



Supporting Health, Wellbeing, and Successful Transitions for Children and Youth in Foster Care

Overview

For children and youth who become involved with the child welfare system, access to health care can promote health and wellbeing and mitigate harm. For those experiencing trauma as a result of family separation and other circumstances related to their involvement in child welfare, consistent access to physical and mental health services is critical for healing and can prevent future challenges. For children returning home, consistency in coverage and health care promotes stability and family wellbeing by supporting stable relationships with trusted providers. For youth aging out of foster care, it ensures timely access to health care services without delays due to eligibility determinations, coverage gaps, or disruptions in providers. Simply put, consistent health coverage and care matter for all children and youth, regardless of where they are living or their circumstances.

In this moment, as access to health care is increasingly undermined, we have an opportunity to change course—to advance policies that support health and enter the needs and realities of children, youth, and families. This is not about returning to the status quo, but about implementing solutions that remove barriers to coverage and care and promote holistic health and wellbeing. Specifically, policymakers should:

Key Findings and Recommendations

1. Develop a comprehensive health insurance program that is available to all children, youth, and families. Ensuring all children and youth have access to health care services prevents families from coming to the attention of the child welfare agency for reasons related to “caregiver unable to cope” or disruptions in health care services.
2. Create a single, comprehensive Medicaid plan that follows the child or youth—not their placement or jurisdiction—to take the place of multiple Medicaid plans that lead to disruptions in services and relationships with providers. Children and youth should not experience any delays in accessing health care services when they enter or exit foster care.

Even as policymakers work toward longer-term solutions that promote holistic wellbeing, immediate action is needed to strengthen the current health system—to prevent child welfare involvement and better support the health and wellbeing of children and youth in foster care. Specifically, policymakers should:



1. Simplify enrollment and eligibility processes when children enter and exit foster care to ensure they maintain coverage through reunification, guardianship, adoption, or the transition to adulthood. Further, as children and youth enter foster care, move between placements while in foster care, and exit care, they and their caregivers must have access to Medicaid cards, eligibility information, and provider referrals at the time of placement or any placement move. Eliminating disruptions in coverage and ensuring children and their caregivers always have health coverage information will ease the burden on families, strengthen provider relationships, promote permanency, and ensure that every child and youth—regardless of where they live or their circumstances—has access to the consistent and high-quality health care they deserve.
2. Require states to implement automatic enrollment in Medicaid for former foster youth when they age out of care. Further, eliminate recertification requirements for youth eligible for Medicaid to 26 in order to promote continuity in health coverage and care. Young people should also not be limited in pursuing their goals based on where they were in foster care. As such, portability processes for youth eligible for Medicaid to age 26 must be simplified to ensure coverage across state lines.
3. Ensure youth aging out of foster care have access to providers and navigators trained to guide them through the transition from pediatric to adult care. Providers who understand both the health system and the unique experiences of youth leaving foster care can help maintain continuity in care, prevent gaps in coverage, and promote wellbeing.
4. Coordinate eligibility and care information for the purposes of ensuring children and youth maintain coverage and continuity of health care—not for monitoring or enforcement. Importantly, data safeguards must be in place, with data sovereignty as a core principle, to protect children and youth from having their data shared for purposes unrelated to their health and wellbeing and without their clearly expressed consent.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Citrin, Alexandra. “Consistent Health Coverage and Care: Supporting Health, Wellbeing, and Successful Transitions for Children and Youth in Foster Care; Policy Recommendations” Center for the Study of Social Policy, January 2026. Available at: <https://cssp.org/resource/consistent-health-coverage-and-care-support-ing-health-wellbeing-and-successful-transitions-for-children-and-youth-in-foster-care>.