

# ★ THE BRIDGE TO INDEPENDENCE PROGRAM ★

*Providing services and support to age 21 for young people aging out of foster care*

In 2013, a bill (LB 216) was passed in Nebraska to provide extra services for young people who age out of foster care until they turn 21. This program will begin sometime in 2014, so some of the details are still being worked out, but there are a few things you should know.

## SERVICES AND SUPPORT FOR YOUNG ADULTS

Young adults who aged out of foster care or were discharged to independent living will receive:

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

Young adults who were adopted at age 16 or older (and whose adoptive parents were receiving adoption assistance):

- ★ Medicaid coverage
- ★ Continued adoption subsidies

Young adults who entered a guardianship agreement at age 16 or older...

... with a licensed relative:

- ★ Medicaid coverage
- ★ Continued guardianship subsidies

...with someone who was NOT a licensed relative:

- ★ Continued guardianship subsidies (although there are limited funds available)

## 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. an internship, volunteering, working with a local career center)
- ★ Unable to do any of those things because of a medical condition

To be part of this program, there are a few other responsibilities of young adults:

- ★ Sign up for the program. *Young adults will sign an agreement with the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to participate in the program.*
- ★ Meet regularly with an Independence Coordinator. *Independence Coordinators will help young adults identify and meet their individual goals.*
- ★ Attend permanency review hearings once a year and case reviews twice a year. *The purpose of these hearings and case reviews is to make sure young adults are getting what they need from the program and that things are going well.*
- ★ Participate in other program requirements. *DHHS may have some additional requirements for young adults in the program, such as choosing safe housing and staying in regular contact with their Independence Coordinator.*

## PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

- ★ **It is up to the young adult.** The program is voluntary, so young adults decide if they want to participate or not.
- ★ **It is youth-directed.** Services are designed to help young adults meet their individual goals.
- ★ **Young adults can change their minds.** If young adults decide to leave the program, they can still come back in later. If young adults decide not to sign up right away, they can sign up any time before they turn 21.

\* Starting in 2014, young people who aged out of foster care could be eligible to receive Medicaid coverage until they are 26 under the Affordable Care Act. Contact Nebraska Appleseed or visit [neappleseed.org/children/#transition](http://neappleseed.org/children/#transition) for details.

# FAQs:

## **When can I sign up for the program?**

Right now, DHHS is waiting for approval from the federal government to move forward with the program in Nebraska. DHHS will start the program within 60 days of getting that approval. This will happen sometime in 2014.

## **How do I sign up for the program?**

As soon as the program starts, the first step is to sign an agreement with DHHS to receive services. For details about this, contact your caseworker, your guardian ad litem, your local DHHS office, or Nebraska Appleseed's Intake and Information Line at 1-800-845-3746.

## **When my foster care case is closed, can I enter the program right away?**

Yes. When the program starts, eligible young adults can sign up for the program before their under 19 foster care case is closed so they can immediately start receiving services.

## **What if I sign up for the program and then change my mind?**

Young adults can exit the program at any time. And if something is not going right, there are things you can do to make the program work better for you. For example, young adults are encouraged to speak out and talk to their Independence Coordinator, bring the issue up during a case review or permanency review hearing, request that an attorney or CASA volunteer be appointed to them, request an extra permanency review hearing, notify their judge, speak to someone else at DHHS, or contact Nebraska Appleseed's Intake and Information Line at 1-800-845-3746.

## **What if I don't sign up for the program before I leave foster care?**

You don't have to sign up right away. Eligible young adults can sign up for the program any time before they turn 21.

## **My case was closed to independent living before I turned 19. Can I still sign up for the program?**

You have to be 19 to participate in the program, but it doesn't matter how old you were when your case was closed to independent living. As long as you meet the eligibility requirements, you can sign up for the program when you do turn 19.

## **I was put in a foster home or group home through the juvenile justice system. Am I eligible for the program?**

In order to be eligible for the program, youth have to have had an abuse/neglect case. If you were dually adjudicated (in other words, if you had both an abuse/neglect case and a juvenile justice case), you would be eligible for the program. Check with your caseworker, your GAL, or someone else at DHHS if you're not sure about your case.

## **What housing options would I have in the program?**

Young adults will work with their Independence Coordinator to decide which housing option is right for them. Housing options for this program include:

- ★ Foster family homes (either relative or non-relative)
- ★ Supervised independent living settings (e.g. renting an apartment or house either alone or with a roommate, college dorm, living with relatives or friends, etc)
- ★ If necessary due to developmental level or a medical condition, an institution or group home. Young adults who are in a group home when they age out can also choose to stay there temporarily, until they can transition to a more independent setting.

## **What does "year-round housing support" mean, and how does it work?**

In this program, young adults who aged out of foster care will receive housing support in the form of monthly stipends (payments). The amount of the stipend will be the same as – or more than – the monthly foster care maintenance payment from when the young person was still in foster care. If a young adult is living in a foster home or group home, the stipend will continue to be provided to the foster family or group home. If a young adult is living in a supervised independent living setting (see question above for details), all or part of the stipend may come directly to the young adult. Decisions about how to handle the stipend in those cases are made on an individual basis.

## **How often would I need to meet with the Independence Coordinator or other people on my case?**

Monthly face-to-face meetings with your Independence Coordinator are required, although extra contact may be needed. Young people in the program also attend one case review (involving someone from the Foster Care Review Office, your Independence Coordinator, and other people you think should be there) and one permanency review hearing (involving your Independence Coordinator, a judge or other person appointed by the court, and other people you think should be there) each year. Aside from that, contact with your Independence Coordinator depends on your own individual needs.

*If you have questions about this fact sheet or general questions about the Bridge to Independence program, contact Nebraska Appleseed at 402-438-8853*