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Supporting the Transition from Foster Care to Adulthood: Independent Living Programs A Literature Review

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Abstract

Background

Youth in foster care typically lose their support systems upon turning 18, when their official placement ends and they leave the foster care system. After age 18, they are no longer entitled to care by law and participation in transition programs is voluntary. Research on care leavers' outcomes highlights the significant challenges they face during their transition to adulthood and underscores the need for improving preparation for adulthood and continued support beyond age 18. This literature review was conducted at the request of the Foster Care Service in the Personal and Social Services Administration of the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs. Its aim is to examine evidence-based strategies for improving the transition of young adults aging out of care.

Objective

This review seeks to identify promising models and best practices from around the world that can inform policymakers and foster care professionals on how to improve the preparation of care leavers for the transition to adulthood and guide the development of independent living programs (ILPs) for adolescents in foster care and care leavers.

Methodology

The review was based on academic articles as well as on systematic reviews of the experiences of transitioning to adulthood among care leavers, independent living programs, and success indicators for transition to adulthood. In addition, gray literature on independent living programs was reviewed. The information was collected between September 2024 through May 2025.

Findings

Research indicates that care leavers often exhibit low levels of readiness for adulthood and face emotional challenges both before and during the transition. One recurring theme across many studies is the need for a supportive adult whom young adults can rely on during this critical period. In the absence of a supportive family environment, these young adults often depend on support from the state, NGO's, and other entities who assume

parental responsibilities and provide services and support. However, the research shows that both legislation and support services decline sharply at age 18, leaving care leavers to cope independently during a stage of life characterized by instability and uncertainty. Independent living programs provide a range of services that are designed to develop life skills, improve education and employment outcomes, foster well-being, and encourage supportive adult connections. Transitional programs may also provide supervised housing options to promote gradual independence.

The literature points to several best practices for building resilience and easing the transition for young adults aging out of care: ensuring stability in their lives, supporting their academic development, involving them in personal and policy decisions that affect them, and preparing and supporting them throughout the transition. These practices must be anchored in policy and legislation, and specialized personnel should be trained to ensure effective implementation. Additionally, the interventions should be grounded in developmental theory and address the evolving needs of youth in care across multiple life domains. Emphasis should also be placed on cultivating high-quality, stable, and consistent relationships with supportive adults that continue into adulthood. Success in adulthood is often a long-term process that extends beyond the scope of current systems. The traditional concept of “independence” should be reframed as interdependence—fostering ongoing, supportive relationships with professionals and caring adults who provide guidance, emotional support, and assistance throughout the transition.

Policy and Practice Recommendation

The literature suggests several measures to improve care leavers' readiness for adulthood and to support them during the transition:

- Develop transition and independent living programs based on best practices
- Appoint a transition case manager to integrate the efforts supporting adolescents and young adults in their transition to adulthood
- Promote cross-system collaboration to ensure care leavers can access the full range of services they need
- Employ professionals from diverse backgrounds and provide training in cultural sensitivity and the unique challenges faced by marginalized youth
- Implement trauma-informed practices that address the long-term effects of abuse, discrimination, and mental health issues

- Provide greater support and training to foster parents to reduce stress and enhance their role in preparing adolescents for the successful transition to adulthood
- Leverage technology to create complementary content for training sessions and offer digital resources for professionals, parents, and care leavers
- Establish ongoing monitoring and evaluation to ensure that independent living programs are effective and to identify problems with program design or service delivery and implement changes when necessary.