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Bridge to Independence Advisory Committee 2020-2021 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.*

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 the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Commission regarding the b2i program, extended guardianship assistance, and extended adoption assistance. At the beginning of this report period, the Committee was Co-Chaired by Jeanne Brandner (Administrative Office of the Courts and Probation) and Christina Lloyd (CEDARS Youth Services). In January 2021, Jeanne Brandner transitioned out of her role and Vernon Davis (Young Adult Previously in Foster Care) was appointed by the Nebraska Children's Commission as Co-Chair for the Committee. 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.

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 PROGRAM BACKGROUND

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 sixth 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 on a monthly basis, and be permanent residents of the State of Nebraska, unless residing out of state through an Interstate Compact Placement Agreement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.** Establish a path for enrollment in the current DHHS-facilitated b2i 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.
- 2.** Clarify in statute that youth can be eligible for the b2i program regardless of their immigration status.
- 3.** Additional resources should be focused on transition periods for youth entering and exiting the program:
 - a.** An Independence Coordinator must meet with youth prior to aging out a minimum of six months before their 19th birthday.
 - b.** Caseworkers for pending b2i participants should work closely with Independence Coordinators to help educate young people about the program and help establish a budget before they receive their first monthly financial stipend.
- 4.** Independence Coordinators should have a specialized b2i caseload with Independence Coordinators supporting no more than 15 young adults in rural areas and 20 in urban areas of the state. The Advisory Committee will re-examine caseload size following the external evaluation to reassess appropriate caseload sizes.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During 2019, the Bridge to Independence Advisory Committee completed an external evaluation of the program. This evaluation was the collaborative work of system partners, Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, the DHHS, and the Foster Care Review Office (FCRO). The Data and Evaluation Workgroup also worked closely with Child Trends, a nationally renowned non-profit research center, to complete this evaluation. The goal of the evaluation was to guide the program's definition of success for young adult participants, as well as establish an ongoing mechanism to perform an internal evaluation of program effectiveness. As part of the statutory charge, the Data and Evaluation Workgroup provides updates at Bridge to Independence Advisory Committee meetings utilizing the evaluation to drive future work of the Committee.

During the 107th legislature, 1st session, Senator Pansing Brooks put forth a longstanding recommendation from the b2i Advisory Committee as part of LB202. LB202 would expand eligibility in the b2i program to a select population of juvenile-adjudicated youth who are at risk of homelessness and lack necessary supports. Senator Vargas also sponsored LB262, which would allow non-lawfully present resident youth aging out of the foster care system, to be eligible for the b2i program, including all its services and supports.

An issue regarding Special Immigrant Juvenile Status was explored by the b2i Committee in 2020. Despite eligibility criteria being met, youth who are not lawfully present in the United States encounter barriers in accessing the b2i program where their US resident peers do not.

Special Immigrant Juveniles can meet b2i eligibility requirements. Additionally, our senators provided immigrant-specific resources for b2i program participants who are immigrants. [Neb. Rev. Stat. §43-4505 \(Section 3\(h\)\)](#) provides for services to "obtain the necessary state court findings and then apply for special immigrant juvenile status...or apply for other immigration relief that the young adult may be eligible for." In order to include SJIS youth in b2i, legislative change is necessary to clarify that all youth, regardless of immigration status, can qualify for b2i.

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.

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 2021 and 2022 will further explore methods for implementing recommendations from the 2019 external evaluation. 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.

ONGOING EVALUATION

The Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (NCFE), the FCRO, and DHHS-DCFS contracted with Child Trends to complete an external evaluation for the b2i program in 2019. This independent evaluation was designed to ensure that the outcomes for this population are clearly identified and correctly determine which measure will demonstrate whether young adults are making progress towards these outcomes. Moving forward, the b2i committee will work to identify ongoing evaluation mechanisms through the Data and Evaluation workgroup.

Two main areas of transition were identified as areas needing additional focus and resources in the external evaluation: *entering* the program and *exiting* the program.

Preparing participants to exit b2i:

Although participants reported that their Independence Coordinators already help them prepare for their transition out of b2i, more tailored supports are needed as participants approach age 21. The differences in outcomes for exited b2i participants when compared to current participants suggests that participants need more support to prepare for their exit from the program. Practices that may ease the stress of transitioning out of b2i include:

- Require participants to open a savings account and draft a savings plan.
- Leverage the Opportunity Passport matching-savings program and the savings mentioned above to purchase assets before exiting b2i.
- Provide trainings and information strategically and frequently.
- Taper off the financial stipend amount in the months before exit.

Preparing participants to enroll in b2i:

The evaluation also revealed that young people can be better prepared to enter b2i. Some participants reported that they struggled to manage their financial stipend or trust their Independence Coordinator when they first enrolled in the program. Caseworkers for pending participants should work closely with Independence Coordinators to help educate young people about the program and help establish a budget before they receive their first monthly stipend

Future evaluation needs:

- Reflect young people's definitions of success
- Monitor outcomes at different points in their b2i experience

SPECIAL IMMIGRANT JUVENILE STATUS

Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) is a policy that represents a crossover between child welfare and immigration policy. It was enacted as part of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1990¹. In October of 2020, the Immigrant Legal Center presented information to the b2i Committee on Special Immigrant Juvenile Status as it pertains to the b2i program.

SIJS requires the following criteria be met:

- Under 21 years old (must obtain order before age 19 in Nebraska)
- Unmarried
- Present in the United States
- Subject of a state Court Order finding the following before the child reaches the age of majority:
 - Have been abused/abandoned and/or neglected by one or both parents
 - Reunification with one or both parents not viable
 - Return to the country of last habitual residence not in best interest

SIJS and b2i eligibility:

Children and youth are removed from their families in Nebraska when certain safety threat criteria are met, regardless of their immigration status. Subsequently, youth who are in out of home placement at 16 years of age or older, prior to aging out, are eligible for the b2i program, according to [Neb. Rev. Stat. §43-4504](#). Despite eligibility criteria being met, youth who are not lawfully present in the United States encounter barriers in accessing the b2i program where their US resident peers do not. [Neb. Rev. Stat. §4-108](#) limits public benefits to lawfully present immigrants and [Neb. Rev. Stat. §4-111](#) establishes verification of lawful presence under the term “qualified alien,” which narrowly fails to capture all lawfully present immigrants, including those with SIJS. Under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act “PRWORA”, states may extend benefits to immigrants otherwise disqualified under federal law, but states must use explicit language in their laws to provide for their inclusion in eligibility.

Special Immigrant Juveniles can meet b2i eligibility requirements. Additionally, our senators provided specific resources for b2i program participants who are immigrants. [Neb. Rev. Stat. §43-4505 \(Section 3\(h\)\)](#) provides for services to “obtain the necessary state court findings and then apply for special immigrant juvenile status...or apply for other immigration relief that the young adult may be eligible for.” In order to include SIJS youth in b2i, legislative change is necessary to clarify that all youth, regardless of immigration status, can qualify for b2i. LB262, sponsored by Senator Vargas during the 107th Legislature, 1st session, would address this issue.

1. [More information on the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1990.](#)

CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AND DATA ANALYSIS

Through the use of data made available by DHHS-DCFS and the FCRO, there is routine review of programs accessed and services provided during b2i program enrollment. The b2i program is monitored and refined through the use of data analysis and case reviews. This data is shared and discussed at Advisory Committee meetings and 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 adults served in each fiscal year since 2014.

FOSTER CARE REVIEW OFFICE DATA COLLECTION

The 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 to focus on broader outcomes, including the progress the young adult has made on their goals, such as employment or education. The case file reviews evaluate:

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

Since implementing this in August 2018, the FCRO has completed 20-35 reviews per month. The Data Collection Workgroup and Advisory Committee will continue to provide comments and feedback on the FCRO b2i case review process.

EXPANDING TO SIMILAR AND AT-RISK POPULATIONS

The b2i Advisory Committee has been charged by statute to make policy recommendations to expand b2i or improve outcomes for similar groups of at-risk young adults. Two 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 a recommendation 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.

Recommendation #2 for tribal youth has been implemented with the passage of LB848 in 2020. LB848 extended eligibility for the b2i program to youth aging out of Tribal Court proceedings at the age of 18. Prior to LB848 becoming law, a youth was required to reach the age of majority in Nebraska to be eligible for the b2i program. In some tribal jurisdictions, youth age out of the court system at 18. This inadvertently created a gap where tribal youth were aged out of their Tribal Court system but were ineligible for the b2i program. The b2i Committee continues to monitor the implementation of this statutory change and is committed to addressing barriers to connecting eligible tribal youth with the b2i program.

Bridge to Independence Advisory Committee Members

Member Name	Member Type	Title and Organization	Representation
Whitney Beck	voting	Young Adult Previously in Foster Care, Young Adult Previously in Foster Care	a young adult currently or previously in foster care
Becky Bounds	voting	Director of Child Welfare Services, Child Saving Institute	a representative of a child welfare service agency
Vernon Davis (Co-Chair)	voting	Young Adult Previously in Foster Care, Young Adult Previously in Foster Care	a young adult currently or previously in foster care
Mary Fraser Meints	voting	Executive Director, Youth Emergency Services (YES)	a representative of an Independent Living Services Agency
Taylor Givens-Dunn	voting	Policy Coordinator for Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice, Voices for Children in Nebraska	a representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
Sarah Helvey	voting	Child Welfare Program Director / Staff Attorney, Nebraska Appleseed	a representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
Camas Holder	voting	Service Area Administrator, DHHS, Division of Children and Family Services	representative of the Executive Branch of government
Jill Holt	voting	Social Worker, Nebraskak Indian Child Welfare Coalition, Inc.	a representative of a child welfare service agency
Christina Lloyd (Co-Chair)	voting	Program Director -Bridges Transitional Living and Street Outreach Services, CEDARS Youth Services	a representative of a child welfare service agency
Felipe Longoria	voting	Deputy Executive Director, Central Plains Center for Services	a representative of an Independent Living Services Agency
Bailey Perry	voting	Transitional Living Manager, Omaha Home for Boys, Jacob's Place	a representative of an Independent Living Services Agency
Sara Riffel	voting	Associate Vice President, Connected Youth Initiative, Nebraska Children and Families Foundation	a representative of a child welfare service agency
Susan Thomas	voting	CASA Volunteer, Nebraska CASA Association	a representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
Vacant	voting		a young adult currently or previously in foster care
Vacant	voting		a representative of a federally recognized Indian tribe residing within the State of Nebraska
Lana Verbrigghe	voting	Senior Director of Programs and Services, Children's Square USA	a representative of an Independent Living Services Agency
Brandy Gustoff	resource	Program Manager – Transition Services, 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
Candi Marcantel	resource	Supervisor, Sarpy County CASA	a representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
Katie McLeese Stephenson	resource	Director, Hope Spoke	a representative of a child welfare service agency
Jennifer Skala	resource	Senior Vice President of Community Impact, Nebraska Children and Families Foundation	a representative of an Independent Living Services Agency
Sara Quiroz	Ex-Officio	Juvenile Projects Specialist, Administrative Office of Probation	a representative of the Judicial Branch of government
Vacant	Ex-Officio	Nebraska Legislative Council	a representative of the Legislative Branch of government
Deb VanDyke-Ries	Ex-Officio	Director, Nebraska Court Improvement Project	a representative of the Judicial Branch of government
Sen. Anna Wishart	Ex-Officio	Senator, District 27, Nebraska Legislative Council, District 27	a representative of the Legislative Branch of government