



Successful Independent Living Program Strategies for Serving Young People from Foster Care During the Coronavirus Crisis

July 2020

In mid-June, FosterClub hosted a virtual panel to learn how ILPs across the nation are addressing the needs of young people from foster care during the Coronavirus pandemic. The webinar featured Independent Living (IL) Coordinators from Alabama, Missouri, Tennessee, and Florida¹ who discussed what programs and services are being offered to address young people's needs in four areas: housing, basic needs, unemployment and financial needs, and connections.

Background

Beginning in late March, FosterClub began receiving increased requests for help from young people who had aged out of foster care who were facing increased challenges because of the pandemic. FosterClub conducted several polls to better understand how the pandemic was affecting young people from foster care. At the end of March, FosterClub [polled](#) 172 youth ages 18-24 and learned many young people from foster care were struggling in terms of employment, housing, food security, health and connection. In May, FosterClub conducted a [second poll](#) of 613 young people (age 18-24) from 44 states to learn about their access to stimulus aid, employment, housing, food security, health and connections. The findings from both polls strongly suggest that COVID-19 has negatively and significantly affected young people from foster care who are in the early stage of transitioning to independent adulthood by causing them to lose employment and housing, have food insecurity, struggle to get health care, and become isolated as many do not have significant relationships they can rely on for financial or emotional support.

Independent Living programs (ILP) throughout the United States provide targeted assistance to young people who have aged out of foster care. In order to see how ILPs were responding to young people's needs, FosterClub polled 21 state Independent Living Coordinators. [The poll](#) revealed that ILPs are experiencing an increase in the calls for assistance from young people - with significant increased needs in housing, technology, access to unemployment and stimulus checks, resource navigation, mental health/connections and food.

How ILPs are Meeting Young People's Needs in the Wake of COVID-19

¹ Panelists for the June webinar included:

- Bill Benson, ILP Coordinator, Children and Family Services, Alabama
- Cal Walton, Youth and Young Adult Transition Services Specialist, Florida
- Courtney Matthews, Director of Independent Living, Tennessee
- Sally Gaines, Program Development Specialist at Children's Division, Missouri

During the session, ILP panelists shared observations of what has been most effective in serving young adults from foster care during the pandemic, specifically related to housing, meeting basic needs, assisting with unemployment and financial needs, and facilitating connections to networks of support.

Housing

As the pandemic caused schools to close and people to move back home to be with family, one of the results was increased housing instability for young people who have left foster care to transition to adulthood and independence. Many young people were enrolled in college and lost their housing as dorms closed, or experienced disruption when roommates, responsible for paying half the rent, went back home to families. The [FosterClub Poll of young people](#) from foster care conducted in May found that 23% of young people reported that they were forced to move or were afraid they'd be forced to leave their current living situation. A separate [FosterClub poll of Independent Living Coordinators](#) conducted shortly after found that nearly every Independent Living program reported young people had contacted them for assistance with housing.

During the ILP webinar, panelists noted a number of ways that they are supporting the housing needs of young people from foster care.

- Several reported increasing utilization of Foster Youth Initiative (FYI) Vouchers and Family Unification Program (FUP) Vouchers which is an on-demand voucher available through HUD that assist eligible youth (age 18-24) for a period of 36 months.²
- One panelist reported reaching out to HUD to discuss ways to extend eligibility under the FYI and FUP programs for young people from foster care.
- In Alabama, the staff have increased contact with young people in independent living arrangements to ensure that their placements were not disrupted due to financial constraints. They have also waived rent for the months of April, May and June for their IL placements and contracted IL housing providers.
- Tennessee reported contacting all of the young people who lived in college dorms (for whom they had contact information) to ensure that they had housing. For many young people, former foster parents and supportive adults were able to step up and provide temporary housing.
- Finally, Florida shared that they also followed up with young people who lived in college dorm settings to ensure they had housing. They connected youth to state programs that covered utility costs and put policies in place to ensure that a young adult was not homeless during the pandemic.

² https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/public_indian_housing/programs/hcv/fyi_tpv

Basic Needs

In addition to housing, young people from care reported struggling meeting basic needs. The [FosterClub Poll of young people](#) found that nearly 1 in 5 young people, or 19% of those questioned, reported they have run out of food. Food insecurity and similar basic needs become even more critical to address when young people do not have family or support to rely on. A separate [FosterClub poll of Independent Living Coordinators](#) conducted shortly after found that three-quarters of ILPs expect they will need additional IL resources as demand for assistance increases.

During the ILP webinar, panelists noted a number of ways that they are supporting youth in getting their basic needs met.

- In Florida, ILP staff conducted statewide calls with young people to hear first hand accounts of their needs and dispatched IL staff to support those youth in getting their needs met. ILPs also partnered with state organizations to send care packages of basic necessities (toilet paper, snacks, etc) to young people.
- In Tennessee, ILP leadership surveyed young people and ILP providers to learn more about what young people need during this time.
- Working with ILP, Community Based Care Organizations in Florida provided funds to those who were too old to be eligible for extended care.
- In Missouri, ILP staff use a care portal where young people can submit requests for their urgent needs.
- In Florida and Tennessee, ILPs provided young people in college with laptops which enabled them to continue with their course work.

Employment & Finances

A significant number of transition age young people aren't accessing emergency assistance through unemployment or stimulus checks. A [FosterClub Poll of young people](#) found that nearly 65 percent of transition-age youth from foster care who were working before the pandemic have lost employment; half of those who applied for unemployment benefits did not receive assistance. More than half of the young people from foster care reported they did not receive the stimulus check (52%). A separate [FosterClub poll of Independent Living Coordinators](#) found that several states noted increased calls for help in figuring out how to apply for unemployment and stimulus checks.

During the ILP webinar, panelists noted a number of ways that they are assisting young people apply for unemployment and get their financial needs met.

- In Alabama, ILP created a road map with step by step instructions for applying and weekly reporting to unemployment to walk youth through the process so that they could successfully access benefits.
- In Missouri, ILP distributed a memo to the program staff so they could share with youth employment opportunities and resources.
- In Florida, State-level IL, hosts bi-weekly state wide calls directly with young people to be able to understand the needs of young people and how best to meet them. Once those needs were identified, state IL staff brought it back to the regional IL staff to address and better support young people.

Connections and Resource Navigation

Further, many young people reported feeling like they are isolated without connections and support during this crisis. According to the [FosterClub Poll of young people](#) only 37% of the young people who responded have family members (legal or chosen) to rely on during the crisis. Less than half indicated they have friends they can rely on for advice and support (45%). 1 in 5 youth reported that they are entirely on their own. The [FosterClub poll of Independent Living Coordinators](#) found that three-quarters of state ILPS reported youth were requesting mental health services and lacked connections to emotional support and guidance.

During the ILP webinar, panelists noted a number of ways that they are helping young people stay connected to resources and peers, and service providers.

- In Alabama, the ILP Coordinator expanded communication directly to young people - compiling email lists and using a facebook page to communicate with young people and ILP staff. Alabama's ILP also hosted a Pop up pizza party using Zoom for young people across the state - coordinating pizza delivery for youth and providers to have the opportunity to connect.
- In Missouri, the IL Coordinator provided scripts to workers to use during mandatory visits for the purposes of ensuring wellbeing needs were met and provided documents on resources available with eligibility information and phone numbers.
- Tennessee implemented youth led town hall meetings to engage youth in peer support conversations. Topics of the town hall included keeping a schedule, staying connected to friends, and maintaining healthy mental health, as a way to minimize the isolating effects of COVID-19. Florida ILPs also increased support for youth councils to engage and empower youth - making sure their voices were heard and promoted.
- In Florida, the IL Coordinator created a live virtual statewide graduation - complete with videos and photos. In Missouri, ILPs gave gift baskets to young people, conducted driveby celebrations for young people, and were able to get donated yard signs for graduates.

After the panel discussion, ILP coordinators in the audience also weighed in on what their states are doing to support young people. Here is what they said:

- In Iowa, DHS is connecting young people to aftercare services, which serves youth to age 23 and has financial support for housing. Iowa has also created a fund for special COVID related needs (housing, etc), which up to 500 youth in aftercare services can access.
- Michigan is taking advantage of a new HHS allowance for youth who were in their extended foster care program to continue to receive funding after age 21.
- Indiana's Governor Eric Holcomb issued an Executive Order that allows them to serve youth over age 21 under their extended foster care program. Indiana has also extended foster care and increased Chafee services to age 25, and increased ETV to age 26.
- Illinois has been doing well-being checks for the youth who are participating in their Post-Secondary programs. Illinois has been able to provide young people with laptops to continue their online courses. Older youth have also been able to receive assistance with emergency housing and food vouchers.

Summary

Through the FosterClub polls and conversations with young people and IL providers, FosterClub has gained insights into how COVID-19 is affecting and hurting young people in and transitioning from foster care. These young people are often vulnerable to economic changes that affect unskilled employees first, and as a result, will likely take longer to recover, especially as they typically have limited to no family support. In addition, the FosterClub polls found that these young people were frequently unable to access relief measures passed by Congress to date, and IL programs across the country report they are experiencing an increase in the calls for assistance from young people. Although they are working hard to meet the increased demand, young people will continue to need more support for many months, if not years ahead.