turnover among professionals in their lives, it is difficult for youth to know who they are, what they are interested in, and what their goals for the future are. With no consistent supportive adult figure, there is too often no one who knows the youth well enough to advocate for their needs or interests, or to instill a sense of confidence and stability that is necessary to developing their aspirations.

On top of that, many youth are discouraged from pursuing any kind of future, due to the stereotypes forced upon them, inevitable system failures, and lack of opportunity. Youth face blatant social stigma and “the labeling hype,”ⁱⁱ whereby foster youth are perceived through a label—i.e., difficult, stupid, useless, etc. The label creates a self-fulfilling prophecy where youth will be treated as that label despite their actual behavior. Systems have long been set up on foster youth failure, with system actors forced to operate within these systems. These underlying systemic barriers permeate into young people's personal relationships with teachers, families, and professionals and reinforce to foster youth that they can only operate within this framework.

With this in mind, it would be much more beneficial for college and career readiness services to focus on meeting foster youth where they are—understanding that there is no one-size-fits-all model, and instead focusing on building confidence throughout the beginning of their relationship before turning to employment-related goals.

Role of the Foundation

Philanthropic partners, including the Hilton Foundation, should research which college and career readiness programs are most effective at developing relationships between systems-impacted youth and staff and improving youth outcomes. Ideally, the program itself would gather youth feedback on what is helpful and what additional supports youth wish they had—before, during, and after accessing college and career resources. Data should be collected to understand the relationships that youth have with staff to understand what made youth more comfortable opening up and receiving supports from these programs. These data should be combined with other programmatic data and analyzed by a youth advisory board composed of youth in different stages of care. Once the Foundation has a clear understanding of what works best for youth and what areas need more support, they can allocate the proper funding to current and new grantees to support youth, build on existing supports, and share information more broadly with partners on what works.

What this should look like

As the Foundation explores programs to support, we recommend prioritizing organizations that hire staff with specific characteristics, focus on relationship-building, and provide individualized career counseling.

Staff characteristics. Staff characteristics that support authentic engagement with youth include vulnerability, charisma, interpersonal communication, problem-solving, innovation, cultural humility, patience, open-mindedness, lived experience in foster care, commitment to serving youth, and the continuous pursuit of knowledge to hone and refine their skills.

Early relationship-building. Career development programs, from the first session, should begin by meeting youth where they are, focusing on understanding who they are and building relationships. Some youth are more open, some more reserved. By focusing on having engaging conversation, determining which topics feel more comfortable, and determining which methods of connection are more seamless, program staff can begin building relationships with youth. It is important to have an open, fluid mindset when working with youth. There is no one-size-fits-all model, so every approach must be youth-centered. The first session must focus on building up a relationship, where the youth feels safe to express themselves and feels that the staff member is someone capable of being trusted. Once staff have established this foundation, it makes the transition from getting to know young people to providing them resources a lot more seamless. Instead of asking youth about their goals and being met with a blank stare or a triggered state, the staff member can work in tandem with the young person—already knowing them—and develop individualized support catered to their interests and experiences.

Career counseling. Once program staff have established a supportive relationship with each young person, the program can then begin incorporating more content related specifically to career counseling. Building youths' confidence and competence helps ensure their success. Once staff know more specifically what the youth wants to pursue (at least in this moment), they can start strategizing. After providing youth with basics such as resume editing and formatting, cold emails, elevator pitches, etc., staff can then move onto skills youth won't find in other programs—for example, strategic storytelling and strengths-based approaches that leverage their experiences, skills, and attributes for future education and employment. Staff should be transparent about the difficulties of navigating the job market despite youths' effort and qualifications, but assure youth that the designated staff will be there with them throughout the process. Each youth and each pathway will look extremely different, but it is the staff's role to not only bring them up to speed but to provide them with the skills and confidence to continue defining and achieving success independently. The staff should spend some of their time researching each young person's desired pathway to find out "hidden" opportunities and strategies that others in that field might have already discovered.

Overall, if staff are open, honest, and genuine in their pursuit of connecting with and supporting a youth, it will become obvious and reciprocated. A youth's hardened edges and perceived toughness are a means of protecting themselves. Their success starts with one healthy connection, where they feel empowered and confident in themselves, where they can start to grow and shine.

Advice to Career Development Staff

A key part of success in working with a youth is not seeing them as a puzzle to be solved, but rather as a friend or peer who you care to support. This is important especially in the beginning phases, because while you are trying to understand what methods of connection work, you do not want the relationship to become impersonal, as this could make the youth feel like an experiment. Each youth will be different in the way you connect with them, and even that might change over time.

In these initial conversations, you can ask questions about the youth's interests and hobbies. They might say they do not have any. However, depending on how this youth reciprocates energy, you could ask questions about what a typical day looks like for them, who they like spending time with, what things they wish they could do, or what things they liked to do when they were younger. Build on these conversations and show them that the things they do are interesting and can be invested in. A youth might only *think* they do not have hobbies because they do not think what they are interested in is worthwhile. They or someone else in their life may have deemed it a waste of time. Build rapport, be curious about what the young person is interested in, and reinforce their interests by letting them know—however softly or blatantly—that their interests are cool, interesting, and worthwhile things. It is key in these moments to cast your biases aside and engage authentically with whatever the youth is putting forward.

Throughout the relationship, keep in mind that the relationship comes first and the workforce counseling comes second. If the youth wants to chat about other things for the majority of the session, you should provide that space for them and then politely shift focus at the end to check-in.

Fund organizations to build youth skills in their areas of interest, with an emphasis on providing foster youth with skill-building and career opportunities outside of the child welfare system.

Why it matters

As a systems-impacted individual, it is often challenging to build skills that will get you out of minimum wage jobs. School, volunteering, being an apprentice, and really all the other things that can help you develop skills to build a better future are often out of reach when systems-impacted individuals are focused on survival. The system was our parents, and at 18 (or in some cases 21), foster youth are cut from the system and thrown into the world to fend for themselves. Parents for the most part would not do that in this era with rising cost and pay gaps. Programs that teach youth skills that allow them to build their own business or qualify for higher-paying jobs are the best way to fight those pay gaps and rising costs by giving

young people a chance to actually think about a future instead of trying to survive. Skill-building programs support young people through:

- Building skills that can help them land long-term careers
- Developing healthy communication skills
- Supporting long term income and sustainability
- Providing professional development
- Allowing them to invest in their passions and dreams, helping with longevity and good emotional health

Role of the Foundation

Philanthropy, including the Hilton Foundation, should identify and fund more opportunities that do not take a one-size-fits-all approach to skill-building and career development, focusing on funding opportunities that can help turn systems-impacted individuals' passions into income and allow for long-term growth and sustainability. Workshops and training opportunities should be geared toward each individual, depending on their needs and wants. Youth should be able to access funding for skill-building programs through streamlined and less labor-intensive application processes. In addition to funding organizations, the Foundation could also fund small grants to allow youth to pursue career-advancing skills (e.g., coding [Python or R], policy writing, research methods, graphic design, project management, marketing, or data analysis). This funding would give youth the opportunity to invest in themselves and build skills that match high-quality industries.

What this should look like

The Foundation should think outside the box and focus on funding more nontraditional routes (e.g., audio engineering, photography, acting, social media and content creation, hairstylist/barber, YouTuber, streamer, gamer, and public speaker), including routes that are outside of the child welfare system. For example, more access to art therapy; partnerships with local nonprofits; and access to paid training that fits young people's specific career paths (such as construction, auto mechanics, audio engineering, etc.) can set youth up for success in the real world. These opportunities should empower youth to be themselves and embrace their unique passions and skillsets, not narrow their routes by providing funding that makes them feel as though they have to choose specific programs or fellowships based on access versus want. For example, if people who are just getting out of the system need

***Diverted* Film Highlights Youth-Serving Programs within Los Angeles County**

Daniel Bisuano

Most of my life, things have been give and take—give of myself and take what they have. Over the many years of advocacy work that I have done, I have seen programs pop up that empower the community in various ways. From arts to practical skills, the list is never ending on what kind of programs can be funded to help empower and educate the community.

I co-produced and participated in a film that highlights community-based programs, including arts programs, that can help youth explore their interests and build their skills: [*Diverted*](#) (Represent Justice, 2025).

life skills training (like opening a bank account) or personal care training (such as a shaving workshop), those opportunities can be very helpful for meeting individual needs. Someone creative might want to do a workshop on audio engineering or film production. Ultimately, each workshop or skill-building opportunity should be geared toward the individual and their needs. We often do not have access to things like this, and it makes it hard for us to excel in life and build a better life for ourselves.

Access for our communities is often a huge barrier. Surviving paycheck to paycheck and working hard to just live—it is often hard to find means outside of survival. Provide access to the tools necessary to make this journey successful for most. Access to transportation, internet, computers, and even a phone are necessary to be successful in this day and age. Providing funding for things like this will help bridge the gap and make access to these programs and fellowships way easier.

Leverage the Foundation’s relationships and connections to create a portal with job opportunities for youth with foster care experience.

Why it matters

Transition-age youth consistently report that finding the right job is overwhelming. As described above, they face challenges such as:

- Limited transportation options
- Inconsistent internet or personal devices
- Anxiety and stress in early adulthood
- Few opportunities aligned with their goals
- Difficulty breaking into fields without prior experience
- Caseworkers who may not know what opportunities exist

A centralized job portal would help address these significant barriers by putting trustworthy information in one accessible place. It would give youth access to opportunities often hidden behind networks they do not have. And, it reinforces to the field that youth leaving foster care deserve pathways that reflect their talents and long-term aspirations.

Role of the Foundation

The Hilton Foundation is uniquely positioned to support the creation of a portal by leveraging its deep relationships with employers, philanthropic partners, funders, public agencies, educational institutions, and workforce initiatives. The Foundation could fund or partner with an experienced organization with strong tech and youth-engagement capacity to create and maintain a centralized, continuously updated job portal specifically designed for transition-age foster youth. Alternatively, the Foundation could fund an organization to

build on an existing career portal to enhance its functionality and focus on youth with foster care experience.

Conducting this work in partnership with another organization would keep the work sustainable while still allowing the Foundation to play a catalytic and strategic role. In this context, sustainability refers to both operational capacity and long-term ownership. Maintaining an effective job platform requires continuous, hands-on work, including regularly updating job listings, vetting employer quality, responding to changes in youth needs, and ensuring that the platform remains relevant and accessible over time. These functions are better suited to organizations that work directly with young people day-to-day and already have the infrastructure, staffing, and relationships to curate opportunities in real time. By funding or partnering with an experienced organization to operate the portal, the Foundation can avoid assuming an ongoing operational role that may fall outside its core staffing model, while still ensuring the platform's longevity and effectiveness. The Foundation could also use its relationships to bring employers and training programs into the system.

By doing this, the Foundation would catalyze a sustainable, high-quality resource that grows with youth input and evolves over time. It would help move the field away from survival jobs and toward career opportunities that offer stability, upward mobility, and dignity. It would also signal to agencies, partners, and employers that equitable access to career pathways for foster youth is a priority.

New opportunities continue to emerge that can also benefit from these recommendations. For example, the [Fostering the Future for American Children and Families Executive Order](#) (November 2025) includes a focus on education and employment and requires the federal government to plan for a new online platform for youth with foster care experience to navigate resources. These ideas can be woven into local, state, and federal efforts to better support young people with foster care experience.

What this should look like

To be effective, the portal should be designed around the lived realities and needs of foster youth and include:

- **Curated long-term career opportunities:** Listings should emphasize apprenticeships, internships, multi-year training programs, and roles that lead to advancement—not just short-term or entry-level jobs.
- **Opportunities from the Foundation's existing network:** The Foundation's relationships can unlock opportunities that youth would otherwise never hear about. Employers could directly list openings, apprenticeships, or training programs. The Foundation should also strongly urge its board members and partners to reserve 2-5 percent of jobs in their network solely to youth, depending on the company or organization's capacity.
- **Clear, accessible qualification breakdowns:** Postings should clarify what is required versus preferred and include short explanations so youth understand whether they should still apply.
- **Supportive resources built into the page:** Include simple guides that address common barriers, such as applying without a laptop or consistent wi-fi; transportation

supports (stipends, ride programs, remote-friendly listings); mental health supports related to workplace stress; tips for balancing school, work, and other responsibilities; and information on where to find resume help, clothing, etc. Existing resource guides could be leveraged and/or expanded upon.

- **Local filters to address transportation barriers:** Youth should be able to sort opportunities by proximity to their housing or by remote/hybrid options.
- **Information and tools for caseworkers:** Include a guidance section for caseworkers who often lack information about available opportunities. This could include:
 - **Quick opportunity-matching guides:** Scannable tools that help caseworkers identify appropriate opportunities based on age, education status, eligibility requirements, schedule flexibility, and transportation needs, reducing misalignment and improving placement fit.
 - **Application and onboarding support resources:** Step-by-step guides caseworkers can use to support youth through applying, interviewing, and onboarding, including how to navigate missing documentation, request accommodations, and set clear expectations for the first weeks on the job.
 - **Retention, coordination, and feedback tools:** Checklists and templates to help caseworkers align employment with school schedules, transportation, and mental health supports, alongside clear pathways to flag unsafe employers, outdated postings, or placement challenges.
 - **Surveys to gauge how the job/job placement for the youth went**
- **A youth-friendly design:** Make resources mobile-first, with no jargon, and easy to navigate. Most youth will use a phone, not a laptop.

Conclusion

Together, the recommendations outlined in this brief emphasize the importance of a holistic approach to supporting youth with foster care experience as they navigate education and career pathways. While access to job opportunities is critical, relationship-building and skill-building are essential to ensuring that youth are prepared to engage in and sustain employment. When implemented together, these recommendations create a meaningful pipeline from mentorship to skill-building to job placement that supports long-term growth, stability, and well-being.

Our recommendations build on insights from the [2024-2025 Evaluation Advisory Board brief on mental health](#), which underscored the essential role of mental health supports in helping youth with foster care experience achieve positive outcomes. Mental health and career development are deeply interconnected. By embedding mental health supports into career-focused initiatives, the Initiative and its partners can help ensure that youth are not only accessing opportunities but are also supported to thrive within them.

To learn more about career supports for youth in Atlanta, Los Angeles, and New York City, please see the following resources from local workforce and youth development agencies:

Atlanta: WorkSource Metro Atlanta's youth services: <https://atlworks.org/youth-services/>

Los Angeles: Los Angeles County's Youth@Work program: <https://opportunity.lacounty.gov/youthatwork/> and City of Los Angeles' Youth Development Department: <https://earnlearnplay.lacity.gov/>

New York City: New York City's Department of Youth and Community Development: <https://www.nyc.gov/site/dycd/services/jobs-internships.page>

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