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## Extended Foster Care in Washington State: *Preliminary Report*

Prior to 2006, youth in foster care were no longer eligible to remain in foster care when they turned 18, unless they were still enrolled in secondary education. In 2006, the legislature created a small pilot program that enabled youth reaching age 18 to remain in foster care until age 21 while enrolled in a postsecondary education program.

Since that time, there have been several changes to the eligibility criteria that considerably widened the pool of foster youth eligible for extended foster care (EFC).

The 2017 Washington State Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) to study the effects of receiving EFC.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, WSIPP was assigned to:

- 1) Review studies of EFC programs;
- 2) Review the use of EFC programs in other states and compare it to the program in Washington;
- 3) Compare outcomes for youth aging out of foster care who did and did not receive EFC; and
- 4) Evaluate any savings to state and local government as a consequence of EFC.

In this preliminary report, we describe the results of our review of the research on extended foster care, as well as the study plan for the remaining components of the assignment. The final report, due December 1, 2019, will include findings from our analyses.

### Summary

The 2017 Washington State Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) to conduct a study of a policy allowing eligible foster youth to receive foster care services between the ages of 18 and 21.

This preliminary report describes our findings from a review of the existing research on extended foster care (EFC) programs. This report also outlines the proposed approaches to:

- Compare EFC programs in other states;
- Evaluate the effects of EFC in Washington; and
- Estimate the potential cost savings of EFC.

The final report, due December 1, 2019, will include the results of these analyses.

Suggested citation: Miller, M. (2018). *Extended foster care in Washington State: Preliminary report*. (Document Number 18-11-3201). Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

<sup>1</sup> Substitute House Bill 1867, Chapter 265, Law of 2017.

## I. Background

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Historically, in Washington and elsewhere, youth in foster care on their 18<sup>th</sup> birthdays were no longer eligible to receive care unless they were completing high school or a vocational program. Each year in Washington, about 350 young people turn 18 while in foster care.<sup>2</sup>

Studies that follow the same youth over time have shown that compared to the general population of young people, youth who aged out of foster care are more likely to be involved in the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems.<sup>3</sup> Former foster youth are more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol and to have mental health disorders.<sup>4</sup> Further, they are less likely to graduate from high school, less likely to be employed as young adults,<sup>5</sup> and more likely to be homeless.<sup>6</sup>

Mindful of the research findings—in particular, the much lower educational attainment of former foster youth—the 2006 Washington State Legislature created

the Foster Care to 21 program, paid for entirely with state funds. The program allowed up to 50 youth per year in 2007 and 2008 to continue to receive foster care until age 21 if they were enrolled in postsecondary education. No youth were enrolled in the program in 2009,<sup>7</sup> although enrollment of 50 youth per year was allowed in 2010 and 2011.

### **WSIPP Legislative Assignment**

*The Washington state institute for public policy shall conduct a study measuring the outcomes for youth who have received extended foster care services pursuant to RCW 74.13.031(11). The study should include measurements of any savings to state and local governments. The study should compare the outcomes for youth who have received extended foster care services pursuant to RCW 74.13.031(11) with youth who aged out of foster care when they reached eighteen years of age. To the extent possible, the study should also include a comparison of other state extended foster care programs and a review of studies that have been completed measuring the outcomes of those programs.*

*The Washington state institute for public policy shall issue a report containing its preliminary findings to the legislature by December 1, 2018, and a final report by December 1, 2019.*

Substitute House Bill 1867, Sec. 3  
Laws of 2017

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<sup>2</sup> Cindy Ellingson, Performance Measures Lead, Department of Children, Youth and Family Services (personal communication, October 15, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Courtney, M., Dworsky, A., Brown, A., Cary, C., Love, K., & Vorhies, V. (2011). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 26*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago and Henzel, P.D., Mayfield, J., Soriano, A., Marshall, D., Felver, B.E.M. (2016). *Youth aging out of foster care: Risk and protective factors for criminal justice system involvement*. Olympia WA, DSHS Research and Data Analysis Division.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Courtney et al. (2011).

<sup>6</sup> Courtney, M.E., Piliavin, I., Grogan-Kaylor, A., & Nesmith, A. (2001). Foster youth transitions to adulthood: A longitudinal view of youth leaving care. *Child Welfare*, 80(6), 685-717; Courtney et al. (2011); Sharkova, I., Lucenko, B., & Fever, B.E.M. (2015). *Transition to adulthood: Foster youth at 19. An analysis of the 2013 national youth in transition database survey for Washington State*. Olympia, WA, DSHS Research and Data Analysis Division; and Henzel et al. (2016).

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<sup>7</sup> Doug Allison, Unit Supervisor/ Adolescent and Education Unit, Department of Children Youth and Families (personal communication, October 17, 2018).

In 2008, the United States Congress passed the Fostering Connections to Success and Adoptions Act of 2008 (“Fostering Connections Act”). One feature of the Act permitted states to use federal foster care (Title IV-E)<sup>8</sup> funds to provide extended foster care services to youth engaged in a broader array of activities.

Under the Fostering Connections Act, in addition to enrollment in secondary education, youth could receive EFC services if they met any of the following conditions:

- Enrolled in postsecondary education;
- Enrolled in a program to remove barriers to employment;
- Employed of at least 80 hours per month; or
- Incapable of participation in postsecondary education or employment because of a medical condition.

The state implemented the Fostering Connections Act in stages. In 2012, new enrollment in state-funded Foster Care to 21 was closed for youth in postsecondary education.<sup>9</sup> After that date, youth aging out of foster care and engaged in postsecondary education could receive EFC. There was no longer a limit on enrollment.

In 2013, eligibility was expanded to include youth participating in programs designed to promote employment or remove barriers to employment.<sup>10</sup> In 2014, the program was expanded to include youth working 80 or more hours per month,<sup>11</sup> and in 2015, the legislature further expanded the program to include youth with a documented medical condition that precluded engagement in other qualifying activities.

In 2017, the legislature modified the law to permit youth to enroll, leave, and later reenroll in the program once between the ages of 18 and 21.<sup>12</sup> The law was modified again in 2018 to permit reenrollment an unlimited number of times before age 21.<sup>13</sup>

As of June 2018, 648 young adults were enrolled in extended foster care—24% were residing in foster care settings and the remainder were served in supervised independent living.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The federal government provides a dollar-for-dollar match to pay for foster care for eligible families.

<sup>9</sup> [Engrossed Substitute House Bill 2592, Chapter 52, Laws of 2012.](#)

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<sup>10</sup> [Engrossed Second Substitute Senate Bill 5405, Chapter 332, Laws of 2013.](#) This bill became effective July 28, 2013 (except sections 8 and 10, which became effective December 1, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> [Engrossed House Bill 2335, Chapter 122, Laws of 2014.](#) This bill became effective March 1, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> [Substitute House Bill 1867, Chapter 256, Law of 2017.](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Substitute Senate Bill 6222, Chapter 34, Laws of 2018.](#)

<sup>14</sup> Sherrie Flores, EFC & Adolescent Support Program Manager, Department of Children, Youth and Families (personal communication, July 3, 2018).

## II. Review of the Research on Extended Foster Care

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To date, there is little research on the effects of extended foster care on later outcomes. What we know comes from several long-term studies.

The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (the “Midwest Study”), conducted by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago compared young adult outcomes for youth aging out of foster care in three states. This study was conducted in a series of five interviews beginning when foster youth were 17 years old in 2002-03. In Illinois, youth turning 18 could—and often did—remain in foster care.

In the other two states, Iowa and Wisconsin, extended foster care was not an option at that time. The effects of extended foster care were examined by comparing outcomes for foster youth in Illinois with those of youth in the other two states. Authors found that extending foster care to age 21 appeared to delay homelessness, although by age 23 or 24 there was no longer an effect.<sup>15</sup> By that time, regardless of participation in EFC, nearly 30% of all former foster youth had been homeless since leaving foster care. By age 26, the researchers found that while controlling for other important predictors of education outcomes, time in care past age 17 was associated with increased educational

attainment.<sup>16</sup> In a similar analysis, extended foster care was associated with a significantly lower rate of adult arrest.<sup>17</sup>

The Midwest Study did not account for other differences among the three states, such as social or educational policy, the characteristics of the state child welfare populations, and state socioeconomic context. Thus, the differences observed may be due to factors other than receipt of EFC.

A second, more recent study, also conducted by Chapin Hall, is underway in California. Like the Midwest Study, the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study is based on a series of biannual interviews beginning when foster youth were 17 in 2013. California had previously implemented extended foster care under provisions of the Fostering Connections Act in January 2012.

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<sup>15</sup> Dwarsky, A., & Courtney, M.E. (2010). *Assessing the impact of extending care beyond age 18 on homelessness: Emerging findings from the Midwest study*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

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<sup>16</sup> Courtney, M.E., & Hook, J.L. (2017). The potential educational benefits of extending foster care to young adults. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 72, 124-132.

<sup>17</sup> Lee, J.A.S., Courtney, M.E., & Tajima, E. (2014). Extended foster care support during the transition to adulthood: Effect on the risk of arrest. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 42, 34-42.

This study compared those receiving EFC will *all* youth who did not participate in the program, some of whom may not have been eligible under the California system. The study measured outcomes when the youth were 19 years old. Early analysis found that one year of EFC was associated with an increased likelihood of high school graduation and enrollment in college. Extended foster care was also associated with decreased criminal justice system involvement, homelessness, and receipt of need-based public aid.<sup>18</sup>

The third study evaluated the effect of EFC on a single outcome, homelessness. The authors used information from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being, a long-term study of a sample of children and youth who had been the alleged victims of child abuse or neglect. The study identified those who had turned 18 while in foster care and identified whether the state where they resided had implemented extended foster care. In this relatively small sample (123 youth), the authors found no effect of EFC on homelessness later in life.<sup>19</sup>

Two of the three studies show promise for positive, long-term outcomes. While most of the analyses used statistical controls for known characteristics, none controlled for program eligibility or state-level characteristics. Thus, based on these three studies, it is premature to make conclusions about the effects of EFC on young adult outcomes.

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<sup>18</sup> Courtney, M.E., & Okpych, N.J. (2017). *Memo from CalYOUTH: Early findings on the relationship between extended foster care and youths' outcomes at age 19*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

<sup>19</sup> Fowler, P.J., Marcal, K.E., Zhang, J., Day, O., & Landsverk, J. (2017). Homelessness and aging out of foster care: A national comparison of child welfare-involved adolescents. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 77, 27-33.

### III. Study Plan

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The remaining three components of WSIPP's study assignment require different research approaches. We outline the plan for each component in turn.

#### Compare EFC Programs in Other States

The Children's Bureau at the Administration of Children, Youth and Families (ACYF) published information on states that were providing extended foster care, as of February 2017.<sup>20</sup> We will survey other states not listed and visit websites of states that were providing EFC at the time of the ACYF publication. We will produce a table comparing eligibility requirements across the states.

#### Evaluate EFC Outcomes

To evaluate the impact of extended foster care, we must compare outcomes for youth who aged out of foster care and participated in extended foster care (our "treatment group") with similar youth who aged out of foster care but did not receive the program (our "comparison group").

Ideally, to evaluate the effect of extending foster care to age 21, we would be able to randomly assign youth meeting eligibility criteria to receive extended foster care or not. Random assignment would give us confidence that any differences between groups are due to receiving EFC, because, in theory, the only difference between the groups is random and not related to participant characteristics.

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<sup>20</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, & Administration on Children's, Youth and Families Children's Bureau. (2017). *Extension of foster care beyond age 18*.

When participation in a program is not random, evaluations can exhibit "selection bias," which occurs when individuals choose—or are chosen—to participate. In the case of EFC, there are several selection criteria: youth must be willing to participate in the required activities (education or work) and must agree to reside in a supervised setting.

Because this evaluation will be retrospective, we are unable to implement a random assignment design. Instead, we will address potential selection bias by using an advanced statistical technique called propensity score matching. This technique allows us to closely match treated and comparison youth on a set of key observable factors related to outcomes.

Propensity score matching allows us to approximate the comparability between groups that might have been achieved with random assignment.

However, we recognize that propensity score matching may not eliminate all differences in unobservable characteristics between the treatment and comparison groups that may affect outcomes. We will therefore conduct "sensitivity analyses," utilizing statistical approaches to test the robustness of our findings.

While the three studies cited earlier in this report identified *associations* between EFC and desirable adult outcomes in other states, this study will provide a stronger evidence of whether participation in the program *causes* improved outcomes for youth as they transition to adulthood. Further, it will study whether expanding eligibility from the early Foster Care to 21 program has improved outcomes for foster youth in Washington.

## Study Groups

To select our study groups, we will first identify all youth who had their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday while in state care between 2006 and 2018. Those who received EFC will form our treatment group.

Eligibility for the program has changed considerably since 2006. Because of this, we will create cohorts by matching EFC youth who turned 18 in each year to similar youth who also turned 18 in that year but did not receive the program despite appearing to have been eligible.

To the best of our ability, we will compare outcomes for those youth who received EFC with those who were eligible but did not receive EFC services.

## Defining Eligibility

We will narrow the comparison pool of youth not receiving EFC by restricting it to those who would have been eligible for EFC between the ages of 18 and 21. As discussed, because program eligibility criteria have changed since 2006, eligibility in the study will depend on the year of the youth's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Prior to 2013, before eligibility criteria were widened, we will limit the sample to youth engaged in secondary, postsecondary, or vocational education. Beginning in 2013, the pool will be expanded to include youth participating in eligible activities after their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Thus, the pool of comparison youth will be expanded each year between 2013 and 2015.

## Matching

We will identify a comparison group by matching EFC participants turning 18 in any given year to non-participants with an 18<sup>th</sup> birthday in the same year. We will use

propensity score matching to identify a group of comparison youth who are similar on a number of known characteristics including eligibility criteria, race, gender, age at first placement, time in out-of-home care, type of placement on the 18th birthday, and involvement in the juvenile justice system.

## Outcomes

All the outcomes for former foster youth will be derived from administrative data sets at the Department of Children Youth and Families, Department of Social and Health Services, Health Care Authority, Department of Health, and Washington State Education Research and Data Center.

At a minimum, the analysis will evaluate the effect of EFC on the following outcomes after age 18.

- Homelessness
- Criminal arrests
- Employment (hours and wages per quarter)
- Receipt of food stamps
- Receipt of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)
- Receipt of Aged, Blind, or Disabled (ABD) cash assistance
- Diagnosis of mental illness
- Use of public mental health services
- Diagnosis of substance abuse
- Use of public substance abuse treatment
- Teen birth
- Educational attainment
  - High school graduation/GED attainment
  - College enrollment
  - Degree attainment

## Estimate Potential Cost Savings of EFC

WSIPP has developed a benefit-cost model that estimates the lifetime monetary benefits and costs of many of the outcomes that will be measured in the study. We will use information from the Department of Children Youth and Families to develop a credible estimate of the cost of providing EFC in Washington. The results from our analyses will provide estimates of how much change we have observed in key outcomes as a result of EFC. We will combine these estimates with the monetary value of the outcomes to compute the overall benefits and costs (including potential cost savings) to participants, taxpayers, and others in Washington over time.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> For more information on the benefit-cost model, see WSIPP's documentation. Washington State Institute for Public Policy. (2017). *Benefit-cost technical documentation*. Olympia, WA: Author.



### III. Next Steps

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By December 2019, WSIPP will publish a final report that will include the analysis of the effect of EFC on outcomes in young adulthood. By virtue of the longitudinal nature of the data, those in the earliest cohort will be 30 years old.

Based on the effect of the program on outcomes, we will estimate the benefits and costs of extending foster care to age 21. The report will also contain a comparison of extended foster care programs in other states.

For further information, contact:  
Marna Miller at 360.664.9086, [marna.miller@wsipp.wa.gov](mailto:marna.miller@wsipp.wa.gov)

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### Washington State Institute for Public Policy

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