

CONFERENCE REPORT :

Ending Homelessness After Foster Care

Report from a meeting to explore effective programs, the principles and data underlying their success, and what is needed to scale up programming to end homelessness after Foster Care.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Conference sought to identify cost effective solutions and actions to prepare young people exiting foster care with life skills and support systems sufficient to prevent subsequent homelessness.

At the outset, Chapin Hall's Midwest study¹ affirmed that the foster care population has characteristics which demonstrate a very high probability of homelessness. Based proportionally on a participant's experience, there is a strong belief that the costs of preventing post-foster care homelessness through development of life skills while in the program, and post exit support, is far less than the cost of subsequent homelessness.

The conclusions of the conference were: **(1)** there are programs that have demonstrated that they can prevent and reduce homelessness among youth aging out of foster care; **(2)** these programs are able to achieve these results cost-effectively; **(3)** there is, however, a lack of comprehensive data to demonstrate both program effectiveness and resource cost-effectiveness; **(4)** this lack of data prevents the emergence of clear "best practices" and; **(5)** establishing widely recognized "best practice" standards is key to influence public policy and attract resources so that these practices can be brought to scale.

¹ Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth, (<http://www.chapinhall.org/research/report/midwest-evaluation-adult-functioning-former-foster-youth>)

INTRODUCTION

Across the country, child welfare and homeless services systems know that young people who age out of foster care and thus lack the emotional or financial support of families are at extremely high risk for homelessness as young adults.

Surprisingly few jurisdictions have taken action to prevent this from happening.

Child welfare system responsibilities end at age 18 in most states. Other states allow foster youth to remain in care until age 21 in light of evidence that longer time in supportive care leads to improved life prospects.

That homelessness is a common experience awaiting these youth is particularly troubling because it is avoidable. It is estimated that each year, the number of those aging out of care is no more than 26,500 nationwide. It is a challenge of solvable proportions.

Nevertheless, neither child welfare nor homeless services systems have claimed responsibility for preventing foster youth from becoming homeless. These young people typically fall between the two systems and their scopes of concern, service eligibility guidelines, and resource flows. Despite the fact that they may have been in foster care for years with ample time to prepare to live on their own, relatively few child welfare programs offer assistance through the transition out of care. In the area of homeless services, few communities have prevention programs and even fewer have programs focused on foster youth despite this group being known as at high risk of homelessness.

To consider what it would take to eliminate homelessness after foster care, the Larson Family Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation sponsored a gathering of leaders from both the child welfare and homelessness fields on March 31-April 1, 2009. For many, it was the first time they had met leaders in the other field or had the opportunity to problem solve across disciplines. Through two days of site visits, presentations, facilitated discussion and informal conversation, a picture emerged of effective programs and achievable policy objectives that could significantly reduce homelessness among this group. Also brought to light were knowledge gaps, particularly in the area of comparative evaluation of existing program models and the costs and benefits of various program and policy options, gaps that the group is working together to address through four sub-committees established at the conclusions of the meeting.

It is the goal of Larson and Rockefeller Foundations, and of Common Ground, the organizer of the meeting, to see that insights, possibilities and relationships emerging from this gathering contribute to action and measurable progress in ending homelessness among foster youth leaving care. This report offers the information, themes and recommendations that emerged at the Gathering to others eager to be part of bringing about this change.

We are particularly grateful to our presenters, including Amy Dworsky, who shared her findings from Chapin Hall's Midwest Study; Amy Lemley whose work on California's THP-Plus Program is an important model for financing services; Richard Hooks-Wayman of the National Alliance to End Homelessness who described the stark reality of limited housing subsidies; and Val Keen of the British government's Department of Communities and Local Government who described the strategic approach and performance-based management initiatives that have dramatically reduced youth homelessness in England. The meeting was enriched by the expert facilitation of Marta

Siberio, the organizing skills of Lisa Falcocchio and Corinne LeTourneau, and the hospitality of the Academy Project, the Chelsea Foyer and The Door.

We thank all attendees for their participation, and offer a special thanks to Peter and Lee Larson of the Larson Family Foundation and Janice Nittoli of The Rockefeller Foundation for their generosity and relentless concern for foster youth.

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I . FRAMING THE PROBLEM

Lack of Data and Scant Funding to Prevent Homelessness After Foster Care

The linkage between foster care and later homelessness is a well understood problem within the shelter community, street outreach programs, child welfare systems and youth development agencies. But, there is no national data quantifying the problem and scant attention to the issue – or funding to address it – at the Federal level.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness estimates that 2 million youth between the ages of 12 and 24 experience at least one night of homelessness every year. Of this number, about 700,000 are believed to be street dependent: 48,000 are in shelters and only 3,700 are currently housed in transitional living programs.²

Approximately 20 to 25 percent of the 26,500 youth who age out of foster care each year experience at least one episode of homelessness.³ They represent just one subgroup of homeless youth. Young people estranged from their families, or who have been part of the juvenile justice system, constitute other sizable groups.

Current funding targeted to combat youth homelessness is woefully inadequate: While Federal funding for all homelessness totals roughly \$6 billion a year, specific funding to address youth homeless totals approximately \$200 million of that funding. The National Alliance to End Homelessness estimates that the average cost nationally to house and provide case management, employment or other assistance to a young person who is homeless or at risk of homelessness is about \$20,000 per year. If each young person aging out of care were provided this subsidy, it would require two and half times the current budget for services for all homeless youth, not just those leaving foster care. Clearly, while ending homelessness among post foster youth will require new resources, it will also require innovative approaches to using existing resources in a more strategic way.

In addition to funding for homeless youth that flows from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, the federal Department of Health and Human Services distributes “Chafee funds”, the only dedicated Federal resource for older youth in foster care. Yet even if states used all available Chafee funding for post foster care housing, each young person would receive only \$800 per year. Not surprisingly, programs serving youth aging out of care must cobble together funding – often from funding sources that have conflicting requirements resulting in inconsistencies that drive up costs and create obstacles to designing effective programs.

Foster Care Leavers Present All Risk Factors for Homelessness

Currently, there is no national data on youth who age out of foster care. Chapin Hall, the largest source of data on the child welfare system, is in its eighth year of tracking foster care leavers in three Midwestern states. Amy Dworsky, senior researcher at Chapin Hall presented findings from

² HHS Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System (RHYMIS) FY 2008

³ Ibid 1

The Midwest Study, the largest longitudinal study of foster care youth making the transition to adulthood.⁴ The study underscores that foster care leavers have almost all the risk factors known to contribute to homelessness.

To begin with, the young people in the study mirror the characteristics of the general homeless population. They are predominantly minority. Their lives have been characterized by instability – 44 percent experienced five or more foster care placements and 30 percent had more than three placements. They live well below the poverty line: Of the 51 percent who were employed, 74 percent earned less than \$10,000 per year. Males had an extremely high incidence of criminal justice involvement – 77 percent had been arrested and 69 percent had been incarcerated. In this sample, 18 percent had been homeless since exiting foster care – 53 percent were homeless more than once and 30 percent reporting their longest homeless spell was more than a month.

Other risk factors for homelessness documented in the Study included running away from care more than once, engaging in more than one delinquent behavior, and being male.

The Midwest Study provides the clearest information gathered to date on the overlap between foster care and later homelessness. More information on typical outcomes for young people leaving care will be surfaced in coming years as a major new national effort, the National Youth in Transition database (NYTD), takes shape. Beginning in 2011, States using Chafee funds will be obligated to fulfill reporting requirements on a range of outcomes on youth exiting foster care. Some states may decide not to collect the NYTD data, and they will suffer a 1% to 5% reduction in the Chafee funds as a penalty.

However, practitioners at the Ending Homelessness After Foster Care gathering voiced concern about the potential limitations of the NYTD data. Some States may decide not to collect the NYTD data, leaving significant gaps in the national picture of the experiences of foster youth after discharge. Furthermore, the database will contain only individual level data, i.e., one record for each foster youth. Program-level data, which is critical to understanding the comparative effectiveness of different program models developed to assist transitioning youth, will not be collected in the database.

National Profile for This Issue Depends on Data

Lack of data on transitioning youth has made it difficult to effectively frame the problem of homelessness following foster care discharge and powerfully advocate for attention and Federal funding. Better data is also needed to build the case for the types of investments that are needed, and the evidence of which approaches are most effective in achieving sustainable housing, employment, education, health and other key outcomes for post foster care youth.

A related problem reported by practitioners at the gathering is that the program data that is collected by funding sources invariably measures inputs, not outcomes linked to the success of transitioning youth. This particular issue has been successfully addressed in England. There, an outcome-oriented system of measuring housing related support program success allows flexibility in program design, yet holds all programs to account for the progress of transitioning youth against critical outcomes in housing stability, employment, health and other critical areas.

⁴ <http://www.chapinhall.org/research/report/midwest-evaluation-adult-functioning-former-foster-youth>

Participants proposed potential short term measures to establish a stronger evidence base to inform policy and advocacy measures. A particular suggestion was to collaborate in a comparative assessment of their own program models to document outcomes linked to the success of young people. This could be a formal study, or to begin with, an analysis of existing program level data to provide more immediate insights into the impact of programs currently serving transitioning youth.

II. PROGRAM MODELS FOR TRANSITIONING YOUNG PEOPLE TO SELF SUFFICIENCY

The Homelessness After Foster Care Gathering brought together a sample of program models to facilitate discussions on what programs are doing, what approaches are effective, how programs use data, and the potential for bringing current models to scale.

Programs Represented

Dreams Realized Through Education and Mentoring (DREAM) – is an academic excellence and college-preparatory program for high school youth aging out of foster care in Detroit, MI. Its site-based mentoring program provides skill development workshops, academic testing, academic planning, career planning and college counseling. DREAM is based on the philosophy that all youth in foster care have the potential to excel in high school and succeed in college and provides strong supports to enable academic achievement.

The Door – provides a one-stop-shop service model of care to all young people including youth in care and in transition. Located in New York City, The Door’s services are wide ranging and include (among others) primary health care, education and career advancement, leadership and job training assistance, legal services, mental health and personal development services and arts programming.

Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative – partners with demonstration sites to implement core strategies that support the creation and/or expansion of opportunities for older youth in foster care. The Initiative’s Opportunity Passport™ is a package of resources that help young people make a successful transition to adulthood and includes: 1) personal bank account for short-term expenses and instant cash; 2) matched savings account (or IDA) for asset-building; and 3) Door openers – opportunities developed on a local basis (e.g. expedited access to job training or adult education courses).

The Chelsea Foyer – is a transitional housing program for youth who are aging out of foster care, homeless or at risk of homelessness. Located in New York City, young people ages 18-25 live at the Foyer for up to two years and participate in a rigorous program in which they must be employed, in school, meeting with case managers, attending life skills workshops and paying a program fee roughly equivalent to 30% of their income. The Chelsea Foyer is housed in Common Ground’s Christopher residence and is operated by Good Shepherd Services.

Youth Villages Transitional Living – is designed to aid young adults 17-22 in care or transitioning out of care to learn the skills needed to succeed independently. The program lasts six to eight months and focuses on self-sufficiency skills, community reintegration, education, vocational skills and job training/experience. Clients are assigned to a transition specialist responsible for aiding youth in every step of the transition process.

The Academy – is dedicated to preparing young people aging out of foster care for independent adulthood through a seamless, wrap-around service delivery structure operated by F•E•G•S Health and Human Services System. Located in New York City, core service areas include education, employment and life skills, which are coordinated for each participant by a F•E•G•S Youth Advisor. The academy is designed as an “open system of services” tailored to the individual and unique needs of youth in foster care.

Latin American Youth Center (LAYC) – is a multicultural community-based organization in Washington, DC that supports youth and their families in their determination to live, work, and study with dignity, hope, and joy. LAYC achieves its mission by operating a regional network of youth centers and public charter schools with a shared commitment to meet young people where they are and help them make a successful transition to young adulthood. LAYC provides multi-lingual, culturally sensitive programs in five areas: Educational Enhancement, Workforce Investment, Social Services, Art + Media, and Advocacy. Included within the Social Service Division are five residential programs affording youth a variety of housing options.

St Basil's –offers accommodation and support services to young people ages 16-25 who are homeless or at risk, including care leavers, young offenders, young refugees, and teenage parents in Birmingham and West Midlands, England. St. Basil's works with some 4,000 young people each year, accommodating 1,000 of those in 23 accommodation projects. St. Basil's services are structured within a continuum: early intervention and prevention, crisis intervention, support and stabilization, and re-integration and sustainment.

Discussion of Effective Approaches

Practitioners across the country have developed programs that meet the needs of young people aging out of foster care, working with them on a successful transition to adulthood in order to avoid homelessness. One of the goals of the gathering was to initiate a dialogue among these practitioners around their program models, identifying what makes each program effective. During this discussion, panelists weighed in on a range of components critical to the success of their programs. While the programs represented have somewhat different approaches, three common themes critical to success emerged: **(1) flexibility in program design and funding requirements; (2) a youth centered approach; and (3) collaborative planning for exiting foster care and cross agency collaboration.**

(1) Flexibility in program design and funding requirements: All practitioners agreed that flexible approaches are most effective for their programs. That is, the path to self sufficiency for transitioning youth is often not linear and it is important to appreciate the interconnectedness of their issues. Andrea Coleman described the importance of flexibility in The Academy program, to provide youth “the services they need when they need them.” The Academy achieves this through its “open system of services” which is tailored to the individual versus a one size fits all approach. Mai Hernandez, of LAYC, observed the tension that arises when restrictive funding leaves many young people without needed services - “mental health programs can only serve up to 18 so we need to be flexible and find other ways to help these kids.” LAYC works around these obstacles by allowing youth to exit the program and re-enter it later.

Denise Hinds, of the Chelsea Foyer, agreed that flexibility is important, and with other practitioners described how funding often dictates specific staffing and program components that are at odds with program priorities and the needs of transitioning youth. The need for greater flexibility in funding was broadly underscored as key to designing successful, cost effective services.

(2) A youth-centered approach: Practitioners stressed that an essential component of successful programs is that they incorporate the insights and desires of the young people themselves. To prepare them for independence and adult decision making, the habits of taking responsibility for their own development and success must begin well before transition.

The Jim Casey Youth Initiative highlights youth engagement as one of five core strategies that can maximize a program's impact. Brian Lyght, from Jim Casey Youth Initiative, described their youth engagement strategy as bringing youth voices and perspectives into the creation and development of the programs that assist them. The process is designed to develop the skills and leadership abilities of transitioning youth so that they may become advocates for themselves and others. The Chelsea Foyer creates a holistic, youth-centered approach that combines young people from different backgrounds and encourages them to teach one another and model for one another. Residents of the Chelsea Foyer are encouraged to actively participate in their community and can join the "Foyer Council" which gives residents a voice in day to day governance.

The St. Basil's program in Great Britain also involves young people in shaping their own success. Jean Templeton of St Basils described that in Great Britain, youth have been very influential in designing services and identifying some of the "soft factors" that bring success. Moreover, St. Basil's facilitates a National Youth Reference Group which brings together young people from across the country who have experienced homelessness to advise youth agencies on their preventive and housing-related support work. This group is involved in improving service delivery to help prevent and tackle homelessness among young people, and the UK Government funds and promotes this work with the aim of enabling young people to influence both local and national policy and practice.

(3) Collaborative planning for exiting foster care and cross agency collaboration: Planning for leaving foster care and for life after care is crucial to improved outcomes. All panelists agreed that this planning process must be collaborative with other foster care and social service agencies and partner organizations. Additionally, planning must start early and incorporate targeted educational and/or workforce development.

Jean Templeton, of St. Basil's, observed that most young people are in crisis because of lack of planning. She described how St. Basil's found it very useful to start the planning process early in a young person's time in care. St. Basil's also benefits from a comprehensive collaborative system in which they have care workers in different government departments providing young people a broad safety net of protection from homelessness and other crises. This network has been instrumental in Birmingham's 75% reduction in post-foster care homelessness.

The United States standard 90 day planning period for transition out of foster care was seen as inadequate by meeting participants. All practitioners agreed that planning must begin much earlier and must be targeted toward improved outcomes, yet current funding patterns do not support a comprehensive planning period

There are hopeful exceptions. One is The Academy program, which was created with the support of private foundations in response to the limited planning and preparation for independence that transitioning youth typically received. The Academy's flexible service model is designed to meet rigorous goals in the areas of employment, education, and life skills. Another hopeful model is The DREAM program that uses mentors to help transitioning youth focus on educational achievement. The mentors work with young people to complete the structured activities within the program and provide career development and academic guidance based on their own experiences. DREAM also focuses on literacy, which was acknowledged as a major challenge in working with transitioning youth and helping them move forward in education and employment.

Successful transitions to adulthood are enabled by collaboration across foster care agencies and with other community organizations. Andrea Coleman described how The Academy was a collaboration of multiple agencies and partners who together constituted a highly effective referral network for transitioning youth.

Although each of these values and approaches is understood to be important for transitioning youth, many programs are unable to incorporate them. Funding constraints inhibit the level of planning, collaboration and direct services that programs are able to support. The resourcefulness of organizations in finding ways to support young people despite these obstacles was remarkable. Nicole Truhe from Youth Villages, for instance, described that although her program does not have a housing component, the program sometimes raises funds to pay foster care parents to keep kids while they finish the Youth Villages program and plan a successful transition.

Performance Management and Data Collection – an Ongoing Challenge

Most programs are in the early stages of tracking and analyzing data. While data gathered is sometimes tied to local or state-wide indicators, there is no agreed-upon set of outcomes by which programs could be measured and compared.

Practitioners expressed enormous frustrations about the onerous funder data management requirements that do little to improve understanding of a program's impact. To quote one meeting participant, "...we report to many different databases – city, state, and federal. I report these kids to so many different places and there is no data sharing. The way we measure outcomes is different from one system to another..." Several practitioners echoed these frustrations and described a lack of reality to the outcomes expected by government funders. Most also measure outcomes in accordance with their own goals and the young person's.

Practitioners described a range of practices for the collection and use of data within their programs. Nicole Truhe, of Youth Villages, described how they collect individual and aggregate data and scan for two or three practices or program components that, over time, contribute to successful transitions to adulthood. The Chelsea Foyer tracks four performance indicators every month while young people are in the program. This data is used in case management and to set clear goals with residents. Aggregate data for all youth in the four areas tracked is presented at monthly meetings allowing the community to review "How Well are We Doing?" This initiative has been extremely successful in engaging young people in the program's goals. Brian Lyght, of Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, applauded this approach, saying it was a practice also used in Jim Casey programs where "young people see how the data we collect impacts systems change."

Jean Templeton, from St. Basil's, reflected that Great Britain's government performance management system created shared standards for success for transitioning youth through a collaboration with local authorities and providers. Standards for youth include staying safe, being healthy and succeeding economically. Each standard translates to something different for each youth and flexibility is built into the understanding of each standard. By allowing a broader interpretation of success in individual contexts, data on transitioning youth has improved and become more realistic. **For young people from St. Basil's, "moving out in a planned way" is now achieved by 80 percent of youth and "Sustained Tenancy for One year" is achieved by 90 percent.**

Practitioners agreed on the need for universally understood indicators of successful transition. They emphasized that indicators needed to be realistic and developed with built-in flexibility so that they would be useful in tracking young people at different stages of transition. The importance of data to understand and improve programs and make the case for adequate financial support for transitioning youth was acknowledged to be a critical issue for the field.

Conclusions

While practitioners represented a wide array of program models, all agreed that flexible approaches, targeted and collaborative planning, and youth engagement are critical to a program's effectiveness.

Current models, however, must continue to develop effective practices with measurable outcomes. As programs continue to develop and hone in on key innovations, gathering participants agreed that it will be important to be able to compare programs and determine what approaches work best for youth with different levels and types of need, in different parts of the country (rural vs urban). Improved measurement tools and comparative data can also make the case for the societal benefits and cost effectiveness of preparing transitioning youth for stable adulthood. Work to move this issue forward will be continued by gathering participants.

III. LINKING NATIONAL PRIORITY AND LOCAL NEED: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE UK AND CALIFORNIA

To increase funding and advocate for flexibility in funding, legislators, policy makers and practitioners must work together to realize their common goals of ending homelessness after foster care. At the gathering, two important perspectives were presented by Val Keen of Great Britain's Department of Communities and Local Government and Amy Lemley of the John Burton Foundation for Children Without Homes, an architect of California's THP-Plus implementation. Both offered examples of how partnerships between legislators and practitioners can be forged to create powerful, systemic change.

England's Response to Youth Homelessness

Val Keen described England's 20-year effort to improve outcomes for youth leaving care. The strategy has dramatically reduced youth homelessness. Central to the effort's success is a strategic "top-down/bottom-up" approach combining national commitment and local action.

This national commitment began in the late 1980's as a surge in youth homelessness brought public outrage and recognition that a significant portion of the homeless youth population were young people who had been in foster care. In response, new services were developed and legislation passed in The Children Act in 1989. This raised public consciousness, but the new programming resulting from the legislation lacked a national vision for what the standard of services should be or consistency in approach. In 1997, with a new government in place and a new focus on quality standards, the Children Leaving Care Act of 2000 passed, resulting in sustained improvements in accommodation, education and employment outcomes for young people leaving care. The implementation of the Children Leaving Care Act involved a sustained and coordinated effort combining the focus of national leaders and investment in local services, supported by government's emphasis on performance management.

Government and local authorities collaboratively developed nine indicators to be monitored on young people in care, including: housing; education; training; health and stability. This system is viewed as critical in keeping national and local strategies aligned and Val Keen underscored the importance of the long and sometimes difficult process used to develop appropriate and mutually-agreed-upon outcomes.

In England, the national government committed unprecedented resources and assumed legal obligation to provide housing and a "pathway to self sufficiency" for all young people leaving care. Locally, wider authority was granted to create housing and determine who should have priority for housing. Local authorities were charged with developing plans and forging partnerships to reduce homelessness, and were expected to assume the role of "corporate parent" asking if efforts were "good enough for my child."

Measurable improvements have resulted from these efforts. The number of foster care leavers in suitable accommodations at age 19 was 88 percent in 2008, up from 69 percent in 2001. In the same time period the percent of foster care leavers who were working or in school at 19 was 65 percent in 2008, up from 46 percent in 2001.

In drawing parallels between the problem of homelessness after foster care in England and the US, Val Keen and Jean Templeton of St. Basil's stressed the vital information developed through research and programs for transitioning youth launched in the 1990's. Insights from programs developed when there was no national leadership in addressing the issue were ultimately critical in determining practices to be brought to scale.

Important findings during this time included: an emphasis on a range of housing and support options; partnerships between housing providers and service providers; a "pathway" model that focuses on prevention of homelessness and identifying risk of homelessness early on in child welfare service delivery; engagement of youth in developing and planning for stability; and extending time in foster care to age 18.

State Leadership: California's THP Plus Program

Coordinated national and local commitment to solving homelessness after foster care is still lacking in the US. However, Amy Lemley, policy director for the John Burton Foundation, described creative strategies used to implement California's Transitional Housing Placement Plus (THP-Plus) program. The passage and implementation of THP-PLUS demonstrates how an innovative public-private partnership can vastly improve funding for housing for youth transitioning from care.

THP-Plus, created in 2001, is now one of the nation's largest state-funded housing programs for young people transitioning from foster care. Administered by the California Department of Social Services, THP-Plus funds are distributed to counties to provide services or contract with practitioners to provide affordable housing and support services for up to 24 months. When THP-Plus was introduced in 2001, counties were required to provide 60 percent of the cost. As a result, no counties implemented it. The John Burton Foundation raised money and granted it to counties to draw down state funds. It was only a few counties at first, but the private funding provided a critical step to broader implementation. This matching requirement was later removed from the legislation.

Additional resources were provided by the John Burton Foundation to demonstrate the benefits of the program by establishing a database to track outcomes. Amy Lemley noted the database was slow to get started and outcomes were not great initially. But over time, programs were able to document good outcomes including increased rates of employment, permanency, college enrollment, higher earnings, and decreased rates of disconnectedness and interaction with the criminal justice system. Through this database, every program can now be compared to state averages. When the legislation was due to be renewed in 2006, data verified the effectiveness of the initiative and funds were increased.

In addition to tracking and measuring outcomes, the John Burton Foundation also organized the advocacy for important legislation changes and for additional funding. They successfully advocated for the removal of key implementation barriers and spearheaded a youth driven public education campaign that played a significant role in adding \$4 million to the program's budget. With increased funds, new agencies were recruited to be THP-Plus providers. There are now 88 providers in the program and a statewide budget of \$35.2 million. By 2008, more than 1,800 transitioning youth had benefited from the program.

Fostering Connections and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008

The success of THP shows that demonstrating good outcomes and effective advocacy can lead to increased funding. THP-Plus provides a valuable roadmap and encouragement to all practitioners to keep improving programs and developing evidence of success to make the case for investment. A significant opportunity for new investment in transitioning youth is the Fostering Connections and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. This important piece of legislation, if effectively implemented, can be a vehicle for expanded services in every state.

Fostering Connections offers numerous resources to support improvements in safety, well-being and permanency that will reduce the number of young people who age out without adult supports. Included in this legislation is a provision for a state option to extend foster care to ages 19, 20, or 21. Yet there are barriers: states are not obligated to adopt the legislation and there is not a strong national organizing effort advocating for it at the state level throughout the country.

Participants agreed that Fostering Connections represents the best available vehicle for broadening assistance to the transitioning youth and that strategic advocacy for the adoption of Fostering Connections must be a priority.

Finally, as efforts are made to address the needs of transitioning youth with existing legislation, Amy Lemley stressed that planning must begin for the next round of Federal legislation to build on Chafee funds and Fostering Connections to ensure that the needs of youth aging out of care and vulnerable to homelessness are addressed in future legislation.

IV. CONFERENCE CONCLUSIONS: A ROADMAP FOR ENDING HOMELESSNESS AFTER FOSTER CARE

At the conclusion of the gathering, participants engaged in a focused discussion on what steps must be taken to end homelessness after foster care. There was general agreement that no one approach is adequate, rather a multi-pronged strategy must be developed including:

- Assemble data to dimension the problem, inform strategy and support effectiveness of approaches
- More effective use of available funding
- Create a range of housing and service delivery options for young people leaving care
- Foster effective relationships between key actors in the child welfare and housing/homelessness fields to create seamless transitions for young people leaving care
- Promote advocacy at the state and national levels to drive investment in the success of young people leaving care.

Creating a Range of Housing and Service Delivery Models

Youth aging out of foster care and vulnerable to homelessness are a diverse group and have a range of needs and capabilities. Some young people require only moderate support to make a successful transition to adulthood. Others, for instance those with serious mental health challenges and/or substance abuse issues, are likely to require an intensive array of services and affordable housing to avoid life on the streets. Thus, helping young people to build a stable life after foster care, will require an array of housing and service options.

Gathering participants recommend that communities have not only a range of apartment options, but also a range of housing models: including a crisis model; an outreach model; an early intervention and prevention model; a reintegration model; and long term housing support. Models geared to parenting youth must also be explored.

Not only are more housing and service options needed to solve the problem of youth becoming homeless after foster care, but better tested assessment tools that can be applied consistently and across systems will also enable a better matching of individuals and their support needs to build long term housing success.

Demonstrating Success

To show the effectiveness of investments in transitioning youth, practitioners must be committed to an outcomes framework. Programs need to demonstrate their success. Development of performance indicators, rigorous collection of data and program evaluation to prove that the program works and is cost effective, is critical to securing and sustaining adequate funding. This will require agreeing upon shared standards of success – both among practitioners and in collaboration with public systems. In the UK, this approach and the development of a shared standards for success framework, allows programs flexibility and latitude in program design yet assures rigor – and long term benefits for transitioning youth - by monitoring outcomes such as staying safe, being healthy, and succeeding economically.

Effective Use of Available Funding to Leverage More Funding

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 is significant new legislation that can help reduce the numbers of youth that age out without adult supports. The benefits of the Fostering Connections Act however, will only be felt nationwide through adoption by all states and effective implementation. Advocates and practitioners must take an active role in advancing statewide implementation of Fostering Connections, in helping states understand their needs and in developing state-level implementation strategies.

Collaboration and Advocacy

Transitioning youth, like all young people as they grow to adulthood, need housing, education, linkages to employment, and help in learning to live on their own. Yet at present coordination between these services is rare. Gathering participants underscored the need for more effective collaboration. Relationships must be forged between affordable housing providers and service providers. Public agencies need a mandate or incentives to work together and create seamless services that operate well. Stakeholders need to understand how each other operate and be able to communicate effectively. More housing providers must be recruited and others not typically allied with child welfare, such as universities and employers need to be at the table.

Local advocates for transitioning youth would be wise to link their efforts to national priorities. Finding solutions to other systems' problems will help advance the issue. Showing the cost savings possible in the health care system, for example, by reducing the high rates of hospital-base care associated with homelessness will broaden participation in solving this problem.

One initiative that generated particular interest among gathering participants was developing a process for pre-screening youth aging out of care for SSI eligibility. This would enable vulnerable young people with disabilities to have income and health supports in place upon discharge from foster care.

At this time there is no coordination between advocacy for homeless youth and advocacy for foster youth. Participants discussed possible approaches including supporting existing efforts for a White House Conference on Children and Youth. Previously conferences had been held every 10 years since 1909; however the last one was in 1971. Legislation to convene a White House Conference on Children and Youth in 2010 was filed in both the House and Senate in 2008.

V. CONFERENCE OUTCOME: HOMELESSNESS AFTER FOSTER CARE TASK FORCE

The Ending Homelessness After Foster Care gathering represented an important step in bringing together multi-sector stakeholders to develop common insights and a shared strategy to seek better opportunities for transitioning youth. At the conclusion, participants broadly endorsed the formation of committees of practitioners and policy makers to continue the work begun at the gathering.

The group identified critical areas for follow up and ongoing collaboration as well as immediate opportunities to advance issues. Committees were formed to take the lead on four key – and actionable items:

- Supporting state by state advocacy and creating draft legislation to press for implementation of Fostering Connections
- Extending SSI eligibility to youth aging out of foster care
- Elevating the importance of the issue through the White House Conference on Children and Youth
- Creating a structure for assessment and evaluation of programs based on universal outcomes to advocate for more funding and greater flexibility in funding for new models of youth housing assistance, including working together to document the features and outcomes of existing program models.

Task force communication is being coordinated by Common Ground. The committees will work independently to deepen the group's understanding of these four issues and develop a strategic roadmap to advance them. The committees may engage a wider group of practitioners and stakeholders to broaden the base of this critical work. To encourage progress and sustain this interdisciplinary effort, the Larson Family Foundation has offered generously to sponsor a follow up meeting of the Ending Homelessness After Foster Care group in 2010.

For more information on the work of the Ending Homelessness After Foster Care Taskforce, please contact Lisa Falcocchio at lfalcocchio@commonground.org or Corinne LeTourneau at cletourneau@commonground.org.