Policy Analysis of Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008

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Each year in the United States’ child welfare system, officially over 20,000 youth “age out” or become ineligible for services from the child welfare system because of their age (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). In most states this occurs at the age of 18, though some states have the age of 21 as their limit. The actual number of youth aging out is significantly larger than 20,000 since more than 4,000 youth run away from their placements annually (Shirk & Stangler, 2004). Additionally the number is larger because teenagers who run away and are not found are excluded from the number of youth aging out, and many youth are returned to their parents, who were originally deemed unfit to provide care to the youth, with less than a year or two before they officially age out of the system (Courtney & Dworsky, 2005). There is evidence that youth staying in the system beyond age 18 have increased positive life outcomes (Courtney et al., 2001). With the passage of recent federal legislation, states have more opportunities for federal funding to extend services to youth aging out. This paper explores the issue of youth aging out of the child welfare system and analyzes the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008.¹

Nature of the Problem

Youth age out of the child welfare system ill-prepared and often unable to make it on their own. They are more likely to have problems domains including: housing, education, employment, physical health, mental health, substance abuse, and criminal involvement (Courtney & Heuring, 2005). Homelessness becomes a reality for many former foster youth. Even if they are able to stay off the street, youth who age out of the system may be temporarily staying in over-crowded housing with friends and family, homeless shelters, hotel rooms, or

¹The framework used is a modification of the Rosenberg and Stein Sarnott Framework which appears in Social Work and Social Problems (Cohen, 1964).
sleeping in cars. One study found that one out of five youth who aged out of care spent at least one day of homelessness within the first year of leaving foster care (Pecora et al., 2006). Another study found almost 14% of youth had experienced homelessness at some point after leaving foster care (Courtney & Dworsky, 2005). Lack of permanent stable housing impact the ability of youth to pursue education and employment opportunities. One study of youth aging out found that 50% left foster care without a high school degree (Reilly, 2003). In a different study the high school completion rate of youth aging out was similar to their counter parts, though youth aging out disproportionately received their GED (Pecora et al., 2006). In a longitudinal study of youth aging out of the system, 63% of youth who have left care were not enrolled in an educational program (Courtney & Dworsky, 2005). Youth often struggle to find and maintain a job that supports them. One study found only 40% of youth who aged out of the system were currently employed compared to 58.2% of 19 year olds in a nationally representative sample (Courtney & Dworsky, 2005). Employment prospects for former foster care youth are poor. One study of youth who had aged out in three states found that youth had mean earnings below the poverty line and were slower to progress in labor market (Goerge et al., 2002). The physical health of youth who have aged out of foster care is poorer than their peers who were not in care (English & Grasso, 2000). One study found 30% of youth who aged out had serious health problems since leaving care, and 32% of the youth needed health care and could not get it (Reilly, 2003). In addition to their own health, many former foster youth have children as they are aging out of care. One study found that by age 19, almost half of former foster youth who were female had been pregnant, this is more than double what was found in a nationally representative comparison group (Courtney & Dworsky, 2005). Foster youth suffer from more mental health problems than the general population (Courtney, Terao & Bost, 2004). One study found one-
third of youth who had aged out of the system experienced depression, dysthymia, post-traumatic stress disorder, social phobia, alcohol/substance abuse, or alcohol/substance dependence (Courtney & Dworsky, 2005). Clearly the problems that youth aging out face are complicated and extensive and finding solutions will be complicated.

Research has shown that youth who stay involved in the system until age 21 have more positive outcomes (Courtney et al., 2001). States policies greatly vary in terms of when youth officially age out and what services are available during the transition (Bess & Scarcella, 2004). Not all states permit youth to remain in the system past age 18. Probably the most important difference in the current practices is the age up to which youth receive services through the child welfare system. A majority of the states only serve youth until the age of 18 (US GAO, 2004). Only twenty six states serve youth up to age 21 (Atkinson, 2008). The remaining states have cut offs between 18 and 21, and may have conditions such youth may remain in care as long as they are actively pursuing an education or gainfully employed.

There are also many variations in the health care options available to youth who age out of foster care. As of 2004, only 7 states extend Medicaid benefits to the youth after leaving the system up to age 21 (Collins, 2004). Other states only offer Medicaid to a subset of youth who aged out of the system such as youth who are full-time students or who are engaged in certain programs. Most states terminate Medicaid rights when a youth leaves the foster care system, though some may be eligible for Medicaid for other reasons (English & Grasso, 2000).

The needs of youth transitioning out of care differ from others within the child welfare system. Developmentally the youth may need types of services that the child welfare system does not offer. Studies have indicated that youth aging out benefit from having more autonomy and control in making decisions that impact their lives.
Youth aging out should not be held entirely responsible for the problems they encounter. The child welfare system forces youth to be dependent upon the state and does not adequately prepare them for independence (Atkinson, 2008). The system serves as a surrogate parent for youth removed from their parents. However, when youth turn 18, the system largely abandons them and does not provide ongoing support that parents and families typically provide. Youth who age out are expected to be independent while their peers raised by their parents receive various kinds of support.

Increasingly in the middle class, young adults rely on their parents for financial support. Moving back in with parents after having moved out and had a period of independence is not unusual. Youth aging out of the foster care system cannot do this for several reasons. Their familial relationships may have been weak and returning home is an option. The child welfare system actively severs some of the relationships that young adults may have benefited from having. Additionally, youth may not be able to move back in or rely on family since the families live in poverty and cannot accommodate them. Young adults aging out of the system are unprepared for independence and struggle to make it on their own without a safety net.

The problem of youth aging out is not only one that affects their lives, but all of society. The problems individuals face aging out translate to burdens upon society. However, it is difficult to estimate the intangible and actual financial cost to society. A study on the returns to society for extending services to youth aging out of care to age 23 determined there was a benefit-cost ratio of 1.5 to 1 (Packard et al., 2008). Courtney and colleagues (2009) estimated that every $1 the state of California spent on youth aging out of care had a return of $2.40, and a similar cost benefit analysis for the state of Illinois found similar results. These estimates most likely are low as they do not consider incarceration and crime into their equations.
As illustrated above, the problem of youth aging out of care is complicated, and has many components including: unrealistic expectations of youth at age 18 to be independent, inadequate preparation for youth aging out of care to be independent, and programs within the child welfare system not meeting the unique needs of youth transitioning into adulthood. One part of the problem is that state policies may not include youth ages 18 to 21 in their programs. Additionally, the dominant political ideology of neo-liberalism contributes to the problem, as it holds youth responsible for their problems and views the market as the only solution to the problems. Using neoliberal thinking as the lens of viewing the problem of youth aging out and looking for solutions is limiting.

All youth who age out of care may face difficulties as they transition to independence and adulthood. There are many circumstances that youth who have been in care have faced that contribute to potential hardships. However, certain youth may face more additional barriers and problems. There is some evidence that those who are leaving group homes and residential programs are more at risk. Youth who age out of the system with a history of being in the juvenile justice system or who have a criminal record may also face additional risks. Those youth who age out and who have children may face unique challenges. These young parents may be in danger of not only facing problems themselves, but also their children. Youth of color may face additional barriers due to structural racism and prejudices they encounter.

Problem Identification

While the social problem of youth aging out has recently gained press, the problem has acknowledged at the federal level for a century. In 1909 at the first White House conference on children’s issues, President Roosevelt mentioned the need to help kids who are leaving the system (Festinger, 1983). It is becoming a larger issue as more children are going into the foster
system and age out of the system. There is a greater need to provide services as they leave the system. The problem is only going to get worse if it is not addressed more proactively.

Service providers to youth aging out as well as scholars identify youth aging out of care as a problem. Both groups have observed how youth aging out face more problems than their peers. It has become an area of focus from a social justice issue in wanting to make sure that those who are vulnerable and in need are helped. Additionally, it has become a concern due to the economic burden that youth aging out of care place on the systems and society. Youth who age out and become unemployed, homeless, or incarcerated cost society greatly. Due to this financial burden, policy makers increasingly are addressing the problem.

The general public may not necessarily view youth aging out of care as a social problem that needs to be addressed by federal legislation. This most likely is due to a lack of awareness of the scope of the problem as well as holding faulty assumptions. Part of the problem is a function of the American values of individualism and of the concept of adulthood starting at age 18. While age 18 is the legal age that adulthood begins, the reality is that at 18 years, most people are not expected to function as adult (Arnett, 2000; Osgood et al., 2004). Families support their children often until their late 20s and early 30s. Upon leaving adolescents, youth do not become fully independent adults (Arnett & Taber, 1994). It is both a misconception and fantasy that youth at age 18 are able to make it on their own today.

Neoliberal thinking also contributes to the belief that youth who age out of care should become more independent and be able to support themselves. The adherence to seeing the market as the solution of social problems does not acknowledge how youth systematically face barriers that prevent them from obtaining and maintain jobs that will allow them to support themselves. Additionally, this type of thought does not hold the child welfare system or other
systems that youth interacted with accountable for not sufficiently preparing youth to be on their own (Propp, Ortaga & NewHeart, 2003). Youth aging out are blamed for making bad decisions and thus seen as responsible for the problem they face.

Racism is a factor in the lack of awareness about the problem of youth aging out. While it is true that African Americans are over represented within the child welfare system, individuals frequently believe that those in the child welfare system overestimate what portion is African American (Wulczyn & Lery, 2007). Youth within the child welfare system are seen as “the other” and the public may view these youth as the African American communities’ “problem.”

Key Decision Makers

Decision makers at the federal, state, and local levels control of the distribution of power and resources that affects the problem. At the federal level, Congress enacts legislation and then the Department of Health and Human Services make recommendations about implementation. Federal funds have been made available to states to provide services to youth aging out since 1986, though arguable they have been insufficient to adequately address the problem.

There are many decision makers between the federal level and the street level where youth actually receive services. States determine their individual policies in their legislature. They can allocate funding to providing services and support to youth aging out of care and determine the age at which youth no longer are eligible for services. Additionally, they may determine upon what set of circumstances youth may remain or re-enter the child welfare system.

While some states have a statewide child welfare system, many of the states actually implement programs at a county level. This results in another set of decision makers that create policies impacting youth aging out of care. Far removed from what is happening in congress, the
daily implantation of programs falls upon case managers and front line workers within county programs and agencies. These individuals while operating within the framework that those above them have created still maintain a considerable amount of power over youth aging out of care.

Possibly the only group that does not have control of the power and resources that effect the problem are the youth who are aging out of care. These youth are not a well-organized special interest groups and do not carry any political clout. While federal legislation mandates that states incorporate youth into the planning and implementing of policies for youth aging out, this may just be in the form of a youth advisory council or a focus group. The true power over the policies that affect the lives of these youth largely remains out of their hands.

Causes of the Problem

Social Structural Sources of the Problem

American dominant political ideology, neoliberalism, as well as the American value of individualism, has created an environment where all individuals are expected to be able to take care of themselves. Extenuating circumstances and structural barriers are seen as immaterial and irrelevant. It is expected that individuals, including youth aging out care, are able to successfully enter the labor market and overcome any adversity through hard work. This line of thinking places blame squarely upon those who do not succeed. Neoliberal thought distorts reality and hides the true experience of citizens. Interdependence, not independence, leads to stable successful adult lives (Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006).

Both historically and currently, the welfare state defines “worthy” and “unworthy” poor who are in need of assistance. Youth aging out of care have many characteristics that deem them unworthy for care. They are not seen as vulnerable and they are unemployed, which contributes
to this unworthy poor status. However, one thing that also plays a role is the common beliefs about teenagers and youth aging out (Framework, 2001). Many people do not like the population simply due to their developmentally appropriate rebellion nature and strong personalities attempting to exert their independence. Teenagers, specifically those aging out of care, may well be “America’s least lovable children” (Shirk & Stanger, 2004, p. 245). Unfortunately, loveable or not, the youth aging out of care need and deserve assistance.

In addition to the political ideology and values, the way youth and the transition to adulthood is conceptualize contributes to the problem. While the state defines adulthood as age 18, and the child welfare system uses that age as a bright line rule, what occurs within most households is quite different. Parents in the United States continue to support their children beyond age 18 and the transition to adulthood is an ongoing and gradual process (Osgood et al., 2004). Parents typically offer assistance to their children as they transition to adults in the forms of food, shelter, financial assistance, support, guidance, and time. The concept of emerging adulthood, which is the period after adolescents as young people take on adult roles and responsibility, extends until people are in their late twenties and early thirties (Arnett, 1994). While this is theoretically accepted and practiced with the family, it is not the practice for youth aging out of care who are thrown into adulthood at age 18 by the system (Avery & Freundlich, 2008).

Length of transitioning to adulthood has expanded in the last few decades. The social norms of meeting adult milestones such as living alone and being able to financially independent have changed in that they take longer to achieve. In addition to the lengthening of the transition, it has become more complicated (Osgood et al., 2004). In addition to the economic forces that are at play, there are more threats and less clarity. No longer is there a single successful path to
adulthood like in the 1950s where education, home ownership, marriage, and children signified a complete transition (Osgood et al., 2004).

Youth in general are a relatively marginalized and disenfranchised group. Their political clout is practically negligible. The fact that youth aging out are not organized and advocating for their wellbeing at the different levels contributes to the status quo where their needs are not being met. This however is not to suggest that they are to blame for the problems which they face or that change is occurring slowly. It is unrealistic and borders on blaming the victim to expect youth aging out to be able to counter the power inequities and successfully advocate for themselves within the political arena.

Individual Sources of the Problem

Like those within the child welfare system, youth aging out are a heterogeneous group. The various personal characteristics that interact with the previous mentioned differences and create a large array of outcomes (Keller, Cusick, & Courtney, 2007). Many of the youth age out of the system have “multiple and serious vulnerabilities that make full self-sufficiency an inappropriate goal, especially in the young adult years” (Collins, 2004, p. 1056). While each youth is unique, there are some trends worthy of note. Using latent class analysis, researchers have identified distinct unique groups of youth aging out of care and those who are most at risk, though more work needs to be done in this area (Keller, Cusick & Courtney, 2007; Vaughn, Shook, & McMillian, 2008).

There are several patterns within youth aging out of care. Youth who age out of the system are most likely to have entered the system in later adolescence and to have lived in poverty (Wertheimer, 2002). African American youth are over represented in the numbers of youth aging out (Wulczyn & Lery, 2007). As previously mentioned, as a group, youth aging out
have more health, mental health, and substance abuse problems. Young women who age out are also more likely than their peers to have children.

Some of the problems that youth aging out of foster care face stem from the lack of life experience as well as their dependence upon the system. You aging out of care have poor life skills. Many may not be able to negotiate independence easily on their own without knowing how to manage money. A longitudinal study of youth aging out of care found that only 46% of the youth had savings or checking accounts while 82% of a comparison group had one (Courtney & Dworsky, 2005). Problems with credit often arise. The social skills of youth aging out of care may also be poor due to the lack of living in a family setting (Shirk & Stangler, 2004). The complexities increase for racial and ethnic minority groups in some part due to the extended adolescent period in minority cultures (Avery & Freundlich, 2008).

Youth aging out are less likely than their peers who are not in the child welfare system to be educated and employed, as previously mentioned. It is widely recognized that the educational disparities youth aging out face are due in part to the discontinuities in their lives. Moving among placements as well as schools disadvantages youth educationally.

Youth aging out also have higher rates of involvement within the juvenile justice and criminal justice systems. Youth who age out of foster care have higher arrest rates. One study of approximately 300 young men who aged out of foster care, found more than 50% had an arrest record from either while in foster care or subsequent to aging out (Ryan, Hernandez, & Herz, 2007). Considering the overlap between the child welfare system and the juvenile justice systems, the fact that youth who age out of foster care frequently have subsequent problems within the criminal justice system should come as no surprise (Jonson-Reid, 2002).
Youth’s experiences with the child welfare system drastically differ. The reasons for entering care are varied. Some entered due to abuse and neglect, while others entered the system due to the death or incarceration of their care giver. Still others may have had their parents ask the child welfare system to be removed the child from their home due to parent-child conflict. The amount of time spent in the system as well as the number and types of placements also differs among youth aging out. Some may have been in the system for months, while others languished in care for years. The placement types range from the least restrictive of a foster home to the most restrictive of a lock down residential facility. In between these endpoints on the spectrum of care include kinship care, therapeutic foster care, and group homes. A small portion of youth aging out spends time in independent living programs.

While youth aging out of care may have the appearance of being adults, it is important to use a developmental perspective and acknowledge that they are not completely mature (Wulczyn, 2008). The concept of emerging adulthood, a developmental theory, suggests that the period of late teens through the twenties is a time of identity exploration and not one of stability (Arnett, 2000). This is most relevant to the youth who are aging out as they live within the American culture that largely permits this time of exploration.

Research on Causes of the Problem

The body of knowledge about youth aging out is growing. A search of the literature can easily yield a few hundred peer reviewed journal articles and book chapters of studies within the United States. The Chapin Hall Center for Children at University of Chicago has provided leadership in the area research, as have the Casey Foundation and the Child Welfare League of America. The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth, conducted by Courtney and colleagues (2001), is considered one of the most extensive pieces of research in
the area. The longitudinal design follows youth from three states as they transition out of the child welfare system. The another important study is Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study, a case review of over 650 youth who aged out of care (Pecora et al., 2006). There is also the important work of Casey Foundation Alumni Study and several reports from Child Welfare League of America (CWLA, 2005).

While the research focuses about the extent of the problem, little emphasis is placed upon understanding the underlying cause of the problem. Research within the area is largely atheoretical (Stein, 2006). However, most research focuses on the specific domains that Courtney and Heuring (2005) have identified as areas where youth aging out face difficulties: housing, employment, education, health/mental health, substance use, and criminal involvement.

Currently there is more quantitative research than qualitative research. This speaks to the need to increase qualitative studies to better capture the voices and experiences of youth aging out (Fox & Berrick, 2007; McMillen et al., 1997). There is limited knowledge about youth’s perceptions and understanding of aging out (Wyn & Dwyer, 1999). Nor is there much research conducted on how service providers comprehend the problem of youth aging out. There has yet to be published scholarly research on public opinion about the understanding of youth aging out of care.

Current Operatives – The Actual

The issue of youth aging out of the child welfare system have been addressed by three piece of federal legislation: the Independent Living Program (1986), The Foster Care Independence Act (1999), and The Fostering Connections to success and Increasing Adoptions Act. Additional federal legislation on child welfare and foster care exists, however it is beyond

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2 Other countries also are addressing the issue of youth aging out of care with federal legislation. For a comparative analysis of national policy for this problem, see Mendes and Mosleuddin (2006).
the scope of this paper which focuses on the issues of youth aging out of care. As each piece of subsequent legislation builds upon and replace the previous piece, each will be described below.

The passage of the Independent Living Program in 1986 was monumental in that it was the first piece that specifically addressed the issues of youth aging out. The Independent Living Program amended Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, thus allowing states to receive federal funding to help youth in foster care gain independent living skills. The Independent Living Program largely is viewed as unsuccessful due to inadequate funding (Collins, 2004). However, it remains landmark legislation in that it was the first legislation aimed at youth aging out of care and a complete departure from previous legislation in that it addresses the issue.

The Foster Care Independence Act, commonly referred to as the Chafee Act, was passed and replaced the Independent Living Program. A radical improvement over the previous legislation, the Chafee Act increased federal funding from $70 to $140 million and required a 20% state match that was allocated to states based on the number of youth in care with the minimum federal amount set at $500,000. Eligibility for services was expanded to include youth up to age 21 who were in care as well as those who have aged out of care up to age 21. Additionally, states can use 30% of the funding to provide room and board for youth age 18-21 who have aged out of the system. States were also given the right to allow youth ages 18-21 who were in care on their 18th birthday to be eligible for Medicaid coverage. The Chafee Act also allocated funds for training of those who work with youth aging out of the system and for an evaluation component. A national evaluation of the Chafee Act found that it states were implementing a variety of services that had the potential to assist youth in their transition to independence (Cook, n.d.). One of the most promising practices was the skills training that assisted youth with the development of financial knowledge, education, and careers.
States ultimately decide how they are going to provide services to youth aging out of care. Since the states ultimately decide the programming for the youth in their care, there is no universal set of priorities of funding use (Collins, 2004). Due to the limitation in federal funding, states cannot provide comprehensive services to all youth and therefore often offer piecemeal services to target segments of the population (Collins, 2001). The funds that the Chafee Act appropriated to serving youth aging out of care would amount to less than $1,000 per youth aged 14 to 18 who were going to age out of the system or become emancipated and youth aged 18-21 who had already aged out each year (Shirk & Stangler, 2004). The Department of Health and Human Services hold the responsibility of creating the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) established under the Chafee Act. The Chafee Act allocated $2.1 million for the evaluation and technical assistance associated with it. Information from NYTD will be used to determine the effectiveness of programs as well as to identify areas where improvement is needed (Shirk & Stangler, 2004). The Chafee Act’s flexibility in allowing states to determine the services provided will allow there to be great variation which can be used to evaluate most effective practices (Guinn, 2000).

Less than a decade after the Chafee Act was passed, President George W. Bush signed the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act into law on October 7, 2008 after it had bipartisan support in congress. The law addresses several issues within the child welfare system. Among other provisions, this legislation increases federal funding available to serve youth ages 18 to 21 who are in or who have recently left foster care. For the purpose of this paper and analysis the focus will only be upon the pieces of the Fostering Connections Act that address youth aging out, which largely can be understood as an expansion of the Chafee Act.
However, it is important to note that the law contains provisions on kinship care, adoption, and tribal child welfare systems.

The Fostering Connections Act provides states new options, resources, and requirements (Hudson, 2008). The new option relevant to youth aging out of care is that beginning in fiscal year 2011 states may extend all foster care services to youth up to age 21. State do not necessarily have to choose this option, and are actually cautioned to carefully consider if they have the infrastructure and policies that allow them to successfully implement the option if they choose it (Brown, 2008). Some states are considering using this legislation to allow youth up to age 21 to reenter the system after they have left (Mols, 2008). Funding, some of it mandatory and therefore not subject to congressional budget cuts, will be available to serve these youth. One requirement that the Fostering Connection Act created is that older youth exiting foster care must have a transition plan in place within 90 days before they leave care or cease to receive their stipend through the Chafee Act (Hudson, 2008). Several of the provisions became effective immediately, while others did not take effect until fiscal year 2011. The Department of Health and Human Services has yet to determine the interpretation of the new law.

As the Fostering Connection Act has provisions that are not in effect until FY2011, it is impossible to fully comprehend how policies and programs are being implemented and defining the problem of youth aging. It is safe to say that there will be great variation among the states’ programs and policies. While states maintain the power to make the decisions about if and how to use federal funding there will likely many different definitions of the problems of youth aging out of care.

The theme of independence is evident in legislation and throughout the discourse about the issue of youth aging out. While policies and programs do not necessarily blame the
individual youth for the problems they face, there is great emphasis on what youth need to do to succeed. The neoliberal focus upon job readiness and becoming part of the labor market indicates that the problem definition holds the youth responsible for their successes. Missing from the policies and programs are challenges to the social structures that create the barriers that youth will face and overcome.

Evaluation of Policies and Programs

The Chafee Act, passed in 1999, mandated that states track youth aging out of care and that information be submitted to National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD). However, it was after 2006 that NYTD was developed and that information was actually being collected (Shirk & Stangler, 2004). Thus, the programs and policies for youth aging out of care that resulted from the Chafee Act have yet to be fully evaluated.

Evaluation of the Fostering Connections Act will be challenging. Because the federal legislation allows states to determine the actual implementation, there are many of programs and policies to evaluate. It is not one coherent policy and program that is to be evaluated. Due to this, developing a coordinated research strategy would assist.

Scholars have been exploring the effectiveness of providing services to youth aging out of care. Foundations such as the Casey Foundation and Pew Charitable Trust have conducted some valuable research. The findings were used to produced handbooks and guides on how to work with youth aging out as well as policy recommendations. A great need for more research on youth aging out remains.

Likelihood for Change

The Fostering Connections Act of 2008 has the potential to effectively address the social problem of youth aging out of care. While it is not the panacea, the federal legislation for youth
aging out of care provides the states direction and guidance. Equally, if not more important, the simple existence of the federal legislation helps establish the priority of helping youth age out.

While clearly there are limitations in the federal legislation, it has helped to start addressing the problem on a larger scale of youth aging out of care. The federal legislation is a break from the historical response to the issue of youth aging out and a step forward to address the problem. The $140 million for services is unprecedented, and much needed. In addition to the funding, it provides some mandates that will positively influence youth aging out of the system such as requiring youth input in the development of state programs and the data collection for evaluation. With more information being collected, scholars can evaluate programs and better identify the gaps that remain in the system.

With the current legislation, states may be making some progress, however it is unlikely that with the current funding and programming that it is sufficient to solve the problems youth aging out of care (Collins, 2004). What the legislation offers are important philosophical shifts by focusing on the needs of adolescents aging out of care and by providing specific supports in addition to training (Collins, 2004). Research has found that youth who stay in the foster care system past age 18 fare better than those who leave the system (Courtney, 2005). The federal legislation has allows states to lengthen the time that youth are able to receive services, thus giving the youth aging out of care a better chance at positive life outcomes. The research and evaluation component of the legislation is integral in that it will assist states and the country to determine the success of the programs.

Since state policies and agency practices have traditionally played a more significant role in child welfare than federal legislation, it is important to look at current practice to understand
better the realities of youth aging out of the system. This will be important to do as the
effectiveness of the policy is determined.

Goals, Objectives, and Interventions

While there are many policy goals to address the problems of youth aging out of care, the
most basic and important goal is a successful transition of youth from the child welfare system
into a stable adult independence. The goal is for youth aging out to no longer be dependent upon
the state and to be able to be citizens that contribute to society. This benefits both the individual
youth as well as all of society.

It is interesting to note that there have been recent discussions among service providers
and scholars about the appropriateness of “independence” being a goal for youth aging out of
care (Propp, Ortega & NewHeart, 2003; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006; Avery & Freundlich,
2008). Expecting youth to be independent upon aging out of care while youth raised by their
parents face no such expectation is a clear double standard. Additionally, the arguments state
“independence” is a fictitious ideal that does not exist in the United States. Those in society who
succeed are “interdependent” and connected to others. Bearing this in mind, an alternative goal,
made by substituting one word, could be: a successful transition of youth from the child welfare
system into a stable adult interdependence.

Another desired goal could be stated as transitioning youth from child welfare system
into stable adulthood with minimized problems in the domains of housing, education,
employment, physical health, mental health, substance abuse, and criminal involvement. This
clearly outlines the areas that youth often face hardships in while transitioning out of the system.
Instead of using a strengths perspective, this goal focuses on deficits and areas of potential
problems. Due to this, it may not be the best goal to be touting. However, identifying potential
barriers that youth who age out face remains central to developing goals and objectives for addressing the problems of youth aging out of care.

Objectives

Because each state administers and implements child welfare system there is great variations among states’ policies and practices. Due to the differences, not all states may be in a position to make all the changes necessary easily and quickly. Also due the variety in the economic realities as well as the different number of youth in care in different states, there will be some differences. It is important that each state select a reasonable timeline to implement the changes in the Fostering Connections Act of 2008. Additionally states may choose to develop and adopt policies that are not specifically outlined in the federal legislation.

With few restrictions from the federal government, states have practically endless options for how they develop their policies and what the objectives may be. Two very achievable objectives could include continuation of all services until age 21 and amending state laws to allow those who leave the system to re-enter until age 21. To ensure that thorough evaluation can be done, states can have an objective to follow-up with all youth who aged out of the system until they are 25 years of age. This will permit researchers to determine some of the adult outcomes of the programs and policies. Each state likely should create objectives around improving additional supports and refining the delivery system for youth aging out. Creating a universal safety net for youth aging out should be one of the state’s objectives (Atkinson, 2008)

Interventions

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3 For a review of state policies see Dworsky & Havlicek, 2009.
Interventions occur largely at the state and county levels. To implement the above mentioned objectives, states must be willing to make youth aging out of care a policy priority. Additionally, states must reevaluate how programs and policies throughout their child welfare systems. Catering to the unique needs of youth aging out of care requires exploration of how the federal funding can be used to meet the needs of the youth aging out. Not all states will have the infrastructure necessary to fully meet the suggested objectives.

In addition to changing policy priorities, states need to pour money into the services for youth aging out. While some services are in existence, developing more independent living programs that are based in evaluated best practices will be necessary. Along with these changes will be the need to train and educate the front line workers who currently serve youth aging out of care. Youth aging out of care must also be made aware of the new programming options available under new policies.

Action Considerations

Many institutions, organizations, and decision-makers are responsible for resolving the problem. As previously mentioned, the issue needs to be addressed at the federal, state, and local levels. Unsurprisingly, with the various levels and number of individuals involved, there can be great confusion about who ultimately is responsible solving the problem. Since states control the child welfare systems, their responsibility potentially is the greatest. However, this is not to say that the federal government does not play an important role. As with many other social welfare policies there is a balance and tension surrounding the federalist way the policies are determined and implemented.

While the United States Congress must pass legislation about youth aging out of care, and the Department of Health and Human Services must interprets and administers, states play a
central role in resolving the problem. There is evidence that different state policies create
different adult outcomes for youth aging out. (Dworsky & Havlicek, 2009). States are
responsible for requesting funding and choosing to enact Foster Connection Act 2008 Provisions.
In most states, individual counties run the child welfare systems. Therefore individual counties
also hold responsibilities in addressing the problem of youth aging out of care. With so many
players the responsibility quickly becomes diffuse. It is easy to understand how youth could keep
falling through the cracks.
Support and Resistance

To resolve the issues of youth aging out of care collaboration among various groups is
necessary. As youth aging out of care are a relatively disenfranchised group and not politically
organized, they are not necessarily in a position to organize the reform efforts. Youth aging out
may not be perceived by politicians as constituents. Social workers who serve youth aging out of
care may be in a position to organize on the ground level both with the youth they work with as
well as the general public. As will be described below, public support currently is limited for a
variety of reasons. As a profession social workers can focus on advocacy the group of youth
aging out of care as one that is in need of support.

Scholars who conduct research on issues of youth aging out of care also can play a role in
promoting social change for youth aging out of care. One way this can be done is through widely
disseminating research findings. Another alternative is through the type of research they conduct.
Including more research that explores the effectiveness of policies as well as determines best
practices can help youth aging out of care (for a systemic review of practices see Naccarato &
DeLorenzo, 2008).
Possibly the largest source of support for addressing the problems of youth aging out of care lies within the foundations that are funding research to understand the problems as well as determine best practices. These foundations have already published high quality materials and are well versed in the issues.

Harnessing the support of the public and the power of the media will also be necessary in order to achieve the goals and objectives for youth aging out of care. The materials of the foundations clearly can assist in the creation of the media campaign. With their experiences as well as the testimonies of youth service providers also can help create materials for increasing public awareness. Largely an untapped source is the youth themselves. The powerful stories of their life experiences bring to light the tragedies youth aging out face often unnecessarily. Youth Communications, a non-profit based in New York, works to capture these stories and help youth be heard (Desetta, 1996).

The major sources of resistance to change are the lack of awareness that youth aging out is a problem and the desire not to increase spending on social welfare policies. The population is largely invisible, and considered disposable. Few care about these youth or fully understand their plight. While it may seem like spending money on youth aging out is an increase in social welfare spending, it can actually be conceptualized as a reallocation of funding. Funding would be spent on the youth within programs of the welfare program as well as potentially the criminal justice system. By supporting youth aging out and providing them services, these expenses are avoided.

Knowledge for Change

While there is a substantial body of research on the issue of youth aging out of care, there is still a need to generate more knowledge about the issue of youth aging out of care. Creating
knowledge and enhancing understanding of the issue will improve the chances of effecting change. On the top of the agenda should be determining the true cost of not addressing the issue of youth aging out of care. It is imperative that this is determined so that the argument of providing services and support to youth aging out of care can be better made. The current system is not working, and knowing the costs of the system failure on society will strengthen the argument for reform. Cost benefit analyses should be performed for individual states to determine how much money will be saved by extending services to youth aging out until age 21 and supporting them as they transition into adulthood (Courtney, Dworsky, & Peters, 2009; Packard et al., 2008).

Having a sense of what best practices can work with these youth is also key to effectively solving the problem of youth aging out of care. There are countless programs across the United States and determining which of these are effective and why they are so permits them to be replicated in other communities. Building a corpus of knowledge on the programs as well as the policies will place social workers to advocate for change and decisions makers in a better position to make good decisions.

Along with determining the cost of the problem of youth aging out and the best practices, there is a need to generate more knowledge about those within the child welfare system. This is not to suggest that merely more demographic information should be collect. Rather what is necessary is an in-depth analysis of what children and youth within the child welfare system experience and how they conceptualize their experience. Additionally it will be beneficial to focus on capturing how youth understand and negotiate the transition from the child welfare system (Wyn & Dwyer, 1999). It remains unclear to what extent of the problems youth face are due to the system that raised them or at least intervened in their later years. While it may not be a
politically popular view, looking at how the policies and practices of child welfare system hurts youth as they transition must be done.

Strategies for Change

To increase the chance of effectively addressing the problem of youth aging out of care, multiple strategies must be used to promote policy change. First, and perhaps most importantly, consensus strategies should be engaged. Educating the public about the extent of the problem as well as how providing supports and services to youth aging out of care is cost effective definitely is a place to start working for change. The public perception that youth aging out are not worthy of care must be addressed and challenged. Subtly fighting the dominant political ideology and showing that valuing and emphasizing independence at age 18 for youth aging out of care is counterproductive strengthens the chances of social change. Educating the public will not solve the problem alone.

Since the issues of youth aging out of care will best be served by passing legislation, political strategies also must be used. Negotiations and compromises will be necessary. Acknowledging the similarities of youth aging out with the rest of the child welfare population and combining the issues of youth aging out with others will be an effective political strategy to use. This has already done in the case of the Fostering Connections Act that encompassed more issues than simply youth aging out.

If used to the exclusion of other strategies, conflict strategies such as confrontation and protest would be counterproductive. However, when carefully orchestrated and used in conjunction with other strategies, conflict strategies can advance the issues of youth aging out of care. Confrontation and protests can occur at multiple levels—federal, state, and local—and address the multitude of obstacles that youth aging out of care face. While obvious targets of
such conflict strategies are elected officials, protests can be directed at agencies ranging from Department of Health and Human Services to the county level service providers. Youth advocacy can be successful and bring about change (for example, see Tilton, 2009). The power of youth should not be overlooked, thought organizing it is central to its effectiveness.

Social workers play an important role in organizing and participating in these actions as strategies for a number of reasons. First and perhaps most importantly, social workers currently are serving youth aging out and their first hand experience with the issue youth face allows them to be excellent advocates. Additionally, social workers’ training to consider various factors from micro to macro levels allows social workers the ability to frame the issue as one beyond the individual youth aging out of care. Social workers are able to paint the big picture for others to see. Finally, social workers involvement is central as the professional values and ethic dictate that social workers work to end social injustices and to help those in need.

Policy Formulation Proposal

Congress passed the Fostering Connections Act a little more than a year ago. Several part of the legislation impacting youth aging out of care will not be in effect until fiscal year 2011. Due to the newness of this legislation, there has not been adequate time to determine the policy’s effectiveness. The success of the policy depends upon many variables. Perhaps the most important variable is the extent to which states take advantage of the opportunities and funding that the federal legislation makes available to help youth aging out of care. States should take advantage of the resources available to provide for youth transitioning out the system.

Instead of proposing a new policy, it is wiser to wait and see the effectiveness of the Fostering Connections Act. While allowing time to pass and evaluation of the policy and programs to occur, time can be spent exploring how the transition out of the child welfare system
is conceptualized. Understanding the different stakeholders’ perceptions and realities will enable better policy recommendations in the future.

Conclusion

For the youth who have already aged out of care, legislative changes may have come too late. Unfortunately little can be done for those youth. However, for the youth who will be aging out of the system in the future, there is a chance that some hardships and barriers can be avoided due to the passing of the Fostering Connections Act. Youth may be better situated to overcome obstacles and to become successful adults. As all of the parts of the policy are implemented over the next years and the programs are evaluated, it is likely that the problem of youth aging out of care will decrease. However, it is unlikely that the Fostering Connections Act will solve the problems completely.

Policy directed at youth aging out of care remains only part of the equation of social change. The policies of the child welfare comprise only a part of the policies aimed at children and youth. Educational, juvenile justice, health care, and environmental policies are instrumental to the well-being of the children and youth of the country. Currently there are contradictions and gaps between the different policies. There is a need to develop an overarching youth policy that clearly delineates goals and objectives for all of the nation’s children and youth.

Perhaps continuing the incremental policies changes is not enough. There may need to be a massive overhaul of how the child welfare system is structured in general as well as specifically how the child welfare system transitions youth out of care. To do so will require much planning and a closer examination of the child welfare system. If a radical reform is to occur, it becomes important to consider different ways of envisioning the child welfare system.
Regardless of whether or not the child welfare system is overhauled, as future social welfare policies for the child welfare system and youth are developed, a closer examination of how neoliberal thought impacts the systems and policies is necessary. The assumptions and biases of neoliberalism may actually contribute to the problems that occur within the child welfare system and to the problem that youth aging out face. Exploration of other forms of social thought besides neoliberalism would greatly enhance the social welfare policies of the United States child welfare system and better serve the nation’s children and youth.
REFERENCES


