

2022-2023

BRIDGE TO INDEPENDENCE ADVISORY COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT

Recommendations to the Governor and the Health and Human Services
Committee of the Legislature

Submitted Pursuant to Neb. Rev. Stat. 43-4513



BACKGROUND

The Bridge to Independence (b2i) Advisory Committee was created pursuant to [Neb. Rev. Stat. §43-4513](#) to make recommendations to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Commission regarding the b2i program, extended guardianship assistance, and extended adoption assistance. The Committee is Co-Chaired by Brandy Gustoff (Omaha Home for Boys) and Richard Hasty (Plattsmouth Community Schools). The Department of Health and Human Services Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS), service providers, youth advocates, system stakeholders, and current and former foster youth provide regular feedback and updates. The Advisory Committee serves as a forum for stakeholders to exchange information, provide support, and create innovative solutions to the challenges facing child welfare youth aging out of foster care.

B2i is a voluntary program that provides supports for young adults between the ages of 19 to 21, as they transition from foster care to adulthood. The program began in October of 2014 and is now in its eighth year.

Young adults who join b2i, have access to an Independence Coordinator, advice, and resources to help them meet their goals, health care coverage if Medicaid eligible under the Affordable Care Act, and a monthly extended foster care financial stipend. For young adults who achieved permanency through adoption or guardianship after age 16, extended assistance stipends may also be available.

To remain eligible for b2i, youth must be working towards a productive adulthood in one of these ways: completing a high school diploma or attaining a GED, taking classes at least part time at a college or vocational school program, working at least 80 hours a month, engaging in an activity designed to allow the young adult to address barriers to workforce participation, or be medically incapable of the above activities. Young adults must also meet with their Independence Coordinator monthly and be permanent residents of the State of Nebraska, unless residing out of state through an Interstate Compact Placement Agreement.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Statutory Charge

To advise and make recommendations regarding the Bridge to Independence Program, extended guardianship assistance, and extended adoption assistance [Neb. Rev. Stat. §43-4513(1)]

Priorities:

1. Monitor ongoing implementation of the current b2i Program;
2. Outcome evaluation of the current b2i Program;
3. Expand to or improve outcomes for similar groups of at-risk young adults.

Bridge to Independence Advisory Committee Recommendations

Strategic Priority

Clarify in statute that youth can be eligible for the b2i program regardless of their immigration status.

- Placement Stability and Solutions

DHHS should identify and implement best practices and ongoing evaluation mechanisms for the b2i program.

- Prevention Continuum



BRIDGE TO INDEPENDENCE ADVISORY COMMITTEE



In 2023, LB14 was introduced by Senator Dungan which requires that youth involved in the Juvenile Justice System who are in a court-ordered out-of-home placement on their 19th birthday shall receive information regarding b2i. Brandi Gustoff, co-chair of the b2i Committee, testified on behalf of the Commission in favor of this bill as the B2i Committee has recommended this inclusion since 2020. LB14 was amended into LB50 by AM1980 and requires DHHS to implement by January 1, 2025. This has been a long-standing recommendation of the Committee and members are committed to ensuring the b2i program is accessible to youth involved in out-of-home placement at the time they reach adulthood. In the reporting year, the Committee has determined to add a mental health provider as a resource member for the group.

To continue accessibility to the b2i program, youth need to be eligible for the services regardless of their immigration status and the NCC will continue to make this a recommendation until it has been placed in statute. Previous legislative sessions have introduced this change but have not advanced. For the upcoming reporting year, the Committee will have an Immigration Status Eligibility workgroup to determine what barriers there are for this group of youth to gain access to the program. The intent of the workgroup is to determine solutions and make recommendations to address this issue.

The b2i Advisory Committee will continue to explore what is working within the current program and how best to expand using the data and analytics available. These efforts will aid the Advisory Committee in monitoring the b2i program, supporting DHHS-DCFS, and providing information and recommendations to the Nebraska Children's Commission, Governor, and the Legislature.

B2I WORKGROUPS

Sustainability Workgroup

Keenan Page, Chair

The Sustainability Workgroup was established to make recommendations on how to improve outcomes of youth involved with B2i beyond their participation with the program. In 2023, the workgroup assessed what is currently happening with youth engaged in the program, and also began an evaluation of what can be considered successful “sustainability” in order to be able to make recommendation to the current implementation.

Future work of this group includes establishing the definition of sustainability for the B2i committee. An analysis is actively being completed to do this called VMOSA which stands for "Vision, Mission, Objectives, Strategies, and Action Plans". Some of the initial areas of focus include:

- Financial security needs to be established for youth to maintain success
- Educational and Career Development needs to be prioritized prior to and during B2i engagement
- A review of best practices and roles of staff or professionals involved in the youth’s case from case onset to the enrollment in B2i

The workgroup has also considered ways to evaluate past participants and what can be done to offer continued support to youth who have aged out of the B2i program.



Data Collection & Evaluation

Workgroup

Heather Wood, Chair

The Data Collection & Evaluation Workgroup was established to review data provided by the Foster Care Review Office (FCRO) to identify any trends or concerns that may need further discussion. The workgroup discussed the significance of young adults being almost twice as likely to make progress if they have a reliable support system and 1.7 times likely to be making progress if they had stable housing. This data continues to show that the stipends are helpful, but not the only indicator of success for youth in the B2i program.

Bridge to Independence Advisory Committee Members

| Member Name | Member Type | Title and Organization | Representation |
|------------------------------|-------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Douglas Beck | voting | Young Adult Previously in Foster Care, Young Adult Previously in Foster Care | a young adult currently or previously in foster care |
| Whitney Beck | voting | Young Adult Previously in Foster Care, Young Adult Previously in Foster Care | a young adult currently or previously in foster care |
| Richard Hasty (Co-chair) | voting | Superintendent and Special Education Director, Plattsmouth Community Schools | a representative of the Children's Commission |
| Sarah Helvey | voting | Child Welfare Program Director / Staff Attorney, Nebraska Appleseed | a representative of a child welfare advocacy organization |
| Michaela Hirschman | voting | Protection and Safety Administrator, DHHS, Division of Children and Family Services | representative of the Executive Branch of government |
| Jill Holt | voting | Social Worker, Nebraska Indian Child Welfare Coalition, Inc. | a representative of a child welfare service agency |
| Jovan Johnson | voting | Child Welfare Services Director, Child Saving Institute | a representative of a child welfare service agency |
| Christina Lloyd | voting | Program Director -Bridges Transitional Living and Street Outreach Services, CEDARS Youth Services | a representative of a child welfare service agency |
| Felipe Longoria-Shinn | voting | Chief Executive Officer, Central Plains Center for Services | a representative of an Independent Living Services Agency |
| Keenan Page | voting | Assistant VP - Youth & Family Economic Well-Being, Nebraska Children and Families Foundation | a representative of a child welfare service agency |
| Bailey Perry | voting | Senior Director of Self-Sufficiency Services, Omaha Home for Boys, Jacob's Place | a representative of an Independent Living Services Agency |
| Mia Pokorny | voting | Young Adult | a representative of a federally recognized Indian tribe residing within the State of Nebraska |
| Susan Thomas | voting | CASA Volunteer, Nebraska CASA Association | a representative of a child welfare advocacy organization |
| Haylee Wing | voting | Young Adult Previously in Foster Care, Young Adult Previously in Foster Care | a young adult currently or previously in foster care |
| Brandy Gustoff (Co-chair) | resource | Chief Program Officer, Omaha Home for Boys (Jacobs' Place) | a representative of an Independent Living Services Agency |
| Maghan Madsen | resource | Advocate Supervisor, Douglas County Nebraska CASA | a representative of a child welfare advocacy organization |
| Jennifer Skala | resource | Senior Vice President of Community Impact, Nebraska Children and Families Foundation | a representative of an Independent Living Services Agency |
| Theresa Cusic | Ex-Officio | Project Specialist, Nebraska Court Improvement Project | a representative of the Judicial Branch of government |
| Lindsay Meyer | Ex-Officio | Juvenile Projects Specialist, Administrative Office of Courts and Probation | a representative of the Judicial Branch of government |