



# 2024-2025 NEBRASKA BRIDGE TO INDEPENDENCE ADVISORY COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT

Recommendations to the Governor, the Health & Human Services  
Committee of the Legislature, and the Department of Health and  
Human Services

Submitted Pursuant to Neb. Rev. Stat. 43-4218



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# BACKGROUND

The Bridge to Independence (B2i) Advisory Committee was established pursuant to Neb. Rev. Stat. 43-4513 to provide recommendations to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Nebraska Children's Commission regarding the B2i Program, extended guardianship, and extended adoption assistance.

The B2i Program, implemented in October 2014, was created to support youth aging out of the child welfare foster care system without achieving permanency. In 2021, the program expanded to include youth aging out of the tribal court system. In 2023, Senator Dungan introduced LB14, which requires that youth in the Juvenile Justice system who are in a court-ordered out-of-home placement on their 19th birthday received information about the B2i Program. LB14 was subsequently amended into LB50 through AM1980, mandating DHHS implementation by January 1, 2025. This legislative progress reflects a longstanding recommendation of the Committee, and members remain dedicated to ensuring that B2i is accessible to all youth in out-of-home placement as they transition into adulthood.

Recognizing the importance of inclusivity, the Committee continues to prioritize accessibility to B2i services for all eligible youth, regardless of immigration status. To further this goal, the Committee established the Immigration Workgroup, chaired by Felipe Longoria-Shinn, to identify and address barriers faced by immigrant youth, and remains committed to developing actionable recommendations and advancing equitable access in future legislative sessions. In addition, there is the Sustainability Workgroup, also chaired by Felipe Longoria-Shinn, and is focused on defining what sustainability means for young people leaving the B2i Program.

The Data Collection & Evaluation Workgroup, chaired by Heather Wood, has prioritized efforts to better understand and address barriers to the B2i Program. This year, the workgroup recommended a comprehensive analysis of both eligible youth and those lacking access to extended foster care, with the goal of identifying and closing gaps in opportunity. Recognizing the need for meaningful outcome measures, the group also advocates for the development of standardized "self-sufficiency milestones" to consistently define and track participant success. Additionally, the Workgroup is working to resolve challenges faced by youth whose juvenile court cases are automatically sealed at age 18, particularly in the Omaha and Winnebago Tribes, by seeking streamlined processes to ensure all eligible youth can access the B2i Program without unnecessary legal hurdles.

# 2024 CASE REVIEW DATA HIGHLIGHTS

During the 2024 Calendar Year, the Foster Care Review Office (FCRO) conducted 214 case reviews of B2i participants. These reviews provide valuable insights into participant goals, progress, and overall outcomes.

Goal Area	% of Participants Selecting Goal	% Showing Progress
Transportation	97.2%	75.0%
Employment	93.0%	82.0%
Education	66.4%	73.0%
Finance	61.7%	52.0%
Housing	46.3%	75.0%
Health	33.6%	78.0%

Regarding demographic insights, males generally showed higher rates of progress on goals compared to females. White young adults showed higher progress in transportation, education and housing, while young adults of color showed higher progress in employment, finance, and health goals.

## Overall Progress Toward Independence

- 93% of reviewed participants were making progress towards independent living,
- Progress rates were similar across gender and race/ethnicity
  - 93% of females and 95% of males
  - 93% of white young adults and 94% of young adults of color
- Young adults with only one removal from their home as minors had the highest progress rates (96%), compared to those with multiple removals (92%).
- Placement history had minimal impact: 93% of those with fewer than four placements and 94% with four or more placements were making progress

## Key Influencers on Progress

- Participants with **four or more instances of missing from care** as minors were **four times as likely** not to make progress on health goals,
- Those **without a reliable support system** were **21 times as likely** to experience unstable housing
- Young adults **with safe housing** were **four times as likely** to make progress on employment goals.



# DATA & EVALUATION WORKGROUP

Heather Wood, Chair

The Data & Evaluation Workgroup provides three recommendations:

## **1. Improve understanding of eligibility and access**

We recommend conducting a comprehensive analysis to accurately identify the number of youth eligible for the Bridge to Independence (b2i) Program, as well as those who are not presented with the same opportunity for extended foster care. This should include tracking by key subpopulations, such as tribal youth, wards, adoptive parents, probation youth, and guardianships, as well as examining reasons for ineligibility or lack of participation. By deepening our understanding of who is and is not accessing B2i, we can better target outreach efforts, address disparities, and ensure equitable access to critical support for all transitioning young people.

## **2. Establish clear self-sufficiency milestones**

The workgroup supports the development and implementation of a standardized set of “self sufficiency milestones” as a tool to help track increases in skills and progress towards independence. B2i is a voluntary program, and young adults are encouraged to pursue milestones that align with their own goals and aspirations. A component of success in the program should be defined by the growth in skills and self-sufficiency measures chosen by each participant. The program tracks milestones to better understand areas of growth and need, while respecting the individuality and autonomy of each young adult.

## **3. Address barriers related to sealed juvenile court cases**

The workgroup recommends collaborating with tribal and state courts, particularly with the Omaha and Winnebago Tribes, to address challenges created when juvenile court cases are sealed at age 18. This practice currently requires youth to file additional court orders to unseal their records and apply for the B2i program, creating unnecessary barriers to access. The recommendation is to streamline or modify these processes so that eligible youth can more easily obtain the documentation needed for the b2i participation, ensuring that administrative procedures do not impede their transition to adulthood.

# SUSTAINABILITY WORKGROUP

Felipe Longoria-Shinn

Over the past year, the workgroup has refined its definition of “sustainability” by identifying six key domains crucial for a successful transition to adulthood:

1. Financial Well-Being
2. Education & Career Pathways
3. Hope, Confidence, Community Engagement
4. Social Skills & Support Networks
5. Whole Person Development
6. High Expectations & Youth Voice

For this reporting year, the workgroup prioritized a deeper understanding of Domain 3 (Hope, Confidence, and Community Engagement) and Domain 5 (Whole Person Development). These domains are closely linked to a young person’s ability to reach their full potential. The group emphasized that activities which allow youth to explore their strengths and interests are vital to whole person development and fostering hope for the future. However, current B2i participation requirements do not formally recognize these exploration activities as counting toward required hours for education or employment.

Additionally, the workgroup identified the importance of expanding each participant’s support system beyond professional staff. While Independence Coordinators play a critical role in connecting youth to services, they may not always have strong ties to the communities where young adults live or feel most comfortable. The workgroup encourages greater involvement from community agencies and partners, recognizing that a robust and diverse support network is essential for sustained success. The workgroup provides two recommendations:

## **1. Recognize Leadership and Interest Exploration as Participation Hours**

Allow leadership development and interest exploration activities, such as participation in Youth Advisory Boards, Legislative Days, and similar opportunities, to count toward the required B2i participation hours. The workgroup recommends a reasonable cap, such as up to 10 hours per month, to ensure these activities are meaningfully integrated without replacing core educational or employment pursuits.

## **2. Strengthening Community-Based Support Networks**

Develop strategies to engage more supportive adults from within each participant’s community. This may include formal partnerships with local organizations, mentorship programs, or outreach to culturally relevant community leaders. Expanding the network of caring adults will help ensure that every young person in B2i has access to a support system that reflects their unique background, interests, and needs.

# IMMIGRATION WORKGROUP

Felipe Longoria-Shinn

The Immigration Status Workgroup remains focused on dismantling the persistent barriers that prevent immigrant youth from accessing the B2i program. While all state wards in Nebraska are entitled to services regardless of immigration status as minors, those without legal status lose eligibility for extended support at age 19. This exclusion compromises the B2i program's core principle: that no young person is fully prepared for adulthood at 19, regardless of their background.

In 2025, Senator Machaela Cavanaugh introduced LB181 to expand B2i eligibility to all youth aging out of foster care, regardless of immigration status, and to guarantee access to medical care for these young adults. Despite strong advocacy from youth, service providers, and community stakeholders, LB181 failed to advance, leaving this critical gap unresolved. Expanding B2i eligibility for immigrant youth remains a central, unfulfilled recommendation of this workgroup and the Advisory Committee.

This recommendation has become even more urgent following the June 27, 2025 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that allows President Trump's executive order restricting birthright citizenship to take effect in many states. While the ruling does not immediately revoke citizenship from those already recognized, it introduces significant uncertainty and the potential for a patchwork of state-level policies. This has already created confusion and anxiety among immigrant families and youth in Nebraska, heightening the risk that more young people could become stateless and face even greater barriers to stability and opportunity as they exit care without legal status.



