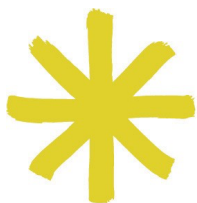




POLICY REPORT
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Supporting a Forgotten Population: Foster Care Youth Transitions in Erie County

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**PARTNERSHIP
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Introduction: Aging Out of Foster Care in Erie County

Each year, about 50 young people age out of foster care in Erie County when they are 18 to 21 years old. Considered too old to need protection, they must navigate independence without a safety net. This abandonment leads to devastating and avoidable outcomes for foster care alumni who experience disproportionately high rates of arrest and incarceration, homelessness, unemployment, early pregnancy, and low academic achievement. Many live in unsafe housing conditions, facing instability and reoccurring traumatic situations that cause harm to their mental and physical health, even abuse and trafficking.

Across the United States, young people who age out of foster care face shocking statistics:

- 25% of foster care alumni will become homeless within four years of exiting the foster care system.¹
- 50% will develop a substance use dependency.²
- 70% of young women will become pregnant before the age of 21.³
- 20% of foster care alumni will be arrested in the year following their exit from foster care; for young men who age out at 21, 60% will have been convicted of a crime.⁴
- Only 3% will graduate from college.⁵

Children of color, already overrepresented in the foster care system, are disproportionately likely to age out of state care without a permanent home. Black teens are 24% more likely to age out of foster care without being adopted than their white peers, and report substantially lower levels of both family and social support after leaving foster care.⁶

At what age does a young person no longer need ongoing, meaningful support?

Regardless of personal history, moving from adolescence to adulthood is a significant and often difficult phase of life. For young people leaving foster care between 18 and 21, the transition to

This policy report was drafted by Megan Battista, MSW, former intern at Partnership for the Public Good.

It is produced in partnership with Fostering Greatness Executive Director Dr. Leah Angel Daniel, who brought this policy change priority to PPG.

The report includes a brief grounding in the foster care system, examines poor outcomes for foster care graduates, looks at emerging policy solutions, and offers recommendations for Erie County and New York State.

The report was edited by Caitlin Crowell, Community Researcher at PPG, and Andrea Ó Súilleabháin, Executive Director at PPG.

The author wishes to express her gratitude to the dozens of young people with foster care experience who shared their insights to inform this research and our recommendations. Their voices matter, and their stories and advocacy can lead us to better policy and programs for foster youth transitions.

Box 1. Cherisse's Story: "I had no one to call"

When Cherisse* turned 24, she felt proud of how she was doing. Her two children, one and two years old, were both healthy. She was working steadily at a factory, her first stable work since she was laid off during COVID. Getting to work was expensive and required an Uber that cost about a third of what she made most days. Her relationship with her sons' dad was unsteady and abusive, but she had used her tax refund to get into an apartment and was finally living on her own. With no one to help her move, she had left some things behind (like the boys' cribs), and she used the rest of her tax refund to replace things.

Unfortunately, the boys' frequent sicknesses, picked up at daycare, meant she was missing more and more work. Then, one day, the toilet stopped working. Cherisse called her landlord to ask for help and he refused, citing unpaid late fees from rent. Cherisse knew she was late on rent sometimes, but between transportation, diapers, and missing work, she was doing her best. The landlord let her know that if she didn't get him the money, not only was the toilet not his problem, but she could move out at the end of the month.

Cherisse knew the balance she had achieved was crumbling. She was responsible for two sons and facing homelessness.

Is there someone she call for support? Someone she can turn to?

Not her family, who she lost all connections with during the eight years she was in the foster care system.

Not her sons' father, who physically and emotionally abuses her, and has not visited the boys in months.

Not her former foster care workers; they don't work at their agencies anymore. Even if they did, none of the programs she was in can help her now. Those supports were age-limited, and, at 24, she is now expected to navigate things on her own.

She is afraid to reach out to community services because the worst thing she can imagine is her sons experiencing the same system that failed her.

Cherisse's story is a common one for young foster care alumni. When they face a housing or financial crisis, they have no one to call; they have no safety net.

*This name has been changed for anonymity.

adulthood is far more difficult due to the absence of a stable, supportive family and having concrete support during times of need.

At 21, when extended foster care ends in New York, youth face changes to their housing arrangements, and a loss of service providers.⁷ Leaving foster care is a time that is marked with disruption of the relationships they consistently had with their case workers, as services are often age-limited. While there is some ongoing support for youth up to age 23 in programs such as Youth Engagement Services, these programs only serve young people ranging from 14 to 23 years old, and therefore are not exclusively designed for the specific needs of foster care alumni.

In Erie County, foster youth are considered “wards of the state,” meaning that the government has custody of children in foster care. Because of this, Erie County and New York State should assist these young people as they move to independence. Early and ongoing support to live a healthy, independent life would help foster care alumni thrive.

It would also save public agencies immense amounts of money. In Erie County in 2022, about 30 young people aged out of foster care.⁸ Estimates suggest Erie County will eventually spend more than \$6 million on them and their children, ranging from the costs of public support and incarceration to the costs of unemployment and underemployment and emergency housing support and intervention.⁹

“These young people are experiencing instability, being homeless, being hungry, and just not being able to function. If society really understood the underlying issues that these young adults face, they would be more compassionate towards them, and they would put their arms around them,”
- Dr. Leah Angel
Daniel, Executive
Director of Fostering
Greatness, Inc.

Box 2. In Their Own Words

When asked why the current programs are not enough, a foster care graduate in Erie County said:

“To cut all ties when a kid turns 21, coming from foster care without knowing a lot and without resources, they act like you are supposed to have it all together. I was doing all the right things. I thought I was prepared. And I did fine for a couple years. Then I started to struggle. I was working 64 hours a week to pay my bills in a subsidized apartment with a two-year old and then we hit a wall. I took my brother in through kinship. He was struggling behaviorally, and I got kicked out of my apartment building. I couldn't find a house in time and became homeless. I reached out to all the contacts I had from the system, and everyone was telling me there was nothing they could do because I was too old.”

Why do young people enter foster care?

Foster care is set in motion when children are removed from their families due to abuse, abandonment, or neglect, usually in cases when children are determined to be at imminent risk. When removal is deemed necessary, children are placed with family or in kinship care when possible. Kinship care is placement with a known relative or resource person, such as a family member, friend, or other known caregiver. It is linked to better outcomes in several areas including placement stability, retention of sibling contact, and mental and physical health.¹⁰ If a resource cannot be found within the family's network, the child may be placed in traditional foster care with a trained and certified foster parent.¹¹ The purpose of foster care is to enable and promote family reunification, bringing children back into the care of their biological family. In Erie County, the Children's Services Division in the Department of Social Services oversees reunification efforts and creates permanency plans (including adoption or permanent kinship care) when reunification is not possible.¹²

THE PATHWAY TO FOSTER CARE PLACEMENT

The starting point for foster care entry is a report to Child Protective Services (CPS).¹³ In 2022, Erie County Child Protective Services received 8,391 reports, and evidence of abuse or neglect was "indicated" (confirmed by CPS) in 23% of cases.¹⁴ As shown in the Table below, this was the lowest percentage of confirmed reports in five years from 2018 to 2022.¹⁵

CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES CASE DATA, ERIE COUNTY, 2018-2022

Year	Total CPS Reports in Erie County	Number of "Indicated" Reports	Percent of Total Reports Found "Indicated"
2018	9,751	2,883	29.6%
2019	9,354	3,854	41.2%
2020	8,090	2,374	29.4%
2021	8,801	2,521	28.6%
2022	8,391	1,949	23.2%

The purpose of foster care is to enable and promote **family reunification**, bringing children back into the care of their biological family.

Of all CPS reports in Erie County in 2022, evidence of abuse or neglect was found in **23.2% of cases**.

Each report must be investigated by a trained CPS investigator. Most CPS reports do not have enough evidence to indicate abuse, and the report is closed. If evidence of abuse, abandonment, or neglect is found after investigating, a family may be offered services to help increase safety for the children and maintain the family unit without removing the children from their parent's care. If a child's safety cannot be maintained in the home, the Department of Social Services petitions family court to remove the child.¹⁶ If a judge agrees that there are safety concerns that pose an imminent danger, the child is removed from the home and placed in the care of a relative, if possible. If a relative cannot be cleared to care for the child, they are placed in a certified foster home.

PLACEMENT OPTIONS

When the county removes a child from their biological parents' care they could be placed in a variety of settings, described below:

PLACEMENT TYPE	HOW IT WORKS
KINSHIP / RELATIVE CARE	Placement with a biological family member or someone known to the parents or children but not related (known as "fictive kin"). These placements are checked to ensure no previous reports of abuse or neglect occurred there, but do not require formal training. ¹⁷
TRADITIONAL FOSTER CARE	Placement with a trained and certified foster family. This process requires background checks, classes, a formal home study, and references. Families accept placements based on their preferences (related to age, race, sexual orientation, and gender).
MEDICAL CARE / HOSPITALIZATION	This placement may occur for children with complex medical or mental health needs if there are no available home placements able to ensure adequate health care.
RESIDENTIAL CARE	This is considered a last resort when a placement for children entering foster care cannot be found. This is usually due to age or behavioral needs that foster families do not think that they can accommodate. Residential care can be in the form of group homes or larger institutional campuses with specialized staff.

INDEPENDENT LIVING PROGRAMS	This placement is for youth who are 17 ³ / ₄ and older and do not have or want a plan for a permanent or adoptive home. ¹⁸ In this program, youth receive life skills coaching, supportive housing, and other services such as case coordination. Some young people may enter this problem at slightly younger age with county approval.
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For all out of home placements, Erie County assumes custody of the child and is responsible for their safety and well-being. All decisions related to the child's physical and mental health care, education, and travel are ultimately under the direction of the County. This arrangement lasts until formal guardianship or adoption is court-approved or until the child is returned to their parent.

Within these options for foster care, placement for children is not equitable. Often teens and older children and youth of color experience more difficulty being placed in traditional foster care and sustaining their placement, causing them to move more often or spend time in an institutionalized or residential setting, such as group homes. Families of color have reduced this by being more likely to take in children, to protect them from the formal foster care system. Currently, 20% of all American children in foster care placements live in kinship care placements, while 32% of Black foster children live in kinship care placements.¹⁹

Every time a child changes placements during their time in foster care they experience disruption, trauma, and loss of connection. Changes in placement are usually due to a foster parent's inability or unwillingness to continue caring for the child. Multiple placements are linked to some of the worst outcomes for youth in foster care. Youth with multiple placements stay in foster care longer, have worse mental health outcomes, and are more likely to be harmed or abused within foster care placements.²⁰ If a child has moved to five or more placements while in foster care, they have a 90% risk of involvement with the criminal legal system.²¹

Focusing on the types of placement and the pathway to placement makes foster care seem like an organized process, but it is deeply traumatic and often leaves children vulnerable to harm while attempting to protect them from the harm they experienced in their

Multiple foster care placements are linked to worse outcomes for youth.

If a child has moved to **five or more placements** while in foster care, they have a **90% risk of involvement with the criminal legal system.**

biological families. Children experiencing any foster care at any point in their life are at an increased risk of poverty, teenage pregnancy, substance use, arrest, mental and physical health problems, and lack of higher education.²² Ultimately, it is critical that we attempt to limit the need for foster care interventions. In the meantime, improving the process of foster care, including extending the support it can offer, is crucial to improving individual and societal outcomes.

Federal Policy and Timelines

The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) is federal legislation that dictates the timeline for children in foster care.²³ If a parent is unable to meet safety standards and a child is in foster care for 15 out of 22 months, the parent may be given the option to surrender their parental rights in exchange for future visitation or involvement of some sort. Alternately, the state files a petition to terminate parental rights, which initiates court proceedings to remove their rights involuntarily. Once this surrender or termination occurs, the youth is “freed” for adoption.

ASFA legislation regulates the length of time spent in care in order to decrease the continued trauma foster youth experience, but it also creates barriers to family reunification. Regaining custody requires accomplishing a court-ordered “menu” within a certain time frame.

For families living with difficult issues like profound poverty or substance abuse, meeting these timelines while navigating their circumstances may be unrealistic. This leads to children remaining in foster care long term, which can mean that children face multiple placements. This in turn decreases the likelihood of youth exiting the foster care system through kinship care, adoption, or reunification (“achieving permanency” – a permanent home).

Exiting Foster Care

There are several paths out of the foster care system.

- **REUNIFICATION WITH BIOLOGICAL FAMILY**

When a child's biological parents comply with court requirements for return (treatment, services, visitation) and are able to meet the minimum standard of safety children are discharged from foster care and returned to their biological parents.

- **ADOPTION OR PERMANENT GUARDIANSHIP**

When a child's biological parents do not comply with court requirements, the county makes a plan for the children to be put in permanent care of someone other than their biological parents. This can happen with foster parents or kinship guardians.

- **SIGNING OUT OF FOSTER CARE (LEGAL EMANCIPATION)**

If a young person no longer wants to remain in foster care after age 18, they can sign out of foster care. Foster care re-entry is available to them until they are 21, but they must complete an involved process to re-enroll in care.

- **AGING OUT OF FOSTER CARE (LEGAL EMANCIPATION)**

When a child's biological parents do not comply with court requirements and there is not a resource willing to assume permanent responsibility for them (or the youth does not want to be adopted) they will age out of foster care when they reach the “age of majority” in their state. In New York State, this is 21 years old. Youth can continue limited services until age 23, and maintain health insurance until 26, but have to assume responsibility for themselves at that point.

If the ideal end to foster care is a return to one’s family, finding a permanent home with kin, friends, or foster parents is next best. But for every child adopted from foster care, two children remain who are freed for and waiting for adoption.²⁴ This is particularly true for older children. The likelihood of a child being adopted after age 10 goes down by 50%, and the older the youth are, the less likely they are to exit foster care into a safe, permanent, family setting.²⁵ If they are not taken into a home, foster youth are required to leave care on their 21st birthday. They graduate into circumstances that are at best unstable or unpredictable.

415 children and youth were discharged from foster care in Erie County in 2023. Of these, seven percent—29 young people—were discharged to independence and assumed “responsibility for self.”²⁶

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415 children and youth were discharged from foster care in Erie County in 2023. Of these, 29 young people were discharged to independence and assumed “responsibility for self.”

Systemic Drivers of Child Removal and Barriers to Family Reunification

The number of children and youth entering foster care in Erie County has decreased in recent years, with over 300 children admitted each year in 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023, compared to over 500 in 2018 and 2019.²⁷ Understanding the reasons youth enter care is the first step in proactively decreasing these numbers further. Serving young adults exiting foster care requires an understanding of their history and the implications of their time in foster care. That starts by understanding the pathways to entering foster care, the risk factors associated with a longer stay in foster care, and the barriers to reunification with biological families, making them more likely to age out of care without a supportive resource.

NEGLECT IS THE TOP DRIVER

Various forms of abuse (physical, sexual, emotional) account for a small population of children placed in out of home care. In the United States, the number one reason for youth entering foster care is neglect. In New York, where multiple reasons (rather than only the primary reason) are listed for foster care entry, neglect is listed on the petitions of 98% of youth removed from their families.²⁸ Children who are entering foster care due to abuse often are also exposed to or are experiencing neglect.

Families accused of neglect are more likely to be families affected by socioeconomic disparities. The foster system can multiply the systemic harms that some communities and children already experience.

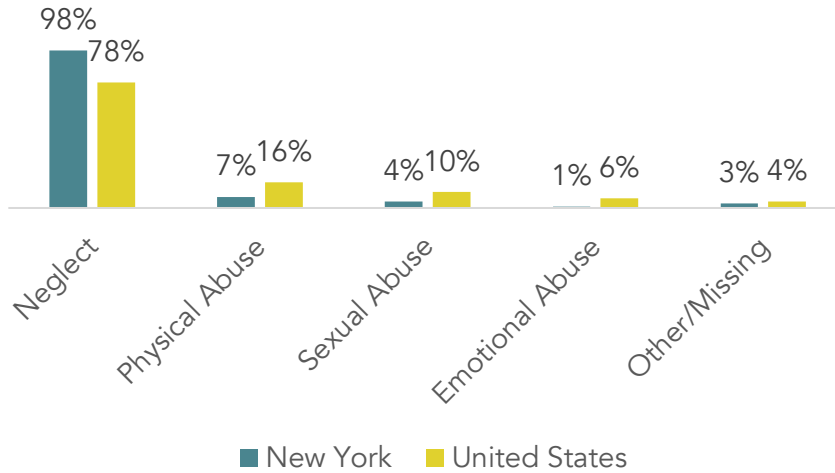
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Box 3. A Closer Look at Neglect

Neglect is a catch-all term for anything serious that endangers youth in their homes that does not fall under the category of abuse. This includes a legally responsible caregiver causing or creating an imminent risk of physical, mental, or emotional harm to the child.

Harms may come in many forms, forms, including failure to provide food, clothing, shelter, education, or medical care; a lack of supervision; excessive physical punishment; and substance use or abuse that impedes adults' ability to care for young people.

CAUSES OF CONFIRMED MALTREATMENT, NEW YORK STATE, 2022



RACE AND FOSTER CARE

Every stage of the child welfare system impacts Black children at higher rates than white children.

- In the United States, over 50% of Black children will experience a Child Protective Services investigation before adulthood, which is double the rate of white children.²⁹
- In the United States, 10% of all Black children will be removed from their parents and placed in foster care.³⁰
- In New York State, 37% of all children in foster care are Black, despite only making up 15% of children in the state (see Table below).

REPRESENTATION IN THE FOSTER CARE POPULATION BY RACE IN NEW YORK STATE, 2021³¹

RACE	FOSTER CARE POPULATION	GENERAL POPULATION
Black	37%	15%
White	27%	47%
Hispanic / Latino	27%	25%
Asian / Hawaiian	1%	10%
Two or More Race Groups	8%	4%

In contrast to this overrepresentation of Black youth in foster care, foster parents in New York remain overwhelmingly white and non-Latino. In Erie County, 84% of foster parents are white and 94% are non-Latino. In 2023, only 15% of Latino children and 50% of Black children were placed in foster and adoptive homes with caregivers that were the same race as them, compared to 83% of white children.³²

This overrepresentation can be traced back to racially biased systems of reporting, screening, and mandating services for non-white people, with the highest levels of prejudice shown against Black women and families. Black families are far more likely to be reported to CPS, and allegations of neglect and abuse are far more likely to be upheld.

- Pregnant Black women are four times more likely to be screened at pre- and post-natal appointments for drug use, even without any report or evidence of prior drug use.³³
- Black mothers who refuse specific medical care services are two times as likely to receive a medical neglect accusation.³⁴
- Health care providers are more likely to report childhood injury as suspected abuse in the injuries of black children, particularly those children who receive public insurance.³⁵
- Even among similar income groups, Black children are over-represented as suspected victims.³⁶

Black children spend more time in foster care, are less likely to receive needed services than white children and are less likely to reunify with their families.³⁷ In addition, those who spend longer stretches of time in foster care are less likely to be adopted, and Black children are more likely to age out of care.

In the United States, 1 in 41 of ALL Black children will have their relationship with their biological parents legally terminated, never reunifying with their family of origin.³⁸ This is more than double the rate of legal, permanent separation for those in the general population. While disparity exists in other subpopulations as well, they are most egregious for Black youth, particularly in Erie County, where other vulnerable populations are not as over-represented.

In Erie County in 2023, only 15% of Latino children and 50% of Black children were placed in foster and adoptive homes with caregivers that were the same race as them, compared to 83% of white children.

The disproportionate representation of non-white children in foster care means that any policy change or program development should address the vulnerability of people of color, particularly Black families.

SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

For families interacting with the foster system, the line between the effects of poverty and the definition of “active neglect” is often blurry. Experiencing poverty means greater susceptibility to being flagged for screening because of housing insecurity, job insecurity, and the struggle to provide basic needs. Biological parents of children entering foster care are much more likely to live under disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions, such as single parenthood, poverty, low education, and underemployment.³⁹

Parents experiencing poverty face practical barriers to reunifying with their children. Each parent with a child in foster care is asked to complete a menu of services. This includes regular supervised or unsupervised visitation, various forms of individual and group therapy, education, and substance screenings. Compliance with this menu often requires multiple appointments in multiple locations. Public transportation or unreliable transportation can make these appointments more challenging to get to. In addition, partial cost for the services may fall on them (such as visitation supervision) which may be more difficult for parents experiencing acute poverty. When children are removed from their home, families often struggle to qualify for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). If their job is not understanding, accommodating the level of appointments and time off may be an insurmountable challenge that prevents parents from achieving their court outlined goals and making them less likely to receive social services which require employment.⁴⁰

YOUTH SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Families experiencing racial and economic inequity may be more vulnerable to foster care, but youth who identify as a sexual minority are significantly more likely to enter foster care regardless of other family factors. Though county and state agencies do not track the sexual orientation of youth entering foster care, an estimated 30% of youth in foster care identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender,

30% of youth in foster care identify as LGBT, compared to 10% of the general population.

and queer or questioning, three times the 10% estimated for the general population.⁴¹ Queer youth are more likely to experience abuse that could lead to out-of-home foster care placements. When a youth's family of origin has prejudice against their identity, the youth is more likely to run away, be asked to leave their home, and experience rejection from their families.

Once in foster care, LGBTQ youth are more likely to experience maltreatment or discrimination within the family they are placed in. The mental health needs of these young people are also significant, and they are more likely to be hospitalized. Fewer services and more placements are common for sexual minority youth, which correlates with less likelihood of permanency, return to parent, or adoption. This higher rate of entry to foster care with lower rates of exiting to permanency means that LGBTQ youth are at high rates of vulnerability for aging out of foster care at 21.⁴²

Outcomes for Youth Aging Out

The crises that bring youth into foster care, coupled with the ongoing trauma of a long-term foster care experience, have an enduring effect. For those who do not establish a permanent home, whether back with their birth family or with a new foster household, this trauma is exacerbated by having to navigate life with very little support. There are no economic safety nets, no places to go for advice, no help in emergencies, no one to listen to concerns, no one who's looking out for you. Unsurprisingly, youth who age out of foster care encounter a myriad of difficulties. They are more likely to experience negative physical and mental health issues, homelessness, incarceration, unemployment and underemployment, substance abuse, educational deficits, and early parenting. These outcomes, which complicate the pursuit of healthy and successful adulthood, can often be traced to a lack of support and guidance. Improving and extending foster care for older youth and young adults can change this.

THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA

Struggling with the demands of independence is a nearly universal experience for young adults moving out onto their own. For youth that have experienced trauma and loss because of family upheaval, this transition is especially difficult. An estimated 90% of children in

After aging out of care, foster youth experience alarming outcomes:

- 25% become homeless
- 50% develop substance use dependency
- 20% are arrested within a year
- 70% of young women become pregnant in early adulthood
- Only 3% graduate from college

foster care have experienced at least one traumatic event, and almost half experience four or more.⁴³ Trauma affects the development of the human brain, and can have negative impacts on adolescent self-esteem, school performance, critical thinking, self-regulation, and self-motivation. These impacts are not short term, and they are not insignificant: more youth in foster care experience post-traumatic stress disorder than those exiting active war zones.

Age 21 for the general population, then, is likely not the same as age 21 for a youth who has endured acute and ongoing trauma within the foster care system. These young people experience the loss of family and connection and are also more likely to have impaired decision-making skills. This is a result of their consistent need to be in survival mode while a ward of the state, and relying on a changing array of case workers rather than people with whom they can have enduring and reciprocal relationships. Between the origins of their foster care placement, which are necessarily negative, and the fact that they are often moved frequently, foster children lack many of the long-term relationships upon which young adults rely.

THE WEIGHT OF BIOLOGICAL FAMILY CARE

When exiting foster care, many young people assume responsibility for their biological siblings or families. Regardless of the legal termination of parental rights, youth in foster care often maintain contact and relationships with family members, even if those relationships are challenging or unhealthy. Youth feel obligated to financially support biological parents or siblings with the stipend they receive in independent living programs.⁴⁴ When they leave these programs, the ongoing payments cease, but the feeling of obligation does not. Without the oversight of caseworkers, they can use much of their resources to support their families, often motivated by unresolved and unwarranted guilt over their foster care placement.

Even youth who are set up for success when they leave foster care can buckle to the continuing difficulty associated with helping others. As one foster care graduate described, “For the beginning years, I was doing pretty well. I had saved up a nice amount of money, and I was able to live off that and work as well. As time progressed, I went through that money by helping others that I shouldn’t have helped because later when I needed help, no one was there for me.”

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Later when I needed help, no one was there for me.”

- Foster care graduate in Erie County

THE PUBLIC COST OF POOR OUTCOMES

In the United States, for each year's class of youth aging out of foster care, closing the gaps in education, housing, early parenting, and juvenile justice outcomes would reduce national social spending by \$4.1 billion.⁴⁵

In Erie County in 2022, approximately 30 young people aged out of foster care. These young people will eventually cost Erie County more than \$6 million in social spending from public benefits for themselves and their children, the cost of incarceration, the cost of unemployment and underemployment and emergency housing support and intervention.⁴⁶

Improving the outcomes of these young people in any of the four measures most heavily correlated with youth aging out of foster care (high school graduation, early parenthood, homelessness, incarceration) would result in significant long-term savings for Erie County. More importantly, the quality of life for youth who have not received the resources they deserve would immeasurably increase.

Box 4. In Their Own Words

When asked about the preparation received for the transition to independence, foster care graduates in Erie County said:

"Some of the preparation for the future felt like people are trying to instill fear and create a false narrative that I am limited in what I can do or who I can be. I know there are opportunities that I have not been able to access because my case workers do not know about them or find it too difficult to connect me to them, so they just don't."

"The system teaches us that people will work for us instead of how to do this work. It gives us the illusion that we will be taken care of, takes our control and choices away from us, and then leaves us to become a statistic."

"When I left foster care, I experienced not being prepared to do simple things like paying certain bills because all my savings went to rent. I wish I had access to budgeting help to learn to be ahead and have some money in savings in case of emergencies."

Extended Foster Care

At age 18, a child becomes a legal adult, and their status in the foster care system changes. First, they must legally consent to remain in the custody of Erie County, called “Extended Foster Care” for this age group.

Some youth in the system, mistrustful and frustrated by their experiences, choose to leave custody at this point. Foster care youth Noel Anaya explained that he was opting out because he wanted to leave “on his own terms.” After a lifetime of being shuffled around and ill-served, he delivered a speech to the court at his emancipation hearing, saying that he saw his departure as a much-needed divorce. “I’m relieved,” he said, to finally get away from a system that ultimately failed me on its biggest promise.”⁴⁷

In New York State, young people without a permanent home can remain in Extended Foster Care until their 21st birthday.⁴⁸ These youth might be in a foster home, but the overwhelming majority enter Independent Living programs. These programs offer supportive housing options where youth receive independent living skills coaching, casework, and oversight. To qualify for independent living programs, youth are expected to remain in school or maintain a job. Stipends are provided to them to cover expenses including rent, hygiene items, clothing, and groceries.

In Erie County, funding for Independent Living Programs has not increased over the last decade. Erie County’s adopted budgets have included approximately \$470,000 for these programs every year since 2017 (excluding a one-time COVID-19 increase in 2021).⁴⁹ As a result, the capacity of available programs in Erie County is small, compared to the population of young people aging out and in need of support.

Extended foster care is relatively new; only in 2008 did federal legislation enable states to extend foster care beyond age 18, allowing them to stay in supported placement until they are 21.⁵⁰ Currently, extended foster care is a vastly underutilized option, and services to prepare foster care youth for independence have low levels of engagement.⁵¹ Many young people choose to voluntarily leave foster care at 18 or before they turn 21.⁵² This choice is not surprising, as many of them had terrible experiences related to or within the institutions of foster care. Foster youth report feeling

Extended foster care services can include:

- Academic support
- Workforce development
- Home management training
- Financial coaching
- Mentor relationship development
- Mental health counseling
- Housing assistance

frustrated with the system and doubtful of its future benefit to them.⁵³

For those who remain in care, however, the extension of support leads to better outcomes. In fact, each year that a young person consents to remain in foster care beyond 18 is linked to improved outcomes.⁵⁴ The extra time can be used to gain additional

independent living skills, build connections and relationships, and save financial resources without the burden of housing costs.

Research demonstrates that youth in extended foster care see an increase in educational attainment, and decreases in risky behaviors, criminal justice system involvement, and homelessness. This support is particularly important for youth of color and LGBTQ youth, who are more likely to be placed in foster care, more likely to age out of foster care without a permanent placement, and more likely to experience negative outcomes once they age out.

Box 5. In Their Own Words

When asked what youth who age out of foster care need most, foster care graduates in Erie County said:

“Every person aging out should have the option to have a case worker... just in case things go south. Some people aging out don’t know what to do in times of struggle or don’t have help after foster care. Some don’t feel comfortable asking for help because they’re scared that everyone’s going to hurt them because of their past.”

“One of the biggest challenges that I faced was housing. Upon exiting foster care, I was homeless, sleeping from couch to couch. I had no guide as to how I could receive housing. I went to social services and was told that because I had some college education, I should just tough it out and get a job. Since I wasn’t a mother at the time and not being abused, there were no programs or resources that could assist me.”

“We need someone to turn to when we need help. It feels like being in the prison system – you get taken care of, and then you leave and there is nothing else for you.”

Policy Changes for Better Foster Care Transitions

Without intervention, the outcomes for young people transitioning out of foster care are devastating. Changing the experiences of foster care alumni means that we will have to invest in programmatic and policy changes that better protect and prepare them for the future.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed national policy flaws in the approach to this population, prompting higher levels of support for foster care alumni. The Supporting Foster Youth and Families through the Pandemic Act, an emergency federal law, prolonged access to support for foster care alumni, extending the services available to those who had been in foster care after 14 years old until they turned 27 years old.⁵⁵ These services included allowing voluntary re-entry to foster care, eliminating work and school requirements to receive subsidy payments, and providing flexibility for the use of federal Chafee funds and in the requirements for education training vouchers.⁵⁶ Yet by 2024, we have largely returned to the former system where young people exit foster care and experience all the challenges of adulthood without programmatic support and services to accommodate the help they still need.

Though Erie County has extended foster care (serving consenting youth until they are 21 years old) and youth engagement services (limited services for youth until they are 23 years old), local stakeholders agree that it is not enough to provide the safety net needed by youth aging out of foster care. Erie County can better support this population by adopting policies and funding programs to mitigate the ongoing impacts of the trauma experienced by foster youth.

Policy and funding reform to build a better safety net for youth aging out of foster care is happening across the country and within New York State. Some examples of these policy changes and budget commitments follow.

ERIE COUNTY

Following advocacy by Fostering Greatness, Partnership for the Public Good, and our partners, the Erie County Legislature adopted a new funding line in the 2024 Erie County budget specifically to support young people who have already aged out of care. According

“This is our time to change the narrative and outcomes for those who are still navigating life after foster care, unsuccessfully.

There are many of us who possess the knowledge, power, lived and shared experiences to make effective, efficient, and real change obtainable.

Let’s make the difference that we wanted others to make for us.”

- Dr. Leah Angel Daniel, Executive Director of Fostering Greatness, Inc.

to the Erie County Legislature, this \$400,000 pilot funding line is to fund “wraparound services for young people after foster care, including a central hub for resources and referrals; mentoring on issues like housing, finding a job, financial literacy, education, and additional engagement of older youth for services.” This new funding line is critical because it will exclusively serve young people who have already aged out of care. Because it is “local funding” drawn from Erie County revenue, rather than federal or state funding, it can serve young people beyond the imposed age limits of 21 and 23 years old. At the time of this publication, Erie County Department of Social Services is preparing a request for proposal (RFP) to select service providers and programs to receive funding.

NEW YORK CITY

New York City has innovative programs for academic preparation and support through the Fair Futures program.⁵⁷ Fair Futures provides youth who are actively in foster care, or who had previously been in foster care, one on one coaching. They also offer access to specialists in areas like career development, educational attainment, and housing in order to best support post-foster care life. While traditional funding pays for this program for youth from 11-20 in foster care, New York City is the first municipality in the nation to secure public funding for young people who have *graduated* from foster care. In 2023, the New York City Mayor’s office committed \$36 million in support for Fair Futures, expanding eligibility to foster alumni up to age 26.⁵⁸ Early results for youth in Fair Futures show that they have increased access to better NYC high schools, are meeting an average of three academic/career goals per year, and see increased graduation rates.⁵⁹

CONNECTICUT

In June 2023, the state of Connecticut passed a children’s mental health law that included funding for paid, community-based service learning and academic and workforce development programs.⁶⁰ This will serve youth ages 16-24 and includes a special emphasis on youth that experienced foster care.

“Foster youth face a pretty steep cliff at age 21 where **they lose pretty much everything** – all their supports and services and help. **But their needs don’t just stop there.**”

- Susanna Kniffen,
Children Now

CALIFORNIA

In 2020, Santa Clara County piloted a universal basic income program with foster youth who aged out of care.⁶¹ The program gave 72 young people aged 21-24 in Santa Clara \$1,000 per month, for two years. After the two years, participants reported improved well-being; specific improvements were seen in income stability, employment, housing, and increased credit scores. Parents enrolled in the program also reported improved family outcomes: children had more access to extra-curricular activities, and parents had freedom to pursue jobs that gave them more time with their children.

Additionally, the Raising the Age for Extended Foster Care Pilot Program Act, a bill in the California legislature, would allow youth the ability to stay in foster care an additional year, allowing them to maintain placement until 22.⁶²

GEORGIA

Georgia is taking a different approach to providing additional supports for youth aging out of foster care. A new law, the Fostering Success Act, is allowing taxpayers to receive dollar for dollar income tax credits for donations to services that support youth transitioning out of care.⁶³ This \$20 million program will help with housing, food, transportation, and medical needs for foster care alumni.

Unfortunately, while there is nearly universal, bipartisan understanding that additional support is needed for youth transitioning out of foster care, many reform and policy suggestions are still theoretical or operating as pilot programs. Foster care alumni are a vulnerable population and large-scale policy changes are needed to positively impact their futures.

Recommendations for Erie County and New York State

Erie County can adopt policies and fund programs to make more transition services available for older youth in foster care and for foster care alumni.

Erie County should better support alumni youth after they leave the system.

As noted above, Erie County adopted a new dedicated funding line of \$400,000 in its 2024 budget to support programs for young people who recently aged out of foster care. This funding should be increased and adopted as a permanent budget line of at least \$800,000. This funding can ensure there are programs to provide:

- Case management on housing assistance, mental health access, education opportunities, workforce development, etc., and mentoring on financial literacy and other areas of independence and well-being.
- Additional engagement of older youth for services, to lessen the negative impacts often seen in youth who age out of foster care without support.

In selecting service providers, Erie County should prioritize programs that have foster care alumni leadership and participation in program design and delivery. Foster alumni with lived experience of the challenges of aging out and living independently can help create better and more trusted programming.

In its 2025 Budget, Erie County should fund an information and resources hub to link foster care alumni to the supports they need.

After aging out, many young people in Erie County find themselves in a crisis with no one to assist them. Most youth exit foster care with a physical binder of information related to their transition and future needs. Considering the housing instability and frequent moves they will likely experience, this is not a practical tool to keep track of. A central hub of electronic resources should be available for youth existing care, as well as a friendly and accessible services hub they can call or visit in times of crisis or confusion.

Erie County should adopt an increased and permanent budget line to support programs for young people who aged out of foster care.

In its 2025 Budget, Erie County should adopt additional funds for an accessible foster care alumni information and resources hub.

Currently, searching for programs and assistance for youth exiting foster care is an involved, convoluted process and is made even more difficult when you are desperate for answers. Many foster alumni shared stories of reaching back out to their foster system case manager when they found themselves in trouble, but they were told they were too old to be helped. After aging out, guidance should still be available by trained, resourced, proactive staff who can help foster care alumni navigate the challenges of adulthood.

New York State should extend foster care up to age 23.

Federal law allows for states to extend care for foster youth, but New York State has not applied to take advantage of those federal protections. The federal John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood supports and services to youth up to age 23. Currently, New York State has not opted in to serve youth between age 21 and 23.

New York State should pursue this option immediately to secure the services that many counties are making accessible with their own funds rather than federal dollars. Providing additional time in foster care will help youth to be better prepared for independence and improve outcomes for youth exiting care.

Box 6. Erica's Story: "No grace was ever given"

"When I was aging out of foster care, no grace was ever given, no compassion. Pretty much, it was just like, 'Hey, you're old. Here you go.' No one cared. There were so many things that I was not taught, so many things I was not given. I faced homelessness, depression, multiple other different things that no one seemed to care about."

"There should be programs to assist these kids and teach them how to do the basic necessities to move on and present themselves as adults. We need to teach them how to live by themselves, and how to deal with the emotions that they're having. The additional funding from Erie County is important to make this happen."

- Erica McDaniel, Erie County foster care alumni and advocate

Designate special places for foster care youth in affordable housing development projects.

Both the City of Buffalo and Erie County have recently announced plans for several affordable housing development projects, with funding from the federal American Rescue Plan. This housing creation should designate a certain number of units for foster care alumni due to the high rates of homelessness after aging out.

As Buffalo, Erie County, and New York State fund new affordable housing development, they should prioritize the creation of dedicated supportive housing for foster care alumni, where layered community supports can improve housing stability and long-term outcomes for these youth.

Urgently prioritize foster care youth in access to housing, mental health services, education and workforce development programs.

The current poor outcomes for foster care alumni should be urgently addressed by all partners invested in the outcomes of young people in Buffalo and Erie County.

Foster care alumni should receive the resources, skills training, and assistance they need to live full and successful lives without the support of a family safety net. They were brought into the care of Erie County and New York State as children, and they deserve continued care and support as they become adults.

Affordable housing development by the City of Buffalo and Erie County should **designate units for foster care alumni.**



To hear the stories and insights of six foster care alumni in Erie County, watch [Untold Stories: Life After Foster Care](#), a short documentary available at PPG's YouTube channel.

Box 6. Important Terms

Aging Out – When a young person in foster care turns 21 in New York State, their county’s custody and supervision ends.

Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA) – The permanency goal assigned to young people when the county will maintain permanent custody until they exit care. APPLA is a permanency option only when other options such as reunification, relative placement, adoption, or legal guardianship have been ruled out.

Community-Based Independent Living Program (CBILP) – Programming that places youth into apartments in the community and supports them through regular check-ins and payment of their monthly rent. Youth in a community-based apartment must assume the lease prior to their 21st birthday if they want to retain the apartment.

Child Protective Services – Government office in the Department of Social Services that investigates allegations of child abuse and neglect.

Extended Foster Care – If a young person is in foster care when they reach 18, they can consent to remain under county supervision and receive reports until they are 21 years old. Youth can sign out of foster care (revoke their consent) at any time during those three years.

Foster Care Alumni/Foster Care Graduate – People who were formerly in foster care who exited care through a variety of paths including aging out, signing out, or adoption.

Legal Permanency – Maintaining placement in a home with a legal parenting relationship which can be obtained through reunification with biological parents, adoption, or kinship permanent care.

Sign Out – After they turn 18, youth can voluntarily sign themselves out of care.

Supervised Independent Living Program (SILP) – Housing units staffed by social workers coordinating services and supports for foster youth over 17.5 and under 21 years old.

Continued on next page.

Important Terms (continued)

Termination of Parental Rights – The Adoption and Safe Families Act, a federal law, requires that a petition to end parental rights be filed when a child has been in foster care for 15 of the most recent 22 months. The termination process requires a county petition and a court hearing, and permanently and legally ends the legal rights of the biological parents of a child, freeing them for adoption.

Surrender of Parental Rights – When a child has been in foster care for 15 of the most recent 22 months, biological parents are usually given the chance to surrender their parental rights through a mediation process. This process allows parents to retain certain rights, usually visitation and contact, after their parental rights are legally ended.

Voluntary Reentry – Youth who are 18 to 21 can sign themselves back into foster care if they feel they need additional support after exhausting all available services.

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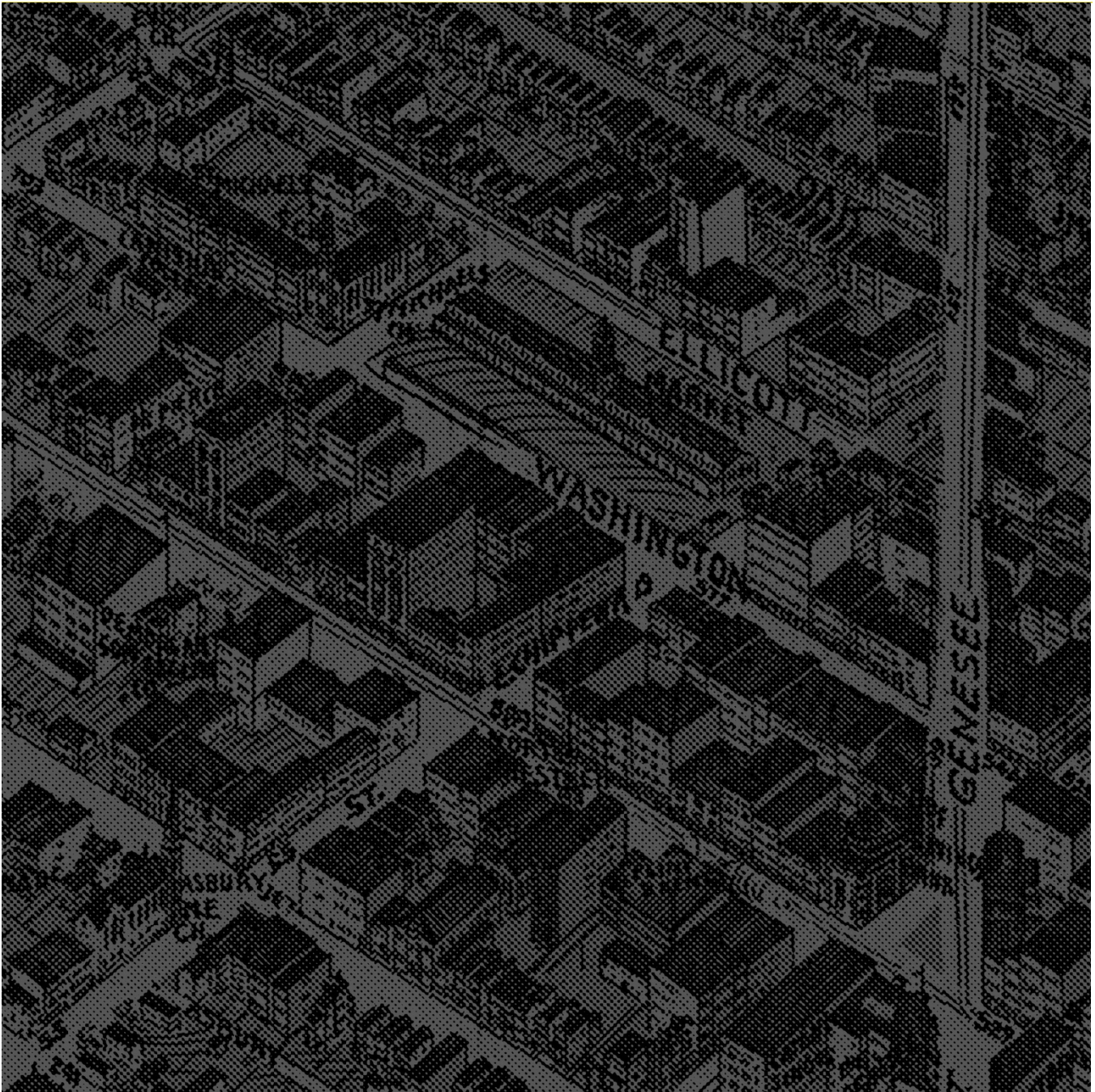
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⁶⁰ Connecticut General Assembly, July 1, 2023, <https://www.cga.ct.gov/2022/SUM/PDF/2022SUM00047-R02HB-05001-SUM.PDF>.

⁶¹ County of Santa Clara, "County of Santa Clara Expands Guaranteed Basic Income Pilot Program to Additional Vulnerable Populations," August 15, 2023, <https://news.santaclaracounty.gov/county-santa-clara-expands-guaranteed-basic-income-pilot-program-additional-vulnerable-populations>.

⁶² California Assembly Committee on Human Services, June 20, 2023, <https://ahum.assembly.ca.gov/sites/ahum.assembly.ca.gov/files/SB%209%20%28Cortese%29.pdf>.

⁶³ Georgia Department of Human Services / Division of Family & Children Services, accessed 15 April 2024, <https://dfcs.georgia.gov/services/qualifying-organization-application-fostering-success-tax-credit>.



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