

# Transition Truths: Foster Care

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The foster care system provides stable housing and safe spaces for children and youth who are experiencing homelessness, abuse, or neglect. This system is sometimes also called child welfare. In 2015, about 400,000 children were receiving services in this system at any given time.

## How this System Works

This system consists of the people, places, policies, and programs that work together to provide safe and stable out-of-home care for children until a permanent arrangement can be made. Sometimes children are safely returned to their original homes and families, but sometimes there is a need to place them permanently with adoptive families or other planned arrangements that provide assistance to help current and former foster care youth achieve self-sufficiency.

This system weaves together education, employment, financial management, housing, emotional support, and assured connections to caring adults, especially for older youth in foster care as well as youth who have aged out of foster care. As such, the foster care system is one that overlaps and works with many others.

## People and Places

This system includes people like children, foster parents, social workers, service providers, judges, birth parents, adoptive parents, and policymakers who make decisions about family reunification and adoption. They do their work in places like foster homes, group homes, family courts, and child protection agencies. At the federal level, the [Administration for Children and Families](#) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has a specific focus on funding foster care programs in states.

## Policies and Programs

[Title IV Part-E of the Social Security Act](#) covers federal funding to states for foster care programs. States can apply for funding to cover the cost of housing, education, training, and other activities related to caring for children. This act also provides for the [John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program](#), which supports current and former foster youth in transitioning successfully out of care.

The [Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008](#) makes a number of changes to the child welfare system concerning these payments to states for foster care and adoption assistance.

The [Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997](#) makes clear that the health and safety of children must be the primary concern of child welfare agencies. That is why these agencies are careful not to assume it is ideal to reunite children with biological family members, because in some cases it may not be the best option for the children.

The [Foster Care Independence Act of 1999](#) focuses on helping youth transition from foster care. For example, youth in foster care at age 18 are eligible for Medicaid health insurance, a program covered in the Healthcare system section of this tool. This act also doubles federal funding for the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program discussed above.

## Eligibility

Youth who enter the foster care system have all experienced severe abuse and/or neglect due to a crisis in parenting. Family stress factors such as poverty, substance abuse, incarceration, mental illness, death, and homelessness have forced the state to intervene in the lives of families to protect children from abusive and neglectful situations. State courts make decisions regarding what is in the “best interest of the child” to determine whether a child or youth will be removed from their family and placed into the foster care system.

All youth can be in the foster care system from birth until age 18. As of 2010, states can decide whether or not to allow youth to remain in the foster care system until age 21. Because being in foster care involves some federal funding through the Social Security Act, getting funding from other parts of this act is complicated. The section of this tool that deals with the Social Security system explains a program called Supplemental Security Income (SSI), which provides needed monetary assistance to older Americans or people with disabilities. Children in foster care are still technically [eligible](#) for this program because the money they receive is not earned income at a job. However, the money they receive will still affect the amount of SSI benefits they get.