# BRIDGING THE GAP:
**Supporting Youth in the Transition From Foster Care to Adulthood**

The purpose of this report is to examine the needs of older youth transitioning out of Nebraska’s foster care system and offer recommendations about how Nebraska could better assist this population as they enter adulthood. In particular, relevant data and direct feedback from young people with experience in foster care and stakeholders working in the field of child welfare will be shared to illustrate how a new opportunity for states to extend services and support to the age of age 21 could benefit youth in Nebraska.

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## SECTION 1: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In August 2012, data was provided by the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (“DHHS”) as part of Legislative Resolution 537 in an effort to identify gaps in the current system of care for youth who age out of foster care. Findings revealed that over 300 young people have aged out of foster care or have been discharged to independent living every year since 2007. In 2011, 208 youth aged out and 113 were discharged to independent living at age 16, 17, or 18. A total of 57% of those young people immediately lost Medicaid coverage upon exiting care, and only 35% received services from the Former Ward program, which is one of Nebraska’s primary methods of offering support for this population. Although the Former Ward program is intended to serve young adults until the age of 21, data from 2007-2010 reveals that an average of only 27 young people each year received Former Ward services for the full two years.

Taking advantage of a recent option under federal law, the Fostering Connections Act, to claim federal matching funds for the costs of extending services and support to age 21 would fill some of these service gaps. To gain the input of young people with experience in Nebraska’s foster care system and stakeholders working in Nebraska’s child welfare system, surveys about this new potential program were distributed over the summer of 2012. A total of 360 surveys were collected: 104 from young people and 256 from stakeholders. Findings supported existing concerns about the current Former Ward program, as 73% of younger youth had not heard of the program and 63% of those 18 and older were not receiving services. Of stakeholders surveyed, 46% did not feel that the Former Ward program was meeting the needs of older youth in foster care, and 70% indicated that they would like to see changes made to the program (i.e. more inclusive, more flexible, case management services, increased awareness). When asked to compare the Former Ward program to a new program of extended services and support, 83% of
stakeholders believed the new program would be better, and 68% of young people reported that they would rather participate in an extended services and support program than the Former Ward program.

Survey respondents were also asked specific questions about how a potential program of extended services and support to 21 should look in Nebraska. Quite a bit of flexibility is offered under the Fostering Connections Act, and states are encouraged to develop creative ways of meeting the needs of young adults locally. Thus, questions were kept as open as possible to truly gain a sense of what young people felt their needs were, what the professionals working with them saw, and how these needs could be met by extending services and support to 21. Some of the options selected by survey participants may not qualify for federal reimbursement or have been put to practice in other states, but there may still be some short- and long-term benefits that Nebraska should take into consideration when designing such a program. Overall findings are summarized below:

Program Eligibility
- 70% of young people and 83% of stakeholders wanted to include youth who are discharged to independent living at age 16 or older in addition to those who age out of foster care in the proposed program.
- 78% of young people and 47% of stakeholders would like adoption and guardianship subsidies for young adults in the proposed program to be provided directly to the young adult to allow them the opportunity to manage their own finances.

Case Management
- Although young people slightly preferred keeping the same DHHS/NFC case manager they had prior to exiting care in this new program (37%), stakeholders greatly preferred a new case manager from either DHHS/NFC (41%) or another agency (44%).
- The vast majority of both young people and stakeholders agreed that case managers should help meet young adults’ needs both directly (72% of young people, 73% of stakeholders) and by connecting them to beneficial services (89% of young people, 73% of stakeholders).

Housing Options
- Young people and stakeholders agreed that housing for young adults in the proposed program should meet health and safety standards (84% of young people, 88% of stakeholders) and should not have drugs or underage drinking present (78% of young people, 74% of stakeholders).
- Both young people (67%) and stakeholders (73%) favored handling housing stipends on a case-by-case basis, with the young adult and others involved in the case deciding on an option that best met the needs of the young adult (e.g. providing stipends directly to the young adult, through the caseworker, to the landlord, etc.).

Judicial Oversight
- Young people (69%) and stakeholders (42%) preferred that the courts play some role in overseeing annual permanency reviews, although both groups tended to favor having a court-appointed person or group conduct the reviews rather than a judge in a courtroom. Young people also felt that it would be better for the court to oversee the case review process in the same manner (68%).
- The majority of both groups agreed that young adults should have access to a client-directed attorney if needed, but that other sources of support (such as peers, an adult friend/mentor, CASA volunteers, etc.) are also important during these reviews (64% of young people, 46% of stakeholders).
SECTION 2: INTRODUCTION
The purpose of this report is to examine the needs of older youth transitioning out of Nebraska’s foster care system and offer recommendations about how Nebraska could better assist this population as they enter adulthood. First, data provided by DHHS as part of Legislative Resolution 537 will be used to offer a picture of this population and the services currently in place. Verbal comments from young people who participated in statewide focus groups will be shared about a new prospective program of extended services and support to age 21, and, finally, written comments* from young people with experience in foster care and stakeholders working in the field of child welfare will be revealed regarding specific program design options.
*please note that all comments from the surveys are relayed exactly as written by the respondent

Acknowledgments
We would like to thank several individuals and organizations for their role in the creation of this report. First and foremost, we would like to extend a huge “thank you” to the youth who provided input and took time out of their busy lives to participate in focus groups, take extremely long surveys, and speak with us so candidly about their thoughts, beliefs, and personal experiences. Likewise, we sincerely thank the stakeholders who responded to our survey for their interest and investment in this population. We are also grateful for the support and assistance of the Jim Case Youth Opportunities Initiative, the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, and the Project Everlast Youth Advisors. Project Everlast has come to be an invaluable source of support for many of these young people, and we look forward to future collaboration. Thank you also to the Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Centers (“YRTCs”) in Kearney and Geneva for opening their doors and participating in the focus group process and to DHHS for providing us with helpful data in a timely manner.

Finally, we would like to thank Senator Amanda McGill for her dedication to improving the foster care system for older youth, along with Senator McGill’s Legislative Aide, Amy Williams. We would also like to thank Senator Kathy Campbell and the Health and Human Services Committee for their leadership in improving the system for all children in care.

Extended Services and Support to 21
The recent passage of the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (“Fostering Connections”) provides states the opportunity to claim federal matching funds for the costs of extending foster care services to eligible youth up to the age of 21. However, such a program would differ significantly from “traditional” foster care, and services would be voluntary, developmentally appropriate, and directed by the young adult. Under the federal Fostering Connections Act, eligibility requirements include young people who age out of foster care and are: 1) furthering their education, 2) working at least part-time, 3) participating in a program or activity to remove barriers to employment, or 4) unable to do any of these things due to a medical condition. Services for these young adults would include Medicaid coverage, housing support, and young adult-directed case management services. Adoption and guardianship subsidies and Medicaid coverage would also be continued for young people who entered a guardianship or were adopted at age 16 or older.

See Appendix A for a one-page informational sheet offering a basic overview of how such a program could look.
SECTION 3: COLLECTION OF DATA

The following data was requested from DHHS by Senator Amanda McGill in August 2012 as part of Legislative Resolution 537, an interim study to gather data and develop recommendations on the unmet needs of and services available to youth who transition or “age out” of Nebraska’s foster care system.

Results

Figure 1 below shows the number of youth who aged out by turning 19 in foster care or who were discharged from foster care to independent living before reaching the age of majority. The number of youth aging out of care over the past five years has remained relatively stable, reach a low of 198 youth in 2008 and a high of 219 in 2010. While the number of youth discharged to independent living has been on a slight decline since 2007, there was an increase from 86 youth in 2010 to 113 in 2011. Overall, the number of youth exiting care without achieving permanency has remained over 300 per year since 2007.

![Figure 1: Youth Who Aged Out or Exited Care to Independent Living: 2007-2011](image)

When determining whether these young people have adequate support as they transition to living on their own, it is important to consider the effectiveness of current programs designed to assist this process. The following table and chart depict access to the Former Ward program, which is one of Nebraska’s primary methods of support for this population. The Former Ward program provides assistance to college-bound young adults who age out of foster care. Eligible young adults receive Medicaid, a monthly stipend, and covered costs of living in a dorm from age 19 until they turn 21.

As indicated below in Table 1, over 60% youth who exited care without achieving permanency did not receive assistance from the Former Ward program. Although 67% (n=216) of youth who were discharged in 2011 applied for the program, only 35% (n=112) received services through the end of the year. Thus, 65% (n=209) were left without the support offered by Former Ward. This is also reflected in data from 2007 to 2010. The percentage of youth who did not receive Former Ward was 63% (n=231) in 2007, 60% (n=198) in 2008, 66% (n=215) in 2009, and 73% (n=222) in 2010. In other words, although over half of youth who exited care without achieving permanency applied for the program, an average of 215 youth each year were left without the important financial support offered by Former Ward.
Table 1: Youth Who Aged Out/Exited to Independent Living 2007-2011
And Received Former Ward Services Through the End of the Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total # of youth discharged from care</th>
<th># that applied for Former Ward services</th>
<th># that received Former Ward services*</th>
<th>Total # without Former Ward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>367</td>
<td>192 (52%)</td>
<td>136 (37%)</td>
<td>231 (63%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>186 (57%)</td>
<td>130 (40%)</td>
<td>198 (60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>161 (50%)</td>
<td>109 (34%)</td>
<td>215 (66%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>195 (64%)</td>
<td>83 (27%)</td>
<td>222 (73%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>321</td>
<td>216 (67%)</td>
<td>112 (35%)</td>
<td>209 (65%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*includes only those youth who remained enrolled in the program through the end of the year they exited foster care

To take a more in-depth look at the outcomes of youth who applied for the Former Ward program over the past five years, Figure 2 shows three groups of youth: those who were immediately denied for services, those who were initially accepted but lost services before they turned 21, and those who received services until age 21 (or who remained enrolled through 2011). As noted in Figure 2, the percentage of youth who were immediately denied for Former Ward services jumped significantly in 2010 (from 5% to 27%) and increased even higher in 2011 (from 27% to 32%). Aside from 2011, the percentage of youth who were able to receive services for the full two years (from age 19 to 21) has remained relatively stable over the years. It should be noted that the representation of youth enrolled in the program in 2011 may appear skewed, because it reflects a smaller portion of time than other years. In other words, the data for year 2011 includes youth who applied for the program in 2011 who were still receiving services in December of that same year, whereas other years show only those who were enrolled in the program for the full two year. Excluding 2011, an average of only 27 young people each year received Former Ward services for the full two years.

Figure 2: Youth Who Applied for Former Ward: 2007-2011

In Nebraska, all youth in DHHS’s care and custody are eligible for Medicaid. However, when they exit the system, they must rely on other services to meet their health care needs (e.g. the Former Ward program). Table 2 shows whether youth who aged out of foster care or exited to independent living received Medicaid the year of discharge. As highlighted in the last column, between 156 and 215 youth each year lost Medicaid when they exited foster care and did not immediately re-enroll in the program. In other words, 55% of youth who exited foster care between 2007 and 2011 went without Medicaid for at least the remainder of the year. Although there is no way to track how many of these youth were able to obtain health care through private insurance or another source, it is likely to be a low number.
Table 2: Youth Who Aged Out/Exited to Independent Living 2007-2011 and Received Medicaid That Same Year:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total # of youth discharged from care</th>
<th># that received post foster care Medicaid via:</th>
<th>Total # without Medicaid immediately following discharge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Former Ward</td>
<td>another program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>367</td>
<td>100 (27%)</td>
<td>52 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>107 (33%)</td>
<td>47 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>82 (25%)</td>
<td>64 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>89 (29%)</td>
<td>60 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>321</td>
<td>85 (26%)</td>
<td>52 (16%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SECTION 4: FOCUS GROUPS

A total of 108 youth ages 14 to 18 participated in focus groups in July and August 2012. These focus groups were organized by the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation and held at eight cities with active Project Everlast councils: Grand Island, Omaha, Lincoln, Scottsbluff, North Platte, Norfolk, YRTC-Geneva, and YRTC-Kearney. Topics included the overall challenges of aging out, the effectiveness of the Former Ward program, issues related to homelessness and health care, and permanency. After completing a written survey regarding specific program design options for a voluntary system of extended services and support to 21, youth were also asked for their feedback.

When asked about their thoughts on extending services and support to 21, youth comments included the following:

“I like it… because I’m creating it. I like that – that it’ll fit what we think we need. We’ll get to have our say.”

“Honestly, I think it’s a great idea to help us become successful later in life.”

“I think more people will be successful.”

“I think that it’s a good idea and will give people a chance to get on their feet and be independent and be successful.”

“They need to hurry up!”

“Since this is a long-term program, I think it’ll be used to a lot of people’s advantage.”

“It’s not just focused on one situation. With the Former Ward it’s more on one situation - one case. It seems like we have more options.”

“I think it’s a good thing because it’s helping people – that’s always a good thing. I don’t really see nothing bad about it.”

“It’s a support system.”

“I think the support stuff would help youth feel more stable and permanent.”

“Logically, it makes sense. You’re getting a lot of support that you just wouldn’t have normally.”

Awesome.”

“I love all the ideas and work that went into creating it. Instead of 21, it should be 24 due to the fact that some of us are nearly or already 21 and still need help. A lot of us can’t really benefit from this because we need the help now.”

“I think it’s very supportive to help you get on your feet.”

“Sounds good!”

“I wish I wasn’t 21.”

“A lot of people were sheltered a lot, like at [group homes], so in order for some people to get on their feet it’s going to take a lot longer.”

“I think it’s a good program. It would benefit some people.”

“It would be important for stability, to get on our feet.”

“I like it. If youth have those extra services, especially with this program instead of Former Ward, I think it’d be a lot better.”

“I think there would be a better success rate of people actually doing good and not becoming homeless or anything.”

“I love it. I think it’s a really, really good thing that needs to be done.”

When asked if there could be any negatives to participating in such a program, youth expressed a few concerns:

“I think the negative is that people still consider you ‘foster kids.’”

“We don’t know exactly what to expect, I guess.”

“It was asking us about caseworkers, and it was just saying that some of the things we were checking are not really set up yet.”
“It’s gonna be voted on by a bunch of politicians who aren’t going to care – that’s the negative I see. Their kids are already taken care of.”
“It’s not in place yet.” “There’s certain higher ups that care, but some don’t.”
“A bad thing is if you do go in this program and you turn 22, and you mess up, what happens?”
“The good thing about making it to 21 is that most kids when they turn 21 aren’t ready to be on their own and don’t know what to do. The downside is that once you’re a certain age, you don’t really want to listen to others – you want to be out there on your own.”

*For additional details about findings from these focus groups, see the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation’s Report: *Nebraska Youth Discuss “Aging Out” of Foster Care: July-August 2012.

**SECTION 5: SURVEYS**

Over the summer of 2012, Nebraska Appleseed distributed surveys regarding specific program design options of an extended services and support to 21 program to young people with experience in Nebraska’s foster care system and stakeholders working in Nebraska’s child welfare system. A total of 360 surveys were collected: 104 from young people and 256 from stakeholders. Youth surveys were distributed in July and August of 2012 in nine cities across the state: at eight focus groups organized by the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation in Grand Island, Omaha, Lincoln, Scottsbluff, North Platte, Norfolk, YRTC-Geneva, and YRTC-Kearney, and at Project Everlast’s annual Summer Convening in Marquette, Nebraska. Paper versions of the stakeholder survey were distributed at the Nebraska Children’s Summit in Kearney in August 2012, and an electronic version was sent to over 500 professionals in September 2012.

**Demographic Information**

*The Young People*

Dividing Nebraska into the 12 Judicial Districts set by the Nebraska State Constitution, *Figure 3* shows the number of young people who responded to this survey from each of the districts. The majority of participants were from Omaha (n=39, 40%), with many also from Lincoln (n=19, 20%) and Norfolk (n=14, 14%). Other cities included North Platte, Chadron, Grand Island, Scottsbluff, Bellwood, Beatrice, Pierce, Lexington, Maywood, Wisner, Curtis, Gordon, and Ogallala. Seven participants did not respond to this question.

*Figure 3: Location of the Young People*
Ages of the young people ranged from 13 to 25, with the majority being between 16 and 18 years of age (n=75, 74%). Three young people did not respond to this question. See Figure 4 for additional details. Depending on their age and current living situation, young people took one of two similar versions of the survey: one for youth ages 17 and under (n=48, 46%) and one for 18 and over or those whose cases had already been closed to independent living (n=56, 54%). Figure 5 illustrates this slight difference.

![Figure 4: Ages of Young People](image)

![Figure 5: Type of Survey Taken](image)

Figure 6 shows whether young people were currently in foster care when they took the survey. The majority indicated that they were in foster care (n=60, 60%), with a significant amount stating they were not (n=36, 36%). A small number of young people were not sure if they were still in foster care (n=4, 4%), and two did not respond to this question. Of the 36 young people who reported no longer being in foster care, 44% (n=16) listed the reason as reaching the age of majority or being discharged to independent living, 22% (n=8) entered a guardianship, 17% (n=6) were reunified, and 11% (n=4) were adopted. Two young people did not specify why they left foster care, and one offered a different explanation.

![Figure 6: Current Foster Care Status](image)

The Stakeholders
The 180 stakeholders who provided their primary areas of practice were spread over 22 different Nebraska cities. Most common cities included Omaha (n=101, 39%), Lincoln (n=48, 19%), Kearney (n=16, 6%), Grand Island (n=9, 4%), and Fremont (n=7, 3%). Other cities with 5 or less respondents were Scottsbluff, Hastings, York, Norfolk, North Platte, O’Neill, Columbus, Beatrice, Lexington, Holdrege, South Sioux City, Nebraska City, Dakota City, Broken Bow, Sidney, Wilber, Ogallala, Gothenburg, Gering, Franklin, Elwood, and Chadron. Several
stakeholders reported being “statewide” (n=7, 3%) or from more rural areas (n=4, 2%). One stakeholder practiced primarily in Sioux City, IA. One declined to answer, and two responses were illegible. A total of 76 stakeholders did not respond to this question.

As shown in Table 3, the majority of stakeholders reported working for nonprofit agencies or being in some sort of direct care service provider role (n=69, 27%). Additional common roles included attorney/guardian ad litem (n=41, 16%), administrative positions (n=36, 14%), and caseworker (n=20, 8%). Other roles not listed in Table 1 included advocate, former state ward, mediator, mentor, court liaison, nurse/medical professional, grant writer, professor, teacher, former child welfare professional, and positions in the realm of behavioral health.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identified Role</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct care service provider</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides services specific to independent living</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attorney or guardian ad litem</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator or supervisor:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonprofit/Service provider/Private</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DHHS</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NFC</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caseworker</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster Care Review Office:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Board Member</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Member</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adoptive or foster parent</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court Appointed Special Advocates Program:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Member</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judge/Magistrate</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Therapist/Clinician</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher education/Special education/Adult education/etc</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeless services</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probation Officer</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey Findings
Prior to completing the survey, young people and stakeholders were given some general information about the history of Fostering Connections and the opportunity for states to create a program of extended services and support to 21. Quite a bit of flexibility is offered under Fostering Connections, and states are encouraged to develop creative ways of meeting the needs of young adults locally. Thus, this survey was designed to encourage young people and stakeholders to broaden their perspectives and think outside of the box in terms of specific program design options. Questions were intended to be as open as possible to truly gain a sense of what young people felt their needs were, what the professionals working with them saw, and how these needs could be met by extending services and support. Participants were informed that not all of the options qualify for federal reimbursement or have been put to practice in other states, but there may still be some short- and long-term benefits that Nebraska should take into consideration when designing such a program.

Both groups were asked for input in several key areas of a prospective extended services and support to 21 program: comparison to the Former Ward program, Program Eligibility, Adoption/Guardianship Subsidies, Case Management, Housing Options, and Judicial Oversight. Although some questions differed slightly by audience, the majority were asked of both groups.

Former Ward
As previously mentioned, the Former Ward program in Nebraska currently provides assistance to young adults who age out of foster care. In order to be eligible, young adults must apply before their case closes and be continuously
attending school. Young adults who were adopted, entered a guardianship, or were reunified with their family are not eligible. Young adults enrolled in the program receive Medicaid, a monthly stipend, and covered costs of living in a dorm from age 19 until they turn 21. See Appendix B for additional details about this program and to observe primary differences between Former Ward and a program of extended services and support to 21.

The two figures below illustrate young peoples’ experiences with the Former Ward program. Because the two surveys for young people had differently worded questions based on age, Figure 24 shows responses from the 17 and under survey while Figure 25 shows the 18 and older survey. As depicted in Figure 24, 73% (n=33) of the young people who took the 17 and under survey denied having heard of the Former Ward program. Most of them were still in foster care (n=24). Three young people did not respond to this question and were excluded from Figure 24. Of the 27 older survey respondents who had already exited foster care, Figure 25 shows that 63% (n=17) were not receiving Former Ward benefits. Six of those who applied for the Former Ward program upon case closure reported that they are not currently receiving benefits.

Stakeholders were also asked about their experiences with the Former Ward program, as indicated in the figures and chart below. Figure 26 shows that nearly half of the 248 stakeholders who responded to this question disagreed that the program meets the needs of older youth exiting foster care (n=114, 46%). Several also indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement (n=99, 40%). A small group felt that Former Ward met older youths’ needs (n=35, 14%). This trend is reflected in Figure 27, with the majority of stakeholders reporting that there were things they would like to see change about the Former Ward program as it currently operates (n=159, 70%). A total of 28 stakeholders did not respond to this question. Common themes from the 159 stakeholders who recommended changes to Former Ward are noted below in Table 4.
Table 4: Changes Stakeholders Would Like to See in the Former Ward Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change</th>
<th>Number Mentioned (n=159)</th>
<th>Percent Mentioned (n=159)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Include more young people (e.g. those who achieve permanency or are non college-bound)</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It can impede permanency for youth who want and deserve the benefit. It should be available to a youth even if permanency has been established.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Youth are put back with their bio parent a few months or even weeks before they age out, thus becoming ineligible for benefits. Sometimes they are put back with their parent against their will. Sometimes they want to go home but don’t really understand what they are giving up.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More flexibility (e.g. changes in school status, apply after case closure and opt in/opt out)</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“…it does not allow the flexibility and growing that ALL 19 year olds go through (Not being a perfect student in school and adjusting to college)”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More support/case management services</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I believe that the implementation of a case manager is an important step to ensuring the success of a transitioning youth. The cost of implementing a case manager should offset the risks that the transitioning youth face, especially with the ease of credit cards, loans, etc. which can handicap a youth for years with only a few poor decisions (further support for the use of a transitional representative payee).”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased public knowledge/education about the program</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Youth are not educated enough about Former Ward. Not only youth, but youth serving agencies, school counselors, foster parents, and case workers should be educated/better educated about Former Ward program.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should look more like an extended services and support to 21 program</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“All of it</td>
<td>should be changed</td>
<td>- the extended services looks how I have felt former ward should be.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both young people and stakeholders were asked to compare the Former Ward program to a potential program of extended services and support. *Figure 28* shows that 83% (n=207) of stakeholders believed this new program **would be better than the Former Ward program**, 13% (n=33) were in-between, and 4% thought it would be worse (n=10). Six stakeholders did not respond to this question.

As indicated in *Figure 29*, most young people would rather participate in a program of extended services and support (68%, n=68) than the current Former Ward program (18%, n=18). Explanations for this most commonly involved the level of support and flexibility offered by this new program, such as: “Seems more supportive,” “Adults can re-enter if they left and it supports those looking for a job.” Several young people referenced their ineligibility for the Former Ward program: “More motivation to do well. I do not fit the requirements of Former Ward but could still use services,” “Because some kids have to work instead of going to college. It seems more realistic in requirements!” Based on the comments provided by the 13 young people who offered explanations as to why they selected Former Ward over an extended services and support program, it appears that some were confused about the differences between the Former Ward program and this new prospective program. Most of the comments had to do with needing assistance in general – not anything specific to the Former Ward program. One young person simply said, “I don’t know.” Only one comment specifically referenced a reason for participating in Former Ward instead of a new program: “I’m used to it. Others may cause manipulation.” Eight young people (8%) indicated that they would probably not participate in either program. Although young people were asked to choose one of the programs, six (6%) did select both options. Four young people did not answer this question.
The final chart in this report illustrates what young people and stakeholders believed should happen with the Former Ward program, should this new program of extended services and support to 21 be created. Figure 30 shows that young people and stakeholders had similar viewpoints; 74% (n=81) of young people and 77% (n=192) of stakeholders believed that the Former Ward program would still be useful for some young adults. Only 26% (n=28) of young people and 24% (n=59) of stakeholders felt that Former Ward would not be needed if Nebraska had an extended services and support program. The groups did differ in their thoughts about changing the Former Ward program, however, as 49% (n=124) of stakeholders suggested changes, compared to 16% (n=17) of young people. It should be noted that only young people who took the 18 and older survey were provided this option; those who took the 17 and under survey simply chose between keeping and tossing the program. This likely accounts for the vast difference. Five young people did provide written comments regarding what they would like to see change about the current Former Ward program: “The exclusion of older youth who are adopted or who enter guardianship,” “Some qualifications. Re-applying should be allowed,” “That even if you have a guardianship you should still be able to apply,” “Applying before exiting care,” and “All of it.”

**Figure 30: What Should Happen with Former Ward?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Young People</th>
<th>Stakeholders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Toss it, 28</td>
<td>Toss it, 59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74% (n=81)</td>
<td>77% (n=192)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep it, 64</td>
<td>Keep it, 68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change it, 17</td>
<td>Change it, 124</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Program Eligibility**

Fostering Connections provides federal matching funds for extended services and Medicaid coverage for young adults who age out of foster care or are discharged to independent living at age 18. Although it is possible and likely beneficial to include other groups of young people, such as those who are discharged to independent living at 17 or younger or reunified with their family shortly before aging out, Nebraska would be responsible for covering these costs with state funds.

The vast majority of survey respondents indicated that youth who are discharged to independent living at age 16 or older should be included in the program. Young people more commonly felt that the program should also include those who are reunified with their family at age 16 or older (68%) or those who are in foster care due to involvement in the juvenile justice system (61%), although the majority (56%) of stakeholders agreed with the latter. Just 12% of young people and 10% of stakeholders felt that only youth who reach the age of majority while still under DHHS’s care should be eligible for the program. One stakeholder did not respond to this question. Another did not select any of the options, commenting, “I’m not sure this is needed. Independent living services are being provided and youth can apply for medicaid or get through former ward.”

**Figure 7: Who Should Be Included in the Program?**
Adoption/Guardianship Subsidies

Fostering Connections also allows for continued adoption and guardianship subsidies and Medicaid coverage for young adults who were adopted or entered a guardianship at age 16 or older. Although several other states have taken advantage of the ability to send housing stipends (similar to foster care maintenance payments) directly to young adults living in independent setting, they have continued sending subsidies directly to the adoptive parents/guardians. It is unknown if matching funds would be provided if these subsidies were sent instead to the young people.

When asked whether adoption and guardianship subsidies for those in this program should continue to be sent to the adoptive parent/guardian or instead be provided directly to the young adult, 78% (n=80) of young people and 47% (n=120) of stakeholders wanted them sent directly to the young adult. On top of that, 7% (n=7) of young people and 8% (n=21) thought there should at least be an option to do this, depending on the maturity and responsibility level of the young adult. Less than half, or 45% (n=113), of stakeholders and only 15% (n=16) of young people felt that the subsidies should continue to be sent to the adoptive parent or guardian of young adults enrolled in the program. Figures 8 and 9 offer additional details about these responses.

Case Management

Case management in this program would be delivered in a developmentally appropriate, young adult-directed way. The primary requirement set by Fostering Connections in this area is that case managers meet with their assigned young adults once a month to ensure their needs are being met.

As shown in Figure 10, young people were fairly evenly divided between the three primary options, with a slight majority favoring continuity of care in caseworkers (in other words, having the same DHHS/NFC caseworker continue on with the youth) (n=43, 37%). On the other hand, Figure 11 shows that stakeholders greatly preferred a new case manager from either DHHS/NFC (n=106, 41%) or another agency (n=116, 44%) over the same worker young people had prior to exiting care (n=38, 15%). Four young people had other suggestions for who should provide case management: “Youth choice,” “The same DHHS worker, if not then someone who the youth relates with and is specific to what they need,” “My parents,” and “A person who is working for other ways(?) of the DHHS because some youth don’t have trust with their own JSO.”
When asked what characteristic are important in a case manager, young people most frequently referenced listening skills, consistency, trustworthiness, dependability, respectfulness, and understanding. Consistency in caseworkers was also a theme in comments. In the words of one young person, “It is hard to meet new caseworkers… more time should be spent with an individual worker.” Another important characteristic listed by a young person was, “People who understand and will stick around.” Many also indicated that case managers needed to genuinely enjoy the work and care about the young adults: “Would do it even if not being paid,” “Someone who actually cares – not just about the paycheck and paperwork, but the actual youth.” Another commented, “Kids like to have some say in what happens to them, so someone who is willing to be flexible and actually work with the youth.” Other popular traits are depicted in the image below.

**Figure 12: Important Characteristics in a Case Manager, According to Young People**

When asked what case managers should be called under an extended program, young people tended to favor “Support Worker” (n=62, 53%). Other suggestions from the young people included: “Friends,” “Caseworker,” “[Transition Planning/Collaborative Care] Care Manager. Something less separated,” “caseworkers,” “caretaker,” and “They shouldn't be called anything (but their own name).”

**Figure 13: What Should Case Managers be Called?**

*Young People Responses*

- Support Worker, 62, 53%
- Transition Planning Specialist, 28, 24%
- Collaborative Care Specialist, 19, 16%
- Other, 8, 7%
Under the Fostering Connections Act, case managers in this program are required to engage in transition planning, continue efforts to finalize permanency, and make monthly face-to-face contact with their assigned young adults. Young people and stakeholders were asked what other roles are important for case managers in this program. As illustrated in Figure 14, the vast majority of both young people and stakeholders agreed that case managers should help meet young adults’ needs both directly (72% of young people, 73% of stakeholders) and by connecting them to beneficial services (89% of young people, 73% of stakeholders). A total of 60% of both groups felt that case managers should assist in organizing monthly team meetings of people the young adult wanted to invite. Additional suggestions from the young people included: “What is needed for the kid,” “Be their support but slowly lean away so they can stand on their own feet,” and “Person who is easy to access. Open-minded.” Stakeholders suggested: “Very Limited,” “Connect via social media, texting, track outcomes with youth, with set goals, visualize success!” “Connect them with informal supports to activities,” “Recruits/trains possible permanent connections for there youth,” “Mentoring,” “Other needs as identified through individual transition planning per each youth,” “Pay essential bills directly such as rent,” “service coordination,” “make sure education is priority,” “Empower young people to organize team meetings as needed for their on-going support,” “24/7 crisis,” “Help them learn to start controlling their finances so they will not fail later,” and “Utilize other services that they are qualified for that they may not know about!”

Figure 14: What Should the Case Manager's Role Be?

Housing Options
This program would continue providing some financial support for young adults’ housing costs, similar to funding for children’s placements in the under 19 system. Housing options can and should include more age and developmentally appropriate independent settings, including single or shared apartments, dorms, or renting a room in a home.

Figure 15 illustrates young people’s initial impressions about the housing options that should be included in this program. As shown, major consensus was not achieved on many of the choices; thus leaving housing options as broad as possible may best meet the needs of young adults in this program. Living alone or with a roommate in a house/apartment or in an apartment run by an agency that provides supportive services were the most popular answers. Young people responded somewhat favorably of three of the more controversial options: living with a significant other (n=69, 68%), returning to live in the parental home young adults were originally removed from (n=52, 51%), and living out of the state (n=44, 43%), such as in Council Bluffs or an out-of-state university. A federal match would not be provided for young people residing in the latter two options. Young people seemed most concerned about the more traditional foster care placements, including licensed foster homes and group homes. Living in a host home was also in the bottom three, perhaps due to lack of familiarity with such a concept. Only 33% of young people agreed with including group homes as an option, although this would only be for young adults who required extra care due to a medical condition/developmental disability or who were transitioning from their group home to another placement. Two young people did not respond to this question.
Young people and stakeholders were also asked what rules or guidelines should be put in place to approve young adults’ housing choices, as shown below in Figure 16. The majority of young people and stakeholders agreed that housing options should meet health and safety standards (84% of young people, 88% of stakeholders) and should not have drugs or underage drinking present (78% of young people, 74% of stakeholders). A fair amount also felt that housing should be inspected via a walk-through by the case manager (67% of young people, 64% of stakeholders). Most stakeholders did not believe clean background checks should be required. One stakeholder did not respond to this question.

Other suggestions ventured by the young people included: “Weekly meetings w/ youth based on how well the house is?” “Area is safe & within normal distance to needed resources,” “Support. Goals for youth. Some independence (youth will be moving into adulthood),” “Random check-ins,” “Periodical follow-ups,” “The house should just meet the young adult’s needs,” “Should be 98% beneficial to the youth,” and “Knowing that they’re not gonna get kicked out.” Stakeholders’ suggestions included: “Meet section 8 standards,” “Youth and worker could chat about what makes a place safe and have youth do the checklist/walk thru with the worker,” “Meet others livin in home, talk about responsible safe housing practices (i.e-safety, substance use),” “Options depending upon youth behavior pattern and desires of youth,” “Monthly checks by caseworker in the home,” “Regulations specific to the lease signed,” “Depends on age. Increased with time and responsibility not all youth are strong some are more vulnerable,” “Names of all roommates should be provided to the caseworker. This seems consistent with a parent knowing who their child lived with,” “Drug/alcohol should be part of the plan when choosing who they live with workers should help them with this and how to do things such as checking the central registry,” “Safety type assessment of all living in adult housing. Background checks will likely find concerning history. What is most important is how the other persons are doing at present,” and “a signed agreement that the young adult participant will not use drugs or drink if they are underage; and other guidelines about what is expected; however, they would not be kicked out of the program should a situation arise.”
Fostering Connections allow states some flexibility in terms of how housing stipends are handled for young adults living in more independent settings (e.g. with a roommate, on their own, with an adult who does not have a foster care license, etc.). Currently, some states provide the housing stipend directly to young adults in such settings; it is then the young adults’ responsibility to pay their own housing bills. Because of federal rules, however, this option would not be available for adults living in licensed relative or non-relative foster homes, group homes, or adoptive/guardianship homes.

Figure 17 shows that young people and stakeholders differed somewhat in their opinions about how these stipends should be handled. Both groups favored using a combination approach and determining the course of action on a case-by-case basis (67% of young people, 73% of stakeholders). Additionally, neither group was in favor of providing the entire stipend to the landlord/homeowner or other adult responsible for paying the bills (30% of young people, 18% of stakeholders). One young person suggested, “Set up an importance plan so money isn’t spent on non-important things.” Other comments from the young people included, “Everyone should be given a chance and be taught how to manage their own bills, money,” and “If the youth can be responsible, then they should be able to see the money and negotiate the rent.”

![Figure 17: How Should Housing Stipends be Handled?](image)

Judicial Oversight
Reviews every six months are required by the Fostering Connections Act. These can take the form of either: 1) two case reviews each year, or 2) one permanency review and one case review each year. States that automatically enroll youth in a program of extended services and support to 21 at the close of their traditional foster care case are required to follow the second structure. Because of the voluntary option Nebraska is currently exploring, there would not be a requirement for an annual permanency review. However, annual permanency reviews could still be beneficial in ensuring professionals assigned to the case continue working to finalize a permanency plan, which is required in this program. Thus, young people and stakeholders were asked in the survey if they felt it would still be beneficial to hold these annual permanency reviews and, if so, how they should be structured. It should be noted that Fostering Connections provides quite a bit of flexibility in terms of how these reviews are structured. They could be as formal as a hearing in front of a judge in a courtroom or as informal as a meeting with some other oversight group in a conference room. Because the court is the only entity that can order DHHS to provide a needed service, young adults could have the option of requesting a court hearing if oversight was provided by a non-court related administrative group.

As shown in Figures 18 and 19, 69% (n=88) of young people and 42% (n=107) of stakeholders indicated that the courts should play some role in overseeing permanency reviews, whether it be a judge in a courtroom (27% of young people, 16% of stakeholders) or another court-related person or group (41% of young people, 25% of stakeholders). Interestingly, 20% (n=53) of stakeholders did not believe permanency reviews should be held, compared to 3% (n=4) of young people. Three of the four young people who denied wanting annual permanency reviews offered the following explanations, although two seem to indicate some confusion about the implications of their selected choice: “Ultimately, the kid has to maintain the connection! You can show them the door – they have to open it!!” “It would be stressful knowing someone breathing down your neck every month waiting for
When asked about the structure of case reviews, Figure 20 shows that young people again felt that the court should oversee the process in some form (n=86, 68%). However, they were again more likely to select a court-related person or group (n=46, 36%) than a judge (n=40, 31%). Stakeholders were evenly split down the middle with only a one-person difference between the two options, as illustrated in Figure 21. In terms of court oversight, the stakeholders also preferred a court-related person or group (n=83, 33%) to a judge in a courtroom (n=45, 18%).

Young people and stakeholders were also asked for their feedback regarding the role of client-directed attorneys. As shown in Figures 22 and 23, the majority of both young people (n=70, 64%) and stakeholders (n=117, 46%) indicated that young adults should only have an attorney if they requested one. Although only a handful of young people felt that young adults should have someone else there as a support – not an attorney (n=6, 5%) – a large number of stakeholders selected this option (n=80, 32%).
SECTION 6: OVERALL FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

What we’re doing right now to help youth who “age out” of foster care isn’t working.

- Over 300 young people have exited the foster care system each year since 2007 due to aging out or being discharged to independent living
  - Although an average of 58% of these young people applied for the Former Ward program, only 35% received services through the end of the year
  - An annual average of only 27 of these young people received Former Ward services for the full two years (excluding 2011 due to lack of 2012/2013 data)
  - Over half of these young people did not have Medicaid coverage immediately after exiting foster care
- Nearly half of the stakeholders (46%) surveyed disagreed that the Former Ward program meets the needs of older youth exiting foster care. Only a very small group (14%) felt that the program did meet these needs.
  - A large majority of stakeholders (70%) recommended that changes be made to the Former Ward program. Key themes in suggestions included making the program more inclusive of non-college bound young people and older youth who achieve permanency, being more flexible in initial and ongoing requirements for eligibility, offering more ongoing support and guidance, and ensuring caseworkers and others are knowledgeable about specific elements of the program or raising awareness about the services in general.

Young people and stakeholders are supportive of creating an extended services and support to 21 program in Nebraska.

- The vast majority of stakeholders (83%) believed this new program would be better than the Former Ward program in meeting the needs of older youth exiting foster care.
- Most young people (68%) reported that they would be interested in participating in such a program.

Young people and stakeholders had similar views in a number of areas about how a program of extended services and support could best serve Nebraska youth.

- Both groups strongly agreed that youth who are discharged to independent living at age 16 or older should be included in the program (70% of young people, 83% of stakeholders). Based on the high numbers of youth being discharged to independent living at young ages, more exploration of the reasons for this early discharge and potential consequences would be beneficial.
- Keeping housing options as broad as possible empowers young people to select the setting that best meets their needs. It is important to ensure that more traditional placements, such as group homes, institutional care, and foster homes, are considered as options only when necessary (e.g. due to a medical condition or developmental disorder) or when the young adult wants to remain there.
  - Rules and guidelines around these options should also be simple and as least intrusive/restrictive as possible. Although safety is and should be a significant consideration in this process, it is also important to recognize and respect young adults’ developmental need for autonomy and independence. Young people and stakeholders agreed that housing should meet health and safety standards (84% of young people, 88% of stakeholders) and should not have drugs or underage drinking present (78% of young people, 74% of stakeholders).
  - Similarly, a balance will need to be achieved between allowing young adults to carry responsibility and ensuring that public funds are appropriately and efficiently used. Both young people (67%) and stakeholders (73%) favored handling housing stipends on a case-by-case basis, with the young adult and others involved in the case deciding on an option that best met the needs of the young adult.
Oversight is an important component in ensuring the needs of young adults are being met on an on-going basis. Young people (69%) and stakeholders (42%) preferred that the courts play some role in overseeing annual permanency reviews, although both groups tended to favor having a court-appointed person or group conduct the reviews rather than a judge in a courtroom. Young people also felt that the court should oversee the case review process in the same manner (68%).

- The majority of both groups agreed that young adults should have access to a client-directed attorney if needed, but that other sources of support (such as peers, an adult friend/mentor, CASA volunteers, etc.) are also important during these reviews (64% of young people, 46% of stakeholders).

Approximately three-quarters of young people (74%) and stakeholders (77%) felt that offering young adults the option to choose between the Former Ward program and a program of extended services and support would be beneficial for some. Young adults would get a choice: a program that offers less support but has fewer expectations (Former Ward) or one that offers more support but has more expectations (extended services and support).
EXTENDED SERVICES AND SUPPORT TO AGE 21

In 2008, a federal law gave states the option of creating a more comprehensive system of services and support for young adults transitioning out of foster care. Details are still being worked out, but this is an outline of what the program in Nebraska might look like.

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS
If this program is created in Nebraska, here are a few things you should know about it:

★ It is up to the young adult. The program being considered would be voluntary, so young adults would decide if they wanted to participate or not.
★ It is directed by the young adult. Services would be designed to help young adults meet their individual goals.
★ Young adults can change their minds. As part of the program being considered, if young adults decided to leave the program, they would be able to come back in later. If young adults decided not to sign up right away, they would be able to sign up any time before they turned 21.

ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS
Young adults must be doing at least one of the following to be eligible for this program:

★ Completing high school or an equivalent program (e.g. GED)
★ Enrolled at least part-time in college, community college, or a vocational education program
★ Employed at least 80 hours per month (about 20 hours a week)
★ Participating in a program or activity to remove barriers to employment (e.g. a job training program or applying for jobs at a job training center)
★ Unable to do any of those things because of a medical condition

YOUNG ADULTS’ RESPONSIBILITIES
To be part of this program, young adults would need to:

★ Sign up for the program and meet program requirements
★ Meet monthly with a program support person
★ Attend periodic case reviews
★ Participate in other program requirements

SERVICES AND SUPPORT FOR YOUNG ADULTS
Young adults who aged out of foster care would receive:

★ Medicaid coverage
★ Year-round housing support
★ Young adult-directed case management services

Young adults who were adopted or who entered a guardianship at age 16 or older would receive:

★ Medicaid coverage
★ Continued adoption/guardianship subsidies
## Former Ward and Extended Services and Support to 21

The Former Ward program in Nebraska currently provides assistance to college-bound young adults who age out of foster care until they turn 21. The main differences between the Former Ward program, which is already offered, and the extended services and support to 21 program, which has not yet been created, are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Former Ward</th>
<th>Extended services and support to 21</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Services provided to young adults:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Services provided to young adults:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>★ Medicaid coverage</td>
<td>★ Medicaid coverage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>★ Monthly payments of $352 to help with living expenses and tuition</td>
<td>★ Year-round housing support (monthly payments of $520 is one option that has been discussed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>★ Young adult-directed case management</td>
<td>★ Young adult-directed case management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>★ Continued adoption/guardianship subsidies for young adults who were adopted or who entered a guardianship at age 16 or older</td>
<td>★ Continued adoption/guardianship subsidies for young adults who were adopted or who entered a guardianship at age 16 or older</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Requirements young adults must meet:</th>
<th>Requirements young adults must meet:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>★ Apply before their case closes</td>
<td>★ Sign up for the program any time before they turn 21 (young adults can even re-enter if they were once signed up and then left the program)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>★ Be continuously attending school (e.g. college, high school, vocational program), unless a temporary mental or physical issue prevents it (a doctor’s note is required). If young adults do not take summer classes, they will not receive the monthly payment over the summer.</td>
<td>★ Be either attending school, working 80 hours per month, participating in a program to find a job, or be unable to do any of these things due to a medical condition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>★ Meet once a month with a caseworker</td>
<td>★ Meet once a month with a caseworker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>★ Participate in reviews every 6 months</td>
<td>★ Participate in reviews every 6 months</td>
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