



March 2026

Aligning Chafee Funding to Support Wellbeing and Success for Young People During their Transition to Adulthood

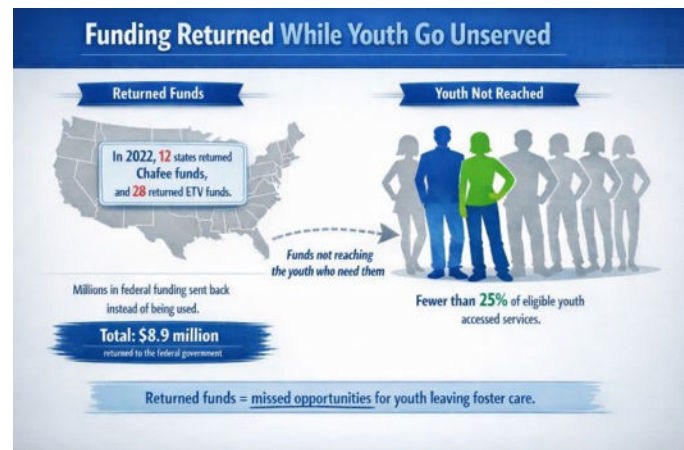
We Owe Young People Aging Out of Foster Care Support

“I can be something great, no matter what my background [is], no matter what foster care was, because at the end of the day, it’s not foster care that defines me.”¹

Young people play an important role in shaping our society and contributing to their families and communities. Their ability to fulfill their hopes and aspirations will ultimately determine our collective future. To promote future success, every young person needs their community’s support during the transition to adulthood, which is a time of significant change and exploration as they navigate education, work, relationships, and living arrangements—often experiencing instability as they navigate new circumstances. Yet each year, approximately 15 to 20 thousand (15,000 - 20,000) young people age out of foster care² without permanent family and are often left to navigate this critically important transition alone.

The John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (Chafee) was designed to support young people as they navigate the complex transition to adulthood by providing access to critical education and employment resources and support for expenses related to independent living. Access to Chafee-funded services matters to ensure that youth who have experienced foster care are prepared to succeed as adults. Research shows that when states support young people by extending Chafee eligibility and services, young people are more likely to complete postsecondary education, experience increased employment, attain greater housing stability, and achieve long-term independence.³

Unfortunately, the program does not currently meet young people’s clear needs as many states underutilize these federal funds, and are then forced to return their unused allocation to the federal government. These Chafee dollars are left unspent not because young people do not need support, but because there is a disconnect between what young people need and the requirements of the various programs available to them. Between 2018 and 2022, restrictions in policy prevented states from spending more than \$42 million in Chafee funding, including \$25 million for the Education and Training Voucher program allocated to support young people continuing their education.⁴ In 2022 alone, 12 states returned



Source: U.S. GAO, GAO-25-107154 (2025).

Chafee funds and 28 returned Education and Training Voucher (ETV) funds to the federal government, totaling approximately \$8.9 million.⁵ At the same time, research shows that fewer than 25% of eligible youth accessed services.⁶ When states fail to leverage Chafee dollars, young people are left without resources when they need them the most. This lack of support has real consequences and contributes to the disproportionately high rates of homelessness, housing instability, unemployment, and lower rates of college completion facing youth who have experienced foster care.

Opportunities to Modernize and Leverage Chafee to Promote Wellbeing and Success

Research is clear, and young people affirm, that Chafee-funded services are key to promoting success and wellbeing for young people during their transition to adulthood.⁷ To ensure states effectively leverage Chafee to support young people, Chafee should be amended to ensure it is responsive and accountable to young people and their needs. Specifically, policymakers should:

1. Extend Chafee Support: Supporting Young People Through Age 27

Research on adolescent development⁸ and emerging adulthood⁹ highlight the importance of this period as young people experience cognitive growth and develop key skills needed for independence. This period continues well into a young person's mid-twenties, with many young people reporting they do not feel prepared for full adult responsibilities until their late twenties. Young people exiting foster care confirm that turning 18, 21, or 23 does not make them ready for adulthood. Current Chafee-funded programs are not aligned with research nor with what young people say they need to succeed. Further, inconsistency in eligibility for Chafee programs—with eligibility for programs ranging between 21 and 26 years old—creates confusion for systems, providers, and young people, hindering access to important programs even when young people continue to be eligible. Across programs, Chafee eligibility should be aligned with developmental research and best practices. **To ensure consistency, take-up, and alignment with adolescent development research, all Chafee-funded programs should ensure eligibility through age 27.**

2. Promote Connections to Community-Based Resources: Create A Navigator Program

Young people deserve connections to consistent and caring adults, based in the community, as they navigate the transition to adulthood. With support from invested adults, reliable access to quality resources, and help developing life skills, young people can successfully navigate the transition to adulthood and establish themselves as engaged adults pursuing their goals and ready to contribute to their communities. Access to supportive adult and peer navigators should not be limited by eligibility restrictions. From when young people first exit care and through their transition from Chafee programs, navigators can provide consistent, reliable support and mitigate the detrimental impact of program cliffs. **Dedicated funding should be authorized for states to establish a navigator program that ensures community-based navigators are available to provide support to young people aging out of foster care as they plan for their future.**

3. Promote Long-Term Goals: Amend ETV Program Requirements

ETVs are a critical mechanism for supporting youth in achieving their education and training goals, however, 1) the maximum amount of the ETV, \$5,000 per year,¹⁰ and program requirements limit the effectiveness of ETVs in supporting young people working to achieve their goals. Specifically, the ETV amount, which has not been adjusted for inflation, is not nearly enough to keep up with the cost of a training program or attending school. Further, program requirements limit young people from leveraging funding to support costs related to apprenticeships or certificate programs. **To promote success, ETVs should be increased to a meaningful amount, adjusted for inflation, and programmatic requirements that limit how young people can leverage funding to promote their goals should be eliminated.**

4. Support Wellbeing for Young People: Invest in Community-Based Supports

To successfully transition to adulthood, young people must be able to access diverse, community-based supports that promote health and wellbeing as they navigate and pursue their long-term goals. These supports may include peer and mentoring programs, family and community-based supports, traditional practices, and other relationship-centered approaches that address young people's holistic needs. Currently, states are often limited in the types of programs they believe they can invest in to support young people. Additionally, resources that are available are often disconnected and difficult for young people to navigate on their own. **Policy should ensure Chafee funding is flexible enough to be responsive to meeting young people's diverse needs. This includes allowing states to leverage Chafee to support young people in accessing diverse, community-based supports that promote their health and wellbeing.**

5. Guarantee a Strong Foundation: Provide Direct Cash Assistance

A guaranteed income is a critical strategy to preventing hardship and instability and promoting success for young people aging out of foster care and transitioning to adulthood. When combined with community-based supports, a guaranteed income can help reduce material hardship, stabilize housing, and support young people's self-identified goals during the transition to adulthood. It provides stability as they begin their careers, establish families of their own, explore new opportunities, and take on new responsibilities. Evidence from pilot¹¹ and demonstration programs¹² indicate that unconditional cash assistance is associated with improved housing stability, increased financial security, and greater engagement in education and employment. **Policy should be amended to ensure states establish direct cash assistance to young people aging out of care in ways that promote autonomy and wellbeing, without eligibility conditions tied to service compliance or behavioral requirements.**

6. Leverage Technology and Ensure Privacy: Provide Real-Time Support to Young People

Young people often describe aging out of foster care as feeling “set adrift”, “thrown into an ocean,” or left to “sink or swim.”¹³ Caseworkers similarly report how difficult it is to find resources and programs in the community that support young people, and to keep track of which programs have open slots, which have waitlists, and which are no longer operating. **To support young people in navigating their communities and identifying resources, new Chafee funding should be allocated to support states in developing easily searchable resource database, developed with and for young people and leveraging existing databases in the community.** The database should provide real-time information on available services, eligibility criteria, and application processes, and be designed solely to support navigation and access, not to replace staff, services, or professional judgment. As these databases and technology are leveraged to support young people, it is critical that privacy protections are in place that ensure young people are able to exercise ownership and control of their data.

7. Center Youth Voice: Strengthen Accountability to Young People

To ensure that Chafee programs achieve the intended goals and meaningfully support young people aging out of care, it is important to increase program responsiveness and accountability to young people. **Policy should require meaningful engagement with young people in the design, selection, and implementation of Chafee programs, as well as in the process of measuring effectiveness and impact through continuous quality improvement processes. Additionally, states should be required to report back to young people about how the data and feedback shared were used to drive decision-making and program selection and implementation.**

About CSSP

This factsheet was developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) and Creating Actionable and Real Solutions (CARES), a CSSP initiative. CARES' work is made possible by the generosity of funding provided by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation.

CSSP is a national, non-partisan policy organization recognized for its leadership in reforming public systems and advancing policies that promote the health and wellbeing of children, youth, and families. CSSP provides direct technical assistance to public child welfare systems and their partners including foster care agencies and community-based organizations. Our work also includes providing technical assistance on improving policy and practice strategies impacting families and transition-age youth.

As part of this work, CSSP leads the CARES initiative, which is a partnership between CSSP and Youth Ambassadors from Atlanta, GA, New York City, NY, and Los Angeles, CA, who have all experienced foster care and are navigating their own pathways to independence. The CARES initiative aims to eliminate the systemic challenges that youth face as they transition out of foster care and into their community by developing intentional, authentic, and youth-centered policy strategies that dismantle problematic policy and practice and increase investments in policies, community resources, and the infrastructure that truly support young people in achieving their goals.

Suggested Citation

Citrin, Alexandra. "Aligning Chafee Funding to Support Wellbeing and Success for Young People During their Transition to Adulthood: We Owe Young People Aging Out of Foster Care Support." Center for the Study of Social Policy, March 2026.

Endnotes

- 1 The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) partners with young people who have experienced foster care through the CARES Initiative to develop and advance policy solutions that support the health and wellbeing of young people in their communities. This quote from a CARES Ambassador captures the core message we hear from young people as they transition from foster care to living on their own in their communities.
- 2 Children's Bureau. (2025). Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). <https://acf.gov/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/afcars>
- 3 Courtney, M.E., Dworsky, A., Lee, J.S., & Havlicek, J. (2007). "Educational and Labor Force Outcomes for Foster Youth after Extended Care." For additional information, please also see Courtney et al. 2007 and, Courtney, Okpych & Park 2018.
- 4 U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), Foster Care: HHS Should Help States Fully Use Federal Funds for Programs Serving Youth Transitioning to Adulthood, GAO-25-107154 (2025).
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Congressional Research Service, Youth Transitioning from Foster Care: Background and Federal Programs (CRS Report RL34499) (2015): shows low rates of service utilization among eligible youth.
- 7 Written Testimony of the Center for the Study of Social Policy and the CARES Initiative. Aging Out is Not a Plan: Reimagining Futures of Foster Youth. Hearing Before the H. Comm. on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Work and Welfare. 119th Cong. (2025).
- 8 Arain, Mariam et al. "Maturation of the adolescent brain." *Neuropsychiatric disease and treatment* vol. 9 (2013): 449-61. doi:10.2147/NDT.S39776.
- 9 Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55(5), 469-480.
- 10 The ETV award amount was temporarily adjusted to \$12,000 annually through the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021.
- 11 For more information on pilot programs please see: <https://guaranteedincome.us/>
- 12 YouthNPower: Transforming Care. (2025). "Starting to Live": Findings of a Direct Cash Transfer Pilot for Former Foster Youth in New York City. Available at youthnpower.org.
- 13 Center for the Study of Social Policy, CARES Initiative. (July 2023). "Understanding how Transition Age Youth Experience Their Communities." Available at: <https://cares4power.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/CARES-Understanding-How-Transition-Age-Youth-Experience-their-Communities.pdf>