The Bridge to Independence program is a new opportunity for young people who age out of foster care to get the services and support they need as they transition to adulthood. Young adults who meet the eligibility requirements can enter into the program any time before they turn 21.

This guide is meant to help young adults understand their rights and get the most out of the Bridge to Independence program.

This guide can help you:

- If something goes wrong in your case
- Know what rights you have in the program
- Know what the law says about your independence and level of control in the program
- Know what information the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) must provide you while you’re still in foster care, before your hearings and case reviews, and when you leave the program

Contact Nebraska Appleseed at 402-438-8853 if you have questions about anything in this guide.

For more information about the Bridge to Independence program, visit neappleseed.org/B2I
**Examples could include:** if you get kicked out of the program for a reason you don’t agree with, if your Independence Coordinator doesn’t approve of the housing you want to live in, or if you disagree with another decision that was made about your case.

### 1. Request an attorney and/or CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate) volunteer
- You can request an **attorney** at any time in the Bridge to Independence program. Attorneys understand legal processes and can advise you on the best way to approach the situation. An attorney assigned to represent you in this program would be there to advocate for what YOU want - both in and out of the courtroom.

You can **download a request form for either an attorney or a CASA volunteer at neappleseed.org/B2I**.

### 2. File an administrative appeal or request an extra permanency review hearing
- **Administrative appeals** are a way to challenge a decision made by DHHS, if you think the decision may be wrong. A hearing would be held by a hearing officer from DHHS to review the decision, and you would be able to speak (or, if you have one, an attorney may be able to advocate for you). After that, the Director of DHHS would send you a letter with the final decision based on the hearing. If you think the Director of DHHS’s decision may be wrong, you can ask the district court to review the decision.

You can request an administrative appeal by sending a written letter asking for a fair hearing to “Legal Services - Hearing Section, P.O. Box 98914, Lincoln, Nebraska 68509-8914” or by filling DHHS’s “request for fair hearing” form, which is available at neappleseed.org/B2I.

- **Permanency review hearings** are held by the court every year for young adults in the Bridge to Independence program, but young adults can ask for another hearing at any time (within reason). The purpose of these hearings is to make sure you are getting the services and support you need to be independent. If there is a service you need and are not getting, the court could order DHHS to make sure you get it. The court can also help resolve disagreements between young adults and Independence Coordinators, or other professionals involved in the case, and make other orders to make sure young adults are getting their needs met.

You can **download a request form for an extra court hearing at neappleseed.org/B2I**.

### 3. Contact the Ombudsman’s Office
- The **Ombudsman’s Office** investigates complaints made about state agencies, such as DHHS. If you’ve tried all the other options and things are still going wrong with your case, the Ombudsman’s Office may be able to help.

You can contact the Ombudsman’s Office at 1-800-742-7690.

### 4. Contact Nebraska Appleseed’s Intake Line
- **Nebraska Appleseed** looks at systemic issues (in other words: problems that lots of people in Nebraska are experiencing). However, we can also refer you to other places that may be able to help.

If you think you might have a systemic issue, or if you aren’t sure where else to turn, you can contact our Intake Line at 1-800-845-3746.
You have the right to participate in the program, if you meet the eligibility requirements.

You have the right to appropriate services and support as part of the program.

You have the right to be free from discrimination.

You have the right to confidentiality.

If you get kicked out of the program, you have the right to sign up again anytime before you turn 21, as long as you meet the eligibility requirements.

You have the right to receive Medicaid coverage as a part of this program.

*NOTE: If Medicaid denies you a service that you need, you can appeal it by sending a written letter asking for a fair hearing to “Legal Services - Hearing Section, P.O. Box 98914, Lincoln, Nebraska 68509-8914” or by filling out DHHS’s “request for fair hearing” form, which is available at neappleseed.org/B2I. (Contact Nebraska Appleseed’s Intake Line with any questions or problems about this at 1-800-845-3746.)*

You have a right to receive Medicaid coverage as a part of this program.

You have more control in the Bridge to Independence Program:

- The law says that your autonomy (in other words, your independence and free will) must be recognized and respected at all times!

- You and your Independence Coordinator will work together to develop a written case plan. This means YOU have a say in what goes into your case plan. You can see and get a copy of your court report and case plan at any time (you should be given a copy of your case plan already). (You can also ask for a copy of your foster care file from DHHS!)

- Services should be driven by YOU, with the goal of helping you prepare for adulthood. According to the law, your Independence Coordinator must help you with the following services (if the service would be helpful, if you’re eligible for it, and if you want it):
  - Finding a job or getting other financial support
  - Getting an ID card (e.g. driver’s license, state ID card)
  - Opening and maintaining a bank account
  - Accessing community resources, if needed (e.g. health services, mental health services, developmental disability services, etc.)
  - Finishing up any juvenile justice requirements and sealing your juvenile court record, if needed
  - Finishing high school or a GED program
  - Applying for college or a vocational course and/or finding financial aid to attend college or vocational courses
  - Adjusting your immigration status, if needed
  - Creating a health care power of attorney, if needed (AKA someone to make decisions about your health care/medical treatment if you aren’t able to)
  - Getting a copy of your health and education records
  - Applying for benefits (e.g. food stamps, Social Security Disability Insurance, Supplemental Security Income [SSI], Aid to Dependent Children [ADC], Women, Infants, and Children [WIC], low-income home energy assistance programs, etc.)
  - Finding and maintaining relationships that are important to you (e.g. relatives, siblings, adult supports, other people you may have lost touch with while in foster care, etc.)
  - Connecting to empowerment opportunities (e.g. Project Everlast)
  - Getting access to pregnancy and parenting resources and services, if needed
Starting when you turn 16 in foster care and every year after, until you leave foster care: you should get information about the program and how to sign up.

At least 60 days before every case review (which occur every 6 months) and permanency review hearing (which occur once a year): you should get information about your upcoming review/hearing and your right to request an attorney and how to do that.

If you decide to drop out of the program: you should get information letting you know how to come back into the program any time before you turn 21 and contact information of community resources that could help you.

If you turn 21 and “age out” of the program: you should get contact information of community resources that could help you.

Before being kicked out of the program: DHHS must send you written notice letting you know that they have determined you are ineligible - and why - at least 30 days before they cut off services. DHHS must also include information about how to appeal that decision if you disagree, how to come back into the program any time before you turn 21, and contact information of community resources that could help you.

IMPORTANT: If you stop meeting one of the four eligibility requirements (listed on the right), you are allowed a grace period of 30 days to meet another eligibility requirement before DHHS will send you this 30 day written notice. Then you have another 30 days before you are terminated from the program. Check out the timeline below to see exactly how it works!

### Important Eligibility Requirements
- Education
- Employment
- Employment activity
- Medical condition

**PLEASE NOTE:** Regular breaks in school are allowed and cannot be used as a reason to kick you out. (So even during the summer break from college or high school, you don't have to worry about trying to meet a different eligibility requirement.)