

OLDER YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

OVERVIEW

Older youth in foster care face a unique and urgent challenge: they must prepare for adulthood on a fixed timeline, often without the stable relationships, consistent guidance, and everyday experiences that most young people rely on. Many have spent years in care, moving between placements during the years when identity, confidence, and life skills are typically built. The transition out of foster care is one of the highest-risk periods in a young person's life: research consistently links aging out of care to elevated rates of homelessness, unemployment, and poverty.

Georgia's Independent Living Program (ILP) exists to address this gap, providing eligible youth ages 14 through 21 with services and opportunities across education, employment, health, life skills, and adult connections. CASA's role with older youth is to ensure they are enrolled in and benefiting from available services, that transition planning is timely and driven by the youth's own goals, and that no young person exits care without the documents, skills, and support network they need to succeed.

THE INDEPENDENT LIVING PROGRAM

Georgia's ILP provides eligible youth with services and opportunities to prepare for a successful transition to adulthood. Understanding what the ILP offers and who is eligible helps CASA ensure youth are connected to services and do not fall through the cracks.

ELIGIBILITY

- ILP is available to youth ages 14 through 21 who have been in DFCS custody for at least six months. The six months do not need to be consecutive, but they must include at least one day on or after the youth's 14th birthday.
- Youth ages 18 through 21 who consent to remain in foster care may continue receiving ILP services through the Extended Youth Support Services (EYSS) program. This is known as Extended Care Youth Services under the law.
- Youth who exit foster care at 18 may request to return to the EYSS program within six months of exiting, provided they meet eligibility criteria and are under age 21.
- Youth ages 18 through 21 who are not participating in EYSS may still be eligible for certain ILP services, including financial and educational supports.

WHAT ILP PROVIDES

ILP services are designed to support youth in reaching the following outcomes:

- **Educational attainment:** Support toward earning a high school diploma or GED and access to opportunities for post-secondary education and training
- **Employment:** Development of job-readiness skills and opportunities for financial self-sufficiency through employment and community service
- **Health care:** Assistance ensuring youth can meet their own physical and mental health needs, including access to health insurance
- **Adult connections:** Support in building and maintaining permanent social connections with responsible, caring adults
- **Life skills:** Training in budgeting, household management, meal preparation, and other practical skills for independent living
- **Financial supports:** Access to Individual Development Accounts (IDA), Education and Training Vouchers (ETV) for post-secondary education, and other financial assistance
- **Avoidance of high-risk behaviors:** Empowerment to make healthy, responsible decisions as members of their communities

WRITTEN TRANSITIONAL LIVING PLAN (WTLP)

- Every youth age 14 and older must have a Written Transitional Living Plan (WTLP) that is updated at least twice per year and developed with the youth's active participation.
- The WTLP should reflect the youth's goals, strengths, and specific plans for housing, education, employment, health, and support systems.
- The WTLP must be incorporated into the court's order. CASA should verify that the court's dispositional order reflects approval of the WTLP and raise concerns if it does not.
- A Transition Meeting must be held within the 90 days before the youth's 18th birthday to develop a detailed transition plan.

DOCUMENTS AND RECORDS AT EXIT

Every youth exiting foster care at age 18 or older must receive the following documents before leaving care:

- Birth certificate
- Social Security card
- State-issued photo ID or driver's license
- Medical and immunization records
- Consumer credit report
- Contact information for adult supporters and a list of resources for ongoing assistance



Understanding what the Independent Living Program offers and who is eligible helps CASA ensure youth are connected to services and do not fall through the cracks.

ADVOCACY BY AGE AND STAGE

YOUTH AGES 14 TO 16

These years are the foundation for everything that follows. Youth at this stage should be enrolled in ILP, so they may begin to understand their rights and options and build the skills and connections that will support them as they move toward independence.



PRACTICE POINTS

- Confirm the youth is enrolled in ILP services and connected with EmpowerMENT if interested.
- Verify that a Casey Life Skills Assessment (CLSA) has been completed and that results are being used to inform goals in the WTLP.
- Confirm the WTLP is in place, is updated at least twice per year, and includes the youth's voice and priorities.
- Ensure the youth is actively involved in both case planning and transition planning and that adult supporters are invited to participate.
- Begin conversations with the youth about their interests, goals, and what kind of future they want to build.

YOUTH AGES 16 TO 18

These are the highest-stakes years. Youth at this stage need concrete preparation for life after foster care, including post-secondary planning, life skills development, and financial readiness.



PRACTICE POINTS

Address all of the above points for youth ages 14 to 16, and in addition:

- Encourage high school diploma completion over a GED whenever possible, and ensure the youth has the support needed to stay on track.
- Explore post-secondary education and training options with the youth. Assess college readiness and connect the youth to college workshops, campus visits, financial aid assistance, and entrance exam preparation.
- Verify that life skills development is underway, including budgeting, household management, meal preparation, and resumé building.
- Confirm the youth is receiving assistance obtaining a driver's license or state-issued photo ID.
- Confirm the youth has received a copy of their consumer credit report and is receiving help interpreting and resolving any inaccuracies.
- Ensure the youth has opened both an Individual Development Account (IDA) to begin saving and take advantage of the cash match opportunity and a checking account.
- Advocate at every hearing for timely, concrete progress on transition planning and raise concerns if the WTLP is not being updated or implemented.
- Verify that a Transition Meeting is scheduled and completed within 90 days before the youth's 18th birthday and that the resulting transition plan is incorporated into the court's order.

YOUTH AGES 18 AND OLDER

When a youth turns 18, all orders connected to their dependency case expire, including the CASA Appointment Order. Those who have not achieved legal permanency may voluntarily re-enter or remain in foster care through age 21 through Extended Care Youth Services, sometimes referred to as Extended Youth Support Services (EYSS).

CASA can help the youth understand their options and access to available services and benefits and, if the youth opts into care and wishes, continue advocating for them through age 21.

- ▶ See the ***Extended Care Youth Services for Youth 18–21*** guide for more information on eligibility, transition planning, and CASA's role.

The youth may opt to remain in foster care without a CASA volunteer continuing as their advocate. Now a young adult, the youth is presumed to be able to advocate for their own best interests. The youth may wish to maintain contact with their CASA not through the volunteer's official capacity. The volunteer may stay connected, but they will no longer function as a Court Appointed Special Advocate and will no longer have the responsibilities and privileges granted to them through their court appointment order.

Whether a youth exits at 18 or remains in care through age 21, they need the same foundation — life skills, record documentation, financial tools, healthcare coverage, and a connection to adult support.



PRACTICE POINTS

- Confirm whether remaining in or returning to foster care through EYSS is appropriate and in the youth's best interests, and ensure the youth understands this option and how to access it.
- Verify the youth has an IDA and understands whether they are maximizing the cash match opportunity.
- Confirm the youth has applied for or received an Education and Training Voucher (ETV) if eligible and understands what it covers.
- Assess whether the youth has the life skills needed for independent living, and identify any gaps that still need to be addressed.
- Confirm the youth has health insurance and understands how to maintain coverage after exiting care.
- Verify that all required documents were provided at or before exit: birth certificate, Social Security card, state ID or driver's license, medical and immunization records, consumer credit report, and contact information for adult supporters and resources.
- If the youth is transitioning to an independent living arrangement, confirm the arrangement is safe, stable, and that the youth has a support network in place.
- Determine whether ILP services are still needed and whether any transition to adult protective services or other adult services has been addressed.
- Stay connected. Youth who have aged out of care are at heightened risk of homelessness, unemployment, and isolation. A CASA volunteer's continued presence and support can make a meaningful difference even after the case closes.

IDENTITY, BELONGING, AND WELL-BEING

Older youth in foster care are navigating the same developmental course as any adolescent — forming their identity, building relationships, and figuring out who they are and where they belong. For youth who have experienced instability, trauma, and loss, this path is harder and the stakes are higher. Advocates play an important role in affirming each youth's sense of self and ensuring they have the connections, safety, and support they need.

Research has shown that youth who identify as LGBTQ are overrepresented in the foster care system and face compounded risks, including higher rates of homelessness, mental health challenges, and experiences of discrimination and rejection. These youth need the same advocacy as any young person in care, delivered with the same commitment to their dignity, safety, and best interests. Advocating for a youth's well-being includes ensuring that their sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression are respected and appropriately considered.



PRACTICE POINTS

- Build a genuine relationship with the youth. Show consistent interest in their life, goals, fears, and what matters to them. For youth who have experienced repeated loss and instability, a trustworthy adult presence is by itself a meaningful intervention.
- Ask the youth who are the important people in their life and actively support those connections as found family. Relationships with peers, mentors, and caring adults outside the system create protective and lasting bonds.
- Identify any services and opportunities for social support that respect and affirm the youth's identity, including sexual orientation, gender identity, cultural background, and personal values.
- Promote access to supportive services and affirming environments by identifying what helps the child feel supported and if they have any concerns about how they are treated in their placement or at school.
- Ensure the youth's mental and physical health providers are affirming, competent, and offer appropriate guidance and access to information about available treatment and support options.
- Advocate for the youth's ability to express their identity, including choices about clothing, hairstyle, and personal space, and call attention to any discriminatory or disrespectful treatment by providers or individuals involved in the case. Advocate for placements that are affirming and respectful of the youth's identity.
- Consider whether the youth exhibits self-directed negative emotions or distress related to their identity and advocate for appropriate mental health supports.
- Help the youth develop their own voice. Support their ability to advocate for themselves, ask questions in meetings, and express their preferences and concerns to the court.
- Ensure the youth is connected to trusted adults who can provide ongoing support as they transition out of care and into adulthood.

ADVOCATING FOR DUALY ADJUDICATED YOUTH

CASA volunteers can provide vital support for youth involved in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Effective advocacy for crossover youth requires bridging both systems so the youth's needs are met with coordinated, compassionate services.



PRACTICE POINTS

- Help others recognize that delinquent behavior may stem from trauma, instability, unmet mental health needs, educational challenges, relationship issues, or family circumstances.
- Emphasize the youth's strengths and progress, not only problems, violations, or setbacks.
- Review the delinquency court order for probation conditions, sentence requirements, and rehabilitative services.
- Promote coordination across systems, and identify any court orders that create conflicting expectations or requirements.
- Protect confidentiality by avoiding disclosure of dependency case information to probation officers, law enforcement, or other professionals outside the child welfare case unless sharing is authorized and appropriate.
- Raise concerns about placements that may increase delinquency risk or disrupt the youth's progress.



Effective advocacy for crossover youth requires bridging both systems so the youth's needs are met with coordinated, compassionate services.

KEY PRACTICE NOTES

TRUST IS THE FOUNDATION

Older youth in foster care have often learned not to trust adults who say they will show up. Consistency, follow-through, and genuine curiosity about the youth's life are the foundation of effective advocacy at this stage.

THE YOUTH DRIVES THE PLAN

Transition planning should be driven by the youth's own goals and desires, not by what others think is realistic or appropriate. The WTLP should reflect what the youth actually wants in as much detail as they choose.

THE CLOCK MATTERS

Youth age out of care on a fixed timeline regardless of whether they are ready. Advocates must treat every hearing as an opportunity to assess progress, raise concerns, and push for timely action on transition planning.

EXTENDED FOSTER CARE IS AN OPTION, NOT A FAILURE

Remaining in care past age 18 through EYSS is a right and can significantly improve long-term outcomes. Ensure every youth understands this option before they exit care.



CASA

Court Appointed Special Advocates
FOR CHILDREN

GEORGIA