

FIXING THE CHAFEE FOSTER CARE PROGRAM THE CASE FOR CONGRESSIONAL ACTION

There are nearly 150,000 youth ages 14 and up in foster care, according to the latest data. Congress created the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (the Chafee program) nearly 25 years ago to support these youth who face a steeper climb than their peers in the journey to adulthood. Yet far too many still lack permanent family connections. Too few are plugged in to the services they need. Every year, nearly 20,000 youth are left to “age out” of foster care, meaning they exit the system alone, without a forever family, a statistic that has remained largely unchanged for more than 10 years.

The creation of the Chafee program 25 years ago represented a bipartisan commitment by Congress to youth experiencing foster care. Our leaders can realize the full potential of Chafee and make good on their promise to youth in foster care by investing in and redesigning the program. A strengthened Chafee program will support the strong relationships and access to services these young people need for a successful transition to adulthood. **Now is the time for Congress to step up for foster youth.**



5 REASONS CONGRESS SHOULD INVEST IN AND REDESIGN CHAFEE: DATA- AND YOUTH-INFORMED SOLUTIONS TO BUILD ON THE BIPARTISAN LEGACY OF CHAMPIONING YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

1. PROBLEM: The Chafee program is meant to provide services to help all youth in foster care succeed in school, work, and relationships — yet, in a given year, **Chafee services reach fewer than one-quarter of eligible youth.** Congress has expanded the population of youth eligible for Chafee services, but the funding level to serve them has not kept up.

SOLUTION: Increase investment in the Chafee program by at least \$100 million per year so agencies can serve more eligible youth.

2. PROBLEM: Fewer than half of all eligible youth receive a Chafee service the entire time they are eligible. For years, youth who “aged out” of foster care without adequate support have said they were not aware of available Chafee services.

SOLUTION: Incentivize agencies to develop outreach and communications strategies to ensure all eligible youth are aware of available services, including peer-delivered services.

3. PROBLEM: Youth in foster care often face a steep climb in their journey to adulthood. Unfortunately, the services they need to succeed are often unavailable, or youth face eligibility cliffs during these transitional years.

SOLUTION: Make Chafee eligibility requirements more flexible so young people up to age 26 can access Chafee services. This would provide continuity and support that is reflective of their development and consistent with other services such as Education and Training Vouchers (ETVs) and Medicaid health insurance.

4. PROBLEM: Permanent family relationships set transition age youth up for success in life, but the Chafee program does not currently prioritize these connections. In recent years, permanency rates for teens and young adults have declined.

SOLUTION: Make healing and permanent family connections a top focus for Chafee-eligible youth to eliminate “aging out” alone as an acceptable outcome.

5. PROBLEM: Chafee’s menu of services doesn’t currently address the issues older youth say they need help with most: mental health, housing, education, employment, transportation, mentoring, and more.

SOLUTION: Update the scope of Chafee services to include those youth say are most needed. Congress can also create incentives for agencies to improve the effectiveness of services by having agencies involve youth in continuous program improvement and solicit youth feedback as programs are implemented.

CHAFEE’S UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

By investing in and redesigning the Chafee program:

✓ **Youth will have greater success** in school, work, and family life — outcomes that positively shape the rest of their life’s journey.

✓ **Communities will benefit** from a stronger workforce, more economic mobility, and fewer individuals experiencing homelessness, incarceration, and isolation from society.

✓ **Our leaders will deliver on the bipartisan promise they made to older youth in foster care** when they created Chafee 25 years ago.

CHAFEE AT A GLANCE

The Chafee program consists of a mandatory formula grant program (Chafee program) and the discretionary Chafee Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program. This brief focuses on the mandatory formula grant program, referred to as the Chafee program.

WHO IS CHAFEE INTENDED TO SERVE?

- Children and youth in foster care between ages 14-21
- Youth who aged out of foster care (exited without permanent family connections) and are between 18 and 21 (or 23 in states that extend foster care to 21)
- Children and youth who left foster care at 16 or older for kinship guardianship or adoption until they reach 21 (or 23 in states that extend foster care to 21)
- Children and youth who had been in foster care between 14 and 21 and left for some other reason besides aging out of foster care, kinship guardianship, or adoption
- Children deemed likely to remain in foster care until 18, pertaining to the Chafee purpose area of providing “regular, ongoing opportunities to engage in age or developmentally appropriate activities”
- **According to the latest data, less than half of this population receives a Chafee service the entire time they are eligible.**

WHAT TYPES OF SUPPORT AND SERVICES ARE INCLUDED?

- Chafee funds are intended to support permanent connections with caring adult(s) and a wide variety of services to youth in foster care at age 14 or older, including former foster youth up to age 21 (or age 23 in some states). Services can include educational support, job readiness training, mentoring, life skills training, wellness services, and opportunities to engage in age-appropriate activities, among other services.
- Up to 30% of a state’s allotment can be used for room and board for eligible youth over age 18. This includes room or board for youth who attend institutions of higher education. Room or board is not defined in statute but typically includes shelter and food.
- States are required to submit a Chafee plan as part of their five-year Child and Family Services plan (www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/child-family-services-plans) which is updated each year in the Annual Progress and Services Report to HHS. Among other things, plans should describe the state’s activities to collaborate with and solicit feedback from diverse groups of youth and young adults about their service needs and desired outcomes for the Chafee programs (both on the individual and system level) such as information learned from Youth Advisory Boards, town halls, virtual forums, and other state activities. The plans should provide an overview of how the information collected was used to inform service delivery and how the agency has provided feedback to participating youth/ young adults on the impact of their input.

HOW MUCH CHAFEE FUNDING DO STATES RECEIVE?

- State allocations are determined by a formula based on a state’s percent of children in foster care in proportion to the national total of children in foster care, using data from the most recent year available. No state receives less than \$500,000. Tribes with an approved Title IV-E plan or a Title IV-E tribal/state agreement have the option

to directly receive a portion of the funds otherwise allotted to the state to provide services to tribal youth. See www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/pi2301.pdf for the most recent state allotments.

- The Chafee program is a capped formula grant available to states, territories, and tribal entities. It is funded at \$143 million per year. States are required to provide a minimum 20% match.

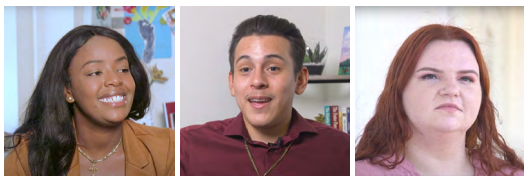
HOW IS THE CHAFEE PROGRAM ADMINISTERED?

- The Chafee program is authorized under Title IV-E, Section 477 of the Social Security Act. It is administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.
- It was first established by the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (P.L. 106-169), replacing a similar program created in 1985. Congress has revised the program five times, most recently in 2021, when legislation created time-limited funding and flexibilities as part of the COVID pandemic relief efforts, which have since expired.

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE ABOUT THE CHAFEE PROGRAM AND HOW YOUNG PEOPLE ARE FARING?

The latest national and state data on youth in foster care underscores the urgent need for Congress to intervene.

- States report information to the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) for youth ages 17 and every three years thereafter. For more information about NYTD, see www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/research-data-technology/reporting-systems/nytd
- For a recent state-by-state analysis of youth experiences and outcomes, see the Annie E. Casey Foundation report at www.aecf.org/resources/fostering-youth-transitions-2023
- In 2018, HHS issued a report (www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/planning-next-generation-evaluation-agenda-john-h-chafee-foster-care-independence) on the “state of the field” related to independent living services for youth aging out of care.
- In 2021, ACF launched a new study (Chafee Strengthening Outcomes for Transition to Adulthood, found at www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/project/chafee-strengthening-outcomes-transition-adulthood) to test promising practices in programs serving transition age youth. The project will examine policy-relevant issues for the population of youth served by the Chafee program, including an exploration of how young people gain access to information about available services.



Visit journeytosuccess.org/stories to view our campaign's Journey Stories, a series of three-minute videos featuring young adults sharing their foster care insights and experiences.

ACCESS Journey to Success policy recommendations and advocacy tools at journeytosuccess.org.

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