

# **COPING WITH COVID-19**

## **HOUSING & ECONOMIC SECURITY FOR FORMER FOSTER YOUTH IN COLLEGE**



### **As Schools Close Dorms & Facilities in Response to COVID-19, Former Foster Youth are at Risk of Homelessness: Here's what we can do.**

#### **Applaud colleges that allow students without alternatives to remain in dorms**

We are learning from former foster youth that many, if not most, schools are allowing students with extraordinary circumstances to remain in the dorms, keeping dining halls open, and even providing stipends when they can to students in need. Increasingly, colleges are establishing food pantries – and these schools will keep these options open during COVID-19 campus closures.

We are extremely grateful to the foster youth champions among the faculty and staff of these institutions. We are also proud of the young people who raised awareness about homelessness during college breaks that made this level of planning and sophistication possible. Since 2012, many colleges have developed solutions for students without alternative housing options during college breaks – such as homeless youth, former foster youth, and international youth. These plans were developed largely due to the advocacy of former foster youth, Jessica McCormick. In 2012 Jessie posted an [on-line petition](#) and gained 123,000 signatures urging the president of her university to address the plight of students like herself who experienced homeless during holiday breaks. Jessie's advocacy created a nationwide movement in higher education to meet the housing and economic security needs of these students.

#### **Tap the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act – lift the cap, extend eligibility to age 23 across the US, and infuse supplemental dollars for unexpected housing needs & financial hardship**

Alumni, led by Lisa Dickson from ACTION Ohio, immediately reached out to the Children's Bureau to urge the associate commissioner to issue guidance to child welfare professionals and state commissioners to tap the Chafee Program to meet the housing and income needs for students displaced from dorms and work study arrangements. Associate Commissioner Milner agreed – the most expedient method to help former foster youth is to trigger the flexible funding available through the Chafee Act.

Of the nearly 12 million college students under the age of 24 in the US, 72,000 are current and former foster youth who were considered financially independent and receiving federal financial aid<sup>1</sup> and of this group, roughly 17,000 received Education & Training Vouchers<sup>4</sup>. Information regarding how many of these youth live in dorms is not collected or reported nationally. The majority of these young adults (70%) are pursuing (quite successfully) certificates from two-year colleges; while 30% are attending four-year colleges. Nearly half (46%) of students at four-year institutions live on campus, Thus, NCHCW estimates that approximately 10,000 former foster youth live in college dorms<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> US Government Accountability Office. (2016). *Actions Needed to Improve Access to Federal Financial Assistance for Homeless and Foster Youth*. <https://www.help.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/d16343.pdf>

<sup>2</sup>Fernandes-Alcantara, A. (2019). *Youth Transitioning from Foster Care: Background and Federal Programs*. Congressional Research Services. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RL34499.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (2020). *Today's College Students*. <https://postsecondary.gatesfoundation.org/what-were-learning/todays-college-students/>

In this letter, Dr. Milner references that states can spend up to 30 percent of their Chafee allotment on “room and board.” This averages out to roughly [\\$780,000 per state](#) much of which is tied up in contracts or otherwise allocated. **We recommend that Congress lift this cap temporarily as states deal with the COVID-19 crisis.**

The Family First Prevention Services Act allowed states the option of extending eligibility to age 23. Some states are not aware that they have the latitude to add this older population to their State Chafee Plans and thus, forfeit the opportunity. In order to ensure that states can adequately serve youth through the age of 23 during this national crisis, **we urge Congress to include an automatic extension of Chafee eligibility to age 23 in the emergency supplemental bill.**

In order to accommodate this increase in eligible Chafee participants and to control for the fact that much of the funding Congress provides to states is tied up in contracts and program commitments (leaving little in reserve for emergencies) **we also urge Congress to infuse a 30% increase to Chafee funding through the COVID-19 emergency bill.** This funding will allow states the resources necessary to meet needs related housing, lost wages, and other problems related to the community impact of the virus and the prevention of disease spread. This funding can also be used to put into place the necessary equipment to access online learning platforms.

Chafee was designed by Congress to be flexible enough to offer support in whatever form the young people need. In the event that a college or university has failed to make adequate plans to allow youth in need to stay in the dorms, or schools that do not have sufficient capacity to allow students to remain in the dorms, Chafee funds can be used for another suitable living arrangement. Chafee funding is flexible enough to be used for a wide variety of housing accommodations including hotels, host homes, shared housing, etc. until a youth can return to the dorms.

It is also to point out that during this time of crisis, youth who are displaced from the community within their school and dorm may feel isolated. Child welfare agencies can use Chafee funds to make sure that child welfare offers access to programs, professionals, or mentors to ensure ongoing social connections. Chafee is designed to be nimble enough to allow for that as well.

### **Tapping HUD’s new Foster Youth to Independence Initiative**

For students who are displaced for the remainder of the year but would be renting an apartment next year anyway, they may be able to access a Housing Choice Voucher through a new program that HUD implemented in July 2019. This program was designed and presented to Secretary Carson by foster youth themselves. It is called the [Foster Youth to Independence Initiative or “FYI”](#). Over 600 youth have secured permanent housing through this program. The program is agile enough to serve up to 25 referrals or just one at a time.

However, it is important to point out that FYI is not intended to be an emergency housing solution. It was designed to be exactly the opposite – the youth who conceived the idea intend for it to be used to encourage child welfare agencies to be planful and avoid a hasty, frenzied aging out experience.

That said, for students at colleges where the dorms have closed for the semester who would be moving to apartments next year, it is the case that these students can be referred to FYI. Basically, they could just find their apartment now, rather than waiting until August and the local public child welfare agency (PCWA) may refer them for a housing choice voucher now. In the interim, we urge child welfare professionals to use Chafee funds to ensure that we can all work together to prevent homelessness during this nationwide crisis.

### **For more information**

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