

# LB 216: Important Things to Know

## *The Young Adult Voluntary Services and Support Act*

**Existing federal funding and current local programs do not offer the support young people aging out of foster care need for a successful transition into adulthood.**

*Below are brief overviews of relevant funding streams and local programs that currently shape Nebraska's service array.*

### **Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) of 1974**

Provides federal funding to support programs that target youth homelessness (e.g. emergency shelters, transitional living programs, outreach services)

- **Limitations:**
  - There isn't enough money to meet the need, and there are usually *long wait lists* for the housing programs.
    - Funding was further cut by the recent sequester, so waiting lists may be even longer in the years to come.
  - Services are *not specific to youth who aged out of foster care*.
  - Services are *not flexible* in terms of housing options (e.g. youth do not have the option of residing with relatives, prior foster parents, family friends, etc.).

### **McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987**

Provides funding to homeless assistance programs (e.g. homeless shelters) and schools serving youth who are homeless

- **Limitations:**
  - Funds are targeted to priority subgroups and tend to be used to assist populations like veterans, families, and the chronically homeless – *not youth aging out of foster care*.
  - Funds provided to Nebraska schools are primarily used for transportation to and from school; not for long-term housing support.
    - *Most 19-year-olds are no longer in high school, so they would not be able to access these funds at all.*

### **Nebraska's Former Ward Program**

Provides college-bound youth who age out of care with Medicaid coverage and a monthly stipend to 21

- **Limitations:**
  - *Eligibility requirements present significant barriers* for youth in need of assistance:
    - Youth who do not immediately go to college are excluded.
    - Youth must apply before they age out.
    - Youth who were adopted or entered into a guardianship are excluded.
    - Youth must follow certain guidelines to remain in the program. If terminated, they can't re-enter.
  - Data from 2007-2010 reveals that an average of *only 27 of the 300+ young people who aged out each year went on to receive Former Ward services for the full two years*.
  - The program does not provide case management services.

### **Nebraska's Preparation for Adult Living Services (PALS) or, in Omaha, Branching Out**

Offers one-on-one support and guidance for youth who aged out of foster care or who are living/preparing to live independently.

- **Limitations:**
  - The program does not provide housing assistance or Medicaid.

### **Nebraska's Education and Training Vouchers (ETV) Program**

Provides grants to help cover school related expenses for youth ages 17-23 who are/were in foster care or were adopted or entered a guardianship at age 16+

- **Limitations:**
  - The program does not provide housing assistance or Medicaid.
  - The program does not assist non-college bound youth.

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**Under LB 216, decisions about the distribution of housing stipends are individualized to reflect and respect the young person's level of maturity and responsibility, and case professionals provide regular and ongoing oversight throughout the life of the case.**

- Decisions about housing stipends are made on a case-by-case basis by both the caseworker and the young person.
    - Federal law requires that housing stipends are provided directly to licensed providers, so stipends for young people who are residing in licensed foster homes will be sent to the foster parent(s).
    - If a young adult is living in a more independent setting (e.g. leasing an apartment or renting a room) and both agree that the young person is mature and independent enough to handle the responsibility, the stipend can be directly provided to the young person.
  - Oversight mechanisms are in place to ensure young people are budgeting appropriately and maintaining their housing.
    - Caseworkers will be checking in with young people via, at minimum, monthly face-to-face visits.
    - Case and permanency reviews will be held every 6 months to offer additional oversight and guidance.
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**Many young people will choose NOT to participate. Only the ones who really need and want the help will sign up for the program.**

- The program is voluntary, so only young people who are in need of the extra help and willing to meet program expectations and requirements will receive services.
    - Young people may choose not to participate for a number of reasons. They may feel ready to live on their own, may not want to be involved with DHHS anymore, or may be deterred by certain program rules.
  - An estimated 30% of eligible 19-year-olds and 25% of eligible 20-year-olds will participate in FY 2013-2014. *This is a conservative estimate based on the experiences of other states.*
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**Focusing on youth who are in the system can go a long way in strengthening transition planning and preventing children from languishing in foster care, but those are only pieces to a larger puzzle.**

- Recent efforts have been made to improve the way Nebraska cares for children in foster care, but *we must not forget about the youth who grew up in that broken system*. Many older youth leaving care now weren't well served during their time in the system, and they deserve to be included as a part of the broader reform.
- *LB 216 is a form of prevention*. Many of the young people this bill targets are more likely to have to rely on our adult welfare system to meet their basic needs and are at heightened risk for negative outcomes (e.g. unplanned pregnancies, legal trouble, and homelessness). Programs like LB 216 *decrease reliance on the state and improve long-term outcomes*.
- Current state and federal laws require that transition planning occur while youth are in foster care, but *Nebraska has not done a good job of ensuring that all older youth in care have comprehensive transition plans*.
  - Even when comprehensive planning does occur, the transition itself doesn't actually happen until a young person ages out at 19. Young people need to experience increased responsibility and independence *with a safety net in place* during the actual transition – not total abandonment.
  - *19-year-olds who just aged out of foster care especially need assistance and a safety net during this transition period*. These young people go from a structured environment with very little freedom to total independence.