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Bridge to Independence Advisory Committee 2021-2022 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 childrens.nebraska.gov*

BRIDGE TO INDEPENDENCE ADVISORY COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT

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 was Co-Chaired by Christina Lloyd (CEDARS Youth Services) for a majority of the report year. Christina Lloyd stepped down from her role and was replaced by Brandy Gustoff (Omaha Home for Boys) in August of 2022. 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.

BRIDGE TO INDEPENDENCE PROGRAM BACKGROUND

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.

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 eighth 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 monthly and be permanent residents of the State of Nebraska, unless residing out of state through an Interstate Compact Placement Agreement.

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.** Clarify in statute that youth can be eligible for the b2i program regardless of their immigration status.
- 3.** DHHS should develop practice guidance and/or policy focused on transition periods for youth entering and exiting the b2i program.
- 4.** DHHS should identify and implement best practices and ongoing evaluation mechanisms for the b2i program (see pages 5-6 for further information).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2019, the Bridge to Independence Advisory Committee partnered with Child Trends to complete 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 utilizing the evaluation to drive future work of the Committee.

During the 107th legislature, 1st session, Senator Pansing Brooks put forth a longstanding recommendation from the Committee as part of [LB202](#). LB202 would have expanded eligibility in the b2i program to a select population of juvenile-adjudicated youth who are at risk of homelessness and lack necessary supports. Senator Vargas also sponsored [LB262](#), which would have ensured youth aging out of the foster care system could be eligible for the b2i program regardless of their immigration status. Both bills carried over into the 107th legislature, 2nd session and they did not advance.

The Committee reviewed recommendations from the external evaluation and identified the need to continue the Data and Evaluation Workgroup and create the Sustainability Workgroup. These two workgroups remained active throughout the report year. The Sustainability Workgroup finalized substantial recommendations for DHHS and the Legislature to consider. 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.

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. 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.

CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

Heather Wood (Foster Care Review Office), Chair

The Data and Evaluation Workgroup met regularly throughout the report year to map our current data collections systems and determine gaps and opportunities for improvement.

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.

SUSTAINABILITY WORKGROUP

Sara Riffel (Nebraska Children and Families Foundation), Chair

The Sustainability Workgroup was created in 2021 with the goal of examining the cliff effect of the b2i program. One of the main findings in the 2019 external evaluation was that although youth experience positive outcomes while enrolled in the b2i program, many of those outcomes are not sustained long term.

Financial Sustainability and Safety Nets

Should federal funds become available, we recommend legislation to prioritize the financial sustainability and resources for former foster youth such as providing unconditional direct cash payments to youth to address the cliff effect of b2i and prevent homelessness for youth and young adults exiting the b2i 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 (CYI) 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. This intervention should incorporate 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.

ONGOING EVALUATION

The Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (NCFE), the FCRO, and DHHS-DCFS contracted with Child Trends to complete an external evaluation for the b2i program in 2019. This independent evaluation was 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. Moving forward, the b2i committee will work to identify ongoing evaluation mechanisms through the Data and Evaluation Workgroup.

Two main areas of transition were identified as areas needing additional focus and resources in the external evaluation: *entering* the program and *exiting* the program.

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

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.

Future evaluation needs:

- Reflect young people's definitions of success
- Monitor outcomes at different points in their b2i experience

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 passage of [LB848](#) in 2020. LB848 extended eligibility for the b2i program to youth aging out of Tribal Court proceedings at the age of 18. Prior to LB848 becoming law, a youth was required to reach the age of majority in Nebraska to be eligible for the b2i program. In some tribal jurisdictions, youth age out of the court system at 18. This inadvertently created a gap where tribal youth were aged out of their Tribal Court system but were ineligible for the b2i program. The b2i Committee continues to monitor the implementation of this statutory change and is committed to addressing barriers to connecting eligible tribal youth with the b2i program.

During the 107th legislature, 1st session, Senator Pansing Brooks put forth a longstanding recommendation from the Committee as part of [LB202](#). LB202 would expand eligibility in the b2i program to a select population of juvenile-adjudicated youth who are at risk of homelessness and lack necessary supports. Senator Vargas also sponsored [LB262](#), which would allow non-lawfully present resident youth aging out of the foster care system, to be eligible for the b2i program, including all its services and supports. Both of these bills carried over to the 107th legislature, 2nd session and did not advance.

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
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	voting	Deputy Executive Director , Central Plains Center for Services	a representative of an Independent Living Services 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
Sara Riffel	voting	Associate Vice President, Connected Youth Initiative , Nebraska Children and Families Foundation	a representative of a child welfare service agency
Susan Thomas	voting	CASA Volunteer , Nebraska CASA Association	a representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
Vacant	voting		a representative of an Independent Living Services Agency
Vacant	voting		a young adult currently or previously in foster care
Vacant	voting		a representative of a federally recognized Indian tribe residing within the State of Nebraska
Vacant	voting		a representative of an Independent Living Services Agency
Vacant	voting		a representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
Brandy Gustoff (Co-chair)	resource	Chief Operations 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
Candi Marcantel	resource	Supervisor , Sarpy County CASA	a representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
Vacant	resource		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
Lindsay Meyer	Ex-Officio	Juvenile Projects Specialist , Administrative Office of Courts and Probation	a representative of the Judicial Branch of government
Vacant	Ex-Officio		a representative of the Legislative Branch of government
Deb VanDyke-Ries	Ex-Officio	Director , Nebraska Court Improvement Project	a representative of the Judicial Branch of government