

MORE THAN WORDS

2024 ISSUE BRIEF: CHILD WELFARE CLIFF



END THE CYCLE OF HOMELESSNESS AND TRAUMA FOR YOUTH AGING OUT OF STATE CARE

THE PROBLEM WITH THE STATUS QUO

The Department of Children and Families (DCF) is no longer legally obligated to support youth in their custody past the age of 18. While youth may receive support to age 22, they must “opt in” and be “compliant” for continued support, and few do. Regardless of transition age, federal, state, DCF, court law and policy all specify the requirement for a thoughtful transition planning process, but this is not happening consistently. Exiting youth into homelessness is a form of abuse and neglect, and the Commonwealth, the legal guardian of these young people, is complicit.

FAILURE POINTS INCLUDE

- Youth often pick up their first charges, becoming criminalized, due to incidents in DCF residential placements. DCF is then quick to discharge them, which results in pulling back resources when they are most in need.
- Children and Family Law (CAFL) attorneys at the Committee for Public Counsel Services (CPCS) are supposed to ensure appropriate services and care from DCF but are not adequately trained or held accountable to represent transition aged young people. Many youth don't even know their lawyer.
- As youth lack adequate representation in court, Juvenile court judges often rubber stamp case closures without requiring that the CAFL attorney and youth be present to ensure there is a transition plan. Once youth are 18, DCF closes a case without even first going to court.
- There are not enough developmentally appropriate housing options for young adults in DCF or once they exit. While there are federal resources including Title 4E dollars and Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) vouchers, that can create more housing options for this population, Massachusetts is not accessing enough.

50%

30-50% of the homeless youth population in Boston is coming right out of the child welfare system

70%

Over 70% of youth committed to DYS have current or recent child welfare involvement

3%

Only 50% of former foster youth graduate high school and only 2-3% earn a 4-year degree

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE

Massachusetts must meet the needs of older youth in DCF care and support thoughtful transitions to independence. We support an “opt-out” vs “opt-in” system mirroring other states like California that ensures continued support and accountability for youth past 18 and we also support creation of a specialized department for Transition Age Youth.

All DCF-involved youth should know their rights and access legal counsel, and transition plans should be crafted with youth input that includes plans and resources for housing, continued education, work and overall well-being. To address the complex challenge of housing, all parties – DCF, youth, providers, landlords, and housing authorities – need to maximize access of federal FYI (Foster Youth to Independence) vouchers.

HOW WE DO THIS AT MORE THAN WORDS

- We train and support all our young people involved with DCF to know their rights, contact their lawyers, request new representation if needed, advocate for adequate transition plans from DCF, and push-back on case closures that cause homelessness.
- We collaborate with the CPCS training division to support training for CAFL attorneys to better represent older youth in DCF care and engage with judges to educate and ensure they are holding others accountable for serving transition age youth before cases may be closed.
- We provide a continuum of housing support including a single room housing initiative which has become an alternative for some DCF-involved young people who have nowhere else to live.

RELATED LEGISLATION

- **SSI/SSDI Benefits (H157/S65)** – Prevents DCF from taking SSI/SSDI benefits from youth, ensures youth are accessing benefits when eligible, and ensures benefits available at time of transition out of DCF.
- **Foster Care Review Office (S158/S66)** – Creates an independent entity for oversight.
- **Foster Care Bill of Rights (H164/S68)** – Outlines basic rights to be afforded to children experiencing foster care.
- **UBI for Foster Care Youth (S144)** – Provides a monthly income of \$1,000 per month for 5 years to all youth after exiting the foster care system.

MORE
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242 E. Berkeley Street | Boston
56 Felton Street | Waltham
www.mtwyouth.org

More Than Words (MTW) is a social enterprise that empowers youth who are in the foster care system, court-involved, homeless, or out of school to take charge of their lives by taking charge of a business. Youth work 15-20 hrs/week in a \$4M used book and clothing business to learn skills, while also participating in programming to set goals and plan for success in education, work, and life.

The Power is Yours is a youth-led advocacy team at MTW focusing on issues in the child welfare and criminal justice systems.