

6/3/2019



# Bridge to Independence Advisory Committee 2018-2019 Annual Report

Report to the Nebraska Children's Commission, the Governor, Health and Human Services Committee of the Legislature, and the Department of Health and Human Services

Submitted Pursuant to Neb. Rev. Stat. §43-4513  
*For more information about the Bridge to Independence program and Advisory Committee, please visit the Children's Commission website at [www.childrens.nebraska.gov](http://www.childrens.nebraska.gov).*

# Bridge to Independence Advisory Committee Annual Report

## Background

The Bridge to Independence (B2i) Advisory Committee was created pursuant to [Neb. Rev. Stat. §43-4513](#) to make recommendations to DHHS and the Commission regarding the B2i program, extended guardianship assistance, and extended adoption assistance. This Advisory Committee is chaired by Jeanne Brandner (Administrative Office of the Courts and Probation) and Christina Lloyd (CEDARS Youth Services). The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)-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.

## STATUTORY CHARGE

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. Expanding to or improving outcomes for similar groups of at-risk young adults

## Bridge to Independence Program Background

B2i is a voluntary program that provides supports for young adults between the ages of 17 to 21, as they transition from foster care to adulthood. Young adults who join B2i, have access to: a B2i case worker, called an Independence Coordinator, to advise and access resources to help youth to meet their goals, health care coverage- if Medicaid eligible under the Affordable Care Act (ACA), and a monthly extended foster care stipend. For young adults who achieved permanency through adoption or guardianship after age 16, extended assistance stipends may also be available. The program began in October of 2014, and is now in its fifth year.

To remain in the program, the 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 education program, working at least 80 hours a month, be engaged 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 on a monthly basis, and be permanent residents of the State of Nebraska, unless placed out of state through an Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC).

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During 2018 and 2019, the Bridge to Independence Advisory Committee has continued to work on the B2i external evaluation. With the help of system partners, Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, the Department of Health and Human Services and the Foster Care Review Office, the Data and Evaluation Workgroup is working with Child Trends, a nationally renowned non-profit research center, to evaluate the B2i program. The evaluation will guide the program's definition of success for young adult participants, as well as establish an ongoing mechanism for to perform an internal evaluation of program effectiveness. As part of the statutory charge, the Data and Evaluation Workgroup provides updates at B2i Advisory Committee meetings and look forward to the culmination of this important evaluation in 2019.

During the 106<sup>th</sup> legislature, 1st session, Senator Kate Bolz put forth several recommendations from the B2i Advisory Committee's 2018 annual report as part of LB600. Many partners came forward to support the bill's components. The bill extends the operations of the Nebraska Children's Commission, and its support for the B2i Advisory Committee.

More specifically, this legislation:

- Expands eligibility to youth adjudicated under 43-247 (8) who have experienced a disrupted guardianship or state-funded adoption assistance agreement at age 16 or older;
- Requires as a component of eligibility, Nebraska residency, except a Nebraska resident placed outside of Nebraska pursuant to an Interstate Compact Placement of Children agreement;
- Maintains eligibility for children who do not meet nursing facility level of care, skilled nursing facility, or intermediate care facility for persons with developmental disabilities (NRS 71-424; NRS 71-429; 71-421);
- Requires the Court to make reasonable efforts findings and issue those findings in writing within 12 months after the court makes its "best interests" determination, and
- Requires the Court to determine whether reasonable efforts have been made to achieve the permanency goal outlined in the case plan and the department's report provided under subdivision (6)(b) of §43-4508. The Court shall issue specific written findings regarding such reasonable efforts;
- Allows young adults who are eligible to participate under both extended adoption assistance (NRS 43-4512) and the B2i program in subdivision (2)(b) of section 43-4504 a choice to participate in either version of the B2i program;
- Requires DHHS to provide written notice to young adults who are eligible under extended adoption assistance and B2i;
- Directs the department to submit an amended state plan to seek Title IV-E funding by October 2019 for any newly eligible young adult (disrupted/terminated guardianship/state-funded adoption assistance agreement).

A necessary component to monitoring the ongoing implementation of B2i is reviewing data on a regular and ongoing basis. The B2i Advisory Committee, the Department of Health and Human Services and Foster Care Review Office have prioritized continuous quality improvement and data analysis of the B2i program. Each Committee meeting, program and participant data is

reviewed and discussed. It is used to guide the work of the Advisory Committee and formulate recommendations. The data includes essential indicators related to the participants, exits and entries, services and benefits accessed by participants, and federal Title IV-E funding for the program.

During the next year, the Advisory Committee plans to revisit past recommendations since 2015 that have either not been adopted, or, were adopted but have since, required renewed attention. Some past recommendations in need of attention have been included in this year's recommendations. The Advisory Committee continues to support the expansion of the Bridge to Independence program to similar or at-risk populations including youth exiting the juvenile justice system, and Tribal youth.

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. Committee meetings in 2018 and 2019 will explore issues related to the extended guardianship and adoption programs along with the areas identified in this report. These efforts will aid the Committee in monitoring the B2i Program, supporting DHHS-DCFS, and providing information and recommendations to the Nebraska Children's Commission, Governor, and the Legislature.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.** Establish a path for enrollment for Tribal youth who have aged out of Tribal Court custody at age 18 (to mend the year gap with State age of majority, age 19, when Bridge to Independence begins).
- 2.** Establish a path for enrollment in the current DHHS-facilitated Bridge to independence program for youth involved in Nebraska's Juvenile Justice System utilizing the following two criteria:
  - a.** A young person must be in a court-ordered out of home placement as they age out of probation on their 19th birthday; and
  - b.** Prior to aging out, the court must hold a hearing and make a finding that such placement is necessary because returning to the home would be contrary to the welfare of the child.
- 3.** Independence Coordinator must meet with youth prior to aging out a minimum of six months prior to their 19<sup>th</sup> birthday.
- 4.** DHHS will ensure Independence Coordinators are responsible for a caseload size no more than 15 in rural areas and 20 in urban areas of the state.
- 5.** System partners will collaborate on the implementation of the federal Families First Prevention and Services Act to include vulnerable populations such as pregnant and parenting young adults exiting child welfare, and those at risk of disrupted adoption and guardianship, pertinent to the Bridge to Independence vulnerable and at-risk populations previously identified as a priority.

## GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR THE EVALUATION

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?

DHHS-DCFS, the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (NCF), and the FCRO have begun the process of designing an external evaluation for the B2i Program. The B2i population participates in evaluations and data collection from several different entities. This independent evaluation will be carefully designed to ensure that the outcomes for this population are clearly identified and determine correctly which measure will demonstrate whether young adults are making progress towards these outcomes.

NCF and DCFS are seeking to answer several important questions related to its Bridge to Independence (b2i) program, specifically:

The current evaluation has identified three components and the group recommends that they be undertaken in the order described below.

### **1. Outcome Analysis and Data Consultation**

**Description:** This task includes a preliminary analysis of existing survey data, including that from the Outpatient Payment System (OPPS), National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD), and the Connected Youth Initiative (CYI) to determine if the data sets are useful in examining the above research questions. This process will result in a memorandum detailing tasks to accomplish during the study period.

### **2. Youth Assessment of B2i Program and Other Supports and Services**

**Description:** Child Trends researchers will assess how the B2i program is serving young people in Nebraska by conducting focus groups and phone interviews with young people in a rural and urban community. A mix of young people were invited to participate—both those

who are currently participating in the B2i program (or other extended care activities) as well as those youth who are not participating in any 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.

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

**Description:** 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.

The Workgroup and Advisory Committee will continue to work on this evaluation and look forward to providing the Legislature, and Governor with more information to guide the work of supporting improved outcomes for Nebraska's young adults. Good progress has been made towards accomplishing this goal and the Workgroup and Advisory Committee anticipate a completed evaluation in 2019.

## CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AND DATA ANALYSIS

### **Continuous Quality Improvement and Data Analysis**

Through the use of data made available by DHHS-DCFS and the Foster Care Review Office (FCRO), there is routine review of programs accessed, and services provided through B2i. The B2i program is monitored and refined through the use of data analysis and case reviews. Data is shared and discussed at Advisory Committee meetings. It is used to guide the work of the Advisory Committee and formulate recommendations. The data includes essential indicators related to the participants, exits and entries, services and benefits accessed by participants, and federal Title IV-E funding for the program.

### **DHHS Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Process**

DHHS has created a CQI process to examine point in time and data over time collected through the B2i Program. This data is run on a monthly basis and reviewed by DHHS and stakeholders for program and process improvement. The Advisory Committee will continue to review this data and support DHHS in its CQI process.

The following information has been identified as key for the review of the Advisory Committee:

1. Title IV-E eligibility data;
2. Data related to the benefits and programs that young adults enrolled in the B2i program are accessing;
3. Program participation including entries, exits and reasons for exit; and
4. Total number of young adult served in each fiscal year since 2014.

### **Foster Care Review Office Data Collection**

The Foster Care Review Office (FCRO) has a statutory duty to review B2i cases, and has identified a need to focus on data from which conclusions about the program may be drawn. The review process was modified last year to focus on broader outcome issues, including the progress the young adult has made on their goals, such as employment or education. The case file reviews now evaluate:

1. Young adult goals and the progress made on goals;
2. Independence Coordinator responsibilities; and
3. Young adult responsibilities.

Since implementing this in August, 2018, 160 reviews have been completed. The Data Collection Workgroup and Advisory Committee will continue to provide comments and feedback on the new FCRO B2i case review process.

## EXPANDING TO SIMILAR AND AT-RISK POPULATIONS

The B2i Advisory Committee has been charged by statute to create recommendations to expand the program or improve outcomes for similar groups of at risk young adults. Three key populations have emerged through analysis and collaboration:

1. Youth exiting Juvenile Probation who remain in out of home placement at age 19, and
2. Youth exiting Tribal Court custody at age 18.

Each Annual report since 2015 has included recommendations to expand the program to at risk youth exiting the juvenile justice system after having been in juvenile justice out-of-home placements. Juvenile justice involved youth with clear and demonstrated needs for support to prevent adult involvement with the criminal justice system, homelessness, and increased need for support programs would benefit from the B2i program. The Advisory continues to support this recommendation.

Many states age of majority is 18, while in Nebraska, the age of majority is age 19. In addition to the many other states, Nebraska tribal territories age of majority is age 18. The B2i program enrolls young adults at age 19, the State of Nebraska's recognized age of majority. The one-year gap for native youth has made locating youth for enrollment particularly challenging and subjected them to a period with no formal support or resources.

A statutory language change recognizing the age of majority at either the state or tribal definition would ensure that the program could benefit all young adults aging out of care without permanency. It is recommended to extend eligibility for the Bridge to Independence program to native youth aging out of Tribal Court proceedings at the age of majority.



## Bridge to Independence Advisory Committee Members

Member Name	Member Type	Title and Organization	Representation
<b>Vacant</b>	voting	,	a representative of a Behavioral Health Organization
<b>Whitney Beck</b>	voting	<b>Young Adult Previously in Foster Care</b> , Young Adult Previously in Foster Care	a young adult currently or previously in foster care
<b>Vernon Davis</b>	voting	<b>Young Adult Previously in Foster Care</b> , Young Adult Previously in Foster Care	a young adult currently or previously in foster care
<b>Mary Fraser Meints</b>	voting	<b>Executive Director</b> , Youth Emergency Services	a representative of an Independent Living Services Agency
<b>Misty Frazier</b>	Voting	<b>Executive Director</b> , Nebraska Indian Child Welfare Coalition	a representative of a federally recognized Indian tribe residing within the State of Nebraska
<b>Sarah Helvey</b>	voting	<b>Program Director / Staff Attorney - Child Welfare Program</b> , Nebraska Appleseed	a representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
<b>Doug Lenz</b>	voting	<b>Director</b> , Central Plains Center for Services	a representative of an Independent Living Services Agency
<b>Christina Lloyd (Co-Chair)</b>	voting	<b>Program Director -Bridges Transitional Living and Street Outreach Services</b> , CEDARS Youth Services	a representative of a child welfare service agency
<b>Amanda McGill Johnson</b>	voting	<b>Community Impact &amp; Strategic Initiatives Director</b> , Nebraska Children's Home Society	a representative of a child welfare service agency
<b>Bailey Perry</b>	voting	<b>Transitional Living Manager</b> , Omaha Home for Boys, Jacob's Place	a representative of an Independent Living Services Agency
<b>Sara Riffel</b>	voting	<b>Associate Vice President, Connected Youth Initiative</b> , Nebraska Children and Families Foundation	a representative of a child welfare service agency

<b>Camas Steuter</b>	voting	<b>Service Area Administrator</b> , DHHS, Division of Children and Family Services	representative of the Executive Branch of government
<b>Juliet Summers</b>	voting	<b>Policy Coordinator for Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice</b> , Voices for Children in Nebraska	a representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
<b>Susan Thomas</b>	voting	<b>CASA Volunteer</b> , Nebraska CASA Association	a representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
<b>Lana Verbrigghe</b>	voting	<b>Director of Child Welfare Services</b> , Child Saving Institute	a representative of an Independent Living Services Agency
<b>Cristen White</b>	voting	<b>Operations Program Manager</b> , PromiseShip	a representative of a child welfare service agency
<b>Brandy Gustoff</b>	resource	<b>Innovative Growth Leader</b> , Omaha Home for Boys	a representative of an Independent Living Services Agency
<b>Candi Marcantel</b>	resource	<b>Supervisor</b> , Sarpy County CASA	a representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
<b>Katie McLeese Stephenson</b>	resource	<b>Director</b> , Child Guidance Center	a representative of a child welfare service agency
<b>Jennifer Skala</b>	resource	<b>Senior Vice President of Community Impact</b> , Nebraska Children and Families Foundation	a representative of an Independent Living Services Agency
<b>Kim Thomas</b>	resource	<b>Executive Director</b> , Douglas County Nebraska CASA	a representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
<b>Sen. Kate Bolz</b>	Ex-Officio	<b>Senator</b> , Nebraska Legislature - District 29	a representative of the Legislative Branch of government
<b>Jeanne Brandner (Co-Chair)</b>	Ex-Officio	<b>Deputy Administrator of the Division of Juvenile Services</b> , Administrative Office of Probation	a representative of the Judicial Branch of government
<b>Deb VanDyke-Ries</b>	Ex-Officio	<b>Director</b> , Nebraska Court Improvement Project	a representative of the Judicial Branch of government
<b>Anna Wishart</b>	Ex-Officio	<b>Senator for Legislative District 27</b> , Nebraska Legislative Council	a representative of the Legislative Branch of government