



**House Concurrent Resolution 168 and
House Resolution 171
Report Submitted to the
House Committee on Health and Welfare
and the Senate Committee on Health and
Welfare**

February 2016

HCR 168 & HR 171

HCR 168 passed in the regular session of the 2015 legislature established the Task Force on Youth Aging Out of Foster Care. The purpose of the task force was to study and explore the public policy and financing options for programs and services that could assist youth aging out of foster care to achieve successful independence once they reach the age of majority.

HR 171 passed in the regular session of the 2015 legislative session. The language supported the work and intent of HCR 168 but desired the Task Force to also consider the potential for homelessness of this at-risk population.

Initiation of the Study

In response to HCR 168 & HR 171 the Department of Children and Family Services was charged with chairing the task force and initiated meetings beginning August 2015. The task force was comprised of the following members as designated in the resolution:

1. Secretary of the Department of Children and Family Services or his designee – Kaaren Hebert, Child Welfare Policy Advisor
2. Secretary of the Department of Health and Hospitals or his designee – Tiffany Howard
3. President of the Juvenile Judges Association or his designee – Judge Paul Young, Caddo Juvenile Court
4. Member of the Louisiana Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) Association – Joy Bruce
5. Executive Director of the Louisiana Association of Children and Family Agencies or his designee – Laura Jensen
6. Executive Director of the National Association of Social Workers, Louisiana Chapter, or his designee – Carmen Weisner, Executive Director
7. One member appointed by the Board of Directors of Louisiana Progress – Dylan Waguespack
8. One Representative of the Louisiana Conference of Catholic Bishops – Robert Tasman
9. President of LouisianaChildren.org or his designee – Kathleen Richey
10. Executive Director of the Louisiana Foster and Adoptive Parent Association or his designee – Peggy Kirby, Executive Director
11. Executive Director of HP Serve or his designee – Jennifer Vidrine
12. Executive Director of Covenant House, New Orleans or his designee – James Kelly, Executive Director
13. Executive Director of the Louisiana Workforce Commission or his designee – Bryan Moore
14. State Superintendent of education or his designee – Dianna Keller
15. President of the Louisiana Community and Technical College System or his designee – Stephanie Ercolini
16. President of the Louisiana Board of Regents or his designee – Claire Norris
17. Representative from the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program Independent Living Provider Coalition – Angie Thomas

18. Executive Director of the Louisiana Housing Corporation or his designee – Nicole Sweazey, Executive Director
19. And 20. – 2 Former foster youth who have aged out of the foster care system – Sonya Brown, Jarvis Spearman

Meetings of Task Force

Charged with convening by August 15, 2015, the task force convened the first meeting on August 5, 2015. In order to address the urgency and subject matter of the resolutions, by vote of the members, a bi-weekly meeting schedule was planned. As of the date of this report, task force meetings have been held on the following dates:

August 18, 2015
September 1, 2015
September 15, 2015
September 29, 2015
October 20, 2015
October 27, 2015
November 10, 2015
December 1, 2015
December 7, 2015*
December 15, 2015
January 5, 2016
January 19, 2016
February 2, 2016

*On December 7, 2015, the Task Force on Youth Aging Out of Foster Care sponsored a training by Mark Kroner, national speaker and provider of transition services for youth aging out of foster care. Participating were approximately 225 stakeholders from various disciplines including the legislature, legal community, educators, social services, private agencies, independent living providers, mental health providers, social workers, and foster and adoptive parents. Mr. Kroner also provided consultation to the task force to guide the work of the group.

All task force meetings to date have seen high levels of attendance and participation not only by designated task force members, but also by a varied and diverse stakeholder population.

Current Status

Target Population

The task force is focusing on youth who have or who are likely to “age out of foster care.” These are youth in foster care for whom a permanent family has not been secured when they exit foster care upon reaching age 18. The past three years have seen a decline in the average annual number of children aging out of foster care compared to prior years. For SFYs 2010 – 2012, an average of 237 youth aged out of foster care annually. SFYs 2013 – 2015 saw an average of 184 youth exiting at age 18 annually. The first six months of SFY16 report 86 youth exited foster care at age 18, which is slightly below the average of the 3 previous years.

LA Youth Exiting From Foster Care at 18

SFY 2010	SFY 2011	SFY 2012	SFY 2013	SFY 2014	SFY 2015	7/1/15- 12/31/15
248	229	233	195	162	181	86

SFY 2015 data reflects a wide range in the number of youth exiting out of foster care at age 18 across the state; however, all regions have some children exiting as reflected in the chart below.

LA Youth Exiting Foster Care at Age 18 By Region SFY 15

Region	#
ALEXANDRIA	28
BATON_ROUGE	18
COVINGTON	35
LAFAYETTE	28
LAKE_CHARLES	9
MONROE	7
ORLEANS	26
SHREVEPORT	22
THIBODAUX	8
TOTAL	181

There has been significant emphasis on improving permanency outcomes for youth in foster care over the past three years within the department and as such, the reduction in the number of youth attaining age 18 while still in foster care reflects those efforts. It is recognized that securing a safe and permanent family for youth in foster care is a more desirous outcome than having any youth age out of foster care without a permanent family or connection; however, in the absence of being able to assure that each and every child in

the foster care system will be guaranteed to exit foster care to a permanent placement, the task force must focus on those youth who will transition out of foster care at age 18 and into our communities.

It is recognized that state and national data regarding this population of youth is critical in guiding the work of the task force. Data is needed regarding the target population, the services and programs available to serve the youth, and the success of the various support programs across communities and states, etc . Some state level data, as well as national data, has been obtained; however, the task force recognizes the need to obtain additional data to guide their work and ensure the recommendations are appropriate for the youth being served here in Louisiana.

Support Services

In prior years, some support services were available to these youth through a program developed within DCFS called the Young Adult Program. This voluntary program was available to youth exiting foster care at 18 and for whom permanency had not been achieved. For youth who voluntarily participated, they were required to remain in school or a job training program and were provided a monthly financial subsidy to assist with room and board, transportation support, and some employment or school related supplies. They were allowed to participate in the program to age 21, allowing them to contract with their foster care parent to remain in their home while participating in the program. Additionally, each youth retained an agency case worker to assist them. Funding for the Young Adult Program was supported through federal Social Services Block Grant funds and/or state general funds. Medicaid funding also provided medical coverage for these youth.

In 2014, the Young Adult Program was eliminated due to budgetary constraints and replaced with a more limited program, the Transition Stipend Program. This program provides financial assistance for monthly room and board up to age 19 for youth who, at age 18, had not yet graduated high school but are on schedule to graduate by their 19th birthday. Case management services are provided through federally funded contract providers located across the state. Additionally, the educational supports through federal voucher, grant, and stipend programs remain available to all youth who have exited care at age 18. Medical coverage is available thru the Medicaid program, to all foster youth who have aged out of care to age 26, without any other eligibility criteria. The educational and employment supply supports previously included in the Young Adult Program available on a limited basis to some qualifying youth as part of the federal educational grants. Transportation services are no longer available.

The Young Adult Program served between 332 youth in 2008 to 153 youth in 2013. The length of time youth remained in the voluntary program averaged less than one year. Since 2014 and the termination of the Young Adult Program, the number of youth aging out of foster care has decreased on a fairly consistent basis. The number and percentage of aging out youth who are participating in the current service program is significantly less

than in the previous program, primarily due to the limited eligibility requirement to age 19. In SFY 2015 only 34 youth enrolled or were eligible for participation. That being said, it is also necessary to acknowledge that the rates of participation of youth in both the previous Young Adult Program and currently in the Transition Program have never achieved the desired levels.

Encouraging youth to remain engaged in a system they perceive as very structured and involving case managers, court systems, non-related caregivers, etc. has admittedly been a challenge to the department and private agencies attempting to serve them. It will be necessary for the task force to develop expectations that service delivery models support program enrollment, participation, and successful outcomes for a greater number of youth aging out of foster care. The system must also recognize that these youth, at their developmental stage, can have some slippage in their compliance with elements of their individualized plan and make accommodations to support and encourage their success.

Areas of Focus

As outlined in HCR 168 and HR 171, several key areas of focus have guided the work of the task force. These measures have been identified as the key indicators to assess the successful transition into adulthood for youth who have aged out of foster care. These measures are widely utilized across the nation and for which data is more readily available from other states. National data provided for each measure reflects the results of surveyed youth who aged out of foster care in Louisiana in 2011..

Outcome Measures

Financial Self Sufficiency – focuses on the skills possessed by youth which are necessary to afford them the opportunity to enter the labor market and also their ability to access financial resources to assist them in meeting their everyday living expenses.

- 26% of Louisiana youth surveyed reported at current part or full time employment or training program.

Educational Attainment – focuses on the attainment of a high school degree as the minimal requirement necessary toward self-sufficiency. This outcome also serves as a critical prerequisite for more advanced educational or training opportunities.

- 81% of Louisiana youth surveyed reported being enrolled and attending school;
- 7% had completed high school.

Connections with Adults - recognizes that in order for youth to successfully transition into adulthood, it is critical that they have positive, consistent, and lasting relationships with at least one adult in their life.

- 94% of Louisiana youth surveyed reported having a positive connection with an adult.

Homelessness among Former Foster Youth – access to permanent and adequate housing is also a key prerequisite to minimizing other negative outcomes as well as to serving as a key safety support.

- 6% of Louisiana youth surveyed in 2011, reported being homeless at some point in time.

There has been an increase noted by emergency shelters, service providers, and programs across the state in the number of former foster youth in need of short and long term housing. In order to more accurately capture the scope of the homelessness issue for youth, the Louisiana Housing Corporation task force member was able to provide great assistance in this area.

Annually, homeless programs across the state conduct point in time surveys of all individuals who are homeless on that date. This year the point in time survey was conducted on January 25, 2016. For the first time, the survey included questions related to the prevalence of a foster care history among the homeless population. The areas surveyed included:

1. Determining if the homeless individual had any history with the foster care system; if so,
2. At what age did they exit the foster care system; and
3. To what type of setting did they exit. (Family , shelter, relative, etc.)

It is anticipated that once compiled, this data will provide us with the most current information on the impact of foster care on homelessness in Louisiana.

High Risk Behaviors– three key behaviors have been identified as negatively impacting former foster youths’ successful transition into adulthood. These three high risk behaviors include: substance abuse, incarceration, and becoming parents as teens or young adults.

- 22% reported a substance abuse referral;
- 31% reported having been incarcerated;
- 5% reported having children.

Access to Health Insurance – assuring that youth receive prevention and treatment services is critical to good health, which is a pre-cursor for all other outcomes as well. 93% of Louisiana youth surveyed reported having Medicaid coverage and 2% reported having some other type of health insurance.

Core Principles

In addition to identifying the outcomes to be utilized in measuring the success of youth transitioning out of foster care, the task force has identified the core principles on which the work of the task force is being guided. These principles include:

The Whole Child Welfare System Must Own The Program.

Recognition that providing quality and appropriate services to provide youth transitioning from foster care the opportunities to be successful involves multiple institutions, organizations, and groups that are vested with this special population. These entities should combine their efforts and collaborate to achieve greater outcomes.

Youth Do Not Find Permanency Without Safe and Secure Housing.

Safe and secure housing is critical to ensuring positive permanency outcomes for youth transitioning from foster care.

Life Skills Training is Necessary and Unique for Children in Foster Care and Should be Formal and Informal, Group and Individual, Flexible to Allow Individualization and Mistakes.

Children in foster care have unique life experiences and life skills need to recognize their real world experiences.

Permanency is Defined Differently For and By Each Child

Permanency options for youth in foster care may comprise various individuals including the child's family (biological, legal, or fictive), community, friends, etc. and should be youth defined and include multiple options, rather than one identified resource.

Support Services Must Transition Youth To Self-Sufficiency In A Balanced, Individualized Manner.

Support service plans must be developed and implemented with an understanding that some youth will need continued services for life recognizing that mistakes are a part of the process and should be viewed as learning opportunities.

The above guiding principles are recognized as essential components to decision making regarding a comprehensive and quality youth transitioning service delivery system.

Accomplishments To Date

The various task force members have been able to provide qualitative data and other information regarding youth who have aged out of foster care, the services and supports available in communities to achieve the above outcomes; services needed; and supports currently unavailable. During the course of the work of the task force, barriers and impediments to success for youth who have aged out of foster care were identified. Through the active engagement of the task force members, three barriers were identified and, once brought to light, quickly resolved. These improvements included:

- 1) Federal regulations require individuals enrolled in the Former Foster Care program be otherwise ineligible for coverage in all other Medicaid groups. Therefore, many individuals aging out of foster care are enrolled in LaCHIP/Champ Medicaid programs but were not being reviewed for eligibility in the former foster care program when they lost eligibility in those programs.

Accomplishment: Training was developed for educating Medicaid eligibility staff on properly identifying and enrolling former foster children in the Former Foster Care program.

- 2) Youth, foster parents, and other stakeholders reported barriers for foster youth attempting to obtain a driver's license. A specific requirement documenting proof of insurance for the youth was identified as the issue.

Accomplishment: Through immediate collaboration with office of motor vehicles, training and policy clarification was enacted and issue resolved removing insurance requirement.

- 3) Lack of reliable and current data and information on the prevalence of foster care among the homeless population was seen as a barrier in developing necessary and comprehensive plans and supports for youth.

Accomplishment: Representatives from the Housing Corporation introduced three questions in the Homeless Point In Time Survey specific to foster care experience of current homeless individuals. The survey was administered statewide on January 25, 2016 and will provide valuable, current data on the prevalence of foster care involvement in the homeless population.

Recommendations

While the task force has made significant progress during the past several months, it has been determined that additional time is needed to thoroughly identify and address the issues, needs and effective solutions for this vulnerable population. Although data has suggested that fewer youth have been exiting foster care at age 18, a study of the foster care population shows that most of those youth are entering foster care in their mid to late teens. This presents unique challenges in trying to develop appropriate interventions not only to address the reasons the youth entered foster care, but also to identify and implement appropriate strategies and services for a successful transition from foster care.

As previously mentioned, the task force is awaiting the data from the Louisiana Homeless Point In Time Survey conducted on January 25, 2016. The results of this survey will provide essential information in guiding more comprehensive recommendations on the issue of homelessness for former foster youth.

Additionally, with recent administration changes, the task force will seek to ensure the continued participation of current department representatives or work with new department administrators to identify new participants. It should be noted that the continued support for these youth was one of the recommendations of the transition team for DCFS on behalf of Governor John Bel Edwards.

The task force is hereby recommending continuation of this study for an additional year.