



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



(402) 890-6510

www.childrens.nebraska.gov

1225 L St., Suite 401
Lincoln, NE 68508



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BACKGROUND

Richard Hasty, Chair

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, supports 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 receive 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, whose 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 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. The Sustainability Workgroup, also chaired by Felipe Longoria-Shinn, is focused on defining what sustainability means for young people leaving the B2i Program.

The Data Collection & Evaluation Workgroup, chaired by Heather Wood, prioritizes efforts to better understand and address barriers to the B2i Program. This year, the workgroup recommended a comprehensive analysis of eligible youth and those lacking access to extended foster care, aiming to identify and close opportunity gaps. 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 to streamline processes so that all eligible youth can access B2i 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 standardized “self-sufficiency milestones” as tools to track skill increases and progress toward independence. B2i is a voluntary program, encouraging young adults to pursue milestones aligned with their unique goals and aspirations. Success should be defined by the growth in skills and self-sufficiency measures selected by each participant. Tracking these milestones will allow for better insight into growth and service needs while respecting participant individuality and autonomy.

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

This year, the workgroup prioritized Domain 3 (Hope, Confidence & Community Engagement) and Domain 5 (Whole Person Development). These areas are closely tied to a young person’s ability to achieve their full potential. The group emphasized that activities enabling 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 exploration activities as counting toward required hours for education or employment.

The workgroup also identified the importance of expanding each participant’s support system beyond professional staff. While Independence Coordinators play a crucial role in service connection, they may not have deep ties to the communities where young adults most identify. The workgroup encourages increased involvement from community agencies and partners, emphasizing 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 Workgroup remains dedicated to dismantling barriers that prevent immigrant youth from accessing the B2i Program. While all state wards in Nebraska are eligible for services as minors regardless of immigration status, those without legal status lose eligibility for extended support when they turn 19. This exclusion runs counter to the B2i program's fundamental principle: that no young person is fully prepared for adulthood at 19, regardless of their background.

In 2025, Senator Machaela Cavanaugh introduced LB181, seeking to expand B2i eligibility to all youth aging out of foster care, regardless of citizenship status, and to guarantee medical care access for these young adults. Despite strong advocacy efforts, LB181 did not advance, leaving this gap unaddressed. Expanding B2i access for immigrant youth remains a central recommendation of this workgroup and the Advisory Committee.

The urgency of this issue has only increased following several major federal developments. On June 27, 2025, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of allowing President Trump's executive order restricting birthright citizenship to take effect in a handful of states. While the ruling does not immediately revoke citizenship from those already recognized, it has introduced significant legal uncertainty affecting immigrant families across the country.

In response, federal agencies and Congressional leaders remain sharply divided on the issue, and efforts to establish nationwide guidance for states have stalled. The Department of Health and Human Services, as well as the Administration for Children and Families, have not yet issued clear directives on how state child welfare agencies should serve immigrant youth in light of the new legal landscape. Meanwhile, Congress has yet to pass legislation providing protections or clarifications for immigrant youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood.

As a result, many Nebraska immigrant youth and families face growing confusion and anxiety. They fear the patchwork of state-level policies that now governs eligibility, as well as the potential for more young people to become stateless or lose access to support as they exit care without established legal status. These uncertainties further jeopardize stability and opportunity for immigrant youth, reflecting the ongoing need for urgent state action.

BRIDGE TO INDEPENDENCE ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

Member Name	Type	Title and Organization	Representation
Douglas Beck	Voting	Young Adult Previously in Foster Care, Young Adult	A young adult currently or previously in foster care
Terry Gibbs	Voting	CASA Volunteer, Nebraska CASA Association	A representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
Dylan Graeve	Voting	Young Adult, Young Adult	A young adult currently or previously in foster care
Brandy Gustoff	Voting	Chief Program Officer, Omaha Home for Boys (Jacobs' Place)	A representative of an Independent Living Services Agency
Richard Hasty (Chair)	Voting	Superintendent, Plattsmouth Community Schools	A representative of the Children's Commission
Camas Holder	Voting	Community Prevention Administrator, DHHS, Division of Children and Family Services	Representative of the Executive Branch of government
Angela Jarecki	Voting	Business Outreach Coordinator, Metropolitan Community College	A person with lived experience (non-statutory)
Felipe Longoria-Shinn	Voting	Associate Vice President, Secondary and Career Pathways, Nebraska Children and Families Foundation	A representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
Monalisa McGee	Voting	Divisional Social Services Director, Western Division, Salvation Army	A representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
Sarah Mitchell	Voting	Child Welfare Community Organizer, Nebraska Appleseed	A representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
Camille Ohri	Voting	Opportunity Passport Coordinator, Central Plains Center for Services	A representative of an Independent Living Services Agency
Mia Pokorny	Voting	Young Adult, Young Adult	A representative of a federally recognized Indian tribe residing in the State of Nebraska
Sami Spain	Voting	Program Manager, Child Saving Institute	A representative of a child welfare service organization
Susan Thomas	Voting	CASA Volunteer, Nebraska CASA Association	A representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
Kitty Washburn	Voting	Tribal Liaison, Nebraska Indian Child Welfare Coalition, Inc.	A representative of a child welfare service organization
Jennifer Skala	Resource	Senior Vice President of Community Impact, Nebraska Children and Families Foundation	A representative of an Independent Living Services Agency
Colton Stogdill	Resource	Advocate Coordinator, Douglas County Nebraska CASA	A representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
Theresa Cusic	Ex-Officio	Project Specialist, Nebraska Court Improvement Project	A representative of the Judicial Branch of government
Brooke Fuhr	Ex-Officio	Juvenile Justice Projects Specialist, Administrative Office of Courts and Probation	A representative of the Judicial Branch of government

