



February 2, 2021

The Honorable Gavin Newsom
1303 10th Street, Suite 1173
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Governor Newsom,

The federal coronavirus relief package included \$400 million to protect and assist older youth in foster care and former foster youth under age 27, of which roughly \$44 million is expected to come to California. Funds will be allocated through the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program with a minimum required allocation to the Chafee Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program of roughly 12.5%. States are awaiting guidance from the federal government, including the deadline for spending funds, which is likely to be either September 30, 2021 or September 30, 2022. Although formal guidance is still pending, representatives from the Children's Bureau have indicated in public forums that the primary purpose of the legislation is to provide immediate support to current and former foster youth.¹

We are writing as a coalition of child welfare advocates to provide recommendations for how these funds should be utilized by California once received from the federal government.

Process Recommendations

1. **Issue assistance within 45 days:** Congress authorized these funds as emergency relief payments. As such, other than specified below, California should distribute this much-needed financial assistance to qualified youth within 45 days of receipt to meet their urgent needs and prevent homelessness, housing instability, academic disruption, and hunger.
2. **Utilize Section Letter process:** To ensure timely distribution of emergency assistance, we recommend that the funds are distributed through a Section Letter, issued by the Administration and reviewed by the Joint Legislative Budget Committee, chaired by Senator Nancy Skinner. This process has been used effectively in the past to provide foster youth with immediate support, including access to technology and cash payments to families.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Prioritize immediate direct payments to current and former foster youth.** Older youth with experience in the foster care system have faced considerable challenges during the pandemic. A national survey found that half of foster youth reported COVID-19 having a negative impact on their living situation, including being forced to leave their living arrangement, fearing they would be forced to leave, or experiencing homelessness/housing instability. Nearly three-quarters of

¹ <https://imprintnews.org/youth-services-insider/officials-urge-states-chafee-funds-cash-foster-youth/50818>

the participants reported a financial situation that would be stable for no more than one month and fifty-five percent reported being food-insecure as a result of COVID-19.²

At least 70% of available funding should provide direct payments to both youth currently participating in extended foster care (including those without a current placement) and those 18-26 who are no longer eligible for foster care support. This would include older youth who aged out of foster care prior to the moratorium on discharging youth who turn 21 and youth 18-21 who qualify for the Chafee program but are not eligible for extended foster care.

- **Utilize prepaid cards for fund disbursement:** Prepaid cards were used successfully by the California Department of Social Services to disburse more than \$27 million to support families staying together during 2020. A similar mechanism should be used to disburse these funds directly to youth. This will create a consistent and streamlined system that will get funds to youth in need as quickly as possible.
 - **Create fund disbursement policies that provide equitable, low-barrier access to emergency relief:** All youth and young adults who qualify for the Chafee pandemic assistance are deserving of its support, not just those who know about its availability or those who have the resources and support to complete an application for it. As such, we recommend an approach to emergency relief that is equitable and presents the lowest barriers possible. Specifically, we recommend that no means test or application be required. The responsibility for verifying eligibility for funding should be on the agencies distributing the funds through CWS/CMS rather than on the youth.
 - **In order to ensure that these funds reach the greatest possible number of youth, the state and counties will need to develop robust outreach strategies.** Counties should be encouraged to hire former foster youth/peer advocates to assist with marketing and distribution. State and local marketing plans should be developed in collaboration with the Office of the Foster Care Ombudsperson, local community-based organizations, advocacy organizations, college campus programs, and other relevant partners. Funds in the amount of 5-10% of total funding could be allocated for verification and outreach activities.
2. **Expand availability of Chafee ETV:** Funding available specifically for ETV should first be used to eliminate the current waiting list. Remaining ETV funds, along with roughly 15% of the general Chafee program allocation, should be transmitted to the California Student Aid Commission to ensure that all students who receive ETV funding in 2020/2021 can be renewed for the 2021/2022 academic year, while also allowing some newly enrolled students to receive funding. These funds would also enable payments beyond \$5,000 to youth with the greatest level of need, including students with dependents.
 3. **Support youth expected to age out of foster care upon expiration of the current moratorium on foster care exits due to age:** If the federal government provides guidance that funds can be expended through September 2022, 5-10% of funds should be set aside to support the transition of youth in extended foster care who will age out when current extensions of EFC expire. Efforts should also be undertaken to provide technical assistance to public housing authorities and county child welfare agencies to develop and secure federal Foster Youth to

² Johanna K.P. Greeson, Sara R. Jaffee, Sarah Wasch & John Gyourko, *The Experiences of Older Youth In & Aged Out of Foster Care During COVID-19*, The Field Center, University of Pennsylvania, September 2020.

Independence (FYI) and Family Unification Program (FUP) vouchers and develop plans to transition youth. In addition, counties should be encouraged to use state funds that have been allocated for transitional housing for former foster youth but have not yet been disbursed to accommodate the increased numbers of youth who will be aging out of foster care upon expiration of the exit moratorium.

4. **Do not use Chafee funds to pay for past or future costs related to the extension of foster care beyond age 21:** Federal statute allows states to use funding to cover the state costs of extending foster care between December 27, 2020 and September 30, 2021 for youth not federally eligible. We strongly recommend that the existing state budget allocation be retained in the budget and that Chafee funding not be used for this purpose, but rather be used to provide additional protection and assistance to foster youth during the pandemic as described above. Note that separate from this funding, the state will receive an estimated \$5.6 million from Title IV-E federal reimbursement to cover the federal share of costs of extending foster care beyond 21 for those who qualify for federal reimbursement.

Respectfully,

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