

Introduction

Foster Care Review (FCR) has more than 20 years of experience working within Miami-Dade County's foster care system through our Citizen Review Program. In that time, we have gained a wealth of knowledge and insight about the status of youth in foster care who are leaving the system when they reach their 18th birthday, commonly referred to as "aging out".

FCR conducts judicial reviews of children across the developmental spectrum. Each case is unique, but those of older youth are especially heart wrenching. Many of these youth have no reliable family connections, are below the appropriate educational level, have difficulty trusting others, and have poor prospects for stable housing once they leave their foster homes.

Our local foster care community has recognized these issues, and in recent years there have been improvements in the way youth are prepared for independent living. For FCR, however, the information about their welfare ends once they age out, as they are no longer under the jurisdiction of the court or subject to our judicial reviews. Therefore, with the goal of learning whether or not our community's efforts are actually helping the youth, FCR received a grant award from The Miami Foundation that allowed us to interview transitioning youth about their experiences with life after foster care.

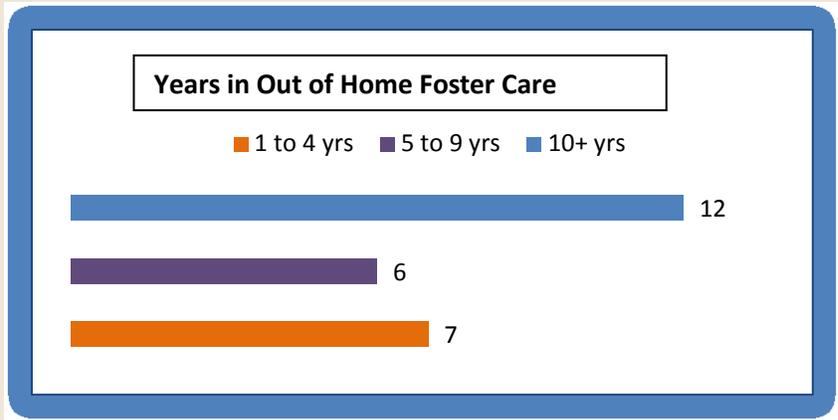
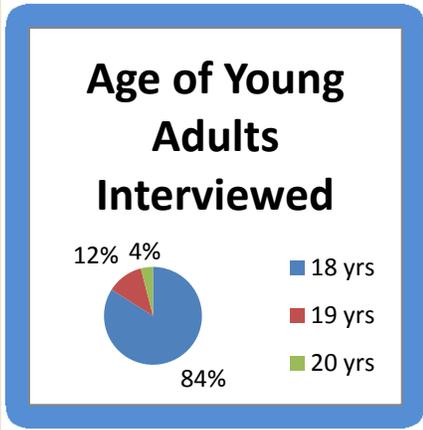
The administrative reviews

FCR created a steering committee to discuss the project and help determine what data to collect. Committee members came from various local child welfare entities: Our Kids of Miami-Dade, Inc., CHARLEE Homes for Children, Educate Tomorrow, the Guardian ad Litem Program, Casa Valentina, Florida Youth SHINE (Miami Chapter), and the Miami Dade County Public School System.

We chose to call the reviews "administrative reviews" to differentiate them from FCR's citizen or judicial reviews that are conducted pursuant to Florida law. A panel of volunteers who have experience in conducting judicial reviews of children 16 and older, and who are knowledgeable about the Independent Living statutory requirements was selected.

We selected young adults within the age criteria at random from a contact list provided by Our Kids and invited them to participate. FCR also solicited referrals from the full case management agencies, Educate Tomorrow and Casa Valentina. Of the 56 young adults that were scheduled for review, 25 participated and each that participated received a \$75 stipend. Participation was voluntary. The youth were required to be accessible by phone and/or must have had access to transportation, which limited our target population.

In total, 25 young adults—20 females and 5 males—were interviewed. The majority had transitioned out of foster care within the previous year. Their ages and length of time spent in foster care were as follows:



Financial Self-sufficiency, Employment and Education

The Road to Independence (RTI) program provides a monthly stipend to young adults who transition out of foster care up to age 23. Although the explanation is simplified for this report, the primary qualification for the program is full-time enrollment in an educational program. This can mean high-school, an adult education program to obtain a GED, technical/vocational school or college. Twenty-three of the young adults interviewed relied on the monthly Road to Independence stipend and the remaining two had been cut because they were no longer enrolled in an educational program.



CURRENT EDUCATIONAL STATUS	Total
Enrolled in College	6
Pursuing High School Diploma	11
Pursuing GED	6
Enrolled in Vocational School	1
Not enrolled	1

Several young adults did not grasp what it would take to attain the career goals they hoped to achieve, professions requiring years of education and training . Seventeen were still pursuing a high school diploma or GED and only 5 were employed at the time of the interview – four of those five were self-employed.

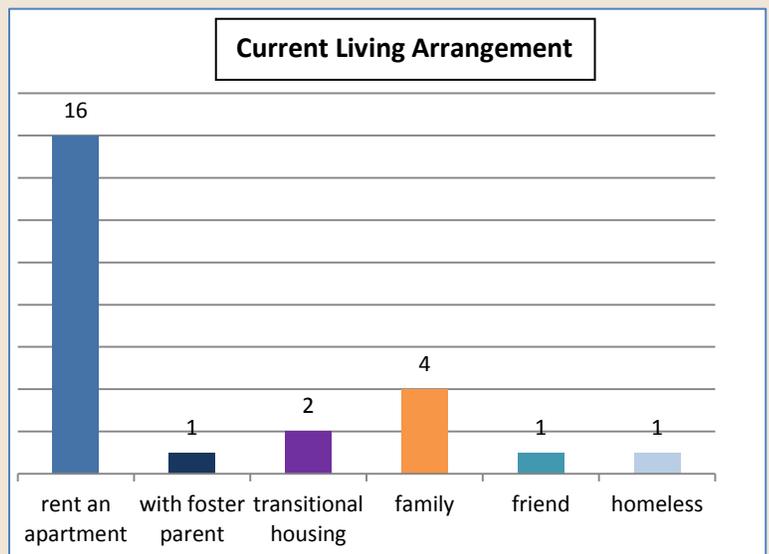
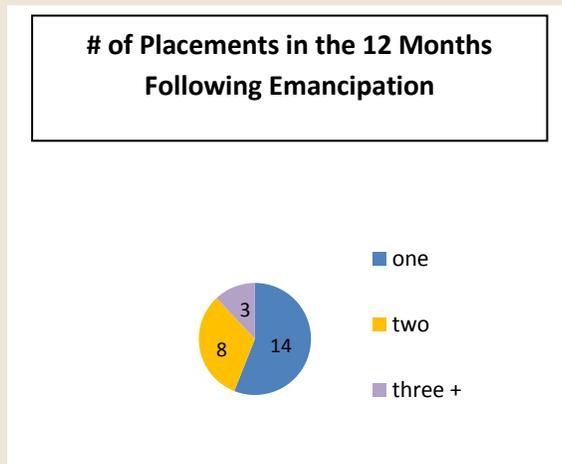
The RTI stipend is a concern for many who work with older youth. The stipend is consistent until the young adult is no longer enrolled in an educational program, but it abruptly stops when the youth drops out or graduates. The structure of the program builds a reliance on this steady source of income to make ends meet. However, if the student is not also actively obtaining job skills and building a positive employment history, he/she will be ill prepared when the stipend stops. Although several of the young adults we interviewed were anxious to find employment, only 5 were employed at the time

of the review and all but 1 of the 5 were self-employed as barbers and stylists. Seventeen had bank accounts.

The Florida independent living statute requires that an education/career path be developed for all foster children age 13 and older, and that the plan incorporate participation from teachers and care givers. Fifteen of the 25 young adults recalled having a discussion with a case manager/IL coordinator and/or school official about their future education/career paths, but they did not have a clear understanding of the plan or how to attain their goals. Eighteen reported that they knew what steps to take in order to attain their current goals. Yet when asked to elaborate, few were able to. Three young adults planned to pursue an education that didn't support the occupation they desired. Three reported that they wanted to complete a vocational program but hadn't picked a field, and one did not have an educational/career goal. Lastly, two reported not been aware of the tuition waiver that is available to transitioning youth to attend state universities in Florida.

Housing

This is a population that is used to multiple, abrupt moves. Sixteen of the youth had resided at their final home for less than one year before exiting foster care. Nine reported that they had the option of remaining at their last placement after emancipation and but only 2 had wanted to. **One young woman reported she would have liked to stay with the foster parent, but the foster parent would have charged her more than an alternative living arrangement.**



During a youth's final year in foster care, agencies conduct an independent living staffing to begin planning for their living arrangements once they turn 18. Only 14 of the young adults reported having assistance from their agency in finding somewhere to live. Of those, 2 were forced to relocate after learning that the apartment the agency had located for them was in foreclosure. Another told the reviewers she had felt anxious **because the planning for her future housing arrangements had taken place at the last minute and she hadn't known what was going to happen on her 18th birthday.**

Twenty-one young adults reported that they were in stable housing at the time of the interview. Three had experienced homelessness and one was homeless at the time of the review, meaning that she did not have a place of her own. Twenty-one reported that they felt safe in their current environments.

Twenty-three of the youth reported receiving the Road to Independence stipend, with a majority (22) receiving approximately \$1200. That amount has since been reduced to a maximum of \$892 per month for new program enrollees. Given the limited access to affordable housing in Miami-Dade County, the future outlook regarding housing may be much worse for newly emancipated youth.

Relationships and Social Support

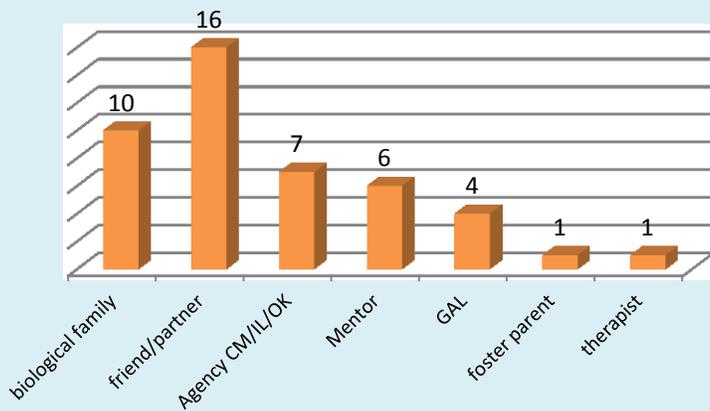
The majority of the young adults (19) reported having relationships with members of their biological families, primarily siblings. Six reported that they had not been allowed to visit with their families while in foster care, but had done so regardless.



The young adults felt that sibling visitation was, for the most part, not promoted within foster care and reported rarely having sibling visitation if they were not placed together. Six reported not being allowed to have visits with a sibling once the sibling had been adopted. **One young adult credited the case manager for making great efforts to keep her siblings together while in foster care.**

The majority of the young adults mentioned a “friend or partner” as the key member of his/her social support. Boyfriends, girlfriends and friends of young adults constantly change. These young adults truly need relationships with stable adults who bring life experience to the table and can be a part of their safety net.

Who do you consider to be your social support?



Although most had relationships with biological family members, only 10 mentioned members of their biological families when asked to identify people who were part of their social support. The majority (16) listed a friend or partner as their primary source of support. It is important to note that **of the 6 young adults who had mentors in their support system, 4 were enrolled in college.** Five of those interviewed reported receiving support from their mentors in helping with their education.

Fifty percent of the young women interviewed had either given birth to a child or was currently pregnant. None of the young mothers was older than 20. It is not uncommon for the children of young adults formerly in care to end up in care as well.



Wellbeing

Twenty-three young adults had received a physical exam within the prior year, 15 had seen a dentist and 13 had their vision checked. Twenty-two did state that they had Medicaid coverage, 2 weren't sure and one young woman who was pregnant reported that she had been denied coverage. Teen pregnancy is more prevalent among youth who have been in foster care than in the general population. Two young women were pregnant at the time of the interview and eight young women had children (3 of these had 2 children each and 2 did not have custody of their children). None of the men reported having fathered children.

Life in Care and Overall Preparation for the Transition to Independent Living

As mentioned above, the majority of the young adults had multiple placements while in care. ***They said that often they were not made to feel like a member of the family, were not treated equal to other members of the home, and they believed that the adults did not care about them.*** Two had a positive experience in a group home, while 2 others stated that children should not be placed in group homes because they do not provide a family like setting. Three of the young adults who had spent a significant amount of time in one placement did feel they had been very supported by their foster parents and continued to maintain relationships with them after turning 18. Three others reported maintaining some level of contact with a foster parent or group home staff.

Foster care agencies are required to provide youth in foster care with life skills classes on topics such as budgeting, job skills, cooking, etc. Ten young adults reported receiving assistance from their foster parents in learning life skills such as light cooking and/or laundry. Most (21) had participated in at least 1 life skills class. Of those, 6 thought the classes were helpful, 6 reported the classes were boring and they hadn't learned anything from them and 2 stopped attending due to lack of transportation. Of the four that did not participate at all, 3 reported they had not wanted to attend and 1 had not been informed of the classes.

When asked to rate how prepared they had felt for the transition on a scale from 1 to 5 (5 being very prepared), 16 selected a 3 or higher. However, of the 16, only 2 reported that the agency had helped them significantly. ***The youth often commented that they learned what they knew from friends and siblings that had previously aged out. Five reported that they had felt scared and/or unprepared for the transition.***

"We wish we could have just been in a stable home with a real family."

There were mixed reviews about how well case managers and/or Independent Living coordinators had prepared the youth for transitioning. Some highly praised their case managers, while others felt that they weren't responsive to their needs. Some of the young adults lacked information about their cases while in foster care, **one reported having been discouraged from attending court hearings** and not one was able to identify his/her case plan goal. Lastly, regarding life skills classes, some reported they had been encouraged to participate, however, they didn't seem to understand their intent or personal benefit.

More than one young adult did say that youth have to be more accountable and the agency's efforts to prepare youth for the transition are only effective if they choose to be active participants.

From the Youth: Recommendations for System Improvements

1) Better foster parents

By far the most frequent recommendation we received from the young adults was that there has to be a "better" selection of foster parents. They believe foster parents should make youth feel like a part of the family and should be more involved in monitoring their progress in school. They also recommended that group home staff be trained to learn how to better interact with adolescents.

2) Maintaining relationships with families

The second most frequent recommendation from the young adults was that the agencies should do more to support relationships with siblings and other members of their biological families. Eight of the young adults were interested in finding family members, mostly siblings, from whom they had been separated. They were provided with information about Family Finders, an organization that assists youth in finding family members.

Most of the youth who were interviewed maintained some level of relationship with members of his/her biological family while in care despite court rulings against it, and continued to do so after leaving care. We have seen this dynamic over and over in our work. Five had even moved in with relatives upon turning 18. Rarely do children in foster care completely cut ties with their biological families. We must recognize this and do more to support the healthy aspects of these relationships to ensure that we provide intervention while we can.

3) *Quality life skills classes*



The young adults also recommended that life skills classes have a more “hands on” approach so that youth are able to practice what they learn and get more out of them. They also recommended having different class levels for individuals based on their needs. Finally, they recommended offering more classes with a focus on credit/money management, learning to drive and apartment hunting. Young adults reported that life skills classes are rudimentary and that they did not want to participate because they were “bored”.

4) *Case manager/ Independent Living coordinator involvement*

The young adults reported that case managers and Independent Living Coordinators need to be more involved – and that they should work more closely with youth throughout their final year in care to establish their educational plans and living arrangements rather than waiting until the last minute. They reported having too many loose ends in their transition plans and feeling that they didn’t know what was really going to happen when they turned 18. They recommended that youth be encouraged to participate in court hearings.

5) *Response team*

Another recommendation was that a “response team”, or any group of people not affiliated with the agency, should be available as a resource for youth when they have a complaint or safety issue. ***Youth reported having been unable to report a complaint about case managers or foster parents when there was an issue because they feared the consequences of doing so.***

The young adults suggested “more unannounced visits to monitor foster homes” and “quick removal of children from bad foster homes”.

6) *Incorporate classes or activities that raise self-esteem*

Finally, it was suggested that classes aimed at raising self-esteem should be incorporated for every child in foster care. One young adult expressed that many children and youth in foster care lack self-esteem but there is not much attention given to this issue.

Conclusion

The findings from this project create a picture of a group of young adults who did not have a positive experience while in foster care and did not receive much preparation for adult living from foster parents or life skills classes. Almost half were in foster care for more than 10 years; ***one recounted***

more than 20 placements. Most were 100% dependent on the Road to Independence stipend, yet they did not have clear career plans, and fewer than half had received their high school diploma or GED. Half of the women had children or were pregnant. While the majority had a relationship with a family member—usually siblings, less than half considered their family as part of their social support. Fortunately, while most did not have a primary care physician, the majority had a physical exam during their last year in foster care and about half had seen a dentist and eye specialist. And all but one had housing at the time of the interviews.

There were also positive findings and common variables among the youth who were most resilient. Those who came into the foster care system as teenagers appeared to have more confidence and a better sense of self-esteem. Those who had information about and access to biological family members while in care or had been treated like family by foster parents demonstrated the same qualities. The majority of young adults with mentors were enrolled in college (5 mentors were from Educate Tomorrow, an organization with a distinct educational focus that is the core of their mentoring program.) It was clear that these young adults had a sense of identity and had developed positive attachments.

*The process of preparing youth in foster care for the transition to adulthood **must** be transformed from one of simply completing the right forms and meeting the minimum legal requirements to one that gets to the heart of the matter- these are human beings with little to no prospects for success or happiness without intense personalized intervention by people who genuinely care about them.*

As a direct result of statutory requirements, there has been a strong focus in recent years on preparing youth for transitioning out of foster care—requirements such as independent living staffings and education/career plans. There have also been significant efforts made to encourage youth to participate in life skills classes. Nonetheless, our foster youth continue to face serious obstacles. They are often disengaged and many simply want to get out of care, not understanding the reality of what they will face without an education, work experience and connections. In conclusion, we agree with the youths' recommendations. We also believe that the system needs to adopt a culture that encourages and values the importance of education from an early age and integrates this concept into the training for case managers and foster parents. Transitional planning for youth has to start early, and we have to find a way to make the experience meaningful so that the youth participates. Every transitioning youth should have an education mentor to provide assistance in implementing their education/career plans and to keep them focused on a path to success. In addition, the delivery of life skills classes should be implemented consistently across the board; the quality of life skills classes should not depend on the particular agency providing the services. FCR also supports all of the provisions of the Fostering Connections and Increasing Adoptions Act, which federal legislation enacted in 2008 but has yet to be adopted by the Florida Legislature. First and foremost, youth should have the opportunity to remain in foster care until the age of 21, as provisioned in the Act. This has

made it possible for the states to extend foster care until the age 21, but the Florida Legislature did not support the related bill. Studies have shown however, that youth in care that is extended to age 21 fare much better in the long term. Finally, efforts must never stop towards making sure that youth in care have many permanent connections with healthy, supportive adults so that they always have someone to turn to and don't have to age out alone.

Continuation of the Project

This was a most interesting project and also most difficult to implement. Youth participation was difficult to obtain, even when offering a \$75 stipend and making numerous phone calls to secure their attendance. The volunteers conducting the reviews spent a considerable amount of time waiting for youth to arrive – more than half of those scheduled never did. Even with additional funding, we are not sure we could achieve a higher participation rate amongst the youth or obtain data that would be more meaningful. Our findings, after all, are reflective of many national studies completed on larger groups.

Funding for this project was provided by the DadeFund of The Miami Foundation – a supporting organization committed to making effective grants that help children, youth and families in Miami-Dade County.

