

LB 216: ADDRESSING CONCERNS

Concern: Don't we already get federal funding and have programs to help these youth?

Existing federal funding and local programs do not target nor adequately address the program.

- LB 216 would provide housing support, Medicaid coverage, and case management services in a flexible and developmentally appropriate way. Neither the federal funding Nebraska currently receives nor local programs provide a coordinated response to the needs of youth aging out of foster care. 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

This Act provides federal funding to support three types of programs that target youth homelessness in the areas of short-term immediate needs, longer-term housing services, and street outreach.

- **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

This Act 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 who aged 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

This program provides college-bound youth who age out of foster care with Medicaid coverage and a monthly stipend (maximum of \$352 per month or dorm feeds and a possible grant of up to \$100) to age 21. Should LB 216 pass, it would subsume this program.

- **Limitations:**
 - *Eligibility requirements present significant barriers* for youth in need of assistance:
 - Youth who do not immediately go to college are excluded.
 - Youth who were adopted or entered into a guardianship are excluded.
 - Youth must apply for the program prior to aging out.
 - Youth must follow certain guidelines to remain in the program. If terminated, they can never 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 Education and Training Vouchers (ETV) Program

This program provides grants of up to \$1,500 (or more, if funding is available) per school year to help cover school related expenses for youth ages 17-23 who are/were in foster care or were adopted/guardianshiped at age 16 or older.

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

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

This program provides youth who aged out of foster care or who are transitioning to independent living with one-on-one support from an independent living specialist to offer guidance and connect youth to existing resources.

- **Limitations:**

- The program does not provide housing assistance or Medicaid.
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Concern: Shouldn't we focus our resources more on prevention and kids who are still in the system?

Extending services and support is a form of prevention itself and an important piece to the larger puzzle.

- 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*.
 - Recent emphasis has been rightly placed on the front end of the system, and DHHS continues to make that a priority. 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 foster care, and it is our responsibility to do the best we can to rectify some of this damage. LB 216 is our opportunity to ensure that these youth are also a part of the broader reform.
 - 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. While in foster care, their caseworker tells them when they can see their parents, what school they'll go to, whether or not they need therapy. Their foster parent or group home staff tells them when to get up for school, when to do homework, when to go to bed. When youth wake up on their 19th birthday, all of this drops off.
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Concern: Isn't this an entitlement program? If we have to serve every young person who wants to get into the program, it's going to be really expensive.

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 after aging out, 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.*

Concern: Is this just a handout? How will we know what the youth are using the housing stipend money for?

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) there is more leeway about how this stipend can be handled. LB 216 specifies that decisions are made on a case-by-case basis by both the caseworker and the young person.
 - If both agree that the young person is mature and independent enough to handle the responsibility of paying the rent him/herself, the stipend can be directly provided to the young person.
 - If the young person is not quite ready for that, other options could be explored (e.g. having the young person and caseworker sit down every month to determine how to spend the stipend, providing the stipend directly to the renter/homeowner, etc.).
- Oversight mechanisms are in place to ensure that 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.
 - Permanency reviews, conducted by the courts, and case reviews will be held every 6 months to offer additional oversight and guidance.