

2023-2024

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.

In October 2014, b2i began as a voluntary program that provides supports for young adults between the ages of 19 to 21, as they transition from foster care to adulthood. 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 because trauma and mental health are factors that can impact a young adult's success in b2i.

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. The Committee has created the 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 review what is working within the current program and how best to expand using the data and analytics available. DHHS implemented best practices, and the Advisory Committee applauds these efforts. Implementation of CYI surveys will continue to improve the program evaluation. The Advisory Committee will continue monitoring the b2i program, supporting DHHS, and providing information and recommendations to the Nebraska Children's Commission, Governor, and the Legislature.

B2I WORKGROUPS

*Sustainability Workgroup
Keenan Page, Chair*

Historically, the B2I Sustainability Workgroup discussed how to make the program sustainable for young adults after leaving the program. Over the last year, the group decided to better define what “sustainability” could look like and determined the following domains be considered when determining how to support young people’s sustainable success after exiting B2I. The B2I program can provide holistic, youth determined supports and community connections so that B2I participants:

1. Have the financial knowledge, resources, and opportunity to build habits to achieve long term financial well-being.
2. Have the opportunity to explore, enroll, and proceed, in the educational and/or career pathway they choose.
3. Have the hope for the future, confidence in their decision-making, and engagement in their community to build a sense of belonging and purpose.
4. Have the opportunity to build social skills and make social connections that strengthen their self-esteem and create a positive support network.
5. Are supported by professional that focus on whole person development, including building safe, healthy relationships, and the ability to bounce back from challenges.
6. Are supported by professionals that have high expectations of young people that incorporate youth voice and real time feedback, while considering young people’s backgrounds, cultural practices, and lifestyle.



To best support growth within these domains, the following recommendations have been identified for 2024 to increase sustainability of young people’s success after exiting B2I:

Recommendation #1: Allow for leadership development, financial literacy education, and interest exploration as part of existing required participation hours. This should be determined by Independence Coordinators as advised by their supervisor.

Allowable activities could potentially include Youth Advisory Board participation, Legislative Days, Opportunity Passport, or other activities identified by young people and approved by their Independence Coordinator.

B2I WORKGROUPS

Sustainability Workgroup continued...

This would provide a platform for B2I participants and their Independence Coordinator to discuss goals outside of the traditional confines of barrier removal, employment, and education, focusing on an expanded range of personal development. These conversations open the door to developing authentic, trusting, and strengths-based relationships that increase young people's confidence. When young people are confident, it allows them to set high expectations for themselves, reach for new opportunities, and set life changing goals. When one knows what is possible, it motivates one to aim high.

Recommendation #2: Independence Coordinators and participants should promote leadership development, financial literacy education, interest exploration, career and postsecondary pathways that align with the strengths of the individual and their goals through continuous exploration.

When a young person feels like a “problem” or a “project” that staff and their support network need to “fix”, that can confine the young person's sense of self and sense of how to work collaboratively with their support network. When a young person and their support network builds their sense of self, goals, and plans based on the young person's strengths, it increases their self-determination and making plans that occur and sustain their life long after exiting B2I. By offering these activities as allowable required participation hours, Independence Coordinators will have increased opportunity to have these conversations and should encourage them throughout the participant's time in B2I.

Independence Coordinators work to connect and coordinate services to the young adults they are working with, and have extensive knowledge of the Child and Family Services system, but may not be connected to the community the young adult is from or is comfortable in. The workgroup acknowledges that not every professional will connect with a young adult in a way that maximizes their engagement and would encourage more attempts to get community agencies or partners more involved with the B2I participant. Each person is unique in who they will connect best with, and most adults have a larger support system than two or three professionals. It should be a continued priority to build each participant's support system with engaging and committed adults. Young people can empower their B2I Independence Coordinator and support network by discussing and exploring their interests and leadership development - that input empowers staff to then create plans and refer to resources that support the interests and goals the young person identifies within that context. These deeper conversations and ability to uncover new areas of expertise also allow for Independence Coordinators and Program Administrators to identify new areas of potential professional development, training, and resource establishment.

B2I WORKGROUPS

*Immigration Status Workgroup
Chaired by Felipe Longoria-Shinn*

See additional attachment.

B2I WORKGROUPS

*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. Data is collected on specific goals and progress toward each goal the young adult has selected or is working on, allowing the workgroup to determine what is considered a need or a priority to the young adults within the B2i program.

Recommendation #1: DHHS should prioritize lowering the total amount of out-of-home placements youths are placed in during the course of their involvement with the Child Welfare system.

One of the largest indicators of success for a young adult in the B2i program is the total number of out-of-home placements they experienced as a youth.

B2I WORKGROUPS

Data Collection & Evaluation Workgroup continued...

*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. Data is collected on specific goals and progress toward each goal the young adult has selected or is working on, allowing the workgroup to determine what is considered a need or a priority to the young adults within the B2i program.

Recommendation #1: DHHS should prioritize lowering the total amount of out-of-home placements youths are placed in during the course of their involvement with the Child Welfare system.

One of the largest indicators of success for a young adult in the B2i program is the total number of out-of-home placements they experienced as a youth.

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