

Financial Sustainability and Safety Nets

We recommend legislation to provide direct cash transfers to system-involved and at-risk youth to address the cliff effect of B2i and prevent homelessness for youth and young adults exiting the program.

Rationale

According to the Nebraska Bridge to Independence Extended Foster Care Evaluation Report from November 2019, many young people close to exiting the B2i program are concerned about their future and have anxiety about their expenses after they no longer receive the monthly stipend. While the evaluation showed that young people who exited B2i are more likely than their peers without B2i to have people to turn to in a crisis, they were no less likely than their peers to experience homelessness or have enough funds to cover monthly expenses. The strategy recommended would provide a consistent source of income for housing; provide a financial safety net that affords young people the opportunity to take on work that is safe and meaningful to them; and help sustain young people while they pursue postsecondary education or career training that will increase their long-term earning potential. This also allows them to make up for educational opportunities that may have been delayed or missed due to housing instability, child welfare involvement, parenting, or the COVID-19 pandemic. Research shows that direct cash transfers paired with voluntary services for financial coaching, housing navigation, and education support lead to even more positive life outcomes. Young people receiving the recommended unconditional cash transfer receive supportive services from a coach in the Connected Youth Initiative to achieve financial goals during an extended timeline beyond age 21. Based on 2020 and 2021 CYI data, young people in Nebraska with the safety net of an unconditional regular income have higher levels of hope and feelings of value than their peers who did not receive a monthly case benefit.

Concrete Supports and Connections for Long-Term Sustainability

We recommend that the Department of Health and Human Services utilizes an evidence-informed, strength-based, youth-led intervention for B2i case management that includes older youth best practices. We propose that this intervention incorporates a tested evaluation tool.

Rationale

Many extended foster care programs offer case management to young people transitioning from foster care, but many fail to guide them toward stability and mobility and slow the cycle of poverty. Research demonstrates that often traditional approaches to case management do not deliver services equitably because they do not address the many barriers to sustained success that young people face. Key aspects of youth-driven, strength-based coaching models include generally smaller caseloads, coach-participant relationships lasting multiple years, youth-driven goal development, two-generation approach, high training standards for coaches/case managers, and an emphasis on developing long-term solutions to systemic and system barriers to thriving. It is necessary to create (and evaluate) an older youth system that advances the understanding of the skills and supportive environments all youth need to thrive.

Data Collection and Program Evaluation

We recommend that Department of Health and Human Services collects additional information from exiting B2i participants about their:

- health and well-being and
- protective and promotive factors such as:
 - Engagement with available ongoing services,
 - Permanent social connections,
 - Resiliency to seek out services and supports
 - Ability to mitigate the impacts of trauma.

Other data collection considerations:

- Identify B2i experience in long-term (public-private partnership) data collection
 - How many B2i participants engage in CYI services after exit from the B2i program?
 - CYI coaching survey responses disaggregated by prior B2i experience/participation
 - What formal and informal support systems do young adults have as they exit b2i?
- Collect and report data about when youth start the B2i program (relative to their date of eligibility)

Rationale

Well-being has been defined in many ways, and older youth data indicators should include constructs that highlight the extent to which young adults are better able to navigate life's challenges, understand what they are going through during adolescence, experience healing, and how they have made progress toward their own definition of success and self-assessment of their own strengths. For example, past evaluation methods might collect information about life milestones or skill development – such as whether a young person has stable housing at a given point in time or knows how to use the bus system. While those skills are important, older youth best practice has advanced to support healthy development and promote well-being for young people and evaluation tools have evolved to meet this challenge. For example, current evaluation methods might measure presence, strength, and growth of protective factors that advance that healthy well-being and mitigate the impacts of trauma or other negative life factors. For example, whether young people can persist and find solutions to problems they may face now or into the short- or long-term future (such as housing challenges), and how much progress a young person has made towards their own housing goals according to their strengths and unique situation.