

Improving the Quality of Services to Youth in Substitute Care

A Report on Surveyed Youth in Foster Care FY 2007

Texas Department of Family and Protective Services

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	iii
Executive Summary	i
Overview	2
Senate Bill 6	2
Surveys.....	3
<i>Annual Random Youth Survey</i>	3
<i>Youth Questionnaire</i>	8
Survey Results – Summary	11
Current Transitional Living Services Program Efforts	11
Conclusions.....	16

Improving the Quality of Services to Youth in Substitute Care

Executive Summary

The Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) provides programs and services for youth aging out of care through its Transitional Living Services Program (TLSP). The TLSP within Child Protective Services (CPS) works to improve and expand transition and discharge services for youth ages 16 and older who are likely to remain in foster care until at least age 18 and support of youth who have aged out of foster care during their young adult years. The TLSP includes programs and services such as:

- Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) Programs;
- Education and Training Vouchers (ETV);
- Extended Care for youth up to 22 years of age to complete high school;
- Circles of Support (COS);
- continuous Medicaid for youth up to 21 years of age; and
- expansion of transition youth centers across the state.

Legislation regarding some services can be located in Senate Bill 6, Section 1.51 (79th Legislature).

This report discusses the results of two surveys of youth in foster care, the Annual Random Youth Survey and the optional Youth Questionnaire. This report also describes the ongoing efforts toward program improvement undertaken by Child Protective Services. These results are being shared with community partners, CPS management and staff, and the adolescents themselves in the interests of further improving the foster care experience for all children.

Annual Random Youth Survey

The Annual Random Youth Survey (survey) is in response to Senate Bill 6 (79th Legislative Session). Youth receiving substitute care services and at least 14 years old were randomly selected from the foster care population. Three hundred seventy-three youth from all areas of the state were asked about the quality of the substitute care services provided to them, any improvements to support youth in care, and additional factors DFPS considers relevant to program enhancement. Substitute care services were broken down into three categories: support services, financial benefits and the adoption process.

- **Support Services:** The first set of questions evaluated support services used while in foster care. A high percentage of youth rated the following services as “good” to “outstanding” in quality.
 - Personal and interpersonal skills - 83 percent;
 - Job skills - 85 percent;
 - Housing and transportation - 84 percent;

- Health - 89 percent;
 - Planning for the future - 83 percent; and
 - Money management - 76 percent.
 - Counseling/Therapy – 82 percent
 - Mentoring – 83 percent
- Additional services provided to high school youth were rated similarly.
 - Vocational assessment – 79 percent
 - GED classes – 76 percent
 - Preparation for college exams – 81 percent
 - Driver’s education – 84 percent
 - High school graduation expenses – 84 percent
 - **Financial Benefits:** The second category evaluated the financial benefit programs available through the Educational and Training Voucher Program and The Texas Youth Hotline. The responses indicated that:
 - approximately 55 percent were aware of the services, but
 - only 8.5 percent had actually received them.
 - **Adoption Process:** The final set of questions focused on how youth who had participated in the adoption process rated their experience. Twenty percent of the youth indicated that they had participated in the adoption process and rated their experience as follows:
 - 32 percent rated the experience as being “poor” to “very poor”;
 - 35 percent rated it as “adequate”; and
 - 33 percent rated the adoption process as “good” to “very good”.

These findings are an improvement from the last survey, where most comments indicated the process was too slow or no placement resulted (see the 2007 report), however, as the data indicates, one-third of the youth still found the process lacking.

Youth Questionnaire

The Youth Questionnaire was created by alumni of the Texas foster care system and CPS staff to obtain feedback from youth in care upon discharge. Completion of the questionnaire is optional. This questionnaire provides an opportunity for youth to comment on the quality of their most recent placement and how it helped prepare them for adult living with the primary focus on those who assisted youth in foster care rather than the services received while in care. A total of 228 responses were received from youth who exited care in the latter half of 2006 and FY 2007. Of the 143 youth who provided their age, eighty-five percent were 18 years of age or older.

- Sixty-nine percent of the responses received from the exit survey indicated that youth were either “satisfied” or “extremely satisfied” with their last placement.
- Seventy-five percent preferred a foster home placement rather than a group home placement.

- Seventy-one percent rated their last placement as being helpful in dealing with problems, while 73 percent indicated that the last placement was helpful in preparing them for adult living.

Both the survey and the questionnaire indicate that youth are generally satisfied with the quality of all services and benefits made available to them. However, comments made in the qualitative sections suggest that there are areas of improvement still needed within the program for service enhancement. Based on youth comments, areas for improvement include:

- an increase in their caseworker time and attention;
- lowered caseloads to accommodate more access to their caseworker;
- more information about all their options;
- more responsiveness from caseworkers when voicing concerns and opinions;
- more advice from adults (caseworkers, counselors and mentors, etc.) in order to make their own informed decisions;
- increased training to prepare them for adult living; and
- improved understanding of the process for securing financial benefits.

DFPS continues to elicit the voice of youth through the use of surveys, forums and conferences. In addition, the TLSP continuously strives to improve and expand services in order to ensure that more youth receive necessary services that will help them successfully transition to adulthood. The Annual Random Youth Survey combined with the Youth Questionnaire has provided valuable quantitative and qualitative information that will improve the services available for youth transitioning to adult living.

Improving the Quality of Services to Youth in Substitute Care

Overview

Since the passage of Senate Bill 6 (79th Legislative session), the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) has undertaken several activities designed to improve the overall preparation into adult living for youth in foster care. To determine the needs of youth in foster care, DFPS has utilized a variety of methods for gathering feedback from youth who have experienced the foster care system. In fiscal year 2007, DFPS conducted two surveys of youth in Texas foster care. The first survey, the Annual Random Youth Survey, mandated by Senate Bill 6, is conducted annually from a pool of randomly selected youth. The focus of the survey is to measure foster care youth's views of services provided to them in preparation for adult living. The second survey is the optional Youth Questionnaire. The questionnaire is part of an ongoing effort to obtain feedback from youth in care upon discharge.

This report reviews the methodology and outcome of each survey, summarizes the overall results, and describes the ongoing efforts toward program improvement undertaken by Child Protective Services (CPS). These results are being shared with community partners, CPS management and staff, and the adolescents themselves in the interests of further improving the foster care experience for all children.

Senate Bill 6

Senate Bill 6 (79th Legislative Session) requires the DFPS to conduct an annual survey of youth ages 14 to 17 receiving substitute care services. Specifically, Section 1.50 of the bill states:

The department shall conduct an annual random survey of a sample of children from each region of the state who are at least 14 years of age and who receive substitute care services. The survey must include questions regarding:

- (1) The quality of the substitute care services provided to the child,
- (2) Any improvements that could be made to better support the child, and
- (3) Any other factor that the department considers relevant to enable the department to identify potential program enhancements.

In response to Senate Bill 6, DFPS also developed the Transitional Living Services Program (TLSP). The goal of the TLSP is to ensure greater consistency and quality in services to foster youth. The ongoing efforts of the TLSP are informed by the annual youth survey results.

This report will summarize the results of the two surveys conducted in 2007 along with the program improvement efforts undertaken in response to identified needs. These efforts are expected to enhance the foster care experience for all youth and better prepare youth for adult living.

Surveys

Annual Random Youth Survey

The second Annual Random Youth Survey in response to Senate Bill 6 was developed with input from alumni of the Texas foster care system as well as CPS staff. Between July and October 2007, Regional Youth Specialists contacted randomly selected youth ages 14 to 17 by phone and completed 373 interviews from youth in all regions. Responses were entered directly into a web-based instrument. The youth were asked to rate the quality of the services received while in foster care with regard to a broad array of support services, access to financial benefits, and the adoption process. They were also asked to provide any suggestions for improvement of these same services. Question format included multiple choice and several open-ended questions allowing for quantitative and qualitative data to be collected.

The survey questions were arranged in three categories: 1) questions regarding the support services offered, 2) questions regarding knowledge of and access to financial benefits, and 3) questions regarding the experience of the adoption process.

Survey Category 1 - Support Services

Quantitative Results: Thirteen support services categories were rated by the youth on a quality scale. The options available included: “Poor”, “Fair”, “Good Quality”, “Outstanding Quality” and “Did Not Receive”. Detailed data on the specific support service categories is located on the following page in Table 1.

Overall, youth who received such services, rated their experiences favorably. In particular, health services rated among the highest with 89 percent of the youth scoring their experience as “good” or “outstanding”. Money management services ranked at the bottom of the scale; however, 77 percent of the youth still rated the service as “good” or “outstanding” In short, the vast majority of youth rated all services highly (see Table 1).

Table 1¹: Quality Ratings of Support Services

<i>Support Type</i>	<i>Reported Good to Outstanding Quality</i>	<i>Reported Poor to Fair Quality</i>
Personal and Interpersonal Skills (e.g., <i>Building Self-Esteem, Interpersonal Skills, Self-Management, Leisure Activities, and Sexual Responsibility</i>)	83% 229 youth	17% 44 youth
Job Skills (e.g., <i>Searching for Work, Getting the Job, Keeping</i>	85%	15%

¹ The numbers of responses to questions in this and subsequent tables differ because not all respondents answered all of the questions. The percentages in Table 1 are rounded upward and only reflect the responses of those who received the services.

<i>the Job, and Leaving a Job)</i>	219 youth	40 youth
Housing and Transportation (e.g. <i>Locating, Securing, Maintaining, and Moving</i>)	84% 203 youth	16% 40 youth
Health (e.g., <i>First Aid, Personal Hygiene, Health and Nutrition, Substance Abuse, Health Insurance, Getting Health Care, and Safe Sex</i>)	89% 261 youth	11% 31 youth
Planning for the Future (e.g., <i>Completing Forms, Roots and Records, Legal Issues, Educational Planning, and Community Resources</i>)	83% 220 youth	17% 46 youth
Money Management (e.g., <i>Currency, Budgeting, Banking, Consumer Credit, and Education</i>)	76% 198 youth	24% 62 youth
Vocational Assessment or Training	79% 129 youth	21% 35 youth
GED Classes	76% 53 youth	24% 17 youth
Preparation for College Entrance Exams	81% 113 youth	19% 26 youth
Driver's Education	84% 115 youth	16% 22 youth
High School Graduation Expenses	84% 107 youth	16% 21 youth
Counseling/Therapy	82% 247 youth	18% 57 youth
Volunteer Mentoring to Provide Guidance and Support	83% 162 youth	17% 30 youth

Table 2 below displays the percentages of those who received support services and those who did not. It is likely that the high percentage of respondents who did not receive high school related services simply reflects the population of younger youth in care. Respondents under the age of 14 are not offered such services.

Table 2: Youth Receiving Support Services

Support Type	Did receive services	Did not receive services
Personal and Interpersonal Skills (e.g., <i>Building Self-Esteem, Interpersonal Skills, Self-Management, Leisure Activities, and Sexual Responsibility</i>)	80% 273 youth	20 % 67 youth
Job Skills (e.g., <i>Searching for Work, Getting the Job, Keeping the Job, and Leaving a Job</i>)	76% 259 youth	24% 80 youth
Housing and Transportation (e.g. <i>Locating, Securing, Maintaining, and Moving</i>)	71% 243 youth	29% 97 youth
Health (e.g., <i>First Aid, Personal Hygiene, Health and Nutrition, Substance Abuse, Health Insurance, Getting Health Care, and Safe Sex</i>)	86% 292 youth	14% 47 youth
Planning for the Future (e.g., <i>Completing Forms, Roots and Records, Legal Issues, Educational Planning, and Community Resources</i>)	78% 266 youth	22% 71 youth

Money Management (e.g., Currency, Budgeting, Banking, Consumer Credit, and Education)	75% 260 youth	24% 82 youth
Vocational Assessment or Training	48% 164 youth	52% 175 youth
GED Classes	21% 70 youth	79% 269 youth
Preparation for College Entrance Exams	41% 139 youth	59% 201 youth
Driver's Education	40% 137 youth	60% 204 youth
High School Graduation Expenses	37% 128 youth	63% 213 youth
Counseling/Therapy	89% 304 youth	11% 38 youth
Volunteer Mentoring to Provide Guidance and Support	56% 192 youth	44% 148 youth

As part of the survey, several youth made comments and suggestions for improvements in support services available to them.

Qualitative Results: Youth cited a need to have more personal time with their case workers and a need for more case workers in the system. They felt the workers were unable to give them personal attention and were unresponsive to their needs due to high case loads. The youth wanted workers to listen to their wishes and give them chances for more autonomy over their lives.

Additionally, some respondents were unsatisfied with the quality of their therapy/therapist. Seventeen percent of respondents reported poor to fair quality of counseling and therapy services. Of these, several youth felt therapy was not helpful, seemed forced upon them, and wanted improvements or the choice not to attend.

There also appears to be a need for additional education services and information on day-to-day difficulties of adulthood once out of the system. Youth felt a particular need to have more college preparation classes, financial planning, driver's education, and housing and job information. Several youth cited their financial situation as a problem and desired more money for things such as hygiene products and graduation expenses.

The results gathered regarding this service area suggest that, although we have recently implemented the TLSP to enhance and improve programs and services for transition age youth, CPS is still falling short of the goal to increase the number of youth who report good to outstanding quality of services across all 13 support types. As CPS continues to guide, support and monitor the ongoing implementation of the TLSP, CPS will continue to engage and involve youth as partners in program and policy development.

DFPS is scheduled to meet with the statewide Youth Leadership Council in September 2008 along with other key stakeholders later in the year to review these findings and discuss strategies and solutions to further all 13 areas of support services.

Survey Category 2 - Financial Benefits

The second section of the survey evaluated the respondents' views on the financial assistance available to them. Questions evaluated whether or not youth were aware of these services and ascertained whether services had been received.

Quantitative Results: The results can be seen in the table below (Table 3). For all the programs offered, approximately half of the youth were aware that services were available.

Table 3: Youth Awareness of Financial Services

<i>Financial Service</i>	<i>Were aware (yes)</i>	<i>Were not aware (no)</i>
Education and Training Voucher Program	55 % 184 youth	45 % 153 youth
The Texas Youth Hotline	50 % 167 youth	50% 170 youth
Transitional Medicaid	58% 196 youth	42% 141 youth
Transitional Living Allowance	61% 205 youth	39% 132 youth
Aftercare Room and Board Assistance	51% 173 youth	49% 164 youth

The survey then measured how many youth had received services through the Educational and Training Voucher Program and The Texas Youth Hotline. These results are shown in Table 4. Although approximately half of the youth were aware of these services, the table indicates that only 8 percent had actually received education and training vouchers and had used the Texas youth hotline. Again, this may reflect the ages of some of the respondents not yet eligible for certain services or benefits. For example, transitional services are only available for older youth aging out of care.

Table 4: Youth Receiving Financial Services

<i>Financial Service</i>	<i>Did receive (yes)</i>	<i>Did not receive (no)</i>
Education and Training Voucher Program	8% 28 youth	92% 309 youth
The Texas Youth Hotline	9% 30 youth	91% 307 youth

Qualitative Results: There were a number of suggestions regarding how to increase awareness, access, and improve financial services. Under the Educational and Training Voucher Program, youth reported they would like to receive more assistance when applying to colleges, universities, and institutions. Youth also requested that case workers be more accessible and follow up when services are allocated. Many youth felt they

needed more financial assistance and several requested co-signers. Other suggestions were made to increase funding for services and decrease the time delay in receiving funds. With regard to financial benefits and access to them, the results suggest that more work needs to be done to ensure that youth are aware of and able to access these programs.

Survey Category 3 - The Adoption Process

Youth who had participated in the adoption process were asked to rate the quality of adoption services provided.

Quantitative Results: As shown in Table 5, 32 percent rated the adoption process as “good” to “very good”, 36 percent rated it as “adequate,” and 32 percent rated the experience as being “poor” to “very poor.”

Table 5²: Quality Ratings of Adoption Services

<i>Adoption</i>	<i>Reported Good to Very Good Quality</i>	<i>Reported Adequate Quality</i>	<i>Reported Poor to Very Poor Quality</i>
How do you rate the adoption process?	32% 22 youth	36% 24 youth	32% 22 youth

Qualitative Results: Of those who rated the adoption process as “very good” or “good”, several commented on the quickness and ease of the adoption system. Those who rated the process as “very poor” or “poor” felt as if they were pushed into adoptive placements. These youth felt they had little choice in the adoption process and that often the case workers were unresponsive and did little to explain options to them. They also felt that the process took too long and there was no follow-through. These results suggest communication throughout the duration of the adoption process should be improved to allow for more youth interaction.

Additionally, the results suggested that some of the youth did not wish to be actively involved in their adoption despite a desire to be adopted. Many youth feared they were too old and doubted that someone would want to adopt them.

Obtaining feedback on these adoption experiences is valuable for the Transitional Living Services Program since part of preparing youth for adult living often involves helping them deal with the emotions tied to failed adoptive placements. As a whole, the comments reinforced the need for caseworkers to listen carefully to youth, keep them informed of the process, and help them to understand and verbalize the complexity of emotions surrounding the adoption process.

² Table 5 represents the rating of the 20% of youth who took part in the adoption process.

Youth Questionnaire

Youth leaving care are asked to fill out a questionnaire as part of the foster care discharge process. Developed by alumni of the Texas foster care system and CPS staff, the questionnaire has been offered for approximately six years and participation is voluntary.

This questionnaire provides an opportunity for youth to comment on the quality of their most recent placement and how it helped prepare them for adult living. The focus of the questionnaire is on the placement and the people who assisted youth in foster care rather than the services received while in care. A total of 228 questionnaires were received from youth who exited care in the latter half of 2006 and FY 2007. Of the 143 youth who provided their age, eighty-five percent were 18 years of age or older. Questions were rated on a five point scale ranging from extremely helpful to extremely unhelpful. One item was rated on a satisfaction scale (extremely satisfied to extremely unsatisfied).

The questionnaire recorded the respondents' views on their last placement, their preferences between a foster home or group home living, and the quality of assistance offered to them by their CPS caseworker, CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate), therapist, Big Brother/Big Sister mentor, and attorney ad-litem.

Quantitative Results: Overall, youth responding to the questionnaire expressed positive feedback regarding their last placement and any assistance received. Table 6 reflects these results. When asked, "How satisfied were you with your last placement?" 69 percent responded "satisfied" or "extremely satisfied." Twenty percent were "somewhat" or "extremely unsatisfied" and 11 percent reported being neither "satisfied" nor "unsatisfied." Seventy-five percent preferred a foster home placement rather than a group home placement, although, due to the anonymity of the survey, it is not known what type of placement they had actually experienced.

Specific questions were asked about the helpfulness of the youth's last placement in terms of dealing with problems and preparing them for adulthood. Seventy-one percent rated their placement as being "extremely helpful" or "somewhat helpful" in dealing with problems. The ratings regarding how helpful the last placement was in preparing them for adulthood were similarly positive; 73 percent reported their last placement as being either "extremely" or "somewhat helpful".

Table 6: *Quality Ratings for Foster Placement*

	<i>Extremely or Somewhat Satisfied/Helpful</i>	<i>Neither Satisfied/Helpful Nor Unsatisfied/Unhelpful</i>	<i>Extremely or Somewhat Unsatisfied/Unhelpful</i>
How satisfied were you with your last placement?	69%	11%	20%
How much did your last placement help	71%	13%	16%

you deal with problems?			
How well did your last placement prepare you for adulthood?	73%	12%	15%

Youth were then asked about the helpfulness of staff at their last placement (which includes foster parents and child care workers) and other support staff specifically involved in their foster cases. The staff viewed as the most helpful were placement staff (79 percent), caseworkers (69 percent), and therapist (62 percent). Table 7 reflects the complete response results.

For questions regarding the helpfulness of their attorney ad-litem, 28 percent of those who responded found them “somewhat” to “extremely helpful.” Youth who were unable to rate the attorney ad litem’s helpfulness were given the option of selecting “did not have contact” or “did not know I had one”. Twenty-seven percent indicated they had not had contact and 23 percent did not know they had an attorney ad-litem. Some youth may not have ever had an attorney ad litem as they are often dismissed from the suit when DFPS takes Permanent Managing Conservatorship.

Table 7³: Quality Ratings for Placement/Support Staff

	<i>Extremely or Somewhat Helpful</i>	<i>Neither Helpful Nor Unhelpful</i>	<i>Extremely or Somewhat Unhelpful</i>	<i>Not Applicable</i>	
How helpful was:					
How helpful were your staff at your last placement?	79%	8%	13%	0%	
CPS caseworker?	69%	12%	19%	0%	
CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate)?	32%	8%	14%	45%	
Therapist?	62%	13%	13%	12%	
Big Brother/Big Sister or Mentor?	30%	7%	10%	54%	
				<i>Did not have contact</i>	<i>Did not know I had one</i>
Attorney ad-litem?	28%	10%	12%	27%	23%

Qualitative Results: Respondents thought that it was important for the staff and foster parents to allow for the development of responsibility. Many youth wanted the ability to

³ Note that with the “Not-Applicable” responses removed, the “extremely or somewhat helpful” percentages increase as follows: CASA = 59 percent, therapist = 70 percent, and Big Brother or Sister = 63 percent.

practice skills before they left their placement. Some youth felt like they were prevented from experiencing adult responsibilities such as purchasing food, paying bills, driving a car, and money management and requested more freedom to seek jobs.

Some youth expressed concerns over PAL classes being structured around the age of the child and not the educational level of the child. They felt as if the information provided was either too advanced or overly simplified. Youth cited the need to receive more adequate preparation in the area of job training, searching, and skill assessments. Youth specified the need for more money management preparation, specifically regarding information sessions and assistance on college preparation (including filling out Financial Aid forms and applying for college). Youth wanted more help not only from Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) classes but also from their placements and caseworkers.

Youth provided several reasons as to why they preferred foster homes over group living. Some thought foster homes provided a more home/family environment and several felt they were given more one-on-one attention. Youth who preferred foster homes reported having more of a social life since they were allowed to attend a public school, participate in after-school activities, and interact with other youth outside the family setting. Foster youth who resided in foster homes also reported feeling loved and cared about by their foster families. The youth felt that living in a foster home provided them with the feeling of having a “normal” family environment.

Individuals who preferred group home placements preferred the feeling of not being forced to build a bond with foster parents. They wanted to surround themselves with peers with whom they could share a relationship and learn from each others experiences. Respondents enjoyed interacting with many different kinds of individuals and felt that group homes promoted group cohesion and leadership. They also enjoyed the structure of the group home setting.

Despite that 69 percent of the respondents rated their CPS case worker as “extremely or somewhat helpful”, comments received on the youth questionnaires indicated dissatisfaction with the lack of contact and involvement of youth’s caseworkers in their everyday lives. They would like to keep the same caseworker and requested that their caseworker be more available. Youth also suggested that caseworkers be given smaller workloads in order to meet their needs. Several youth complained about being treated like a case number and not like a human being. Many youth wanted a stronger emphasis on the prevention of sibling group separation, and would like more visitations with biological family members.

Other suggestions involved safety and privacy issues. For instance, suggestions were made that DFPS discontinue background checks on friends because it is viewed as an invasion of privacy. Additionally, two youth reported foster parents stealing money from their personal savings accounts. One response from a youth indicated he/she felt as if they were losing pieces of their childhood because tree houses and trampolines were denied for safety reasons. Youth felt as if not all members took the “circles of support”

services seriously because not all attendants kept their end of the bargain when helping to provide for the child.

Summary of Results

Both the Annual Random Youth Survey and the Youth Questionnaire indicate that although youth are satisfied with the quality of services and benefits made available to them in some areas, there remains a need for improvement. Results showed that the youth would like more information about support services, financial benefits, and the adoption process along with more adult living preparation and training.

While support services received high marks from those who had received them, youth cited gaps in their relationships with caseworkers and expressed a need for additional education services. Youth wanted more of their caseworker's time and attention and desired to have more decision-making freedom and autonomy. Some youth felt they were not given adequate chances to be responsible young adults and make decisions that would help teach them to live independently in adulthood. In addition, it appeared that youth felt education was lacking in the areas of college prep classes, financial planning, driver's education, and housing and job information.

With regard to financial benefits and access to them, a number of suggestions were received regarding the improvement of financial services. Particular interest was given to the access and availability of such services. The results suggest that more work needs to be done to ensure that youth are aware of and able to access available financial programs.

Since all of these programs are addressed in Preparation for Adult Living class curriculum, this information may need to be presented in other ways. Some of the respondents had attended classes where the information was covered, but they still indicated they had not been informed. This suggests more varied styles of learning, as well as more opportunities to receive this information, may need to be incorporated to increase the retention of the information. PAL is required for youth 16 and 17 years of age and optional for 14 and 15 year olds based on availability of funding; therefore, some youth may not yet be informed of benefits and services for transitioning youth.

Current Transitional Living Services Program Efforts

DFPS provides programs and services for youth aging out of care through its Transitional Living Services Program (TLSP). The TLSP, within Child Protective Services (CPS), works to improve and expand transition and discharge services for youth ages 16 and older who are likely to remain in foster care until at least age 18 and to improve and expand services and support of youth who have aged out of foster care during their young adult years. In most cases, DFPS has permanent managing conservatorship of these youth. Legislation regarding specific services can be located in Senate Bill 6, Section 1.51 (79th Legislature).

It is important that DFPS establish a baseline of services to ensure youth aging out of the foster care system receive consistent service quality statewide. The Transitional Living Services Program supports this baseline by providing the following:

- Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) Programs;
- education services;
- transition planning;
- youth transition centers
- Circles of Support;
- extended care and return to care programs;
- STAR health and transitional Medicaid;
- Texas Youth Connection website/Texas Youth Hotline
- caseworker and foster parent training;
- Youth Specialists and the Youth Leadership Council; and
- Annual Random Youth Survey and Youth Questionnaire.

Below is more information about each of these services. Information about these services is also available on the DFPS website at: www.dfps.state.tx.us.

Preparation for Adult Living

CPS policy requires every youth 16 and older in paid substitute care to receive Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) services. PAL services are funded by Chafee Foster Care Independence Program federal funding (80 percent of total funding) and state general revenue and/or community match (the remaining 20 percent). Through the PAL program, youth acquire skills and resources they will need to become self-sufficient adults. Supportive services and benefits are provided to eligible youth ages 16 to 21 (and in some cases up to age 23 for certain educational/vocational needs). PAL Services include:

- life skills assessment (Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment);
- life skills training in money management, job skills, and planning for the future;
- educational/vocational services;
- supportive services (based on need and funding availability), such as:
 - graduation items;
 - counseling;
 - tutoring;
 - driver's education; and
 - mentoring.
- transitional living allowance up to \$1000 (distributed in increments up to \$500 per month to help with initial start-up costs in adult living);
- aftercare room and board assistance (based on need) up to \$500 per month for rent, utilities, utility deposits, food, etc. (not to exceed \$3,000 of accumulated payments per client); and
- case management to help youth with self-sufficiency planning and resource coordination.

Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) between the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) and DFPS and agreements between DFPS regions and local workforce boards were put in place to serve youth in DFPS care as priority populations. These cooperative agreements further the objectives of PAL and streamline referrals for services between the two agencies. Services may include: financial assistance, job skills, access to computers, and job preparedness and placement. The services vary depending on the local resources and agreements.

Education Services

The Educational Training Voucher (ETV) Program is a federally-funded and state-administered program. Young people ages 16 to 23 may be eligible for up to \$5000 financial assistance per year to help them reach their post-secondary educational goals. In FY 2007, 610 young people participated in the ETV Program, as compared to 435 participants in FY 2006 and 235 participants in FY 2005.

Education services provided by ETV include vocational assessment, vocational training, tutoring, and GED tests. Many youth receive assistance through partnerships with colleges, community organizations, and foster care placement providers. Additionally, DFPS Education Specialists are provided to assist youth with educational needs and requirements in order to maximize the benefits of the school setting.

State-paid tuition and fee waivers cover the cost of public post-secondary education in colleges, universities, or vocational programs. They are available for eligible youth who age out of foster care or who were adopted from foster care. In addition, a signed adoption assistance agreement between DFPS and the adoptive parents under Subchapter D, Chapter 162, of the Texas Family Code is required.

Critical support from colleges across the state also strengthens PAL youth's success. Many offer services to PAL youth such as mentoring programs, a variety of available scholarships, as well as free residential housing, leadership camps, and conferences. Additionally, foster care alumni support groups exist on several college and university campuses. The support of these groups opens doors to new mentoring relationships between youth in care and those who have aged out of care. Currently, a statewide alumni group is being developed by Foster Care Alumni of America (FCAA), a national organization, to help connect alumni and transform the child welfare system.

Transition Planning

In fiscal year 2006, a standardized transition-planning process and transition plan was developed. While in care, youth 16 years of age and older are introduced to the transition planning process and information about support services and benefits that will be available to them when they leave foster care. CPS identifies what services are needed for each youth to accomplish goals for transition. Its use across the state and incorporation into the child's plan of service helps ensure all youth are receiving consistent services.

Youth Transition Centers

Youth transition centers provide a central clearinghouse for many partners to serve the diverse needs of older youth, ages 15 ½ to 25, who are in the process of aging out or have aged out of foster care. These centers are funded and supported by a partnership between DFPS, the Texas Workforce Commission, and the Casey Family Programs Foundation. The centers are designed to serve as locations for DFPS services such as PAL, employment readiness, job search classes and assistance, and mentoring. Other partners provide additional services including substance abuse counseling, housing assistance, and leadership training. The centers are located throughout Texas in Austin, Beaumont, Central Texas (Belton, Killeen, Temple), Corpus Christi, Dallas, El Paso, Houston, Kerrville, Kingsville, and San Antonio.

Circles of Support

Circles of Support (COS) is a youth-driven process based on the Family Group Decision Making model that is offered to youth 16 years of age and older. It is a facilitated meeting with the foster youth and participants identified by the youth as “caring adults” in their support system. The COS participants consist of foster care providers, teachers, relatives, church members, mentors, and others invited by the youth. Each caring adult participant identifies a personal way they can help support the youth’s transition plan of attaining short- and long-term goals toward self-sufficiency. Information about all benefits and resources available is listed on the transition plan and is also included in the informational packet youth receive when they are discharged from care. Any changes in the plan are updated immediately.

Extended Care and Return to Care Programs

Since the number of youth still in foster care over the age of 18 is increasing every year, youth are given the opportunity of extended care and return to care services. Extended care services provide opportunities for foster youth to continue their education. If foster youth elect to extend their stay in placement, they can do so up to the age of 22 in order to pursue their high school diploma. As of September 1, 2006, the opportunity for extended care to complete vocational training was increased from 19 to 21 years old. The CPS return to care services allow for youth who have aged out of the foster care system to return to CPS paid care in order to:

- attend high-school or a GED course (up to age 22);
- attend a vocational or technical program (up to age 21); or
- return on a break from college or a technical or vocational program for at least one month, but no more than four months (up to age 21).

This opportunity became effective November 1, 2007 for youth 18 to 20 years old. Return to care information is provided to youth during transition planning meetings and Circles of Support meetings. Youth choosing to return to care may contact their previous

caseworker, their previous caseworker's unit, the PAL worker, other DFPS staff, or Statewide Intake to initiate services.

STAR Health and Transitional Medicaid

Senate Bill 6 (79TH Legislature) required the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) develop a new health care delivery system. The new model included children in foster care, young adults who choose to stay in foster care and young adults who have left foster care but continue to receive Medicaid services. HHSC contracted with *Superior Health Plan Network* to provide and coordinate healthcare services for current and former foster youth in the state of Texas. Through a contract with Superior Health Network, HHSC can help track youth healthcare services and records to ensure they are getting the services they need when they need them. Caregivers and each young adult received a packet informing them of STAR Health services along with instructions on selecting or changing primary care providers. All eligible youth are automatically enrolled in the new healthcare delivery model. The new STAR Health services model includes services such as:

- an immediate service start date once the child enters state care;
- a Health Passport available online to improve access to health histories;
- a 7-day, 24-hour Nurse Hotline available to caregivers and caseworkers; and
- a Medical Advisory Committee to review health provider services for quality assurance purposes.

Young adults 18-21 years old can choose to “opt out” of the STAR Health Program. Their Medicaid will revert to Medicaid-fee-for-service and will not cause an interruption of service or require them to reapply for Medicaid coverage.

Texas Youth Connection website and Texas Youth Hotline

The Texas Youth Connection website, designed with input from youth, is a resource for youth in the Texas Foster Care system, alumni of foster care, or youth seeking general tips and information. The website offers information and resources related to education, finances, personal records, diversity, health, employment opportunities, food, housing, books, stories, hotlines, Bill of Rights and other information.

www.texasyouthconnection.org

The Texas Youth Hotline is an ongoing resource to increase youth's awareness of the variety of benefits available to them. The Texas Youth Hotline is geared towards youth under 21 years old, including those who have aged out of the foster care system. The hotline is available for telephone counseling, information on services available in local communities, and referrals. Youth are informed of the hotline through various means, including PAL life skills trainings, transition planning meetings, Circles of Support, the Texas Youth Connection website, the Texas Youth Foster Care Handbook, and the DFPS internet. Texas Youth Hotline: 1-800-210-2278

Caseworker and Foster Parent Training

Changes have been made in both foster parent and CPS staff training in order to enhance services for youth preparing for adult living. Curriculum was designed and launched as Basic Skills Development (BSD) training in 2005, providing a full day of interactive learning for caseworkers. The training covers transitional living program services for youth in and exiting foster care along with roles and responsibilities of caseworkers, contract providers, and caregivers. Foster parent trainings across the state address policy and best practice related to caring for older foster youth. The objective of these trainings is to shed light on the aging-out process; thus, better preparing young adults for the many challenges of independent living.

Youth Specialists and the Youth Leadership Council

Beginning in FY 2006, Youth Specialists, youth who were formerly in foster care, were hired in each of the 11 DFPS regions. Their task was to advise and partner with local staff and communities on behalf of youth in out-of-home care, to develop local youth councils, and to help establish and support the statewide Youth Leadership Council (YLC). The statewide YLC is made up of youth from each region currently in foster care or who recently left care. The purpose of the YLC is to provide input and feedback to those responsible for policy and program development and to serve as partners on various task and advisory groups. The YLC has addressed and advised on such issues as medical consent for youth in care 16 years of age and older, CPS *Rights of Children & Youth in Foster Care*, Extended Care, Return to Care and the development of the Texas youth friendly website.

Annual Random Youth Survey and Youth Questionnaire

Since the passage of Senate Bill 6, DFPS has undertaken several activities designed to improve the overall preparation of youth in foster care for the experience of adult living. To determine the needs of youth in foster care, DFPS has utilized a variety of avenues for gathering feedback from foster care youth, including two annual surveys.

The first survey, mandated by Senate Bill 6, is the Annual Random Youth Survey. The focus of the survey is to measure the foster care youth's views on the services provided to them in preparation for adult living. The second survey is the optional Youth Questionnaire which obtains feedback from youth upon discharge from care. Both surveys provide invaluable information regarding youth's views of DFPS's programs and provided the agency an opportunity to continue to expand and improve upon available services to foster youth in Texas.

Conclusion

DFPS is continually seeking the voice of youth in foster care as an avenue for improving the delivery of DFPS services. To that end, several efforts are being made to enhance the services to foster youth in preparation for adult living.

In preparation for the second annual youth survey, improvements to the survey tool were implemented based on feedback from Youth Specialists and PAL staff involved in the process. Improvements were made to the timeliness of initial contact with youth in care to ensure data collected reflects their most current placement. Efforts were also made to conduct the surveys on the weekend and after school/work hours when youth are more readily available.

Comments provided on the surveys reinforced the need for the Transitional Living Services Program to strive to ensure their goal of providing a consistency in quality of care across the state. This approach of continuous quality improvement is derived directly from the issues raised in the surveys. Minimum standard requirements for life skills training in job skills, money management, housing, transportation, personal/interpersonal skills, health, and planning for the future also help guarantee consistency.

While youth continue to express the desire for more flexibility in funding (taking less time to receive funds), the Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) and Educational Training Voucher (ETV) programs are not entitlement programs. The funds authorized are discretionary funds that Congress must appropriate each year. Federal and state requirements direct the allocation and use of funds for PAL program services, and students must meet certain eligibility and qualification criteria to be accepted into the ETV program. Therefore, while DFPS cannot increase or alter the funding methodology, continued efforts to walk youth through the process are made through the Transitional Living Services Program.

Ensuring that youth receive the information they need regarding programs, support services and benefits available to prepare for adulthood and life after foster care is a priority. Foster youth receive information regarding the services and benefits available to them before (at age 14), during, and at the conclusion of their involvement in the PAL program. Furthermore, DFPS will continue to inform foster youth through their various direct service means (including PAL life skills training, transition planning meetings, Circles of Support, youth events, and teen conferences) as well as through the informational packet given to foster youth prior to discharge.

Although a wide variety of support services are available to youth, the survey results indicate that too many youth remain unaware of what services are available to them. Several youth indicated in their survey responses that certain services had not been received despite the fact that they participated in a class where informative information on the same services was made available. This suggests that a review of the curriculum take place with specific attention given to of the various learning styles of foster youth. Adjustments to how this information is presented are expected to improve retention.

Regions continue to explore potential mentoring programs and collaborations that will utilize both formal (mentoring programs such as Big Brother/Big Sister) and informal (church members, teachers, and coaches) youth mentors. Youth Specialists assist in increasing the chances of a positive mentor relationship through their presence and involvement in the development of regional youth leadership councils. These councils support mentoring relationships as well by engaging alumni and youth in joint activities.

In response to the expressed need for increased access to their caseworkers, DFPS has implemented a weekly performance report at the caseworker level that measures face-to-face contacts with youth in foster care. Since the initial implementation, the rate with which caseworkers visit youth in care has more than tripled and the visitations have remained at high levels. Policy has also been revised to ensure the quality and variety of these contacts.

The Transitional Living Services Program emphasizes the importance of providing a range of services and supports to youth currently and formerly in the foster care system. Youth surveys, forums and a variety of program enhancements designed to elicit youth feedback and recommendations will continue to set the stage for program improvements. DFPS will continue to work towards implementing changes in both policy and practice to assure staff are taking the extra step in the direction of improved transition services for youth. The efforts of DFPS to create and constantly improve programs, services and activities for transitioning youth represent a larger commitment to strive for an unmatched quality of care for the vulnerable citizens of Texas.