

Extending supports for young adults aging out of foster care during COVID-19

ADAM WILLIAMS, RHODE ISLAND DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN, YOUTH, & FAMILIES
ADAM.WILLIAMS@DCYF.RI.GOV

SUMMARY

Adam Williams, a Foster America alumnus and Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) Legislative Liaison, researched and helped to draft an executive order extending support for young adults poised to age out of foster care between January and June 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis.

THE OPPORTUNITY

For youth exiting foster care without a permanent, legal connection to family, the goal of the child welfare system must be to set them up for financial security and successful independent living. Yet young adults leaving foster care continue to be tremendously vulnerable, even in the best of times. Studies show that approximately 1 in 3 former foster youth experience an episode of homelessness by age 26.

The current pandemic and resulting economic downturn make it even more challenging for young adults exiting care to achieve independence. Those working or prepared to work are overwhelmingly in industries that are shut down or that place them at higher risk of illness. Homeless shelters and other adult housing systems are reluctant to accept new residents for fear of exposing their current population to additional risk. These young adults must be enabled to remain safely sheltered where they are for as long as possible, ideally until the crisis passes.

THE SOLUTION

Gather information. In early April 2020, DCYF Acting Director Kevin Aucoin asked Williams to research what other states were doing to protect foster youth during the COVID-19 crisis. Williams reached out to his Foster America colleagues for help and quickly received information, drafts of legislation and executive orders, and offers of assistance from experts across the country.

Identify the right approach for your jurisdiction. Williams presented an array of options for Aucoin to review. From among the examples collected, Aucoin was able to select provisions that best fit Rhode Island's needs.

Some key considerations included:

- *Goals.* In Rhode Island, the primary goal was to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 by preventing these youth from entering congregate care settings (such as homeless shelters) or overcrowded housing situations (e.g., "couch surfing") during the pandemic.
- *Programs and services.* It was important to first inventory all programs for transition-age youth, and then determine which would directly impact the goal. In Rhode Island, only two state programs were affected, a sunset program and a newer program. Both involved a similar set of services, such as rental assistance, case management, education and vocational support, and modest cash assistance.
- *Timeframe.* In Rhode Island, it was determined that support would be extended for young adults who had or were slated to age out of both programs between January and June of 2020. Other

options considered included extending support only for those who aged out beginning on the day the state of emergency was declared, or on the date the order was signed. Although the eligibility window was January – June, support was not retroactive and only began on the date the order was signed.

- *Potential cost.* Based on the above considerations, it was determined that the total number of youth affected by the proposed change was 34. The cost to Rhode Island of reinstating and/or extending their support was determined to be relatively modest.

Execute the change to law or policy. The department consulted with the Governor’s legal team to determine the best way to extend this support. It was important to identify exactly which laws and/or policies needed to be temporarily changed or suspended, and how. For Rhode Island, it was determined that an Executive Order by the Governor was the best approach.

Notify affected youth. Once the order was signed, DCYF had to get the word out to affected youth. Because the number of youth was small and included people who had only recently left the Department’s care, DCYF was able to contact all of them quickly by phone, text, or through social media. The uptake of support was nearly 100 percent.

Larger states taking similar steps have had to conduct far more extensive outreach to hundreds or even thousands of young adults. At least one state established a website to spread the word.

THE RESULT

On April 15, 2020, Governor Gina Raimondo signed Executive Order 20-26, extending state support for young adults who would otherwise have aged out of foster care during this crisis. The state’s quick action will provide these youth a chance at a better start.

RESOURCES

- Rhode Island’s [Executive Order 20-26](#)
- [Executive Orders and Administrative Policies Supporting Older Youth in and Leaving Foster Care in Response to COVID-19](#)
- Additional resources regarding supporting older youth in foster care gathered by our partners at [Think of Us](#)