



TEXAS
Department of Family
and Protective Services

Plan to Standardize the Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) Curriculum

Senate Bill 1758

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Plan to Standardize the Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) Curriculum

Introduction

Pursuant to Senate Bill 1758 (SB1758), 85th Legislative Regular Session, 2017, the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) is directed, in coordination with stakeholders, to develop a plan to standardize the curriculum for the Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) program that ensures that youth 14 years of age or older enrolled in the program receive relevant and age appropriate information and training.

Description of Services

Transitional Living Services

Transitional Living Services (TLS) include a broad array of services and supports that help youth and young adults currently or formerly in foster care with their successful transition to adult living. Transitional Living Services are multipurpose and are available to youth ages 14-23. Transitional Living Services include: the Preparation for Adult Living program (PAL), which includes Individual Case Management and Aftercare Services; Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program; Extended Foster Care program (including Supervised Independent Living Housing); medical benefits; Tuition Fee Waiver; and other related services and resources.

Preparation for Adult Living Services (PAL)

One component of Transitional Living Services is the PAL program. PAL services include a life skills assessment, life skills training, transitional living allowance, aftercare room and board, individual case management services, and other financial assistance, as funding is available.

Eligible youth, beginning at age 14 up to age 21, receive services and benefits that help youth achieve self-sufficiency and become productive adults.

The PAL Life Skills Training Curriculum Outline covers six core elements (five hours classroom training on each core element and two experiential activities per class):

1. Health and Safety;
2. Housing and Transportation;
3. Job Readiness;
4. Financial Management;
5. Life Decisions and Responsibilities; and
6. Personal and Social Relationships.

At the beginning of the class, the Casey Life Skills Assessment (CLSA) is completed by youth and their caregiver to assess the youth's strengths and needs. At the conclusion of the classes, a

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Knowledge Assessment that is comprised of true/false and multiple choice questions is provided to the youth. The Knowledge Assessment is utilized to determine what information youth gained from the classes and evaluate the PAL contractor's effort at providing the complete life skills curriculum to the youth.

When classes are not available or attendance is not practical, youth may complete the training through one of other available methods including:

- Independent study guide (on line or paper form); or
- Through the school as verified through their Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Admission, Review and Dismissal (ARD) documentation.

In addition to classroom training, caregivers are required to provide experiential learning opportunities starting at age 14 to encourage and support the youth's practical application of life skills.

DFPS PAL staff are responsible for reviewing and approving the regional PAL contractor's curriculum prior to use or when replacing approved curriculum content to ensure materials are uniform, current, and relevant. Additionally, as part of the quality monitoring process, DFPS PAL staff observe at least one PAL class per trainer per year and document their observations and share their findings with the DFPS regional contract manager.

The DFPS PAL Life Skills and Assessment Services contract requires the contractor to provide experiential activities, which include real life activities and opportunities that incorporate the following:

1. Physical and mental challenges to support the six core elements in the curriculum outline;
2. Actual physical activities such as providing youth with experience in completing applications for jobs, housing, and scholarships; and
3. Field trips to include (but not limited to) price comparison shopping at a grocery store, visiting a commercial kitchen and participating in preparation of a healthy meal, tours to Workforce Center/apartments/colleges and ride on a bus.

Additionally, youth are provided with a list of reinforcement homework activities per core element and are asked to complete a total of 2 homework activities per core element. This is a total of 12 class hours outside of PAL Life Skills Training class hours -which promotes competency in real life challenges that youth in transition may encounter. Examples of homework activities include, but are not limited to:

- Plan, shop for, and prepare a nutritious meal;
- Make a doctor or dentist appointment;

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- Select an apartment from an advertisement and prepare a monthly budget that includes monthly expenses;
- Plan a bus trip and take it;
- Obtain an application for a real job and complete it;
- Research identity and credit theft;
- Tour the local workforce center or call to find out what services are available; and
- Have a discussion with someone of a different culture or ethnicity and find out what is unique to him or her.

Coordination with Stakeholders

In January of 2018, DFPS formed a stakeholder workgroup comprised of 20 members¹ that specialize in providing services to and/or work with youth and young adults in the foster care system and alumni. The stakeholder workgroup gathered information to inform the recommendations in this report in a variety of ways, including:

- Soliciting the input of youth in foster care and alumni through individual and group discussions;
- Conducting informal youth and alumni surveys;
- Researching independent living programs in others states; and
- Reviewing survey results provided by the Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS). This survey included feedback from some DFPS regional PAL staff, PAL and Extended Foster Care contractors, and others (such as Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children) serving youth and young adults in and formerly in foster care

Two areas of focus emerged from this work: 1) Enhancing PAL classroom curriculum; and 2) Increasing experiential learning and skill development outside the classroom. Participants in the workgroup evaluated current PAL classroom curriculum, materials, activities, and opportunities for curriculum improvement to support learning and skill development. A second subset of participants examined experiential activities and the role of caregivers, residential contractors, and others to enhance skill development for youth and young adults.

The workgroup had discussion and provided recommendations about other areas of transitional living and readiness for youth and young adults that exceeds the scope of this report. Additional information can be found in **Appendix II** of this report. DFPS intends to

¹ Please see Appendix I for a list of workgroup member agencies.

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explore these recommendations with stakeholders as the work to improve transitional living services continues.

Plan to Standardize Curriculum for the Preparation for Adult Living Program

Based on the information reviewed, and the feedback solicited, consensus was reached that suggests that the current PAL Life Skills Training curriculum outline defined by the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (federal grant) is comprehensive and covers most of the topics regarded as important to equip youth with information necessary for their successful transition to adult living. Standardization of the processes, methods for delivery, and evaluation of the efficacy of services were identified to better support youth enrolled in the PAL program and to ensure they receive relevant and age-appropriate information and training.

These five areas of focus and subsequent plans include the following:

1. Casey Life Skills Assessment (CLSA) Caregiver Assessment

- **Plan:**

- DFPS will examine and determine what (if any) changes need to be made to PAL contracts and/or Residential-Child Care Contracts to ensure that the person who knows the youth best completes the caregiver portion of the CLSA.
- DFPS will also assess the caseworker's role in assisting the caregiver in completing the CLSA. Ideally, both the caregiver and caseworker should work together in the completion of the assessment.

2. Knowledge Assessment

- **Plan:**

- DFPS will review the current Knowledge Assessment to determine if the tool is adequately measuring what is needed to reflect that youth are obtaining quality services and are able to apply skills learned via the PAL Life Skills training. DFPS may modify the tool as needed, based on this review.

3. High school or college credit

- **Plan:**

- DFPS will collaborate with other state agencies to explore what changes, if any, would be necessary to the PAL Curriculum in order for the training to qualify as high school or college credit(s).

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4. Experiential learning activities

- **Plan:**
 - DFPS will examine the current experiential learning activities used in residential treatment centers, shelters and kinship caregivers to determine level of uniformity across these placement types.
 - Based on this review, DFPS may evaluate the use of *“Ready, Set, Fly! A Parent’s Guide to Teaching Life Skills”* as a tool through a voluntary pilot with select Residential Child Care Contractors. This resource guide was developed by Casey Family Programs, a national foundation focused on foster care and child welfare.

5. Services to younger youth

- **Plan:**
 - DFPS will explore the costs associated with contracting for a curriculum development expert to make additions to the PAL Life Skills Training curriculum specific to the 14 and 15 year old youth population. DFPS will also research other available life skills assessment tools utilized by other child welfare agencies.

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Appendix I: Workgroup Members

- ACH Child and Family Services
- Angel Reach
- CitySquare Transition Resource Action Center (TRAC)
- Lifeworks
- National Association of Social Workers/Texas Chapter
- Texans Care for Children
- Texas Court Appointed Special Advocates
- Texas Department of Family and Protective Services
- Texas Network of Youth Services
- Texas State School of Social Work
- University of Texas at Austin
- University of Houston-Clearlake

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Appendix II: Additional Information and Recommendations

The department remains committed to the continued engagement of stakeholders as we work to ensure quality transitional living services are provided to youth and young adults as they exit care. The stakeholder workgroup provided the following information and recommendations for additional exploration by the department.

1. Amend the PAL Life Skills Training and Assessment Services contracts to remove the administration of the Knowledge Assessment as a requirement as some questions are out of date and also may not reflect the true knowledge of the youth.
2. Move the current Casey Life Skills Assessment (CLSA) interpretation meeting (required with the youth, caregiver and caseworker are invited) from the PAL contractor responsibility to the youth's next service plan review and require the caregiver and all other pertinent stakeholders to attend for the purpose of reviewing and incorporation into the youth's service plan to address how the youth's identified life skill needs and strengths will be met.
3. DFPS, along with other stakeholders, should review and appropriately revise current staff/contractor responsibilities so youth can receive more individualized case management. This case management should utilize:
 - Life coaching to coordinate the services, supports and benefits that will prepare the youth for adulthood and ensure the specific tasks; and
 - Goals associated with their transition out of foster care or through extended care are met.
4. Amend the Residential Child-Care contracts and Residential Child Care Licensing monitoring guidelines to support and track fulfillment of existing CPS requirements around providing youth with normalcy and experiential life skills.
5. Utilization of Ready, Set Fly:
 - Amend CPS policy and Residential Child-Care contracts to add the guide to the required list of "other items" to be provided to a placement no later than 72 hours after placement.
6. Add the life skills assessment results and the Ready, Set, Fly Guide to the youth's education portfolio to inform current caregiver of skill development activities and achievements.
 - Ensure Residential Treatment Centers and Emergency Shelters have the guide and distribute to their staff.

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- Incorporate components of the guide into monitoring tools to assist Residential Child-Care Licensing staff in communicating what has been accomplished and what is needed.
- 7. DFPS, along with outside stakeholders, should explore how current DFPS Youth Specialists job duties could potentially be developed into a peer-to-peer model of support for youth aging out of care.
- 8. Amend licensing regulations related to restrictions around youth (16 and older) in Residential Treatment Centers being a part of the decision making about their own medical care and medication as well as other tasks that help them learn life skills.
- 9. Review licensing requirements for foster homes and residential facilities pertaining to youth in extended care in order to ensure there are no barriers to youth remaining in their placement when turning 18 and choosing to participate in extended foster care, which is a voluntary program that allows a young adult to reside in a paid foster care placement after DFPS conservatorship ends if the young adult is participating in qualifying activities and there is an available placement.
- 10. Develop a plan for a graduated housing model that would allow youth a measured move toward independence.