

EXTENDED CARE YOUTH SERVICES FOR YOUTH 18-21



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OVERVIEW

When a youth turns 18, all orders connected to their dependency case expire, and the youth is legally free to leave foster care. However, a youth who has not achieved legal permanency through reunification, adoption, or guardianship has the option to voluntarily re-enter or remain in foster care through age 21 by signing a Voluntary Placement Agreement for Extended Foster Care (VPA-EFC). This is known as Extended Care Youth Services (ECYS), sometimes referred to as Extended Youth Support Services (EYSS).

Extended foster care provides continued access to housing, healthcare, education supports, and a connection to DFCS during a period when many young adults are not yet ready to be fully independent. CASA's role is to help the youth understand their options, support whatever decision the youth makes, and, if the youth desires, continue advocating for them through age 21. The CASA volunteer is a trusted adult in the youth's life and is well positioned to help the youth reach their goals, build skills, and begin the journey towards self-advocacy.

ELIGIBILITY FOR EXTENDED FOSTER CARE

To enter or return to extended foster care, a youth must meet the following requirements:

- 1** The youth must have been in foster care for at least 6 months prior to turning 18 and remained in care until their 18th birthday without achieving legal permanency through reunification, adoption, or guardianship. The 6 months do not need to be consecutive.
 - ▶ **Exception:** A youth adopted from foster care at or after age 16 who experiences a dissolution of that adoption at or after age 18 is also eligible for extended foster care.
- 2** The youth must be between 18 and 21 years of age and sign a VPA-EFC with DFCS.
- 3** The youth must meet at least one of the following objective eligibility criteria:
 - ▶ Completing secondary education or a program leading to an equivalent credential
 - ▶ Enrolled in postsecondary or vocational education
 - ▶ Participating in a program or activity designed to promote or remove barriers to employment
 - ▶ Employed at least 120 hours per month
 - ▶ Employed at least 80 hours per month, if also engaged in one of the activities above or unable to work more due to a medical condition
 - ▶ Incapable of any of the above due to a medical condition

A youth should execute the VPA-EFC within 5 business days of their 18th birthday or may request to return to extended foster care if they previously opted out or were discharged. A youth may re-enter foster care up to two times. A youth within 12 months of turning 21 may not sign a VPA-EFC.

A youth may terminate their VPA-EFC and exit extended foster care at any time. Every 12 months, a DFCS case manager must redetermine the youth's eligibility. If DFCS determines a youth is no longer eligible, DFCS may terminate the agreement and must provide written or electronic notice to both the youth and the court. If the youth disagrees with the eligibility determination, encourage and facilitate the youth's communication with their attorney.



While remaining in foster care is ultimately the youth's decision, the CASA volunteer plays an important role in making sure the youth has the information they need to make it.

HELPING A YOUTH DECIDE: EXTENDED FOSTER CARE OR EXIT

Between ages 17 and 18, every youth in care faces a major decision — remain in foster care through Extended Care Youth Services or exit at 18. While this is ultimately the youth's decision, the CASA volunteer plays an important role in making sure the youth has the information they need to make it.

The CASA volunteer should approach this conversation as a facilitator, not necessarily pushing toward a particular outcome. The goal is to ensure the youth understands what extended foster care offers, what exiting entails, and how either path connects to their personal goals.



PRACTICE POINTS

- Begin this conversation well before the youth turns 18 and revisit it more than once.
- Ask open-ended questions that invite the youth to think through their own goals. *Have you thought about what you want to do when you turn 18? Have you considered staying in foster care until age 21? What are your goals, and what concerns do you have either way?*
- Highlight the practical benefits of extended foster care, including continued housing support, healthcare, and access to services, without pressuring the youth toward a particular choice. Help the youth understand that they will have more flexibility in care now than they did prior to turning 18.
- Ensure the youth understands that the decision is theirs and that CASA will support either direction the youth chooses.

IF A YOUTH DOES NOT ENTER OR REMAIN IN EXTENDED FOSTER CARE

A youth who declines extended foster care, exits before age 21, or is discharged is not without options.



PRACTICE POINTS

- Remind the youth they may request to return to extended foster care up to two times unless they are within 12 months of turning 21.
- If the youth was in care on their 18th birthday, confirm their health insurance coverage through Amerigroup Georgia Families 360 and that they understand how to maintain it.
- Ensure the youth understands they may still request limited post foster care assistance from DFCS, including:
 - ▶ Transitional Living Supportive Services — supportive services to help develop daily living skills and support the transition to self-sufficiency
 - ▶ Emergency Financial Assistance — emergency financial support for up to 90 days to prevent homelessness, provide life coaching, and stabilize living conditions
 - ▶ Post-Secondary Education Financial Support — funds to support completion of postsecondary education

- ▶ For all other exit considerations — IDA, ETV, identification documents, and adult supporters — see the *Youth Ages 18 and Older* section of the **Older Youth in Foster Care** guide.



A youth may request to return to extended foster care up to two times, unless they are within 12 months of turning 21.

CASA'S CONTINUED APPOINTMENT

If a youth enters or remains in ECYS, a CASA volunteer's continued involvement is the youth's choice, independent of whether their attorney remains on the case. If the youth wants CASA to continue serving and the court is amenable, a new CASA Appointment Order must be executed.

Most of CASA's role stays the same — continuing to access records, maintaining ongoing communication with providers, visiting the youth, and making recommendations. The core restrictions also remain — CASA still cannot transport the youth, be alone with the youth, or provide legal or therapeutic advice.

If the youth wishes to remain connected with their CASA volunteer without their continued appointment as an advocate, the volunteer may do so but will no longer have the responsibilities and privileges outlined in their court order.



PRACTICE POINTS

- Ask the youth directly whether they want CASA to remain involved if they enter or remain in extended foster care.
- If the youth wants the appointment to continue, work with CASA staff to obtain a new Appointment Order.
- Walk the youth through what will stay the same and what will be different under the new appointment, so they can make an informed choice.

TRANSITION PLANNING

DFCS must develop a personalized transition plan with the youth within 30 days of signing the VPA-EFC and a final transition plan within 90 days before the youth exits Extended Foster Care. Both should be as detailed as the youth elects and should address housing, health insurance, education, local mentors and continuing support services, workforce and employment supports, and the option to execute a healthcare power of attorney or proxy.¹



PRACTICE POINTS

- Participate in the development of the transition plan with the DFCS case manager, youth, and other supportive adults.
- Ensure the transition plan addresses common areas of focus, including education, employment, housing, adult and peer relationships, spiritual and cultural connections, healthy lifestyle choices, and transportation.
- Maintain ongoing awareness of the transition plan and the youth's progress toward its goals, not just at the time it's created.
- Advocate for the youth's access to relevant opportunities and services, such as tutoring, college workshops and tours, GED support, financial aid applications, money management and budgeting support, banking, career preparation, and housing searches.

¹ See DFCS Policy 13.04 Transition From Foster Care for the full Practice Guidance for Transition Planning.

DFCS REPORTING AND COURT REVIEW

Understanding what DFCS must report and when the court must review the case helps CASA verify the process is on track and identify any gaps. The court review process looks different in ECYS.

DFCS'S INITIAL WRITTEN REPORT

No later than 120 days after the VPA-EFC is signed, DFCS must file a written report with the court containing:

- The youth's name, date of birth, race, gender, and current address
- Facts supporting the youth's eligibility for ECYS and an explanation of why ECYS is in the youth's best interests
- A copy of the signed VPA-EFC
- A plan for the youth's transition to independent living or another planned permanent adult living arrangement, appropriate to the youth's age and independence
- Any information the youth wants the court to consider
- Any other information DFCS wants the court to consider

DFCS'S ONGOING REPORTS

At least 5 days before any hearing, DFCS must submit a report recommending a plan for transition to independent living or another permanent arrangement, including the youth's name, address, telephone number, the date the youth entered ECYS, and current placement and services.

COURT REVIEW TIMELINE

- Within 30 days of the initial written report being filed, the court must hold a review hearing to determine whether ECYS is in the youth's best interests and must approve or reject DFCS's transition plan.
- No later than 12 months after the youth is considered to have entered foster care (60 days after signing the VPA-EFC), the court must hold a hearing and make findings of fact regarding whether the services and supports provided are developmentally appropriate, DFCS has made reasonable efforts to finalize the youth's transition plan, and the youth is making progress toward independence. The court must issue an order adopting or rejecting any updated transition plan.
- So long as the youth remains eligible for and in ECYS, the court must hold periodic review hearings with written findings of fact no later than every 12 months thereafter.

The court should appoint an attorney for the youth at all stages with the youth's consent. Typically, the child's same attorney remains on the case. However, the youth must be informed of their right to legal representation before any hearing and given the opportunity to obtain an attorney of their choice, request a court-appointed attorney, or waive the right to an attorney.

ADVOCACY THROUGHOUT EXTENDED FOSTER CARE

CASA REPORTS

In addition to the standard report content described on the ***At Every Hearing*** guide, reports for youth in extended foster care should address continued ECYS eligibility, transition plan progress, ILP participation and life skills development, and identified adult supporters such as mentors, family members, or fictive kin.



PRACTICE POINTS

- Request a copy of the youth's VPA-EFC and review it to understand the youth's contractual requirements with DFCS.
- Maintain ongoing awareness of the youth's continued eligibility under DFCS's objective criteria.
- Approach advocacy by encouraging the youth's independence, identifying their strengths and areas for growth, and helping them connect to needed resources. Assist the youth with gaining the confidence to begin self-advocating.
- Communicate regularly with the youth, whether through a standing visitation schedule or simply checking in, so the youth knows CASA remains readily available.



Whether CASA remains involved during extended foster care is entirely the youth's choice.

KEY PRACTICE NOTES

CASA'S ROLE IS OPTIONAL

Whether CASA remains involved during extended foster care is entirely the youth's choice even if their attorney remains on the case. Always ask directly rather than assuming the youth wants CASA to continue advocating.

EXTENDED FOSTER CARE IS NOT ALL-OR-NOTHING

A youth can exit and return up to two times before age 21 (as long as they are not within 12 months of turning 21). If a youth exits and later wants to return, help them understand this is still an option.

THE 60-DAY RULE MATTERS FOR TIMELINES

Because a youth in ECYS is considered to have entered foster care 60 days after signing the VPA-EFC, this date, not the signing date itself, is what determines when the 12-month review hearing must occur. Track this date carefully.



CASA

Court Appointed Special Advocates
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