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Bridge to Independence Advisory Committee 2019-2020 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

*Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this Committee was not able to formally vote on approval of this report. The report was sent to members for informal feedback and this final version reflects their input.

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. This Advisory Committee is Co-Chaired by Jeanne Brandner (Administrative Office of the Courts and Probation) and Christina Lloyd (CEDARS Youth Services). 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.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During 2019 and 2020, 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 and is looking forward to utilizing the evaluation to drive future work of the Committee.

During the 106th legislature, 2nd session, Senator Pansing Brooks put forth a recommendation from the b2i Advisory Committee as part of [LB848](#). The bill extends the age of eligibility to 18 for youth who age out of the tribal court system. Many partners came forward to support the bill's components and the bill passed. The b2i eligibility expansion for tribal youth takes effect July 1, 2021.

Many states age of majority is 18, while in Nebraska, the age of majority is age 19. In addition to many other states, Nebraska tribal territories recognize age of majority at 18. The b2i program enrolls young adults at age 19, the State of Nebraska's recognized age of majority. The one-year gap for native youth has made locating youth for enrollment particularly challenging and subjected them to a period with no formal support or resources.

This statutory language change in [LB848](#) recognizes the age of majority at either the state or tribal definition ensures the program benefits all young adults aging out of care without permanency.

A necessary component to monitoring the ongoing implementation of b2i is reviewing data on a regular and ongoing basis. The Bridge to Independence Advisory Committee, the DHHS, and Foster Care Review Office have prioritized continuous quality improvement and data analysis of the b2i program. At each Committee meeting, program and participant data is reviewed and discussed. It 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.

During the next year, the Advisory Committee plans to revisit past recommendations since 2015 that have either not been adopted, or, were adopted but have since required renewed attention.

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 and tribal youth.

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 2020 and 2021 will further explore recommendations from the 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.

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.** An Independence Coordinator must meet with youth prior to aging out a minimum of six months before their 19th birthday.
- 3.** Consistent with the Case Management Workgroup recommendations in 2015 report, it is recommended DHHS ensure Independence Coordinators 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.
- 4.** 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.

EXTERNAL EVALUATION

KEY FINDINGS

1. Overall, participating in the b2i program is associated with improved outcomes for young people.
2. B2i participants have better housing outcomes than non-b2i peers.
3. B2i participants were more likely than their non-b2i peers to report being able to cover their expenses.
4. Young people participating in both b2i and Connected Youth Initiative (CYI) with asset matching reported being more hopeful compared to their peers in CYI alone and those in b2i and CYI without asset matching.
5. Young people participating in both b2i and CYI with asset matching also reported more self-regulation than their peers in CYI without asset matching and those in b2i and CYI without asset matching.
6. All interview and focus group participants reports having a high-quality, positive relationship with their b2i Independence Coordinator.
7. Participants reported that the stipend allows them to feel financially secure while working toward their goals.
8. Current and former b2i participants were more likely than their peers without b2i experience to report having safe, stable, and affordable housing.
9. Young people currently enrolled in b2i were less likely to report homelessness or couch surfing than their peers without b2i experience.

The Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (NCFF), the FCRO, and DHHS-DCFS contracted with Child Trends for an external evaluation for the b2i Program. This independent evaluation is 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.

Overall, the evaluation was positive and reflected on the strengths of the b2i program. To carry out the evaluation, the team first had to define success for participants in b2i. The outcome-based definition included the following measures:

- Employment
- Educational attainment
- Financial capability
- Housing stability
- Social capital

While this definition was important in development of the evaluation, it was discovered through the evaluation process that most of the young adults surveyed stressed the importance of setting goals and working to reach them. Having a positive attitude was also a common theme in discussions. Several participants also mentioned self-advocacy and community involvement in their definition of success.

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 Evaluations:

Future Evaluations should reflect young people's definitions of success in b2i and should monitor outcomes and different points in their b2i experience. Young people's definition of success extended beyond traditional outcome areas such as education, employment, and financial stability. They also described success as setting and achieving personal goals and having hope for the future. Although this evaluation examined the outcomes of b2i participants during the program and after they exited, future evaluations should evaluate young people's knowledge, perceptions and outcomes before, during and after b2i. This pre-and post-test design of future evaluations will eliminate selection bias.

Recommendations from the External Evaluation:

- 1. More tailored supports are needed as participants approach age 21.**
- 2. Caseworkers for pending b2i participants should work closely with Independence Coordinators to educate young people about the program and establish a budget in tandem with the youth before they receive their first monthly financial stipend.**
- 3. Future evaluations should reflect young people's definition of success in b2i and should monitor outcomes at different points in their b2i experience.**

CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AND DATA ANALYSIS

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.

The recommendation for tribal youth has been implemented with the passing of LB848, described further in the executive summary on page 2.

Bridge to Independence Advisory Committee Members

Member Name	Member Type	Title and Organization	Representation
Jeanne Brandner (Co-Chair)	Ex-Officio	Deputy Administrator of the Division of Juvenile Services , Administrative Office of Probation	a representative of the Judicial Branch of government
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
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	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
Misty Frazier	voting	Executive Director , Nebraska Indian Child Welfare Coalition	a representative of a federally recognized Indian tribe residing within the State of Nebraska
Sarah Helvey	voting	Child Welfare Program Director / Staff Attorney , Nebraska Appleseed	a representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
Doug Lenz	voting	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
Camas Steuter	voting	Service Area Administrator , DHHS, Division of Children and Family Services	representative of the Executive Branch of government
Juliet Summers	voting	Policy Coordinator for Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice , Voices for Children in Nebraska	a representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
Susan Thomas	voting	CASA Volunteer , Nebraska CASA Association	a representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
Lana Verbrigghe	voting	Senior Director of Programs and Services , Children's Square USA	a representative of an Independent Living Services Agency
Brandy Gustoff	resource	Chief Program Officer Omaha Home for Boys (Jacobs' Place)	a representative of an Independent Living Services Agency
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
Kim Thomas	resource	Executive Director , Douglas County Nebraska CASA	a representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
Vacant	Ex-Officio		a representative of the Legislative Branch of government
Deb VanDyke-Ries	Ex-Officio	Director , Nebraska Court Improvement Project	Judicial Branch Representative
Senator Anna Wishart	Ex-Officio	Senator for Legislative District 27 , Nebraska Legislative Council	Legislative Branch Representative