

# MENTORING & FOSTER YOUTH



The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimates that there are over 400,000 children currently in foster care in the United States. Most youth are in the system for at least a year, with 38% for two years or longer. The most common placement setting for children in foster care is nonrelative foster family homes; about half of youth exit the system end up reunited with their caregivers, while another quarter are adopted.

Unfortunately, as a result of the many challenges that can come with unstable and impermanent housing, disruptions in education, and a lack of strong relationships with adults, only 50% of youth in foster care complete high school by the time they are 18 years old, and only 20% enroll in higher education upon graduation.

Studies have shown that mentoring services for foster youth are effective intervention strategies that have a positive impact on a wide range of factors. This document discusses these findings, provides examples of successful program models from across the country, and discusses opportunities to support youth with experience in foster care through mentoring.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

- A 2017 research synthesis of over 30 studies on mentoring youth in foster care concluded that mentoring relationships can have a positive impact on a range of factors, including mental health, educational functioning and attainment, peer relationships, placement outcomes, and life satisfaction.
- More recent research has demonstrated that mentoring at the time of emancipation can have a positive impact on several transition-related outcomes, such as employment and housing stability and avoidance of involvement with the criminal justice system.
- One study funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) of a transition-age program found that these mentoring programs potentially provide a benefit of three times the public expenditure, for every day in jail that program participants avoid.
- MENTOR's national program survey in 2017 estimated that mentoring services for youth in foster care are at least twice as expensive as those of a typical community-based program. With the average cost-per-youth served for a typical mentoring program estimated to be \$1,695, the cost-per-youth in a program that primarily serves foster youth can be over \$3,400.

## STUDIES FROM THE FIELD

- Multiple studies of the **Fostering Healthy Futures** program for middle school-aged youth placed into foster care in Denver, Colorado, found:
  - The program had a significant impact in reducing mental health symptoms, especially symptoms associated with trauma, anxiety, and depression as well as mental health service utilization 6-19 months after participation in the program
  - Participating youth were 71% less likely to be placed in residential treatment
  - For those living in nonrelative care when entering the program, they experienced 44% fewer placement changes, were 82% less likely to be placed in residential treatment, and were 5 times more likely to have attained permanency one year after participating in the program

- The program produced positive impacts on reunification and rates of adoption for participating youth
- A version of the program serving high school-age youth found that intervention youth had 7 times the odds of attaining permanency at long-term follow up
- A study on the **Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)** program suggests that youth paired with a CASA volunteer experience fewer placement changes, less time in care, greater likelihood of achieving permanency, greater access to services and resources, and more support through adult relationships.
- The **Middle School Success** intervention for girls in foster care found:
  - The program significantly reduced participant's substance misuse three years after first entering the program
  - The program significantly reduced the number of placements for participants
- The **My Life** program, focused on transition-age youth in Portland, Oregon:
  - Produced significant improvements in permanency planning, educational completion and graduation, and participation in career development activities
  - A 2018 study found that participating in the program reduced criminal justice involvement 2-3 years post-emancipation by half, with an even stronger impact for male participants
  - The **Take Charge** program, and off-shoot of My Life, found that working with a mentor increased independent living skills and planning, as well as use of transition services.

## OPPORTUNITIES

The *Foster Youth Mentoring Act* seeks to address the need for greater support of mentoring programs that support the country's most vulnerable young people. The bill provides funding to programs that aim to provide foster youth with healthy relationships with volunteer and peer mentors.

Specifically, the bill:

- Authorizes funding to expand and enhance mentoring programs that serve foster youth. Grantees may use funding for critical mentor recruitment and screening to ensure long-term and quality mentor-mentee relationships.
- Provides intensive training to volunteers who serve as mentors to foster youth to ensure that they have a strong understanding of child development, family dynamics, the child welfare system and other relevant considerations that affect foster youth.
- Ensures that youth voice is included in program development, design, and implementation.
- Provides funding to support peer-to-peer mentoring relationships for young people with experience in foster care.
- Ensures that programs receiving a grant follow best practices for screening volunteers and matching mentors with mentees.
- Increases coordination between mentoring programs and child welfare systems.

Contact [cfabbi@mentoring.org](mailto:cfabbi@mentoring.org) with any questions

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