

Evaluation of Nebraska's Extension of Foster Care - Bridge to Independence Program

Proposal Submitted to:

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Child Trends is pleased to submit this proposal to the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (NCF). NCF and Nebraska Department of Children and Families Services (DCFS) are seeking to answer several important questions related to its Bridge to Independence (b2i) program, specifically:

1. Does participating in b2i enhance young adult outcomes (education, employment, financial, housing, parenting, well-being) during the transition to adulthood, during the program, and after the program?
2. How does b2i case management and the stipend influence young adult outcomes during the program and after graduating from the program?
3. What young adult personal or life characteristics influence success in b2i? Is the program targeting the right population, do length of time in foster care, number of placement changes, substance use, or mental health challenges, impact success?
4. Do young adults who participate in b2i perceive they have gained knowledge, skills, and relationships in preparing to transition to adulthood?
5. Does case management at younger ages (<19 years) prepare young adults for the b2i program?
6. How is the b2i program being implemented in different communities, and what are the successes and challenges to implementing each program component?

After considering several evaluation design options, and after discussions with DCFS, NCF asked Child Trends to submit a proposal to: (1) conduct analyses using NYTD, OPPS, CYI and other datasets to assess outcomes of young adults in Nebraska's extended care program or young adults eligible for the program, and provide consultation to DCFS and NCF on use of the data; (2) conduct focus groups with young people participating in the b2i program, as well as young people no longer in the program; and (3) develop a framework for states to use as a guide to assess their extended care programs.

Below we provide a detailed task plan for the proposed work.

Task 1. Outcome Analysis and Data Consultation

Budget: \$25,000-50,000

Period of Performance: December 2017 – May 2018

Child Trends will obtain access to Nebraska-specific datasets (NYTD, OPPS, CYI, and Foster Care Review Board) and conduct preliminary analyses to determine the extent to which the datasets can inform the research questions and subsequent tasks in our work. Our first step will be to work with DCFS and NCF to develop a data sharing agreement which will outline the purpose and details regarding access and restrictions, including disclosure, confidentiality, and retention. After executing the agreement, Child Trends will gain access to the data files and schedule frequent calls with key NCF and DCFS staff to gain insight into the data and develop an analysis plan. Child Trends will submit a memorandum to NCF and DCFS which will detail the analysis plan, provide a timeline for the analyses, and estimate any additional budget needs (late January/early February 2018).

Throughout this task, Child Trends will serve in a consultative role as DCFS and other departments move toward integrating data across systems to design a rigorous evaluation of extended care services and supports and to develop a plan for assessing long-term outcomes for b2i participants.

Task 2. Youth Assessment of Bridge to Independence Program and Other Supports and Services

Period of Performance: May – December 2018

Budget: \$57,500

Child Trends researchers will assess how the b2i program is serving young people in Nebraska by conducting focus groups with young people in four Nebraska communities (two rural and two urban). A mix of young people will be invited to participate—both those who are currently participating in the b2i program (or other extended care activities) as well as those youth no longer participating in extended care activities. The qualitative study will identify promising strategies and generate lessons for the broader child welfare field through input from young adults about their perceptions of the b2i program as well as other available services and supports (whether the programs and services provided them with new knowledge, skills, and relationships), and reasons for staying in care or leaving care. Following data collection, we will analyze the data to draw out important themes and recommendations for NCFE.

We provide a task plan below.

Subtask 1. Protocol Development (May – June 2018)

The first step in the research will be for the team to develop a data collection protocol for use during focus groups with young people, as well as a plan to recruit study participants. The following activities are included in this task:

- **Develop data collection protocol for use during focus groups with young people.** Using results from the outcome analyses conducted in Task 1 to inform our work, we will develop drafts of the focus group protocol and seek input from NCFE prior to submitting to the Institutional Review Board (IRB).
- **Develop plan to recruit focus group participants.** The recruitment plan is an important component of the study and our submission to the IRB. The plan must ensure voluntary participation yet also include strategies for achieving a high level of participation. In each local office in the four selected sites, young adults will be asked to participate in focus groups. We will work with NCFE to identify the best methods for recruiting the groups of young people in each site. The plan will include details such as language for NCFE to embed in email invitations to the prospective participants. We will also discuss the type of incentives, as well as food and refreshments, that will be provided to focus group participants.

Subtask 2. Institutional Review Board Approval (July 2018)

The team will then submit the focus group protocols and recruitment materials to Child Trends' IRB for approval. Once we receive IRB approval, we will implement the recruitment plan and start data collection. Any substantive modifications to the data collection protocols and recruitment plan will need to be reviewed and approved by the IRB.

Subtask 3. Focus Groups (August – September 2018)

Focus groups will be conducted with young people in four communities. The following activities are included:

- **Coordinate with NCFE staff to identify communities in which to conduct the focus groups.** We will work closely with NCFE to identify four communities that will highlight cross-state differences and provide a diverse group of young people from which to recruit focus group participants.

- **Implement the recruitment plan to recruit young people for the focus groups.** We will rely primarily on NCFE staff to recruit participants and schedule the focus groups; however, we will coordinate with NCFE on development of the recruitment materials and scheduling of the groups. Ideally, 10-12 young people will participate in each of the groups.
- **Conduct focus groups with youth participants.** A two-person team will conduct two focus groups in each of the four sites (one group comprised of youth participating in b2i or other extended care activities and the other group with youth no longer participating or who never participated in extended care services). One research team member serves as the facilitator of the focus group while the other takes detailed notes (which are critical to analyzing the data). If the participants agree, Child Trends will record the focus groups to supplement the notes. We may transcribe the recordings if the notes are not adequate.

Subtask 4. Data Analysis, Reports, and Dissemination (October - December 2018)

The final task is to analyze the data and develop final products. After completion of each focus group, notes will be entered in qualitative content analysis program (NVivo or Dedoose). Child Trends team members will use the program to facilitate the analysis process following these steps: 1) an initial round of affixing codes to written data; 2) placing notes about inferences in the electronic records; 3) sorting data into similar and contrasting patterns; 4) incorporating the patterns into evaluation themes; and 5) developing the themes. The analytic process begins during the focus groups when the facilitator (and notetaker) listens for inconsistent, vague, or cryptic comments, and probes for additional details. The two-person team allows for debriefing immediately following each focus group, noting themes, hunches, interpretations, and ideas. They then compare and contrast the focus groups with others they conduct. The team will establish the first round of codes prior to data collection based on the research questions and protocol outlines. We will then refine and revise the codes during the first and subsequent rounds of analysis. We will consider the following seven elements: words; context; internal consistency; frequency or extensiveness; intensity; specificity; and finding big ideas.

We will develop a memorandum and slide deck presenting the findings from the focus groups and submit the products to NCFE.

Task 3. Develop Framework for Nebraska and Other States to Assess Extended Care

Budget: \$30,000

Period of Performance: October – December 2018

Child Trends will develop a framework for Nebraska to use to conduct ongoing assessment of their extension of care program. In developing the framework, the research team will document the process paying close attention to how the framework and learnings in Nebraska can reach other states. Recent federal policy changes have allowed states to extend foster care for young adults until age 21. To date, about half of states elected to do so using federal IV-E funds, while nearly all states extend care to at least some youth using state funds. While some states have years of experience implementing their extended care program, other states are just underway. Extended care programs vary considerably in the criteria for eligibility, stipends and other supports and services offered, and, most importantly, the outcomes for young people participating in the programs. As of now, there is no national repository of this information and no framework for states interested in examining how the youth in their programs are faring.

Learning from the research efforts in Nebraska will enable Child Trends to refine the framework providing guidance to other states around how to track and measure implementation, how to leverage

existing survey and administrative data to understand utilization of extended care, strategies for understanding outcomes for youth in and out of extended foster care, and steps needed to poise states for a rigorous evaluation. Both a written toolkit and corresponding webinar could be produced to disseminate the framework and encourage its use by states to plan for assessment of their extended care programs.

BUDGET

TASK	BUDGET
Task 1. Outcome Analysis and Data Consultation	\$25,000-50,000
Task 2. Focus Groups with Young People in Nebraska	\$57,500
Task 3. Develop Framework for State Assessment of Extended Care	\$30,000
TOTAL	\$112,500-137,500