The Journey Home

Experiences of housing instability among young people transitioning from the child welfare system and juvenile justice system in Illinois

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Acknowledgements

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It is our hope that by lifting up your voices and your vision, that we as a society, might better support your transitioning into independence and safe and stable housing.

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### Abbreviated Acronym Glossary

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>C21</td>
<td>Countdown to 21 Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>CABHI</td>
<td>Cooperative Agreement to Benefit Homeless Individuals</td>
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<td>CoC</td>
<td>Continuum of Care</td>
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<td>DCFS</td>
<td>Department of Child and Family Services</td>
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<td>DHS</td>
<td>Department of Human Services</td>
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<td>DJJ</td>
<td>Department of Juvenile Justice</td>
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<tr>
<td>SAMHSA</td>
<td>Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration</td>
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<tr>
<td>SMI</td>
<td>Serious Mental Illness</td>
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<td>SUD</td>
<td>Substance Use Disorder</td>
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We believe society is better for everyone when all of us can participate, prosper, and reach our full potential.

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Executive Summary

This report is the culmination of a two-year long project centering the voices of young people (YP) and the staff who work directly with young people to better understand the experiences of housing (in)stability that young people face after they have transitioned out of the child welfare system (DCFS) and the juvenile justice system (DJJ). Specifically, we wanted to explore the transition planning processes from the DCFS Countdown to 21 program and the DJJ Aftercare program and the ways in which these programs succeed or struggle to provide young people with the necessary skills, knowledge, and supports as they emerge into adulthood. This report accompanies a website, Day2Day, which provides linkages and resources to a myriad of information and tools that young people might need as they emerge into adulthood. All of the interviews, surveys, and the journey mapping we facilitated informed both the Day2Day website as well as this report.

This study is particularly pressing given the number of YP and families who are unable to obtain or retain stable housing within the United States, and specifically within Illinois. Nationally, federal leadership and advocates have elevated the need to prevent and end youth homelessness, including by reducing homelessness following transition out of the child welfare and juvenile justice system. In Illinois, the child welfare system is housed within the Illinois Department of Family and Child Services (DCFS) and juvenile justice programs are housed within the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ).

Illinois is one of a just a few states that supports youth in care through the age of 21. The Countdown to 21 (C21) program supports discharge practices and processes from DCFS in Illinois. At age 17, YP begin planning for their transition out of the child welfare system. At this point, YP can decide to stay in the system until they are 21 years old. YP who opt to stay in the system begin to engage in the C21 meetings at age 19 in order to prepare for their transition out of the system. Transition planning is intended to be led by the young person, and includes working with a C21 facilitator, the caseworker, support people that the young people identify, and sometimes a youth housing advocate to develop a plan for stability, post-discharge. The youth housing advocate is typically part of the DCFS Youth Housing Advocacy Program, which supports young people with housing and employment navigation, cash assistance (through the Youth Cash Assistance Program), and linkage to Family Unification Program/Foster Youth Independence Program housing vouchers.

DJJ administers Aftercare, a discharge and transition process for young people in the juvenile justice system. Aftercare specialists work with YP from the time of residential or placement in one of the Illinois Youth Centers, through reentry into communities, and finally discharge from Aftercare. The model “creates a youth-focused intervention of rehabilitation and therapeutic services that support quality community supervision for all youth committed to DJJ, and moves away from an adult model of supervision.” Importantly, a number of reforms have occurred in the past few years to reduce homelessness among YP transitioning out of DJJ, including the Aftercare program’s responsibility of approving community placements and host/home sites for release housing.

We collaborated with DJJ, DCFS, the Alliance to End Homelessness in Suburban Cook County, and Be Strong Families to explore how transition planning by DCFS and DJJ influenced post-transition housing stability. We gathered perspectives on transition planning and barriers to housing stability through conducting: 1) journey mapping sessions [see Appendix 2] with young people with systems involvement, 2) individual interviews with young people with system
involvement, and 3) surveys with Aftercare specialists (DJJ) and DCFS Youth Housing Advocacy Program (YHAP) workers. We also conducted a review of local and national emerging best practices.

Summary of Findings
We found that to varying degrees, both DCFS’ and DJJ’s transition processes provide young people with information about community resources related to housing, education, employment, and health services, including substance use disorders and mental health support services. This finding indicates that some young people may be missing connections to crucial services during transition planning, due to the lack of uniformity in the transition processes. Young people also made clear that the transition process did not include an intentional focus on healing either from past trauma or trauma that occurred because of their involvement with either or both systems. The interviews and journey mapping sessions made clear that young people felt that achieving their vision of housing stability would be challenging without addressing their past and present trauma.

The journey mapping process synthesized the ideas of young people to develop a clear pathway for healing and stabilization. Among the young people we interviewed, the healing component appeared to be missing from their discharge processes, which is one reason why most of the YP we spoke were not stably housed two years after leaving DCFS or DJJ.

Among the staff interviewed, many recommended beginning discharge/transition planning much earlier than is done so now. Staff interviews also highlighted a need for more training and resources, specifically related to helping young people connect to housing; at the same time, staff identified a general lack of affordable housing for YP leaving DCFS and/or DJJ. Most staff surveyed said they do not work closely with their local Continuum of Care (CoC) and/or IDHS youth-serving organizations. Lastly, staff recommended improving program coordination within their own agencies and enhancing cross-agency and cross-systems coordination to better support YP as they transition.

Main Recommendations
Recommendations are outlined throughout the report. Recommendations from young people related to specific changes to transition planning programming can be found in the Findings section (page 21). There are also 6 broad recommendations that came out from the journey mapping sessions, the interviews, and the staff surveys that could be applied and implemented across the system of agencies and organizations that work with YP during the emerging adulthood time period. Each of the recommendations are supported by quotes from young people, and examples of emerging practices are provided recommendations section.

1. Prevent systems involvement

2. Prioritize kinship and relationship strengthening prior to transitioning

3. Support YP to live independently in a safe environment before transitioning

4. Improve, strengthen, and sustain housing supports such as employment and education
5. Increase affordable housing options for YP while continuing to support YP during the post-care transition

6. Center YP-driven processes

While we do not provide direct policy recommendations in this report, we hope that advocates and policymakers are informed by the direct experiences of the young people and youth workers involved in this project.

**Conclusion**

Our findings highlight young people needed more support and a stronger network as they transitioned to adulthood, after leaving their respective institutions. There are clear areas of growth that staff and young people identified related to building stronger relationships pre-transition, and having more skills and resources to live independently, as well as improving staff hiring and training. DJJ and DCFS are aware that there is room to improve their transition planning, and indeed both agencies have started down that path. Both agencies are currently in the midst of working towards improving their transition planning processes. It is our hope that by centering the voices of young people in this report, their experiences can directly inform those decisions.

It is undeniable that young people who are leaving foster care and the juvenile justice system as young adults have faced challenges during their adolescence, many of which are related to larger structural issues including poverty, intergenerational trauma, racism, homophobia and transphobia and lack of access to needed behavioral health and/or substance use disorder (SUD) supports. The opportunities that a young person has should not be dictated by their circumstances or by decisions, they made as an adolescent. We must do better. We must invest in our YP as they become adults and provide safe, and brave spaces, to support to healing, stabilizing, and thriving.

*Author’s Note: Much of this project was implemented and the report written between October, 2019 - October, 2020 and information, resources, policies, and practices may have been updated since then.*
An abridged list of policies and programs that influence discharge planning and housing among YP

**Illinois DCFS Transition Program:** The Illinois DCFS transition program is called Countdown to 21. In Illinois, YP are able to stay in care until 21. Foster youth in Illinois can expect discharge planning to begin at 19, according to the D-CIPP guide, Countdown to 21. YP are able to emancipate at 18. **Illinois provides YP with $1,200** upon emancipation from DCFS, assuming that the young person in question complies with all discharge planning and attends all planning meetings with their caseworker.

**Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice Aftercare Program:** Aftercare began as a pilot program in 2011, and Illinois fully rolled out the Aftercare program in 2014 through the Public Act 98-0558. This authorization ‘grants Aftercare specialists the same authority as adult parole agents and provides additional responsibilities for case management and supervision’. The Aftercare program seeks to “provide comprehensive and individualized services to YP committed to DJJ in order for them to successfully reintegrate back into their communities and reduce recidivism.”

**Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (2012):** The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP) provides grants to States and Tribes to support YP to transition to adulthood. Funded supports include “education, employment, financial management, housing, emotional support and assured connections to caring adults for older youth in foster care.” In Illinois, Chafee funds partially support the Youth Housing Advocacy Program (YHAP) to provide housing and employment supports to YP who are transitioning or have transitioned out of care. The Youth Cash Assistance Program (YCAP) provides emergency cash assistance to YP after they have transitioned from care. Chafee Funds support many other programs and services related to transition planning.

**Second Chance Act (2008):** The Second Chance Act passed in 2008 and supports state, local, and tribal governments nonprofits to reduce recidivism and improve outcomes for people returning from jails, detention, centers, and prisons, and juvenile facilities. This act was just re-authorized in 2020.

**Family First Prevention Act (2018):** The Family First Prevention Act (FFPA) created a fundamental shift to allow Title IV-E of the Social Security Act that is the largest source of federal child welfare funding to be used to fund child welfare prevention activities. These funds can be used for services for families to prevent foster care entry, supports kinship caregivers, establishes criteria for appropriate use of residential treatment, and strengthens services for older YP. Information on Illinois’ implementation of the FFPA can be found [here](#).

**IL Youth Bill of Rights:** The Youth in Care Bill of Rights lists a number of rights that youth in care have including but not limited to the right to “participate in the decisions concerning you and your future, have a plan for a permanent living arrangement after you leave DCFS care, and to take part in developing and committing yourself to this plan, and be listened to, respected, and heard”.

**Education and Training Voucher Program:** The Educational and Training Vouchers Program (ETV) for Youths Aging out of Foster Care was added to the CFCIP in 2002. ETV provides resources specifically to meet the education and training needs of YP aging out of foster care. In addition to the existing authorization of $140 million for the CFCIP program, the law authorizes $60 million for payments to States and Tribes for post-secondary educational and training vouchers for YP likely to experience difficulty as they transition to adulthood after the age of 18. This program makes available vouchers of up to $5,000 per year per YP for post-secondary education and training for eligible YP.

**Family Unification Program & Foster Youth Independence program:** The Family Unification Program (FUP) Housing Choice Voucher program is part of the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) agency and is available for YP up to age 24 who are either leaving
foster care and at-risk of homelessness or who have left foster care and are experiencing homelessness. Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) administer the FUP voucher in partnership with Child Welfare Agencies who refer YP to the PHA for determination. The Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) program is similar but focused specifically on YP (18-24) and is available for up to 36 months. It was originally designed to serve Child Welfare System Involved Families but HUD expanded the eligibility criteria in 2001 to assist YP who were aging out of care or have aged out of care, homeless or at risk of becoming homeless and are under 25 years of age.

**Teen Parent Service Network (TPSN)** Provides oversight and service coordination to pregnant and parenting YP in care and their children by linking YP to a network of services including: case management, education and employment, parenting and clinical support, discharge/transition planning, advocacy, healthcare, early learning, home visiting and day care coordination. TPSN is housed within UCAN.

**Continua of Care**: Continua of Care (CoC) are governing bodies of homelessness-serving organizations. In Illinois, there are 22 CoCs across the state that provide a myriad of services to people experiencing homelessness. There are specific YP (18-24) homelessness funded programs and separate adult programs. Youth homelessness programs offer a variety of housing options including transitional supportive housing, rapid rehousing, and permanent supportive housing. Once a YP turns 24, they must leave the YP system to enter the adult system.

**IL Homeless Youth Services**: The Department of Human Services (DHS) also provides youth homelessness services through outreach, emergency shelter/interim housing, and transitional living. YP are eligible for services if they are ‘14-23 and lack safe and stable housing’.

**DCFS supported housing types for YP in extended care**

**Independent living option (ILO)**: An ILO provides case management and support services to assist YP ages 19 to 21 to live independently while preparing for their transition to adulthood

**The Transitional Living Program (TLP)**: A TLP provides supervision and case management services to prepare young adults ages 17 to 21 to live independently after transitioning from the child welfare system

**Foster Family**: YP can continue to stay with their foster family until the age of 21. However, the payment to the foster family is reduced once the young person turns 18.

**Placement Alternative Contract (PAC)**: YP who want to live somewhere different from an independent living or transitional living options can explore a placement alternative contract (PAC). If you approved for a PAC, YP receive services and financial support from DCFS.

Shelter (last resort): DCFS runs emergency shelters, which act as a last resort for housing if needed.

**DJJ Placement types**

**Facility (IYC)**: There are currently 5 Illinois Youth Centers (IYCs), one in Chicago, Warrenville, Harrisburg, St. Charles, and Per Marquette. These centers will be phased out over the next 4 years

**Community Placements**: Some YP, particularly those with higher behavioral health needs are housed in community placements, which can provide more intensive mental health services. Examples include Thresholds, Heartland Alliance’s Manuel Saura Center, and Indian Oaks Academy.
A Note on the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Cooperative Agreement to Benefit Homeless Individuals (CABHI) project was largely implemented prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The stories shared by young people, the journeys that they envisioned, and the perspectives that staff shared were all in a pre-COVID-19 pandemic context. Young people are able to thrive when there is equitable access to opportunities, networks, and sources of support to do so. Young people leaving care, including those leaving the juvenile justice system, however, are often not on stable ground. Youth in these systems face housing instability, past and present traumas, and limited educational and employment opportunities. That ground only became shakier for many of the youth transitioning to independence during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the full impact of the pandemic on youth transitioning from child welfare and juvenile justice institutions may not be clear for several years to come, there are a few factors that suggest that older transition-age youth, who have recently left or are leaving care, may be at risk of experiencing severe adverse health and economic impacts of COVID-19.

- Older youth in care and youth in the juvenile justice system are often living in congregate settings, which pose a higher risk of COVID-19 transmission
- Youth in college who are in care or have transitioned from care may face housing instability as colleges/universities close or alter their schedules due to the pandemic
- Youth with past systems involvement have lower employment and educational attainment, and higher housing instability than their peers; these disparities are very likely to widen as a result of the unprecedented COVID-19 recession
- Youth who have recently transitioned and are in their first lease may face an eviction once eviction moratoriums are lifted and rent becomes due, or may be more likely to face illegal lockouts by landlords

As the COVID-19 pandemic began in Illinois, DJJ significantly reduced the number of youth held in their facilities. DCFS continued providing services to youth who would have aged out, allowing them to maintain housing and support; provided cash assistance; and increased contact with young people to provide well-being checks and connection to resources. DCFS also made several programmatic changes to support youth in securing and maintaining housing, more educational supports, and relaxed the limit on cash assistance.

On a federal level, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 included the Supporting Foster Youth & Families through the Pandemic (H.R. 7947), which includes numerous provisions to support youth to navigate a COVID-19 reality, and a post-COVID-19 context. These include:

- Increasing Chafee funds by $400 million so that the immediate needs of young people for crucial resources like housing and food can be met
- Extends eligibility for Chafee services until youth turn 27
- Increases maximum award for Education and Training Vouchers (ETV) from $5000 to $12000 per individual per year
- Places a national moratorium on youth aging out of care during the pandemic
- Provides federal IV-E funding to support extended care services and supports

The call to better support young people who are just starting to transition to adulthood should be even louder as we near the end of the pandemic. It is time to focus efforts and prioritize resources to allow young people the opportunity to thrive.
The high number of young people (YP) and families who are unable to obtain or retain stable housing is a critical health and human rights issue within the US, and in Illinois. Nationally, federal leadership and advocates have elevated the need to prevent and end youth homelessness, including reducing homelessness following transition out of the child welfare and juvenile justice system. In a study of YP who had aged out of foster care in three Midwest states, 31% - 46% YP experienced homelessness for at least one night since exiting foster care. Nearly 63% of YP experienced homelessness within the first year of leaving care. The Voices of Youth Count study and other studies which have documented pathways from foster care to homelessness, support these data. Additionally, studies have shown that there is a strong correlation between experiences of housing instability and the juvenile justice system. In the Cook County data from Voices of Youth Count, 49% of YP experiencing homelessness or housing instability had spent time in the child welfare system or juvenile detention or jail.

The disproportionate impact of homelessness on systems-involved YP is a human rights and public health concern. Young people who leave foster care and the juvenile justice system are more likely to experience disconnection from education and employment as young adults. YP involved with the child welfare system, juvenile justice system, and YP who experience homelessness are more likely to have a mental health diagnosis (MHI) and/or substance use disorder (SUD) as compared to their peers.

**Transition Planning**

In Illinois, the child welfare system operates within the Illinois Department of Family and Child Services (DCFS) and juvenile justice programs are housed within the Illinois department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ). Discharge planning, often referred to as transition planning, is a key step towards achieving stability for young people leaving care. For example, in an assessment of the recent Juvenile Reentry Initiative, YP leaving DJJ were found to have increased social capital when they worked with a reentry specialist to secure linkages to housing, employment, and education. For YP emerging into adulthood from with systems involvement, which include YP leaving DCFS and DJJ, Russ and Fryar from the American Youth Policy Forum outline three key roots that YP need to grow: sustainable social capital, permanency supports, and postsecondary access and success. Multiple studies have highlighted the importance of family reunification and social supports/social capital as even more critical than life skills during transition for YP across both systems.

**Discharge planning from DCFS**

As of July 2020, there were 18,320 children and YP in DCFS care in Illinois. Of those, approximately 7.3% are YP older than 18. Illinois has historically been a trailblazer in supporting youth in [DCFS] care until the age of 21; a policy and practice that has been adopted by some other states largely through the 2008 Foster Connections to Success and Increasing Adopting Act (H.R. 6893). Extending the transition period allows more time for YP to engage with case management services, education, employment, relationship-building and housing navigation. For some YP, the extended time also allows YP to practice living independently in the community. The Countdown to 21 (C21) program, supports discharge practices and processes from DCFS in Illinois. Youth in care decide if they will remain in DCFS through the age of 21 and begin planning for transition at 17. Once a young person turns 18, they may choose to leave DCFS, close their case, and receive $1200 in transition funds. If they choose to stay, however, YP begin their actual C21 meetings at 19 according

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1 Formerly known as the Discharge-Clinical Intervention for Placement Preservation (D-CIPP)
If a young person decides to remain in care beyond their 18th birthday, they will be placed in one of the DCFS supported housing types, which include transitional living programs (TLPs), Independent Living Program (ILOs), and Placement Agreement Contracts (PACs). A young person can also choose to stay with their foster family. There are different payment structures associated with each of these placements. A young person may also move to different placements while aged 18-21, such as from a TLP to an ILO. The current discharge planning process includes housing navigation, case management, education and employment linkages, and financial literacy classes. As part of the C21 process, YP meet with a team to identify their needs and goals. The process is intended to be youth-driven, and YP are encouraged to include important support individuals in the process, such as a parent, guardian, friend, or partner. Ideally, the young person transitions from DCFS at age 21 with a plan for education, employment, and housing. This commitment is also laid out in the Illinois DCFS Youth Bill of Rights, which should guide youth in care policy and practice. In an evaluation released by University of Illinois, Chicago’s rollout of the C21 process received largely positive feedback among YP, case managers, and caseworkers related the C21 meetings. However, 17% of participants surveyed after the C21 meetings reported having no housing options, and one of the suggestions by YP to improve the process was to offer more help with housing.

One reason for increasing the age limit that a young person can stay in care from age 18 up to age 21 is because additional time in care may support a more stable transition to adulthood. However, Dworky & Courtney found in their Midwest study that between the ages of 23 and 24, YP with extended foster care in Illinois were just as likely to have experienced homelessness than, their counterparts in Iowa and Wisconsin where YP transition at 18. There may be a number of reasons for these outcomes including:

- The current discharge program does not provide YP the skills, tools and supports to remain stably housed post-discharge
- Even if the discharge program is effective, it cannot fully address the macro-level forces (housing affordability, unemployment, trauma, racism) which lead to housing instability among YP.

However, Illinois offers additional supports to YP at risk for homelessness prior to transitioning, or YP experiencing housing instability or homelessness after transitioning. Young people can connect to the Youth Housing Advocacy Program (YHAP), which supports employment and housing navigation for current or former youth in care. The YHAP program works in tandem with the Youth Cash Assistance Program (YCAP) that supports YP with emergency cash assistance after they transition. Young people who are part of YHAP may also be eligible for a Family Unification Program (FUP) voucher or Family/Youth Independence (FYI) voucher. A FUP voucher is a type of Housing Choice Voucher, which subsidizes a portion of the young person’s rent. The availability of FUP/FYI vouchers is dependent on partnerships between DCFS and local public housing authorities (PHAs).
Discharge planning from DJJ

The relationship between homelessness and the justice, or criminal legal system, is often cyclical: for example, YP who are homeless may be arrested for survival crimes, and YP who are released from prisons, jails, or detention centers may not have adequate or stable housing. In a survey with runaway homeless YP service providers, 80% of respondents reported family issues as a key contributor to homelessness, which may be due to unsafe or unwelcoming families after a YP’s return home post-detention. In addition, lack of identification and court-related fines and fees are major barriers to identifying, securing, and sustaining housing, or employment. Prisons are not an evidence-based response to reducing further criminal legal systems involvement among young people. Even brief periods of incarceration have shown poor outcomes among YP, and an increased risk for adult incarceration.

At the same time, it is critical to ensure that as long as they do exist, jails, prisons, and detention centers are supporting YP as well as they can to exit to safe and stable housing and employment and educational opportunities. In 2006, Illinois created the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) as a stand-alone agency separate from the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC). There are currently five Illinois Youth Centers (IYC) around the state which, as of December 2020, house 116 YP. Recently, DJJ released a plan to transform all of their existing IYC into “the 21st Century Illinois Transformation Model” and shift away from incarceration towards small regional residential centers, “investing significantly in community wraparound support and intervention services for justice-involved YP, and increasing financial support for victim services in communities that are disproportionately impacted by violence.”

Prior to 2015, parole officers were responsible for transition planning from DJJ. However, in 2015, the DJJ Aftercare system fully replaced the traditional adult parole system for all YP in IYC centers. As of December, 2020 there were 568 YP in Aftercare. Aftercare specialists work with YP from the time of commitment, through reentry into communities, and finally discharge from Aftercare. The model “creates a youth-focused intervention of rehabilitation and therapeutic services that support quality community supervision for all youth committed to DJJ, and moves away from an adult model of supervision.” Importantly, a number of reforms have occurred in the past few years to reduce homelessness, such as Aftercare assuming responsibility for approving community placements and host/home sites for release housing.

Critical elements of reentry and discharge planning from criminal legal systems for YP include:

1. Assessment of Risk for Re-offending, Strengths, and Needs
2. Cognitive-Behavioral Interventions
3. Family Engagement
4. Release Readiness
5. Permanency Planning
6. Staffing and Workforce Competencies

System Involvement and Structural Racism

It is critical to acknowledge systemic racism and the systems of oppression, which lead to the over-involvement of Black YP in both the child welfare and juvenile justice system.

While poverty is one driver of inequity in these systems, it cannot fully explain the
The overrepresentation of Black YP in particular in the DCFS and DJJ systems. Overall, Black YP are disproportionately involved in the child welfare system, the juvenile justice system, and the homelessness system as compared to their White counterparts. It is clear that systems involvement is a driver of homelessness and housing instability among YP, and that Black YP are overrepresented in both the foster care and juvenile justice system. When Housing Action Illinois analyzed data across age groups, they found that Black Illinoisans are disproportionately impacted by homelessness and that poverty alone does not account for racial disparity. National reports highlight similar inequities. Based on the data below, YP systems involvement may at least partially account for some of that disparity. In a Midwest study exploring outcomes among youth in care, Blazavier et al., found that Black YP who left care were at a greater risk of experiencing homelessness as compared to their white peers.

A framework to promote stability among YP during transition

Housing stability is a key component of a young person’s ability to thrive. For YP who are transitioning from DCFS and/or DJJ, state and local agencies including but not limited to DCFS and DJJ must focus on both mitigating risk factors of instability and supporting the protective factors to support stability. Mendelson, et al., provides a framework for the critical factors that help support young people who are not in school or working—a population known as opportunity youth—reconnect with education and jobs. Due to the similarities between opportunity YP and the young people exiting DCFS and DJJ in our study, we adapted the framework (see Appendix 1) from Mendelson, et al., to outline the key protective and risk factors that we explored through this project. This adapted framework provides a lens with which to understand the C21 and Aftercare transition processes. If transition processes are not both reducing risk factors AND increasing critical protective factors, they may be ineffective in supporting YP to reach healthy development and well-being. We will explore the degree that these systems promote protective factors while mitigating risks during the transition processes from DCFS and DJJ, through the perspectives of YP and youth workers, and to understand housing journeys post-discharge directly from young people.

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Table 1: Racial Proportions of youth in IL populations and youth in DCFS Extended Care and Aftercare
A note on terms used in this report:

Youth/Young People/Emerging Adults: There are numerous terms to describe this population including youth, young adults, emerging adults, disconnected youth and opportunity youth. The term “youth” is defined differently depending on the agency and service, but can include different segments of youth anywhere from 11—25. For the purposes of this study, we defined ‘youth’ as young people transitioning to adulthood who are between the ages of 18-25. This developmental time period is defined as emerging adults. Throughout this paper we will use young people (YP) to describe this population.

Homeless/housing instability: The term “homeless” includes individuals who lack safe and stable housing. While some federal agencies such as the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) focus more specifically on YP facing ‘literal homelessness’, other agencies such as the Health and Human Services (HHS), use more expansive definitions which include people who are ‘couch surfing’ or ‘doubling up’ and are not necessarily living on the street or in a shelter.

SUD/MHI: For the purposes of this research we understood homelessness to include the broader definition used by HHS. Substance use disorders (SUDs) and mental health issues (MHIs)/co-occurring disorders (CODs), including past traumas and a history of adverse childhood events, both contribute to and exacerbate stable housing challenges.

Systems Involvement: While there are numerous systems that a young person might be involved with, in this report we use the term to refer specifically to DCFS and DJJ.

Lastly, we will use the terms transition planning and discharge planning interchangeably, largely dependent on the reference report or data source.
Research Questions, Methods and Findings

Research Questions

How does transition planning from DCFS and DJJ in Illinois influence protective and risk factors for housing stability among YP post-transition?

1. How did young people experience the transition process from DCFS and/or DJJ?
2. How did young people experience the post-transition period (1-2 years post-discharge) after leaving DCFS and/or DJJ?
3. What are the knowledge and resource needs and gaps among staff members who support YP during reentry and discharge planning from DJJ, and transition planning from DCFS?
4. What do staff members view as the main barriers to accessing housing, behavioral health and SUD services among the YP they work with when planning for reentry and discharge?
5. What are the key action steps to reduce or prevent homelessness and housing instability among YP, including YP with MHIs, SUDs, and LGBTQ YP?

A full description of the Methods can be found in Appendix 2.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
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<th>Total number of participants</th>
<th>Recruitment Sites</th>
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<td>Youth</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Alliance to End Homelessness in Suburban Cook County, DCFS Statewide Youth Action Board, Chicago IYC, Warrenville IYC, Indian Oaks Academy</td>
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<td>Staff</td>
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<td>RQ5</td>
<td>Policy Scan</td>
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</table>

The Journey Home, 2021
Findings

Who did we speak with?

We conducted six journey-mapping sessions across different sites with 54 YP involved with DCFS, DJJ, and/or YP experiencing homelessness with systems (DJJ/DCFS) involvement. All but one group of young people were currently involved in either DCFS and/or DJJ. We also conducted in-depth interviews with 12 young people who were in the midst of transitioning (1) or had transitioned from DCFS and/or DJJ in the past two years (10). One young person did not have systems involvement in Illinois but was a similar age range and was experiencing homelessness and so we included their experiences just in understanding housing challenges. Descriptors of the interviewees, including demographics and the priority populations of the CABHI project and housing pre-transition are in Table 2. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, both the journey-mapping sessions and the interviews with YP ended with fewer sessions than originally planned.

We also surveyed Aftercare specialist staff and YHAP staff. There were 44 survey responses among Aftercare specialists. The majority of respondents (57%) identified as community-based Aftercare specialists. Overall, an estimated 43% of YHAP staff (n=27) responded to the survey responses. Of those, nearly all respondents (26) reported working within the YHAP and 1 worked within a transitional living program as a housing navigator/coordinator. A snapshot of the survey responses is included in staff spotlight pages later in the report.

Journey map

The description of the journey map process can be found in Appendix 2. Briefly, we employed a journey map technique with young people to map out their vision of the transition process. The process started with mapping out the shared identity of a young person beginning the transition process. It then identified the resources, knowledge and supports that a young person would need to know on their journey. It lastly defined what the journey map destination - home - meant to participants. For the young people we interviewed, this destination was largely defined as a time and place when and where a young person would be financially stable, emotionally strengthened, and housing secure. Once participants mapped out the resources, knowledge, and supports, they organized them into phases in between identity and destination. While those phases were not named by the participants, a clear pattern emerged across all the journey mapping sites: The phases represented, Emerging, Healing, and Stabilizing. Importantly, young people expressed that is important to be able to move back and forth across this cycle as needed, depending on life events - and this idea was confirmed through the individual interviews. Young people who might self-identify as being in the Stabilizing Phase, also spoke about needing the supports and structures that were present pre-transition, which best fits the Emerging Phase. The takeaway point is that the process can’t be linear because development is not necessarily linear. Young people on both sides of transitioning (pre and post) recognized the importance of independence, but were aware of the necessary resources, knowledge, and support that would allow them to thrive.

Emerging

At the beginning of the map, or the Emerging Phase, YP leverage systems and community to provide their basic needs. YP defined these needs as shelter, food, and income. YP revealed that during the Emerging phase they do not consider themselves able to manage the demands of adulthood on their own because many of them are navigating personal traumas.

2 Due to the nature of the YHAP program it is challenging to know exactly how many staff are providing some YHAP-related services, and so while we identified 63 potential respondents who are YHAP supported staff, the survey could have been forwarded within organizations to a slightly wider group of people.
Systems involvement and other life events contribute to these traumas. Additionally, YP shared that in the Emerging phase, their interpersonal relationships are primarily with the staff who work within the system (DCFS, DJJ) and less with friends and family. As a result, YP felt a need to establish a sense of security, motivation, and self-efficacy first before moving forward.

Many of the YP who we spoke with said that DCFS and DJJ should support their housing and basic income needs as they emerge from care. Specifically, DJJ-involved YP may have insecure housing at the time of discharge, which would in turn affect their ability to find, access, and maintain employment; as a result, a cash benefit would be necessary until they are stabilized in housing. Whereas some YP preferred to live with family as they transition, some preferred to live on their own so that they were not depending on relatives—which they may not fully trust—for housing security. Some YP, especially those living in IYCs, also mentioned not wanting to go live at home. Moreover, YP from both DCFS and DJJ identified that during the Emerging phase, housing is not “home.” YP indicated that feeling that housing is home occurs much later, during the Stabilizing Phase.

During the Emerging phase, most YP did not feel that therapy would benefit them. Instead, YP said that having a sense of stability—including through having safe housing, income, basic home and work skills training, and access to reliable transportation—would be more beneficial than therapy. YP expressed that during the Emerging phase they may not be ready for the heavy emotional lifting that therapy may require. Some YP we spoke with did see the benefit of being able to opt into group therapy, which would also serve as a source of community, relationships, and information network. YP perceived therapy as decoupled from any mental health or substance use services they may need because of a diagnosis of mental illness or substance use disorder. YP overwhelmingly felt that engaging in physical activity such as exercise or sports would be a beneficial outlet for both their mental and physical health and provide a pathway for them to begin their emotional and social healing.

**Healing**

In the middle of the map, the healing phase, is marked by rapid changes in the young person’s life as they experience what journey-mapping participants, who had already left DCFS, described as a ‘cliff dive’ away from the familiar systems, communities, and relationships that guided them into emerging adulthood. In the journey mapping sessions, YP believed that during this phase, systems should provide light touch guidance and support by linking YP with community resources such as access to personal and career guidance, educational pathways, mentorships, and individual therapy. By linking YP with the resources to help them connect with communities, secure income and housing, and address their underlying traumas, some participants mapped out at this time being able to pursue different careers, strengthening personal relationships, and feeling increasingly prepared for independence. YP described that by this part of the journey, they wish to be in a space where they “are not relying on anybody” (journey mapping session at Warrenville-IYC), and were willing to take the personal steps needed to gain independence from relying on systems-provided supports (DCFS and DJJ). While YP did not want to rely on anyone or anything, the most important component of this phase was building relationships. With key needs met earlier in the journey, young people thought it made sense to then really focus on strengthening relationships, working through past traumas, and often seeking counseling or mental health supports to do so. With a strong ‘squad’ or family/friend network around them at this point in the map, young people felt ready to shift towards stabilizing.

**Stabilizing**

By the end of the map, there were few references to any systems - which suggests that by that point, systems involvement should be only as needed; for instance, SSI supports for youth with disabilities. In the Emerging and Healing phases of the map, YP identified wanting continued support from DCFS and/or DJJ. However, strong and stable community and interpersonal relationships are critical to a young person’s stability. In the instance of a setback, community and interpersonal relationships
Present throughout the Emerging Phase

Systems | Community | Relationships
---|---|---
• Child Welfare Services  
• Juvenile Justice  
• Education  
• Public Health  
• Social Welfare  
• SSI  
• Group Homes  
• ITPs/LOs  
• YFCs  
• CBOs  
• Schools  
• Family/Friends  
• Intimate Partner  
• Teachers/Instructors  
• Aftercare Specialists  
• Case Managers  
• Group Therapy*

*Owing journaling mapping sessions, not all YP felt that they were ready to attend therapy during the emerging phase while others felt that group therapy would be an acceptable alternative as well as a source for community and relationships.

Linkages and Supports:
- Systems provide YP with safe housing and income.
- Systems provide YP with community that guide YP into meaningful and supportive relationships.
- Communities and relationships help youth access systems related to health services.

Young People in Transition: A Pathway to Thriving Adulthood

Present throughout the Stabilizing Phase

Systems | Community | Relationships
---|---|---
• SSI  
• School  
• Work Place  
• Neighborhood  
• Personal Interest Groups  
• Personal Support Systems  
• Family/Friends  
• Intimate Partner  
• Co-workers  
• Peer Guidance  
• Mentor

Present throughout the Healing Phase

Systems | Community | Relationships
---|---|---
• Child Welfare Services*  
• Juvenile Justice*  
• Education  
• Public Health  
• Social Welfare  
• SSI  
• CBOs  
• Work Place  
• Teachers/Instructors  
• Aftercare Specialists  
• Case Managers  
• Peer Navigators  
• Therapists

* After transitioning out of care, YP reported a sudden drop off in systems related supports from both child welfare services and the justice system (where involved). During the journey mapping sessions, youth felt it was important to receive support and guidance from these systems (as they apply) until they were able to independently able to support themselves.
will be present to reconnect the YP to systems that can help YP navigate their way back towards housing stability. During journey mapping sessions, YP stressed that financial security is imperative to stability. According to YP, housing stability is nonexistent without financial security. Moreover, interpersonal relationships are imperative to sustaining financial security by way of mentors and solid support communities that help YP navigate education, trainings, and work opportunities to advance earning potential. Mental health supports during the Healing phase now allow YP to build and seek out their own relationships as well as lead others.

**Interviews + Survey data**
The overarching finding based on interviews and journey mapping with YP was that being able to successfully transition first requires the ability to heal from adverse past and current traumas, to then transition towards social and financial stability in adulthood. While services and linkages related to housing, employment and education are critical, YP were often more focused on relationships and healing as the key to stability. Their envisioned journey is presented in The Journey Map visual.

From the perspectives of the YP we spoke with, the transition processes across both systems expects YP to transition and maintain stabilization, while leaving interpersonal-related traumas unreconciled and subsequently bypassing the personal growth and maturation that occurs while healing. While the 11 young people who we interviewed had a variety of experiences during transition planning and/or post-transitioning from DJJ and/or DCFS, only two of the young people defined themselves as having stable housing. Many of the young people talked about specific traumatizing experiences from which they had not yet healed, and recognized the effect of that trauma on their ability to stabilize themselves post transition. The results from the three data streams (interviews, journey mapping, and staff surveys) were integrated to explore specific aspects of transition planning, including resources/services, relationships, and the transition process.

Most of the interview themes related to the Emerging phase, and none related to the Stabilizing phase. The most salient emerging theme across all the interviews was the impact of unresolved trauma during the transition period. Many of the YP we spoke with experienced traumatic events prior to entering DJJ and/or DCFS, while they were within DJJ and/or DCFS, and/or upon transitioning. Before discussing specific aspects of transition planning, it was important to address the role of trauma in the ways in which YP experience transition planning. We explored the main components of transition planning outlined by Russ and Ryan’s transition planning structure, organized by Mendelson et al.’s framework of protective and risk factors in each of the main transition areas that YP spoke about:

1. Housing (Permanency Supports)
2. Relationships, including family, friends, peers, and staff (Social Capital)
3. Supportive services (including employment and education) (Permanency Supports/Post-Secondary Access and success)

Lastly, we describe YP’s experiences with and staff perspectives on the transition planning process, and recommendations to strengthen the transition planning process.

The experiences that young people shared are complex and

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nuanced. Because their stories are not often told from their perspectives, we are centering their voices to honor them. We acknowledge that every young person’s story is shaped by a complex set of circumstances, perspectives, policies, and regulations. That said, we ask readers to focus on the YP’s lived experience.
Stories and Advice from Young People

Dan is a current student at Illinois State University. Before transitioning out of care, he lived in an independent living option (ILO) where he had an overall positive experience. He transitioned out of DCFS recently and went through the C21 process, and now has an apartment with roommates close to school. While he would describe his housing as stable, he has too many friends who are not in the same situation. He also recognizes how tenuous his housing situation is, and feels constant pressure to perform well in school so that he does not lose his housing, due to the DCFS educational grant requirements. Based on his experiences, and the young people he knows, he wants to become a lawyer to fight for the rights of youth in care.

What would you tell young adults who are about to turn 21 about what they need to do?

Most people who are at that point of just giving up and wanting to emancipate. It’s because of one certain situation or because they just don’t want to be told [they are] done with being told what to do. The culture shock is that you’re going to be told what to do regardless and your problems just kind of like triple versus you just kind of going and washing the dishes, or whatever the problem is. My advice to you is to figure out what the problem is and solve it there versus making a dramatic exit... because ultimately it’s just like try to get all that toothpaste at the end of the tube because when it’s gone, it’s gone. You just, there’s no buying another tube, there’s no borrowing some, take from somebody else. It’s just like an hourglass. The sand is done.

Kim is a young person, who is originally from Kentucky. She is currently couch surfing and waiting on her family unification program (FUP) voucher. She has a unique situation of being in DCFS in Kentucky, but having her case re-opened in Illinois to be able to receive the FUP voucher. She bounced around several shelters before she was linked up to a FUP voucher which she had yet to receive. She lived in a group home prior to transitioning out of care, and was dually-involved with DCFS and DJJ. Kim specifically referenced overcoming battles with SUDs.

What advice would you give someone leaving care?

Don’t give up because somewhere, somehow there is a place that that is going to help you. That you can’t think that everybody is out to get you, but at the same time you can’t trust nobody. That’s, that was my issue. I came down here trying to trust everybody and be friends with everybody instead of focusing on myself. People are gonna use you until they can’t use you no more. So really all I got to say is just stick to yourself and know your worth. Don’t let nobody take advantage of you.

Don’t let nobody tell you you can’t do something because only you can stop you from doing something.

Sara is a 23-year old young person and mother. She lives in a Section 8 housing, but does not have a FUP voucher. She said in her current situation she can pay rent with
SSI, but struggles to pay utilities. Her housing placement is in a neighborhood that she is not comfortable in, and she prefers to return to the suburbs. She was dually-involved with DCFS and the criminal legal system (non- DJJ), and was living in a transitional living program (TLP) when she turned 21. Her baby was removed from her custody and placed into care while she was staying at the TLP. Her daughter is currently living with a foster family.

What advice would you tell young adults who are about to turn 21?

And you know, that’s a good question cause I always tell people go down the right path. Don’t play like you [are] tired of your baby or don’t let them see you tire of your kids because once they see that they would take your kid away from you. Don’t get into no fights on anything. I could just tell people just do what’s right. Ooh, Love your baby. Cause somebody else will love them. And fighting to get the kids back is hard. It ain’t easy and stay strong. you know?
Trauma

I only had therapy when I was in the places [DCFS/DJJ], but something that I’m trying to look for is therapy. Yeah. Because I still have a lot of stuff from my childhood and stuff that’s happened here that I still haven’t told nobody about.

Trauma and traumatic experiences were key components of the identities that young people outlined, including experiences of violence, not feeling loved, not loving themselves, experiences of homelessness, and mental health challenges. Each of these traumas indelibly influenced YP’s perception of home as well as their idealizations of home, which included financial stability, safety, and strong meaningful relationships in addition to housing security. Based on our journey mapping model most YP had not had the opportunity to heal from past traumas, especially traumatic relationships, and therefore faced profound challenges in reaching a stabilized transition.

One young person who was pregnant and in care talked about wanting to co-sleep with her child because of fears of her child’s safety in the crib, although DCFS has clear safety guidelines against co-sleeping. However, this young person did not feel heard when she expressed her concern about the crib.

When she continued to co-sleep, DCFS removed her baby from her care. The trauma of being in care and having her baby taken from her was hugely detrimental. This experience prevented this young person from continuing to seek supportive services from DCFS, which could have supported her transition, and affected her ability to fully heal and transition from care.

While some young people referenced receiving counseling and trauma support services while in care, they also said once they left care it was challenging to continue receiving support due to financial and time constraints.
Also, several young people talked about experiencing trauma as they were transitioning, which made that process much more challenging. For example, one young person shared, "at that time when I was going to get discharged [from DCFS], my brother had gotten shot. So when my brother got shot, life was over for me. Me and my brother was very close." Trying to transition into independence in that moment of grief and pain, which also meant losing many of her physical and emotional supports at once, was really challenging for this young person. Unresolved trauma and ongoing trauma can create challenges for maintaining employment, accessing education, getting or staying housed, and, importantly, for securing stable relationships.
Resilience

We just all happy period. So, just like when you just walk around with this big old smile on your face and you will be like, why are you smiling? I was like, cause, I’m still here, you know?

Young people often expressed a sense of resilience in the face of their personal and systems-related trauma. The young people we interviewed talked about resilience in two ways. First, whereas YP should ideally have the time and space to be able to heal and move forward from their traumas before being fully on their own. However, in reality young people had to focus on survival and resiliency, or self-reliance, which didn’t always lend itself to strengthening their emotional or mental well-being. YP viewed resilience as something they must do in order to survive and rather than focusing on recovering from the traumas that they identified as keeping them from achieving a safe and stable adulthood.

Alternatively, despite experience of trauma, several of the YP we spoke with were moving forward into independence with optimism and strength. While all of the YP we spoke with had faced challenges at some point in their transition pathway, some young people also described optimism in the future and a pride in being able to get through tough times – particularly on their own.

Transitioning into adulthood is a tumultuous and scary time for most young people, especially in the face of past traumas. However, for many young people emerging into independence, it was also an exciting time, where young people felt freedom and choice. It should be the goal of systems and communities to support young people to thrive in their independence.

I’m glad everything is turning around for me because looking back last year, I would have never thought that I would be fixing to be getting my own crib. I’m happy in a relationship like, cause last year I was, I was addicted to pills. I didn’t see myself going anywhere.
Housing stability

So by me continuing working and I think I was in school, um, I got my first apartment when I was 19.

The majority of the YP we interviewed were facing housing instability to varying degrees. We asked all YP in interviews and journey mapping to define housing stability. While there was a wide variety of responses, most YP referenced feeling safe and surrounded by people they loved. Overall, we interviewed more YP who identified adverse (risky) housing experiences than positive housing experiences. Additionally, we spoke with more YP who cited unmet housing needs compared to the number of YP we interviewed with fulfilled housing needs.

Recommendations from YP for Improving Housing Stability for youth-serving agencies and organizations including DCFS and DJJ:

1. Provide housing to YP who are leaving DJJ
2. Create relationships with homelessness services so that YP are familiar with these services if needed post-transition
3. Collect and widely share information so YP know where they can access shelters, housing, food, and other basic need services
4. Teach young people about what it means to be responsible for paying rent, paying a mortgage, and having a roommate
5. Create an emergency cash assistance fund for YP leaving DJJ and YP 21+ so they can rely on the fund if they are facing eviction

Protective Factors that can Promote Housing Stability

The majority of YP we interviewed referenced some protective aspect of their housing, whether while they were in care or after transitioning. YP spoke about their positive experiences with specific caseworkers and foster parents, as well as positive feelings about living independently.

Experiencing independent living prior to discharge for youth in care is one strategy to support youth housing stability post-discharge. Some of the YP we spoke with did benefit from living in an independent living option (ILO), and were excited to live on their own.

She had another daughter that was in foster care. So we kind of all got along really good and really well. That was the coolest. That was, it was all right. It was a good experience.

Supportive family, which includes biological, extended, and foster families, are a key protective factor for housing stability post-discharge. One of the young people we interviewed was financially supported by DCFS to live with her sisters prior to transitioning from care. She then transitioned to living with another sister who was also a former youth in care. Both sisters felt positively about their housing situation and were both generally positive about their transition period. Similarly, another young person we interviewed talked about living with a family he was close with in his community, and how that living arrangement supported his transition to college.
Another protective factor for YP transitioning out of care is the Youth Housing Advocacy Program (YHAP) and the Family Unification Voucher (FUP)/Fostering Youth to Independence Initiative (FYI). As described elsewhere in this report, YHAP can only serve YP until 21 if they are referred to FUP/FYI. FUP and FYI can serve YP after they turn 23. Most of the YP we spoke with were not familiar with these programs, except for two young people who had received a FUP voucher. More young people and caseworkers should know about FUP, as it was a helpful tool for those who had access to it.

**Risk Factors Undermining Housing Stability**

Almost every young person interviewed referenced a negative experience with housing prior to transitioning out of care or post-discharge. Some of the risk factors that YP raised that might affect their housing stability include lack of community safety, inexperience with living independently prior to transitioning, and lack of proximity of housing to work and school. Perhaps the largest risk to housing stability that YP spoke about was an unexpected life event that may push them into a financial crisis. This could be a pregnancy, medical or mental health crisis, and/or employment or education issues. One dually-involved young person talked about how their housing instability directly led to incarceration post-discharge, saying: “I ended up losing hope and going to prison cause I was left out there homeless [and] sick and didn’t know what else to do.”

Negative housing experiences in care that may have contributed to instability post-discharge cut across housing types in DCFS. Youth in care talked about challenges with foster parents, TLP/ILO staff, and peers in care.

During the transition period, YP we interviewed sometimes struggled to secure the type of housing they thought would be best for them at that time. Some of the young people we spoke with knew the type of housing that would be sustainable and healthy for them when they transitioned out of care, but sometimes were not able to pursue their preferred option. In one example, an 18-year old dually-involved respondent said she was leaving DCFS because the agency would only support her to live with her father, with whom she did not have a positive relationship, and she wanted to be able to live with her boyfriend instead. Other young people said that they did not have the option of living independently while in care, based on the assessment of their case manager. YP in the DCFS Statewide Youth Action Board (SYAB) who participated in journey mapping spoke about provision of independent housing opportunities as a reward or punishment tool, so that YP who ‘misbehaved’ may not be allowed to live on their own. **These young people expressed that housing should be a right, not a reward.** YP also expressed that DCFS lacked transparency about who ‘got a house’ and who did not. Some of the young people we spoke with acknowledged their behavior challenges, but also thought that those challenges could have been avoided by living in their own space.

As mentioned above, one strategy DCFS can use to support unstably housed YP post-transition is to connect them with a FUP voucher. While most YP we spoke with who transitioned out of DCFS would have been eligible for the FUP voucher and YHAP/YCAP services, most of the YP we spoke with had not heard of the FUP voucher program. We spoke with one young person...
who did have a FUP voucher but who still faced challenges in paying rent and utilities and ended up not being able to stay at the subsidized apartment due to a change in work. This drives home the point that supportive services including education and employment and a supportive network are also critical to housing stability.

While the FUP voucher program provides critical housing supports, employment instability, especially, during the first year post-transition may create challenges for young people whose plans post-transition change once they have left the structures and supports of DCFS. Lastly, while outside of the scope of this project, like other forms of subsidized housing, not all young people who apply for housing necessarily receive it, and there may be a long wait until a young person is actually housed with a housing voucher. Additionally, young people may have particular challenges in navigating the FUP process after they age out of care, especially if they are experiencing housing instability while attempting to obtain the necessary documents to apply and locating housing.

One young person who did not receive a FUP voucher talked about struggling to pay rent despite transitioning to apartment due to lack of employment. As she said, "They're [DCFS] supposed to put me up in something that matched my income that I still can have extra money in my pocket. They placed me here. This rent is $625. I don't have nothing. I barely can pay for toilets tissues and deodorant and soap, toothpaste and stuff like that. Laundromat, got to go to the laundromat. I can't do none of that because I don't have extra money. Yes, I filled out the job application but I need, a high school diploma to also to get a good job.

The dually-involved YP who we interviewed overwhelmingly felt unsupported in identifying housing after leaving DJJ/DCFS. It is unclear whether there is miscommunication between the Aftercare specialists and the DCFS caseworkers, but the young people expressed not feeling supported with housing navigation by either system. For example, one young person who transitioned from Aftercare and was living with his sister said that he would be leaving her apartment soon, because: “People can get mad and put you out anytime. I don’t wanna go through that. So I just wanna have my own [apartment]. I can’t put myself outta my own house.”

There were a few examples of YP we interviewed who transitioned into stable housing with support from their ILO, TLP, or foster family working in coordination with their case manager. Regardless of whether the young person received support during their transition period, most YP struggled post-transition. One young person gave a specific example of how tenuous his housing situation was, when he left the ILO but was unable to move into his housing in Bloomington, where he would be attending school. In this case, he was able to receive housing support from DCFS for temporary living until he could move in.

The [DCFS] directory had a contact that was out here in Bloomington and kinda told me about services out here. And they got, and they [DCFS] paid for a hotel for me for a month. So that was something that was of help that I’m always very grateful for because I could’ve been homeless for a month and I’d have to really experience that, cause I had no choice.
The Journey Home, 2021

Relationships

I didn’t have my mama, my aunt raised me, so it was like, she wasn’t always good. She wasn’t always bad, but it was the hurtful things that she used to do to disappoint me or to make me angry. You know? Like when people say you could be traumatized by a lot of things that people do to a person, I was traumatized. You know what I’m saying? That made me angry because she was always angry, you know what I’m saying? Getting whoopings and that traumatized me, you know? And yeah, like losing a daughter; that hurts, you know what I’m saying? That hurts.

Key recommendations from young people on relationships with staff for YP serving agencies and organizations including DCFS and DJJ:

1. Hire staff who want to work with YP (‘who have compassion’), improve staff training, and ensure there is enough staff to spend sufficient and quality time with YP
2. Improve training on service and supports for foster parents
3. Identify a key point person that young people can connect to for answers, rather than ‘going down a rabbit hole’ trying to find an answer on their own
4. Dedicate a college caseworker for YP in college who can support them in navigating college-specific administration and life changes
5. Structure human resources so that caseworkers focus more on the young person and less on the administrative duties

YP we spoke with highlighted relationships in nearly every interview and journey mapping session as the most important factor to housing stability. These relationships included family, friends, peers, and caseworkers/youth-serving organization staff. The majority of interviewees (9) spoke about an adverse personal relationship in their life, while only half mentioned a positive relationship. In addition, there were more overall relational experiences that we identified as adverse than as positive. More YP expressed an adverse experience with staff as compared to those who expressed positive experiences.

And then the type of sister she is, she’s not going to lay there and let you do nothing; and it wasn’t even because of that; but she pushed me harder [so] I knew what I was getting into… that I was on the right track to being independent.

But my mom’s still around. This whole time my mom, me and my mom had an understanding that we honestly had to go to counseling. So my momma had, my mother had services that she had to do as well.
Protective Factors for Strong Relationships

YP mentioned family, relatives, peers, and staff as key protective factors in their transition process. A few of the young people we spoke with were living with siblings at the time of the interview, and at least two young people were planning to reunite with their mother after transitioning was complete. Two YP also mentioned their foster families as critical supports and a few young people mentioned connections to church and school as important factors for their stability post-discharge.

Young people also discussed how relationships with their own children were crucial to housing stability. Young people in the Chicago IYC talked specifically about their own family, their partners and their children as important factors in keeping their focus on housing and employment post-transition.

The caseworker and staff relationship was one of the more complicated relationships that young people talked about, especially in interviews. The young people who we spoke with were removed from their homes at various ages. Without any of the familial relationships necessary for child/youth development, young people who had been removed from their homes transferred those relationships to the only other adults around them—their caseworkers. Young people did talk about staff who were supportive of them, their transition, and their stability.

The positive relationships depended on the specific caseworker and the TLP or ILO organization. One young person said of his ILO, “They were very adamant about, showing love and care and understanding and kind of treating it as a family based”. Two of the young people we interviewed were pregnant while in care, but had mixed experiences of staff support during their pregnancies and postpartum. The young person who spoke positively about her experience talked about her home visiting nurse as an important support for her and her baby.

Dually-involved YP spoke much more about their DCFS caseworkers as compared to their Aftercare specialists. However, one young person did reference their Aftercare specialist as a

I’m big on, you know, family having those relationships because I consider my, I think I have an attachment disorder because of, you know, my past. So if I’ve built a relationship with you and we have that, you know, and you would just leave. Like, you know how sometimes you feel relationships with your caseworkers and y’all been with each other for years and then they just up and decide to leave. They’re gone. That’s a different type of pain right there because it’s like, dang, I just spent all my time talking to you, telling you not gonna tell somebody. That’s my whole life. So the relationships mean a lot to me, especially because I hate feeling alone.

But the problem is that unlike your own [kids] that connection will be broken at some point and you have to move on. You [the caseworker] might be able to move on because you’ve done this for so long, but we can’t, because we’ve established something and you’re all we have here, we don’t have family.
support for them, by sitting and having coffee and ‘talking about life’. Another young person talked about her day-reporting center, where her Aftercare specialist worked, as a positive influence in her life. While she referenced that when she left Aftercare she would no longer need to go to the center, she also stated that if she had housing issues after transitioning, she would contact the staff there to help her. Her reflection highlights the importance of staff forging connections at community-based organizations to allow YP to have a support network when needed after transitioning, so they are not on their own.

Most of the YP who had positive relationships with staff talked about a transition cliff, or a sudden loss of the relationship with staff upon transition. Perhaps because of the quality of those relationships, losing them was traumatic for young people.

Strong family, peer, and staff relationships are critical to overcoming trauma. Importantly, what the interviews with YP who had left care made clear was that strong relationships while in care are not enough to continue to support young people after they transition. DCFS and DJJ must have an intentional and resourced effort to ensure that YP have sustained, stable relationships with friends, family/kin, and mentors once they leave care too.

**Risk for Gaps in Relationship Supports**

In particular, young people cited adverse, severed, and/or lack of relationships with family as highly traumatic, and as experiences that affected them as they were transitioning out of care. An important risk that must be addressed prior to YP transitioning is the ways in which these family relationship traumas may continue to affect housing stability post-transitioning. The most common experience of trauma that YP shared with us through the interviews was separation from their mothers. Young people talked about getting in trouble for ‘running away’ from DCFS care and back to their mothers, and expressed frustration at denials for housing close to their moms. When asked about her current system of support, one young person who was dually-involved said, *I feel like when they took me away from my mom, I really didn’t need to be in DCFS. My mom was a good parent and she was … they said she smoked weed but it’s medical marijuana because of her health problems, she had pain so they gave her medical and she smoked that for her health and her pain and stuff. But I feel like that they sent and took me away from her talking about she was an unfit parent. She really wasn’t. Yeah, she will take care of me.*

As mentioned above, without close family, many YP looked to caseworkers to play a key support role for them. For that reason, caseworker neglect, poor communication, and/or high turnover was often cited by the YP we interviewed as particularly harmful.

Most of the YP we spoke with...
identified at least one adverse experience with staff, due to neglect, poor communication, lack of professionalism, or lack of caring. For example, one dually involved young person mentioned not seeing her DCFS caseworker for most of the time she was in a DJJ facility.

Young people who did not have positive relationships with staff talked about needing to be self-reliant as they transitioned out of care.\textsuperscript{32} While self-sufficiency\textsuperscript{33} is often talked about in child welfare research and programming as having the skills or economic means to support yourself, self-reliance is the feeling that, in the words of one young person, ‘I’m just gonna have to realize I’m in this by myself.’ Self-reliance did not reflect an optimism around independence as much as having to do things on their own, because they did not have anyone else to support them.

A few of the young people in the journey mapping sessions, and the two sisters we interviewed, said friends were important during their transition. However, no one else referenced their friends as an important aspect of their transition period.

Other young people recommended that DCFS and DJJ should offer more opportunities for YP to take part in community activities to meet and get to know other young people – especially for the purpose of finding roommates for future housing. These friendships are as critical as other key relationships in young people’s lives, such as caseworkers or aftercare specialists will end after transition, but building key positive relationships can last beyond the transition period.

\textit{That’s, that was my issue. I came down here trying to trust everybody and be friends with everybody instead of focusing on myself. People are gonna use you until they can’t use you no more. So really all I got to say is just stick to yourself and know your worth. Don’t let nobody take advantage of you. Don’t let nobody tell you you can’t do something because only you can stop you from doing something.}
Department of Juvenile Justice, Illinois Youth Centers

Reentry and Discharge Planning Timeline

- Reentry planning
  - Staff should begin within 30 days of placement but only 12% do, +19% of staff begin within 72 hrs
  - 7% of staff begin within the first 14 days
  - 14% of staff begin within first 3 months

- Discharge from facility: Enter Aftercare

- Discharge planning
  - Staff should begin within 72 hours of release from Aftercare but there is no consensus on when staff begin discharge planning

- Rejoin family or community

Housing Instability

- 95% of respondents think that at least one young person they have personally worked with in the past year is experiencing or will experience housing instability upon discharge.

- 41% of staff work with at least one young person who had to stay in placement longer than necessary due to housing issues.

Linkages, Information, and Trainings

- Staff most often reported facilitating linkages to services for: SUDs (67%), behavioral health (63%) and employment (58%).

- Staff most often reported providing information for services for employment (72%), SUDs (65%) and community relationships (65%).

- 84% of staff believe that housing should be a top priority of their job but only 63% say that it actually is.

- Housing fell in the bottom three of service areas staff had received information and/or training in in the past 12 months and was by far the number one area that staff expressed wanting more training in.

Barriers

Respondents across the state reported that “family-related issues” was the number one barrier in securing housing for youth.

- 25% Family-related issues
- 18% Shortage of affordable housing
- 15% Unemployment
- 13% Inability of youth to manage lease, timely payment of rent/utilities
- 8% Racism

While 82% of staff working with youth in Cook County identified unemployment as a main barrier to housing instability, only 20% of staff working in non-Cook and Champaign counties reported it as a barrier to housing instability. Family-related issues also appeared as a top barrier to housing instability.

Barriers: Behavioral Health and Substance Use Disorders

Respondents identified lack of transportation and lack of youth motivation as key barriers to receiving to behavioral health and substance use disorders services.

Substance use disorders:

- 45%
- 39%
- 8%
- 8%
- 3%
Illinois Department of Child and Family Services
Discharge Planning

**Linkages, Information, and Trainings**
67% of staff reported facilitating actual linkages to housing followed closely by employment (63%) and behavioral health (63%).

78% of staff reported providing information on housing followed closely by education (74%) and employment (70%).

There were important regional differences in providing information: 92% of respondents in Cook had provided information on housing compared to only 67% of respondents in non-Cook regions.

67% of respondents reported having received training on housing.

There was a major discrepancy between respondents in Cook and non-Cook regions receiving trainings on housing. 91% of Cook County providers reported having received training on housing supports, while only 47% of staff in non-Cook regions reported having received training on housing supports.

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Total Respondents: 27

**Housing Instability**
42% of respondents reported that youth they worked were experiencing housing instability.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>None</th>
<th>A few (≤ 10%)</th>
<th>Some (11-50%)</th>
<th>Many - Most (&gt;50%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>42%</td>
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**Barriers**
Respondents across the state reported that the shortage in affordable housing was the number one barrier in securing housing for youth.

- Shortage of affordable housing: 23%
- Unemployment: 16%
- Inadequate wage for housing market: 13%
- Inability of youth to manage lease, timely payment of rent/utilities: 9%
- Landlord bias in renting to youth: 9%

More non-Cook region respondents reported landlord bias in renting to youth and inadequate wage as barriers for youth in securing housing, while Cook County respondents reported unemployment as a major barrier in securing housing for youth.

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**Behavioral Health**
Respondents identified ‘youth motivation’ and transportation as key barriers to receiving behavioral health and substance use disorders services.

- Behavioral health: 27%
- Lack of transportation: 20%
- Lack of youth motivation: 11%
- Conflicts with work/school schedule: 9%
- Shortage of services that are youth-friendly: 4%
- Shortage of services that are available in your area: 3%

**Substance Use Disorders**
- Substance use disorders: 31%
- 19%
- 19%
- 19%
- 16%
Supportive, wraparound services during transition

When I was working jobs and stuff they told me keep doing [what] I got to do, they see that I keep my apartment clean, my area clean and stuff, they keep praising for that. When I was with [TLP], they even help me find new jobs and stuff, they gave me advice.

Key recommendations about transitional supports and services for YP serving agencies and organizations including DCFS and DJJ:

1. Include a mix of life skills from budgeting, to building credit, to cooking classes
2. Provide linkages to recreational programs that also connect youth in care to other youth in care
3. Provide driving lessons
4. Learn how to pay bills
5. Learn how to navigate different social service systems (SSI, DHS)
6. Learn skills and trades including: typing, construction, culinary

Linkages to employment, education, and healthcare are all important components of housing stability for YP in transition. Some of the skills, resources, and tools that DCFS provided during the transition process were helpful to the YP who received them. The challenge is that while some YP received an entire binder full of ‘life skills’ resource from their case manager when they left care, the experience of young people receiving resources was varied. Similar to receiving housing, receiving life skills resources seemed tied to either a young person’s behavior or if they had a ‘good caseworker.’ Even the young people who described positive experiences with their caseworker acknowledged that they were lucky and that they knew other YP were not as lucky. While young people did provide examples of when their housing, life skills, and education needs were met, the areas in which YP identified unmet needs were in housing, education and employment, and navigating institutional administrative challenges.

Protective Factors related to Supportive Services

Employment and education: Two of the young people we spoke with were part of the DCFS Youth in College program, and did acknowledge the importance of the support they were receiving to attend school. Young people also talked about feeling pressure to complete school either due to aftercare (parole) requirements or because of the monetary benefits from DCFS. Young people in journey mapping sessions talked about challenges of finishing high school because they moved around a lot.

Increasing high school graduation rates and college enrollment is a priority of DCFS, and so there should be plenty of supports for YP to complete high school and pursue higher education without
barriers. YP also acknowledged the importance of education, especially after they transitioned in securing work and stable housing. One young person in DJJ talked about his experience in one IYC as very positive because he was able to achieve his high school diploma although he later did say that it was challenging to retrieve the documentation of his completion.

**Young people** who were not in school talked about the employment-related support that they received as they transitioned. DJJ and DCFS staff identified employment supports as a key strategy to promote housing stability. None of the dually-involved YP, however, spoke about specific job placement supports.

**Life skills:** Other examples of young people’s needs that were met by DCFS and DJJ were related to life skills. The young people we interviewed could list various life skills that they had learned during the transition period. Several YP talked about feeling like the life skills information came too quickly, and that it felt overwhelming or too much at once. The young people also reflected that they did not know at the time how important that information would later be.

One young person credited his ILO site for supporting his rapid transition when he said, “I had to figure out how to get 21 years in two, and I credit them because they [ILO] somehow did that. They [ILO] were able to help me adult ultimately.”

One young person, as mentioned above, talked about receiving a comprehensive transition binder from their caseworker, which included everything from paying utility bills, to saving money, and included some ‘life hacks’ as well. They suggested that all YP leaving care should receive something like this binder, because it was and has remained really helpful in navigating the transition.

**Risk Factors Related to Supportive Services**

**Employment and education:** YP reported challenges while pursuing education and employment pathways, related to administrative issues with payment, fear of debt, and fear of ‘messing up’ and losing both education and housing. One of the interviewees talked about the stress of receiving multiple notifications from his school that his payment was late, and having to explain that DCFS should be managing the payment. This young person also talked about the challenge of transitioning into university life, and that his caseworker did not reach out to him during the entire transition period to check in.

Similar to housing, some young people told us that their ability to access employment and education resources was dependent on their caseworker. While some YP talked about caseworkers who provided linkages and support to employment and education opportunities, other YP, especially those who are dually-involved, were left to navigate the complex system alone. One young person shared that she had to figure out how to enroll in college without any help, while she was in

I got all the necessary things. We had case workers that really did care. We didn’t have lazy case workers, they always made sure they gave us info. They even sent us. I was in MyTime [DCFS job readiness and employment program], and that was to help me get a job, and I went there for a whole week; they helped us maneuver.

I was kinda expecting like no favoritism, no picking sides. Like when I, need to talk to you, like be there. Like if I’m telling you I need help finding a job, like sit down with me, help me fill out applications, just be there, provide help and the resources that this program is supposed to offer. Instead staff want to sit on their phones or, just little stuff.
DCFS care. She said, “I told them [her caseworkers] I wanted to go back to school. I wanted to go to college. And with me being from [outside of Illinois], I gotta like get my transcripts and stuff and they was not trying to help me.

Another young person talked about being a new mom and feeling disappointed in the lack of support from her caseworkers.

YP had varied experiences at each stage of the transition planning process. However, most (8) of the YP we interviewed had the same experience of being fully on their own in looking for education or employment opportunities after transitioning.

**Life skills/administrative burdens**

Navigating the web of DCFS services and administrative requirements as well as social services, such as Medicaid, Supplementary Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Supplemental Security Income (SSI), is challenging, and YP need support prior to transitioning to understand the different systems. One YP recommended having one person they could go to, who would always be available to support him. While ideally this is a caseworker, his experience showed that inconsistency across caseworkers makes services that much harder to access.

The YP we interviewed also talked about wanting more information on how to sustain housing, such as managing money, rent, employment, and credit. They felt that either there was not enough information, or that the information came too quickly and was challenging to absorb. While YP in DCFS attend a financial literacy class as part of the C21 process, YP need to be able to safely practice those skills through trial and error prior to transitioning. A similar financial literacy class as part of DJJ’s Aftercare does not currently exist. As one young person said, “And it wasn’t so much about the money, but it was so much. You get things like you get clothes, you get stuff, you never had, you know what I’m saying? I never had gym shoes. I never I had my hair did. You know, like you get those things like, you know what I’m saying and I can’t even explain it. It’s like the money. It helped. And now I wish I could just take it back. Cause now it’s hard.”

One young person we interviewed talked about not being selected for an ILO placement because she was told she was not able to manage her money well. YP expressed that it was not necessarily realistic or fair to expect a young adult to make the same decisions as a middle-aged adult around finances, and a more holistic program should use teaching moments to allow young people to grow into responsible budgeters. Many of the young people didn’t feel ready to leave at 21, perhaps because they hadn’t had a chance to fail safely.

Other YP thought that at 21, they could be ready to transition, but that the transition process should begin earlier.
Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder services

Seven of the YP we spoke with reported that they had experienced a mental health challenge that affected their life at least once. While young people did not talk about mental health or substance use disorder (SUD) services as frequently as housing, employment, education, or life skills, for a few young people, managing mental health challenges and/or SUDs was a part of their transition to adulthood. A few of the young people talked about battling depression and in one case suicidal ideation. That young person reflected on that time in their life, saying, “It was like, my life just seems so unrealistic and it just is like, I don’t want to deal with this stuff anymore.

As mentioned above, young people who did have mental health challenges struggled losing support once they transitioned out of care. None of the young people talked about a continuity of care once they transitioned. One young person talked about needing medication as the cause of his arrest. He said, “so I do the best I can to pay for my medication, which led me to being back incarcerated.”

Three of the YP we spoke with identified struggling with substances. Only one young person spoke explicitly about supports that her TLP offered to her, while the other two young people, said they managed on their own. Depending on the organization, and the region of Illinois in which YP live, the mental health and SUD service may greatly vary. However, the interviews indicated that, to the degree they wanted to engage, young people in care were able to access services but faced challenges in maintaining that care once they transitioned.

They wanted me to go to substance abuse counseling. And I was like, no, cause that’s not going to do anything. But that’s one thing that I am, I’m honest with myself. I told them, I said, I’m not going to, I said, y’all could stay me, but I’m not good at this now I’m not ready to change. Yeah. I’m not ready to stop drinking.
Transition Process

Key recommendations around the transition process from young people and staff include:

1. Start the transition process younger (or earlier for DJJ)
2. Caseworkers should prepare YP for C21 meetings, so they know what the meeting will be about and they can prepare questions in advance. (DCFS)
3. Supports should be extended until 25-30 or until a young person feels stable.
4. Connect YP to Foster Care Alumni prior to transitioning (DCFS)

Four of the 12 young people we interviewed had participated in the Countdown to 21 (C21) process, and one young person who had not transitioned out of care yet (but was in school) had participated in one of the C21 meetings. Overall, there were mixed experiences of the C21 process (formerly known as D-CIPP). Some young people thought that it was a positive experience that helped them to plan their transition and also thought they had a strong voice in the process.

All of that… All of that [voice] was given to me there. My whole stay at [placement] because that’s, that’s what their main goal is, is to prepare you for events to be on your own. Totally. From the day you stepped foot in [placement], it’s all about discharge. It’s all about discharge planning.

When I was doing the D-CIPP, the case worker couldn’t make it and my sister was there, and they explained all the goals… when you’re getting ready to emancipate that’s the D-CIPP. You was able to bring anybody. Anybody could come to the D-CIPP.

However, for some YP, the C21 process was not supportive in their transition planning, due to the structure, the process, or the preparation. As one young person said, “The D-CIPP process for one was terrible. It was. It was a joke to me and actually I still joke about it because it had questions that you get asked in every quarter that that ultimately seemed irrelevant.”

Another young person talked about seeing the benefit in the C21 process, but that the structure of the meetings was challenging. This young person reflected, “Obviously I would want them to explain stuff better to me or like, you know, take it way slower than the pace they take it in. Also like before the meeting, preparing like this is where we’re going to go over, this is what this is for. And it makes it more complicated because they haven’t talked with me in so long and like, so like they’d kind of just do everything at once. So it was kind of [a lot to] take it all in.”
Aftercare

Three of the YP that we spoke with were dually-involved and had been through Aftercare. One young person said the role of her Aftercare Specialist was to ‘make sure I’m good’ [in reference to behavior]. However, she spoke more specifically about the benefits of her day reporting center, where her Aftercare Specialist worked, which provided strong educational and relationship support to her as she transitioned. Another young person spoke positively about her Aftercare specialist that she began working with in the facility (although she was only in the facility for a very short time). A third young person said that his Aftercare specialist gave him a lot of information on employment and housing but did not help him actually find a job, or locate more sustainable housing.

In general, young people said their Aftercare specialist and their DCFS caseworkers did not work together during the transition planning process, despite the fact that all three of the young people were attempting to transition from DCFS during their Aftercare period.
Recommendations

Through the many stories and experiences that the YP we spoke with shared, one of the clearest themes was that the current transition process feels like a cliff to young people. The current process does not create a strong enough bridge to support young people after they transition as they face the myriad of challenges that are part of navigating the world. Perhaps more importantly, the process does not, in the opinion of the young people we spoke with, adequately prioritize relationship-building among family, friends, and/or mentors to support young people after they transition. Young people with experiences across the spectrum of housing instability consistently spoke about needing support to fall back on after transitioning. While it is not the responsibility or purpose of institutions like DCFS and DJJ to remain in the lives of YP after they transition, it should be the responsibility of DCFS and DJJ to effectively build the knowledge, skills, resources and personal networks of YP prior to their transition to set them up for success. Additionally, it should also be the responsibility to DCFS and DJJ to establish, repair, or solidify meaningful relationships between systems-involved YP and trusted adults and peers, such as family, friends, or mentors who will remain in young people’s lives post-transition.

There are 6 main recommendations that emerged from the journey mapping sessions, the interviews, and the staff surveys. Each of the recommendations are supported by quotes from young people, and examples of emerging practices are provided in the text and in Appendix 3.

Prevent systems involvement

I think, you know, being in DCFS traumatizing too cause every morning when I was 15 and 16 in group homes, I’d always have to wake up and fight staff and kids and defend myself because staff and kids was grouped up together... I was working ... and I had [group home] staff members who used to mess up my uniform and it kind of messed me up a little bit. Every day I went to work hiding feelings because I don’t know what it’s like to be around normal people. Like most of my teenage years growing up I’ve been around institutions and I wanna get out this situation. Give them [young people] more freedom. Not have them locked up, like being in a cage or something.

There is a great deal of evidence about the adverse effects of removing children and YP from their homes. The experience of home removal contributes to underlying challenges that young people may face in achieving healing and stability as they transition to adulthood. The Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 provides new funding to prevent family separation. The funding supports state child welfare systems, and improves linkages to substance use disorder and behavioral health services. This is an opportunity to significantly reduce the practice of family separation.

A recent study by Testa et al., 2019 examined the effect of the Federal Permanency Innovation Initiative grants, which sought to improve family reunification and permanence among YP removed from their families, and included Illinois as a grantee. The study found that there was limited evidence that any of the six PII grantees increased family permanence or improved well-being among YP. The findings prompted the authors to “fundamentally question exactly what the child welfare system is designed to accomplish and what interventions best serve children and families”. The authors go on to say:

We know that lifelong connections to supportive adults are key to improving outcomes for youth in foster care. We also know that however strained or struggling the relationships, the most important sources of such connections are parents and extended family. Thus a critical part of the solution is to develop relationship-focused interventions and supports with parents early and universally to strengthen protective factors. With the vast amount of research now available on trauma, brain science, and wellbeing, child welfare can’t just be concerned with securing foster care beds and protecting the physical safety of maltreated children. Yes, physical safety is core...
to the mission of child welfare, but its presence alone doesn’t equate to social and emotional wellbeing, nor does it necessarily guard against repeated cycles of maltreatment across generations.38

Diversion programs, which provide alternative pathways for YP instead of incarceration, are a key prevention strategy, which proved effective in reducing re-arrest and future, more serious convictions among YP.39 A recent quasi-experimental evaluation of Florida’s implementation of Parenting with Love and Limits, a program that diverts YP from facilities to community-based services, showed lower rates of recidivism, felony conviction, and facility placement among participants.40 Illinois and DJJ have made important strides towards increasing YP diversion pathways. For example, in the past 5 years, the total DJJ Illinois Youth Center population has declined significantly from around 750 YP to around 116 YP (in February 2021).41 One of the main diversion pathways that DJJ uses is Redeploy, which creates alternative pathways to incarceration for YP. An evaluation of Redeploy Illinois (from 2006-2010) found that YP who completed the program had fewer future convictions compared to those who did not complete the program.42 Additionally, Cook County has implemented three Restorative Justice Community Courts focused on young people, in Lawndale, Englewood, and Avondale. The purpose of the RJCCs are to “empower the community to create solutions to repair the harm caused by crime and conflict.” It is important to ensure that alternative pathways replace traditional juvenile detention rather than just delaying YP from entering a harsher, and more traumatic, adult system.

Any discussion of preventing systems involvement in young people must also include discussion of entrenched structural racism. Black YP are overrepresented in both the child welfare and the juvenile justice system. Therefore, preventing systems involvement requires an intentional racial equity assessment of the ways in which these systems historically and currently interact with Black and Brown communities, and an anti-racist approach to develop community-driven YP safety strategies.

Prioritize kinship and relationship strengthening prior to transitioning

In addition, just letting me know that ‘we’re [the caseworkers] not here [for you], we’re just here as your advice givers. No longer coaches or parents.’ Just let them know that this [our relationship] is done. That would have been nice to know.

YP and staff highlighted relationships as a critical component for stability. YP identified that family unification, mentorship and peer-support should all be strengthened. Staff surveyed in DJJ and DCFS both cited the challenges of family strengthening and family reunification, and acknowledged the importance of family support in housing stability post-transition. DCFS does support kinship strengthening and family placements, but there is room for improvement with new provisions for kinship strengthening in the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018. Investing in relative caregiving is highly effective in reducing child entry into the child welfare system and increasing family social support and resources.43 Focusing on ways to provide wraparound supports to relatives who become kinship guardians is a key strategy to preventing DCFS involvement.

With some families, DJJ implements multisystem therapy (MST), an evidence-based program that reduces recidivism among young people who are reentering home and community from the juvenile justice system, through strengthening relationships family relationships.44 However, the provision of this service depends on location and the availability of MST therapists. While ‘family- related issues’ was most frequently cited as a barrier to YP securing stable housing among the DJJ Aftercare specialists, there is a limit to the number of therapists currently trained in MST across the state.45 As mentioned above, the PLL pilot implemented in Florida, New York, and Illinois has also shown positive results for reducing recidivism by building and strengthening family connections.

Lastly, mentorship and peer support is an important component of transitioning. One young person
shared during journey mapping that they credit a friend they met at the library as the reason why they were able to get off the streets and access housing and a job, and that he trusted that person because they shared similar experiences. Similarly, a recent report by Young Invincibles highlighted the importance of apprenticeships, mentorship and peer support for young people.\textsuperscript{46} Paid mentoring roles not only provide jobs for YP, but can also provide critical skills and employment pathways for YP as well.

Programs, policies and staff training should be strengths-based, trauma-informed, and developmentally appropriate

\textit{When they get 21 just don’t put kids anywhere. You know what I’m saying? Try helping us build. You know? Love us more. You know? Try what y’all can and something our moms and dads couldn’t do you know what I’m saying? We come up in the system to get love—not hurt and bruised and mistreated}

Based on interviews and journey mapping, both DCFS and DJJ sometimes use punishment and reward systems as behavior management tools, that can play a role in influencing YP opportunity, specifically for housing. YP in the DCFS Statewide Youth Advisory Board talked about how a point system would determine whether they were able to access an ILO placement—one of the few options that YP have to be able to try living independently. Similarly, young people across the interviews talked about ‘good/bad’ distinctions, and how whether staff thought they were a ‘good or bad kid’, could determine access to housing, employment, or education opportunities.

The reward/punishment system, and effect on YP opportunity also aligns with other research conducted in Illinois on housing instability post-discharge.\textsuperscript{47} In the \textit{Youth Thrive Framework} which outlines a trauma-informed framework for working with YP, Samuels & Blitz say,

\begin{quote}
\textit{“It is absolutely critical to recognize that since young adults' brains and their cognitive functions are still developing, all older youth deserve access to opportunities for positive youth development and a second chance (and sometimes additional chances) if necessary. In fact, these scientific insights should become a mandate for practice and policy (Samuels & Blitz, 2014).”}
\end{quote}

All staff who connect with YP including but not limited to caseworkers, Aftercare specialists, corrections officers, and the courts should have a strong understanding of trauma and adolescent development. All policies, such as putting YP in restraints or removing children from youth in care, and practices, such as the transition process, should be re-evaluated with a trauma-informed and equity-focused lens.

The 2018 DJJ annual report states that Aftercare specialists and IYC staff had training regarding trauma-informed youth work.\textsuperscript{48} Several of the YP we spoke to described behavior from DJJ staff in facilities that was actively harmful. Becoming a trauma-informed agency takes time, commitment, and funding, and may be nearly impossible in an IYC prison-like environment. For this reason, the shift away from the IYC building to more residential centers as outlined in the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century Illinois Transformation Model is an important first step. Continuing the trauma-informed training of staff, and intentionally hiring staff with a background in trauma-informed care and YP work is also key.
Support YP to live independently in a safe environment before transitioning

I felt like the three months leading up to the kids exiting care, I feel like they should have a person set specifically for like job fair and stuff like, that will sit down, help you fill out an application and show you how to do a resume because I don’t even know how to do a resume. And like just simple stuff like that. They need to take more time out of their day to actually sit down with us one on one and give us the resources we need. Whether it’s going to a temp agency. Like I feel like when the kid’s discharged they should get a packet with all that information on it. Like where to go, like all the different temp agency, the different shelters, drop-ins. I feel like that’s what they need to give the kids as a part of the exit care package.

Based on interviews with YP and staff surveys, transition planning should begin younger, involve key relational supports, and include a collaboration between DCFS and DJJ for dually-involved YP. Both Aftercare specialists and YHAP staff we surveyed, along with a few YP we interviewed, recommended that transition/discharge planning begin much earlier both for DCFS and for DJJ. In looking at other states, Minnesota foster youth begin independent living skill development and transition planning at age 14. Several of the YP recommended extending housing past their transition period and beginning to move into independent housing before transitioning as a strategy that would support them during the transition process.

We heard from the young people we interviewed that they would feel safer and more stable having a connection to stable housing that they can fall back on as they navigate their first lease, job, and transition period. Some young people talked about wanting to start working on their independence prior to transition. In many ways, this is what an Independent Living Option (ILO) allows for, and this program is being expanded further through the Youth Villages (YV) LifeSet program, currently being piloted in Cook County. The YV LifeSet approach supports YP to live with whomever they choose in the community and provides financial, educational, and employment supports. Importantly, YV LifeSet also allows YP to return back to more structured environments if they face challenges in living independently, with family, or with roommates. The program will be evaluated after the 3-year pilot.

Similarly, as described above, one young person who was in the process of discharging from Aftercare spoke very positively about her experience with Youth Outreach Services, which provides Aftercare support services such as group therapy, online school, and employment connections, among a myriad of community services. She reflected that if she needed housing support after leaving Aftercare, she would reach back to her connections at YOS. Creating strong bridges with community points that can act as both a safety net and a service connector for YP before discharge that extend past the transition period is a key strategy to promote stability.

Improve, strengthen, and sustain wraparound supports such as employment and education, and mental health and substance use disorder services

I think that the education… is very helpful. I think that they should modify it, though, because college is hard and if you’ve never been to college and, or if you’ve been through like a state system of education, you’re not ready for college. So the, purview of failing, it should be expanded.

Two of the young people we spoke with were part of DCFS’s ETV program and were receiving funding to attend college. Young people reflected on wanting the flexibility to make mistakes and
maintain funding and their connections to the program. Multiple participants said they felt that getting kicked out of the program for failing a class or not getting good enough grades was not effective. Young people who are in DCFS care or who have left, who are in college should be connected to organizations such as Foster Progress as part of transition planning so that they have continued support and mentorship as they navigate college life.

DJJ and DCFS could partner more with state workforce boards, under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). In 2016, for example, DCFS and Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity launched “Building Futures” which expanded “state resources to improve employment outcomes for YP transitioning from foster care.” It is unclear whether the program was successful in improving employment outcomes, but future investments could build on such partnerships. Additionally, homegrown programs, which combine transitional jobs with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), such as READI Chicago within Heartland Alliance, could be effective in supporting the transition of YP who have experienced trauma that may impact their employment, particularly for YP leaving DJJ.

Many of the YP we spoke with through interviews or journey mapping also spoke to wanting to work and/or volunteer to support young people who had been through similar experiences. **Youth-serving organizations and agencies should prioritize hiring YP and providing pathways to growth and leadership within the organizations.** Organizations like UCAN for example, intentionally focus on hiring alumni and providing pathways towards leadership within their organization⁴⁹. Given the opportunity, YP with lived experience can better identify solutions to improve systems.

Young people identified needing a continuity of mental health and SUD services as they leave DCFS and DJJ. While there were generally positive responses to the MH/SUD services offered prior to transitioning, some YP had challenges in maintaining services once they transitioned.

Lastly, it is critical that as young people transition they understand and are aware of their potential eligibility for Supplemental Security Income (SSI). One young person we interviewed talked about how important SSI was in maintaining her rent – despite reporting challenges with buying other necessary items. Other studies, notably a study from Klodnick and Samuels, highlighted the importance of SSI enrollment among YP with serious mental health diagnoses to maintain housing stability.⁵⁰

**Increase affordable housing options for YP while continuing to support YP during the post-care transition**

*Why did y’all put me here? Yeah. I’m not struggling but I’m struggling… Y’all rushed me here and my low income, I could’ve been in low income. Still seeing all my little money, like better let y’all rush me into an apartments, something I can’t even afford. Yes, I’m blessed. I’m very blessed because if it weren’t for that man upstairs, you know I wouldn’t even be where I’m at today, but I’m blessed. [But] y’all could have, you know, put me in a low income, y’all could have put me in a section 8 or something like that, you know, instead of put me up to something that don’t fit my income.*

It is also important to acknowledge that there are larger structural factors that influence housing stability among YP that are not in the control of institutions like DCFS and DJJ. For example, the lack of affordable housing is one of the main barriers that YP and staff that we surveyed identified to addressing YP housing instability. For YP who may not be eligible for a FUP voucher, or for YP who need more wraparound services than YHAP can provide, there are other some examples of trauma-informed supportive housing for YP around the country that have a potential to show positive outcomes. One example is Chelsea Foyer in New York City which provides housing for YP experiencing homelessness or housing instability and YP who are leaving the
child welfare system and juvenile justice system. A recent evaluation of Chelsea Foyer showed positive outcomes related to employment and education among YP 1-year after leaving. Another example is My First Place, which is part of First Place for Youth, in California. My First Place is specifically for YP aging out of foster care and allows 36 months of housing for YP who have either left care or are in extended care (18-21) and provides free rent on a shared apartment and includes a team-based supportive approach with a youth advocate, and education, employment, and housing specialists.

The FUP/FYI Voucher is one tool that could support YP transitioning from DCFS to a subsidized rental. Young people with a FUP/FYI also would receive supportive employment, housing navigation and cash assistance services through the Youth Housing Advocacy Program (YHAP) until the age of 23 as well as Youth Cash Assistance Program (YCAP). Currently [as of publication] only 16 Public Housing Authorities in Illinois are implementing FUP vouchers, and 1 is implementing FYI which limits where young people can live, and could impact their employment and education options and ability to live close to family. Dworsky et al., found that there was wide variability among public housing authorities (PHAs) in the implementation of the FUP program. One of the main findings of that study was that the original 18-month voucher was not enough time for a young person to fully transition to stability after discharge (the new FYI is 36 months). However, importantly, the study found that 41% of the PHAs who responded to the survey thought that time limit should be removed all together.

Young people who are leaving DJJ are eligible for FUP/FYI vouchers as long as they meet the basic eligibility requirements. However the dually-involved YP we spoke with were not familiar with the program. Caseworkers and Aftercare Specialists must be aware that FUP/FYI is an option for YP leaving DJJ and aging out of DCFS care who are at risk of homelessness. Another structural housing barrier that YP leaving DJJ may face is PHA lookback periods even though their records are technically expunged. Some PHAs do consider YP involvement with the juvenile justice system in determining housing eligibility – despite the fact that YP records should be expunged for most convictions when they turn 18. The recent Public Housing Access Bill which recently passed states that lookback periods are limited to 6 months from application among all PHA providers in Illinois, and that PHAs cannot consider records from DJJ. It is critical that that information is clear to all Aftercare specialists and young people leaving DJJ.

In terms of supporting YP leaving DCFS care, what became evident from our interviews and journey mapping sessions, was that while some YP may have a plan post-transition that seems solid, that plan might shift and change along with life and there needs to be a pathway to support if that happens. Currently in Illinois, YP are only eligible to receive YHAP after the age of 21 if they have a FUP voucher. However, based on our interviews, young people either were not aware of FUP/FYI or they may have had other housing plans at 21, but later on could still have benefited from YHAP and YCAP services. Therefore, examining if these services could be provided to young people until age 23 or later, regardless of their housing plan when they transitioned from care, could be impactful. See this summary on how Chafee funds could support YP transitioning from care.

Center youth-driven processes

But I’ve always felt like I’ve had a voice for myself... I hate not having a choice.

The importance of YP ownership in developing transition plans, protocols, and policies cannot be underscored. One of the products of this research was a YP electronic resource, Day2Day. We created this resource in partnership with the DCFS Statewide Action Board and the Alliance to End Homelessness in South Suburban Cook, and the input and direction of young people was invaluable. The DCFS Youth Advisory Board, for example, is a critical avenue for YP in care to have influence, but all youth-serving organizations within DCFS and DJJ should have active youth advisory and/or action boards. There should be attention and resources given to the policy
priorities of YABs to meaningfully influence youth-serving agencies and Illinois policy. These young leaders are closer to the issues and the solutions than adults designing the system. While DJJ is a different institution than DCFS, we advocate that some form of a youth advisory board within DJJ could provide needed accountability and lead to improvements in staff interactions with YP, reentry planning, and discharge planning.

**Looking Ahead**

Addressing youth homelessness requires a full systems approach. There is a new [Youth Homelessness Prevention Subcommittee](#) as part of the Governor’s Office, which includes representatives from DCFS, DJJ, IDOC, DHS, among other agencies and the Governor’s Office. This new initiative should be supported for a long enough period to measure the effect of the taskforce on reducing youth homelessness and potentially create a shared financial model across agencies to adequately fund this initiative. Importantly, this taskforce intentionally is hiring YP who have experience with DCFS and DJJ. A second example of cross-sector collaboration to support youth homelessness planning was this past year, led by the Alliance to End Homelessness in South Suburban Cook (SCC), as part of their [Youth Housing Development Project (YHDP) project](#). The SCC brought together key subject matter experts from across DCFS and DJJ, professionals from suburban Cook County-based homelessness prevention and workforce agencies, and most notably leaders from both the northern and southern suburban Cook County Youth Advisory Boards to develop a 5-year strategic plan to achieve absolute zero youth homelessness in suburban Cook County. Lastly, as the Illinois Interagency Council on Homelessness (IICH) transitions to the Supportive Housing Provider Association, we urge the IICH to take up the issue of youth homelessness prevention as key priority area. Only one young person we spoke with had actually connected with the homelessness system, but many were experiencing housing instability. Homelessness is a traumatic experience for anyone, and there needs to be a better connection across agencies to develop innovative and youth-led solutions to enact strong policies and programs that support YP to thrive.
Policy Actions

This project intentionally does not include direct legislative recommendations. We hope that policymakers and advocates are able to better understand what policies to advocate for by hearing the perspectives of YP and staff who work closely with YP. However, we do recommend the following resources to view clear legislative recommendations to improve housing stability among YP in transition:

1. Voices of Youth Count, [Child Welfare Recommendations](https://example.com)
2. [Away Home America](https://example.com)
3. [Think of Us](https://example.com)
Conclusion

Our findings highlight young people needed more support and a stronger network as they transitioned to adulthood, after leaving their respective institutions. There are clear areas of growth that staff and young people identified related to building stronger relationships pre-transition, and having more skills and resources to live independently, as well as improving staff hiring and training. DCFS and DJJ are aware that there is room to improve their transition planning, and indeed both agencies have started down that path. Both agencies are currently in the midst of working towards improving their transition planning processes. It is our hope that by centering the voices of young people in this report, their experiences can directly inform those decisions.

Ultimately, what we have heard over the past year from young people, advocates, and staff is that the transition period into adulthood for YP who are transitioning from DCFS and DJJ is challenging and exacerbated by age and program time limits. How do we, as a society, decide what it means to be a ‘YP’? Is it age? Development? Experience? Policies and practices hinge on whether a young person is 18, 21, 24, as largely arbitrary divisions of child/adult. A recent article by Sawyer et al., states that “the transition period from childhood to adulthood now occupies a greater portion of the life course than ever before at a time when unprecedented social forces, including marketing and digital media, are affecting health and wellbeing across these years.” The article goes onto suggest that a more appropriate transition period might be 25 or 26. As discussed above, many adolescents do not fully develop their brain executive functioning until early or perhaps mid-twenties. Traumatic experiences challenge adolescent development, and healing is heavily dependent on time and space; housing instability can itself compound existing trauma. We argue that it is different for everyone and heavily dependent on the time and space that young people have to heal without the compounding trauma of housing instability. Systems respond to a challenge sometimes through increasing connections and resources. There is a clear shortage in affordable housing for YP, and both YP and staff highlighted the need for an improved resource environment both in access and availability. There is a pressing need to address these gaps. Building and sustaining relationships may in fact be more complex, and does not does not fit easily into a strategic plan. However, we heard this theme repeatedly: as YP are navigating this transition period, they cannot, and should not, do it alone. That relationship might be with family, peers, mentors, or kin, but it cannot be a box checked on a discharge form—it has to be a resourced activity that begins early on to create that relational network. We must set up our young people to have a ‘squad’ in their court as they go on their journey to become thriving adults, and that relationship-building and strengthening must be the most important focus while they are still in care.

It is undeniable that young people who are leaving foster care and the juvenile justice system as young adults have faced challenges during their adolescence, many of which are related to larger structural issues including poverty, intergenerational trauma, racism, homophobia, transphobia and lack of access to needed behavioral health and/or SUD supports. The opportunities that a young person has should not be dictated by their circumstances or by decisions, they made as an adolescent. We must do better. We must invest in our YP as they become adults and support healing, stabilizing, and thriving.
Appendix 1: Adapted Youth Framework from Mendelson et. al

Protective Factors

- Access to Housing, Employment, Education, and Healthcare
- Neighborhood Cohesion, Safety, Access to recreational and wellness/faith-based spaces
- Supportive squad, wraparound supports, positive relationships
- High motivation, strong self-coping mechanisms

Risk Factors

- Structural racism, income inequality, lack of affordable housing, mental health stigma, homophobia
- Neighborhood violence, neighborhood disinvestment, adultism,
- High rates of school dropout and suspensions/expulsions; poorly trained/motivated employers and teachers/caseworkers
- Low emotional self-regulation; mental health challenges, substance use disorder

Connected

- Promotion
  - Managed trauma
- Prevention
  - Acknowledged trauma
- Reengagement
  - Unaddressed trauma

Under-attached

Disconnected
Appendix 2: Methods

Ethics
The study design was submitted to the Heartland Alliance IRB and was approved. A separate IRB application to work with the DCFS SYAB and to survey DCFS staff was also submitted and approved. All journey mapping and interviewees went through an informed consent process and the survey participants agreed to an online consent form.

Interviews

Data Collection: We used purposive sampling to identify young people to interview. Eligible youth were young people who were in the process of discharge (to transition within 3 months), and/or had left DJJ and/or DCFS within the past 2 years; all were ages 18-25. We partnered with social service providers in Chicago and Cook County, Day Reporting Centers, and DJJ, DCFS and Be Strong Families (which coordinates the SYAB), and the through various housing networks. We also posted flyers on social media, through ILO/TLP sites, Illinois State University and at Chicago Public Libraries. Lastly, we used snowball sampling approaches to identify more young people connected to youth that we interviewed.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 young people aged 18-25 in Chicago, Suburban Cook County, and Bloomington IL. One young person we spoke with did not transition out of DCFS or DJJ but was experiencing homelessness and wanted to share their experiences too. We included this young person’s experience in understanding experiences of housing instability, but not in transition planning; therefore, the total number of interviews reflected in the findings are 11. Interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes including the informed consent process. Each young person was given a $30 Visa gift card. Young people were provided with housing information and resources if requested, and we had information on hand for mental health support services if needed. 10 of the 12 interviews were audio recorded; for 1 interview, which included 2 participants, we took detailed notes rather than audio record at the request of the interviewees. All recordings were transcribed using Temi software, and the notes and transcripts were uploaded into Dedoose for analysis.

Data Analysis: All transcripts were read, and initial primary in vivo coding was conducted to identify basic transition theme areas including housing, education, employment, relationships, financial literacy, among others. Next, we grouped those codes into either a ‘life experience’, adverse/neutral/positive or a ‘resource need’, met/unmet. We included separate codes specific to the C21 components such as youth voice, support people, and transparency. We then secondarily coded the data with larger themes we viewed as emerging from the stories related to transitioning such as ‘trauma’, ‘self-reliance’, ‘support cliff’, ‘fear/instability’, and ‘excitement/optimism’. Once a team of 4 coders agreed on the codebook, we coded the data, with a primary coder and secondary coder assigned to each interview. The secondary coder co-coded a chunk of each primary coded interview. The lead researcher exported codes by descriptors and interviews to organize the data and understand the frequency of primary and secondary theme mentions across interviews. We did not quantify the codes within and across the interviews because due to the nature of the semi-structured interviews, some primary codes (i.e. housing, education, employment) would appear much more than others in certain interviews because of the experiences that a young person wanted to focus on.

Journey mapping:

Data Collection: We met with 6 groups of ranging sizes including: The DCFS Statewide Youth Action Board, the Alliance to End Homelessness in Suburban Cook County Youth Action Board, a group of dually-involved youth at Indian Oaks Academy, a residential placement site for youth within DJJ, and two groups of young people at Illinois Youth Centers (IYCs). Youth ranged in ages from 18-24. The facilitation process lasted 2 hours. All young people went through an informed consent, were compensated with a $30 Visa gift card per session, and provided with refreshments and transportation when needed.

We began the journey mapping process by asking young people to envision housing stability and what housing stability means to them. Young people started writing down ideas on post it notes and grouping them in an idea of housing. Next, we asked youth to think about a shared collective identity among their
group. Whose experiences were they representing? We asked youth to think about first their experiences, and then a broad identity, when thinking about informing a transition process. Then we worked with youth to fill in the gap between identity and journey starting point and the group’s self-definition of housing stability. We asked young people to identify the ‘resources they need to know and to have’ and who their ‘squad’ is to help them reach those resources. We then asked youth to create a loose chronology of immediate to less-immediate needs, acknowledging the cyclical and nonlinear nature of transitioning.

Data Analysis: We did not compare groups (DCFS, SYAB, and DJJ) against each other but rather understood the groups that we spoke with were at different places within their transition journey. The youth we spoke with at the DCFS SYAB and at the DJJ sites were at the beginning of their journey, whereas the youth at the Alliance to End Homelessness in South Suburban Cook were at a different place in their transition period. We organized the data within a shared matrix by the same emerging themes as those that were emerging from the interviews, which included healing, transitioning, and then stabilizing. We then organized the responses into those main categories to attempt to answer the question, ‘what resources and supports do young people need as they are healing, transitioning and stabilizing?’ understanding and acknowledging that that process is not linear. That organization is visualized in Figure 1 on the journey map. Again, we did not think that dividing responses by group type was useful and rather propose that understanding youth in transition as a group rather than necessarily divided by experience may be more useful.

Staff Surveys

Data Collection: In April 2020, IMPACT, in partnership with DCFS Youth Housing Advocacy Program (YHAP) leadership, developed a survey, which was disseminated electronically to YHAP staff across the State of Illinois. A list of 65 respondents were identified, but the survey was shared wider within organizations if other staff members worked on the YHAP program. The survey was open for 3 weeks, and 2 encouragement reminders were sent by YHAP leadership. In February 2020, IMPACT, in partnership with DJJ leadership, developed a survey that was disseminated electronically to all (45) Aftercare specialists across the State of Illinois. The survey was open for several weeks, and 2 encouragement reminders were sent by IMPACT. Each electronic survey included an electronic informed consent.

Data Analysis: YHAP and Aftercare Specialist survey data were analyzed separately using a combination of Excel and R. Basic frequencies of key variables were run and data was visualized.

Limitations:

There are several limitations with this study. First, we were only able to interview 12 young people (one of whom did not have experiences with DCFS or DJJ), who were predominantly from the Chicago/Cook area. While we conducted outreach across the state it was challenging to recruit young people around the state from Chicago. Our plan to go in-person to recruit at agencies in Southern and Central Illinois was thwarted by COVID-19. Additionally, we wanted to gather more input into the journey maps by training young people as facilitators. However, that plan too was de-prioritized in light of COVID-19. We also had challenges recruiting young people with experience with DJJ- which is understandable given how small the population is. All of the young people we recruited who had experience with DJJ also had experience with DCFS. While we tried to dig into transition experiences within Aftercare, young people who were dually-involved were more inclined to talk about their experience with DCFS and their caseworker.

We had also planned to validate the journey map with the young people who helped us create it. However, again due to the COVID-19 pandemic plans were put on hold, and it was then challenging to connect back to the YABs whose memberships change annually, and the youth who were in IYC’s.

Originally we had hoped that a survey on housing instability could be disseminated across caseworkers who work with youth 18-21 in DCFS. However due to COVID-19 it was decided that focius on the Youth Housing Advocacy Program (YHAP) staff was more feasible given
competing demands. However, the YHAP staff are not representative of caseworkers who work with youth 18-21 and tend to work with young people who are already experiencing housing instability.

The staff spotlight data presented here from the staff surveys are a subset of data that was provided back to each agency on their staff.
## Appendix 3: YHAP Recommendations

### What recommendations do you have to address barriers to transition planning and housing stability among youth in your area?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Sample Recommendation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improve employment services</td>
<td>Employment services, linkages</td>
<td>“More options for bridging housing with employment”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide more general life skill and financial literacy training and support</td>
<td>Resources both for youth and staff that spanned more general ‘life’ categories</td>
<td>“Digitalize Youth resources”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“more financial resources to encourage stability after youth is housed”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase housing availability and accessibility</td>
<td>Housing affordability, timing of housing search, housing availability</td>
<td>“Provide accessible affordable housing specifically allocated to youth who have aged out”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve integration of transition planning across DCFS</td>
<td>Better coordination within DCFS systems and programs</td>
<td>“A more thought-out plan for transitioning out of care from DCFS...I felt like my youth had no real plan and it’s been mostly on the housing advocate to navigate this.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“How to connect youth with DCFS services and what services are available for the youth”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach housing and transition planning through a trauma-informed lens</td>
<td>Includes medication, motivation, addressing/responding to trauma</td>
<td>“More about mental health related care, assisting youth with a physical disability, trauma informed care plans.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase system coordination within and outside of DCFS</td>
<td>Coordination with homelessness services, transportation</td>
<td>“Better communication from services that are handling youth homelessness”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### What recommendations do you have to address barriers to behavioral health and SUDs in your area?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Sample Recommendation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase access/availability of BH and SUD services</td>
<td>Includes outreach to ensure access to resources and information as well just having more and higher quality referral sites</td>
<td>“Outreach to youth who are presenting with mental health or substance abuse issues.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve system coordination</td>
<td>Includes references to links with justice system, housing, transportation, and healthcare systems</td>
<td>“Create recovery support services that will monitor client’s housing stability.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destigmatize BH and SUD services amongst youth, staff, and community members</td>
<td>Includes recommendations to reduce stigma around mental health among youth and increase referrals to services</td>
<td>“Help youth realize important of mental health”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Youth that have lost their housing or could lose their housing due to mental illness or substance abuse meet with other youth that have overcome the barriers”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timing</td>
<td>Recommendations that refer to when behavioral health and SUD supports should happen</td>
<td>“better connecting youth to providers prior to emancipation”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“ongoing Therapy provided to the youth once they emancipate out of care”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of service</td>
<td>Describes services that are youth-centered, therapeutic, and focused on youth in foster care specifically</td>
<td>“More availability of mental health services designated for foster youth specifically”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The Journey Home, 2021
## What are 3 recommendations to better promote housing stability among youth transitioning out of care in your area?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Housing availability</td>
<td>More affordable and youth-friendly housing options</td>
<td>“more services/housing options in our area for younger adults”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing and timing</td>
<td>Being able to begin housing application process earlier, particularly as it relates to Section 8 Housing</td>
<td>“if they are able to apply for section 8 prior to discharging”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>Programs to assist with finding employment or securing stable income</td>
<td>“to have youth employed upon entry into community”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial resources</td>
<td>Direct financial assistance or other resources</td>
<td>“financial resources to assist youth in maintaining housing”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>More engagement with community members and collaboration with community-based providers</td>
<td>“networking with agencies in your community”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCIPP/transition</td>
<td>Improved discharge planning process</td>
<td>“youth have ability to call for support in case issues arise after discharge”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More resources</td>
<td>General call for resources; suggestions for workshops and programming for youth</td>
<td>“life skills programs,” “financial literacy”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>Direct financial assistance or other resources</td>
<td>“better transportation”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Stronger supports for families and greater engagement with them through transition process</td>
<td>“in-home services with families for youth that are over 18”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## What are 3 recommendations to better address the housing needs of youth with behavioral health issues and/or substance use disorders in your area?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Sample Recommendation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Availability</td>
<td>More substance use and mental health facilities for youth</td>
<td>“Ensure more adolescent services are available...”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access</td>
<td>Greater access to services through financial assistance and more providers that accept Medicaid</td>
<td>“allow the youth to attend even if they cannot afford to pay” “free assessments should be available”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System coordination</td>
<td>Collaboration with mental health and substance use disorder service providers, housing service providers, and transportation services</td>
<td>“providers being more transparent on who receives services and explaining their reasoning when someone is denied when they have nowhere else to go” “to have a list of available housing for youth when the family cannot assist”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of service</td>
<td>Counseling and services that engage families and peers</td>
<td>“for youth’s parents to be included in counseling sessions prior to release from IYC” “position youth with mentors, life coaches, and counselors”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Work Cited

9. Ibid. 8


35 Catherine R. Lawrence et al. (2006). Impact of Foster Care on Development, 18 Dev. & Psychopathology, 57.


45 Conversation with Brian Cooper, DJJ.


49 Conversation with Prestina Singleton, Director of Alumni Services, 9/2/2020

50 Ibid. 41


54 Data analyzed by Heartland Alliance, Research and Policy team, July, 2020.

55 Havlicek J. & Samuels, GM. (2018). The Illinois State Foster Youth Advisory Board as a Counter-space for Well-being through Identity Work: Perspectives of Current and Former Members. Social Service Review. DOI: 10.1086/697694
