



2025-2026

NEBRASKA CHILDREN'S COMMISSION REPORT ON THE NEBRASKA BRIDGE TO INDEPENDENCE PROGRAM

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

Submitted Pursuant to Neb. Rev. Stat. § 43-4513



(402) 890-6510

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.

In 2025, the Legislature voted to eliminate the Bridge to Independence Advisory Committee with a sunset date of June 30, 2026. However, the Children's Commission voted to continue the group as a standing subcommittee under its authority. Members have discussed opportunities to increase procedural flexibility while maintaining transparency and public engagement. The Legislature passed LB962, the Youth Reentry and Transitional Support Act, which closely aligns with the goals of the B2i program by strengthening supports for youth transitioning to adulthood.

Workgroups have continued to advance recommendations and review program outcomes. The Data and Evaluation Workgroup, chaired by Heather Wood, reviewed CY2025 Foster Care Review Office Data, which showed continued growth in B2i participation. Transportation, employment, and financial stability remained the most common goals identified by youth, while access to healthcare and safe housing were identified as critical factors influencing successful outcomes.

The Sustainability Workgroup, co-chaired by Felipe Longoria-Shinn and Dylan Graeve, developed recommendations focused on improving youth engagement and long-term support. Proposed strategies included creating recurring program orientation materials, expanding the use of youth-centered outreach and social media, and encouraging the identification of a supportive adult beyond the Independence Coordinator to promote lasting stability.

The Special Populations Workgroup is exploring opportunities to better serve youth with unique needs, including documented and undocumented immigrant youth facing barriers related to immigration status and employment authorization. Planning also began to re-engage the workgroup and identify future priorities for addressing service gaps among additional specialized populations, such as tribal youth, adjudicated youth, etc.

2025 CASE REVIEW DATA HIGHLIGHTS

During the 2025 Calendar Year, the Foster Care Review Office (FCRO) conducted 252 case reviews of young adult B2i participants. These reviews provide valuable insights into participant goals, progress, and overall outcomes.

Goal Area	% of Participants Selecting Goal	% Showing Progress
Transportation	95.6%	80.0%
Employment	89.7%	88.0%
Education	71.8%	71.0%
Finance	71.0%	69.0%
Housing	42.5%	79.0%
Health	27.8%	81.0%

Regarding demographic insights, females tended to be making more progress on transportation, education, housing, and health goals. White young adults tended to be making more progress on goals than young adults of color; however, young adults of color tended to be making more progress on financial goals.

Overall Progress Toward Independence

- 91% of reviewed male and female participants were making progress towards independent living;
- Progress rates varied by race/ethnicity in that 96% of white participants were making progress to independent living compared to 88% of participants of color;
- Young adult participants with only one removal from their home as minors had higher progress rates (92%) compared to those with multiple removals (89%); and
- Placement history also seemed to have an impact as 95% of those with fewer than four placements were making progress compared to 89% for participants who had four or more placements.

Key Influencers on Progress

- Young adults without a reliable support system were 5 times as likely to have a health goal.
- When B2i participants had 4 or more times missing from their out-of-home care placement as a minor, they were 6 times as likely to not be making progress on their health goal.
- Young adults who had safe housing were nearly 6 times as likely to be making progress on independent living.

DATA & EVALUATION WORKGROUP

Heather Wood, Chair

The Data and Evaluation Workgroup developed its recommendations through a focused, data-driven review process conducted between October 2025 and July 2026. Chaired by Heather Wood, the workgroup collaborated during regular meetings with stakeholders representing the Foster Care Review Office (FCRO), Children and Family Services (CFS), and system-involved partners. The group utilized recent trends from the FCRO June 2026 Quarterly Report to ground their discussions, ensuring that objective outcome data informed every policy suggestion. Workgroup members examined the intersection of rising congregate care utilization and lower-than-expected Bridge to Independence enrollment among high-acuity youth. By analyzing these placement trends alongside existing service gaps, the group identified actionable recommendations to improve outreach via digital tools and to mitigate the "services cliff" for youth transitioning into adulthood. Final recommendations were developed through consensus-building, transparent discussion, and a careful balancing of statistical evidence with the practical realities of case management.

Additional data suggests an area of focus for promoting the B2i program should include increased attention on youth in more restrictive placement settings as they get closer to their 19th birthday. According to the Foster Care Review Office (FCRO) June 2026 Quarterly Report, there has been an increased use of congregate care placements for Nebraska children and youth in out-of-home care. On March 31, 2026, 12.9% of child-welfare-involved youth ages 13–18 were in congregate settings. Despite this growing trend in use of more restrictive placement types, less than 2% of B2i participants reviewed by the FCRO were in a congregate care setting for their last placement in out-of-home care as a minor, indicating a potential lack of knowledge about the B2i program amongst this population.

- Given these data trends, Children and Family Services (CFS) should ensure case managers are utilizing the B2i promotional video and other relevant promotional materials when informing eligible youth about the program, particularly those in more restrictive settings like congregate care. Many of these youth are placed out-of-state, creating further challenges with effectively promoting the program.
- Increased use of restrictive placement types likely reflects more severe clinical acuity for youth in out-of-home care. Understanding that the need for clinical supports does not disappear when a youth ages out of child welfare, CFS should ensure young adults in B2i have access to appropriate clinical supports and services.

SUSTAINABILITY WORKGROUP

Dylan Graeve & Felipe Longoria-Shinn, Co-Chairs

The Sustainability and Peer Connections Workgroup developed its recommendations through a collaborative, cross-sector engagement process that took place over approximately eight to nine months, from July 2025 to March 2026. Co-chaired by a youth with lived experience and a community partner, the workgroup convened monthly meetings with stakeholders representing B2i staff, DHHS, youth-serving organizations, CASA, Nebraska Appleseed, and other partners with direct experience supporting prospective, current, and/or former B2i participants. The workgroup intentionally incorporated youth voice throughout the process, including contributions from youth with lived experience who participated in discussions and provided feedback on emerging ideas. Through facilitated dialogue, workgroup members explored the meaning of sustainability for youth exiting B2i, examined challenges related to long-term stability and social connections, and identified recommendations meant to strengthen life outcomes beyond program completion. Recommendations were developed through consensus-building, ongoing stakeholder feedback, transparent discussion, and careful consideration of both professional expertise and lived experience perspectives.

RECOMMENDATION 1: Improve and align annual data collection across B2i, Opportunity Passport (Financial literacy program), and ETV (Education and Training Vouchers) to better track participation, outcomes, and gaps in programs that support long-term sustainability.

Recommendation Description: Data related to participation, persistence, and outcomes are currently collected independently across B2i, OPP, and ETV. This limits our ability to understand how B2i youth engage across programs for which they are eligible—particularly those that strengthen financial literacy, postsecondary access, and career advancement, all of which contribute to long-term sustainability of the B2i participant.

Without aligned data, it is difficult to assess cross-program utilization, referral effectiveness, equity in participation, or cumulative impact. Aligning annual high-level data collection would provide a more comprehensive view of youth engagement across programs, allowing us to identify service gaps and monitor engagement and outcomes in OPP and ETV for B2i participants, which may support improved sustainability beyond B2i involvement. Ideally, data collection would capture ETV and OPP enrollment for youth currently in B2i and, when feasible, for those who have exited B2i to assess longer-term stability and success. This should consider improving OPP survey completion rates from participants, encouraged by B2i Independence Coordinators—as data may inform outcomes by participants utilizing B2i and other programs simultaneously.

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Because OPP and ETV data are already collected for participating youth up to age 26, advancing this recommendation will require a clear, long-term data-sharing agreement between DHHS, Central Plains Center for Services (the OPP and ETV administrator), and Nebraska Children and Families Foundation. This agreement should outline what data will be shared, for how long, costs, and under what access parameters. Stronger alignment across B2i, OPP, and ETV would enhance coordinated referrals, support continuous improvement, and improve our ability to demonstrate system-level impact to stakeholders and policymakers. It may also provide insight into the extent to which B2i youth continue accessing relational supports, such as PALS, beyond formal program involvement.

- **Suggested Recommended Action Step:** We believe it would be beneficial for DHHS, Central Plains, and NCFE to collaborate on developing a long-term agreement for shared data across programs that can be mutually beneficial.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Strengthen B2i's understanding and relational connections by revisiting program intake information—at minimum every six months—through a clear, youth-friendly one-page summary.

Recommendation Description: Youth often receive a significant amount of information during intake, which can be overwhelming and difficult to retain—particularly given the transitions and instability many experience when entering B2i. When program expectations and supports are not clearly understood or reinforced, it can negatively affect engagement, participant outcomes, and the strength of the relationship with their Independence Coordinator (IC). Over time, this misalignment can hinder a participant's ability to successfully reach their goals and exit B2i in a stable and confident manner that supports long-term sustainability.

Developing a concise, accessible one-page overview of key intake information, and intentionally revisiting it at least every six months, would reinforce understanding of program benefits, youth rights and responsibilities, and expectations and clarity on engagement and communication. It would also reinforce goal setting and progress monitoring. Having this overview available as a virtual option on a website could be an alternative way to support easy access and could include more detailed descriptions. This recurring touchpoint should be flexible, align with youth needs, and would essentially function not only as an informational refresher, but also as a structured opportunity to assess and strengthen the IC–youth relationship. It might also support clarity around mutual accountability, addressing disengagement early, and navigating boundary challenges proactively and transparently.

SUSTAINABILITY WORKGROUP

By normalizing these check-ins, the program reinforces transparency, shared expectations, relational trust, and consistent support—key conditions for sustained engagement, personal development, and long-term success.

- **Suggested Recommended Action Step:** Establish a practice expectation that ICs review and discuss the B2i one-page intake summary and program norms with youth at least every six months—and more frequently when disengagement or boundary concerns arise—to promote shared understanding, relational alignment, and sustained engagement.

RECOMMENDATION 3: Explore structured peer engagement opportunities that strengthen connection among youth, deepen relationships between youth and B2i staff, and inform ongoing program improvement.

Recommendation Description: While individualized staff support remains central to B2i, creating intentional opportunities for youth to connect with one another—both those currently enrolled and those who have successfully exited or aged out of the program—is equally important. Structured peer engagement allows participants to build meaningful bonds, reduce isolation, and empower one another through shared lived experiences. It could also improve opportunities for skill development in budgeting, studying, and career development. Connections between current participants and alumni can be especially powerful, offering real-world perspective, modeling of long-term stability, and tangible examples of success beyond B2i.

When youth engage with peers navigating similar transitions, it strengthens belonging, normalizes challenges, and reinforces persistence—key factors in achieving goals while enrolled in B2i. At the same time, alumni engagement can reinforce leadership identity and continued connection to supportive networks, contributing to sustained success after exit. Learning from other peer engagement work, such as the Connected Youth Initiative’s (CYI) peer engagement model, may help inform development of these opportunities.

Beyond relational benefits, peer spaces can serve a purposeful role in improving the program itself. Bringing youth together to provide feedback, identify barriers, propose solutions, and promote shared accountability shifts participants from service recipients to active contributors in program improvement. Structured opportunities—i.e., peer cohorts, facilitated dialogue sessions, youth advisory groups, alumni panels, mentorship pairings, virtual check-ins, etc.—can create consistent environments for connection, leadership development, and collective problem-solving.

SUSTAINABILITY WORKGROUP

By fostering connection, empowerment, and shared ownership, structured peer engagement can strengthen in-program outcomes while building the confidence, skills, and community ties that support long-term sustainability after youth exit B2i.

- **Suggested Recommended Action Step:** Pilot small-scale, structured peer engagement opportunities—co-informed by youth with B2i experience and drawing on models such as CYI—that intentionally include both current participants and alumni. Collect feedback on connection, relevance, and impact, and use those insights to refine and scale a sustainable model that strengthens engagement, supports continuous program improvement, and promotes post-exit success.



BRIDGE TO INDEPENDENCE (B2I) ADVISORY SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

Member Name	Title and Organization	Representation
Theresa Cusic	Project Specialist , Nebraska Court Improvement Project	a representative of the Judicial Branch of government
Brooke Fuhr	Juvenile Justice Projects Specialist , Administrative Office of the Courts and Probation	a representative of the Judicial Branch of government
Terry Gibbs	CASA Volunteer , Nebraska CASA Association	a representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
Dylan Graeve	Young Adult	a young adult currently or previously in foster care
Richard Hasty (Chair)	Superintendent , Plattsmouth Community Schools	a representative of the Children's Commission
Camas Holder	Community Prevention Administrator , DHHS, Division of Children and Family Services	representative of the Executive Branch of government
Felipe Longoria-Shinn	Associate Vice President, Secondary and Career Pathways , Nebraska Children and Families Foundation	a representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
Monalisa McGee	Divisional Social Services Director, Western Division , Salvation Army	a representative of a child welfare service agency
Sarah Mitchell	Child Welfare Community Organizer , Nebraska Appleseed	a representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
Camille Ohri	Opportunity Passport Coordinator , Central Plains Center for Services	a representative of an Independent Living Services Agency
Hannah Olafson	Lead Family Support Specialist , Child Saving Institute	a representative of a child welfare service agency
Mary Petite	Caseworker , Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska Human Services Department	a representative of a federally recognized Indian tribe residing within the State of Nebraska
Jordan Ramsey	Transitional Services Manager , Omaha Home for Boys	a representative of an Independent Living Services Agency
Jennifer Skala	Senior Vice President of Community Impact , Nebraska Children and Families Foundation	a representative of an Independent Living Services Agency
Colton Stogdill	Advocate Coordinator , Douglas County Nebraska CASA	a representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
Susan Thomas	CASA Volunteer , Nebraska CASA Association	a representative of a child welfare advocacy organization
Kitty Washburn	Tribal Liaison , Nebraska Indian Child Welfare Coalition, Inc.	a representative of a child welfare service agency