



PARTNERSHIP FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD



HOMESPACE
WORKING TO CHANGE TWO GENERATIONS AT A TIME

NOVEMBER 2023 / POLICY BRIEF

Support a Forgotten Population: Funding Programs and Resources for Foster Care Alumni in Erie County

In Erie County, 30 to 50 youth age out of foster care each year and are expected to navigate the challenges of independence without a safety net. This leads to devastating and avoidable outcomes for these young people, with remarkable disparities and high rates of arrest and incarceration, homelessness, unemployment, and early pregnancy and parenting. Many young people live in very unsafe housing after they leave foster care, facing instability and sudden moves, health-harming conditions, or situations of abuse and trafficking.

Fostering Greatness, Partnership for the Public Good, and Homespace, together with partners in workforce development, affordable housing development, and youth support, have mapped the gaps in services offered to young people after they transition out of foster care. We have interviewed many service providers and young alumni of the foster system, as well as researched policies and programs in other counties and states that can improve outcomes for foster care alumni.

Currently, Erie County does not fund any programs exclusively serving youth after they age out of foster care. There are two program areas that *can* serve this population until age 21 or 23 only, but they also serve youth still in care:

- 1) Independent Living Services provide supervised and community-based housing support and life skills training to youth 17 ³/₄ - 21;
- 2) Youth Engagement Services are designed for individualized skill building (including academic support) for youth 14 - 23.

To address the severely negative outcomes foster care alumni face, new dedicated funding and programs are needed. As explored below, the public cost of not providing these services is much higher.

“We don’t have anybody to call, we don’t have safety nets, we don’t have support systems.”

**-Leah Angel Daniel,
Fostering Greatness,
Foster Care Alumni**



70% of youth in the juvenile justice system have been in the child welfare system.



1 out of every 4 youth in foster care will become homeless within 4 years of exiting the foster care system.



High school dropout rates are 3 times higher for foster youth than other low-income children.



Compared to white youth, Black teens are 24% more likely to “age out” without being adopted.

Foster care alumni should receive the resources, skills training, and assistance they need to live full and successful lives.

In its 2024 Budget, Erie County should add a new dedicated funding line of \$400,000 to support young people who recently aged out of the foster care system to provide:

- **Mentoring** that is focused on housing, mental health access, workforce development, financial literacy, educational attainment, and emergency problem-solving.
- Development of a **central hub of resources** for youth who are preparing to or have aged out of foster care to make finding support easier in crisis.
- Additional **engagement of older youth** for services, mitigating the negative impacts often seen in youth who age out of foster care.

The new budget line would fund an RFP for programs specifically designed to support and engage youth over 21 who have aged out of foster care. Currently, the Independent Living Services and Youth Engagement Services outlined above receive federal funds (passed through Erie County) with restrictions that cut off the age of service at 21 or 23. New funding from Erie County is needed to allow the flexibility to serve young people beyond these age limits.

In its 2024 budget, Erie County should add a new dedicated funding line of \$400,000 to support young people who recently aged out of foster care.

Young Alumni on their Transition from Foster Care

“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, when we age out, leaves us to become a statistic.” – Anonymous, Foster Care Alumni in Erie County

“They cut all ties when a kid turns 21, but we are 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. 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 my two-year old. Then I got kicked out of my apartment, couldn’t find a new house in time, and became homeless. I reached out to all the contacts I had from the system and everyone told me there was nothing they could do because I was too old.” – Oneshai Cooke, Foster Care Alumni in Erie County

What is the Public Cost of Aging out of Foster Care?

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.

Even with a smaller population, aging out of foster care without support leads to high public spending.

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.¹ Instead, early ongoing support to live a healthy, independent life would help foster care alumni thrive.

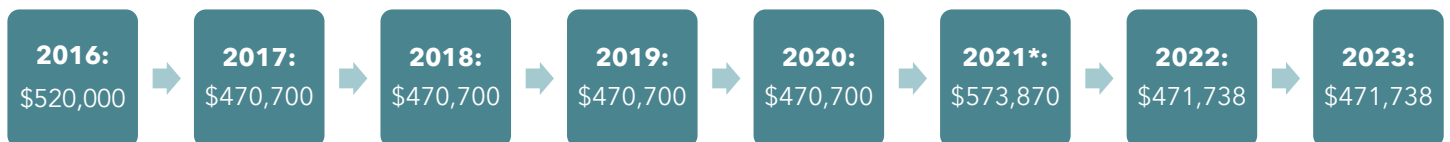
Improving the outcomes of these young people in any of the four measures most heavily correlated with youth aging out of foster care (high school graduation, early parenthood, homelessness, incarceration) would result in significant long-term savings for Erie County. **More importantly, the quality of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

¹ Based on estimates from The Annie E. Casey Foundation, "Future Savings: The Economic Potential of Successful Transitions from Foster Care to Adulthood," 2019.

Expanding the Options for Youth Aging Out

In Erie County, the budgets for programs that serve youth aging out of foster care have not been increased since 2016. The graphic below shows the approved budget amounts approved from 2016 to 2023 for the two programs that include services for foster transitions.

Erie County Approved Budget Amounts for Independent Living Services (age 17 ¾ - 21)



* Due to a one time COVID-relief increase, Independent Living programs received approximately \$100,000 in additional funds.

Erie County Approved Budget Amounts for Youth Engagement Services (age 14 - 23)



In addition, the capacity of available programs in Erie County is small, compared to the population of young people who have aged out in recent years and still need support.

Erie County should better support foster care alumni by funding additional services to support young adults after care, beyond our current capacity and federally imposed age limits.