

# **Improving the Quality of Services to Youth in Substitute Care**

**A Report on Surveyed Youth in Substitute Care  
Fiscal Year 2010**

**Texas Department of Family and Protective Services**

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## **A Report on Surveyed Youth in Substitute Care**

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# Improving the Quality of Services to Youth in Substitute Care

## *Executive Summary*

The Annual Random Youth Survey is a survey required by the 79<sup>th</sup> Legislature aimed at collecting information on services to youth ages 14 to 17 in substitute care. This report discusses the results of the fiscal year 2010 Annual Random Youth Survey. Additionally, this report describes the ongoing efforts of the Child Protective Services (CPS) division of the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) to improve services to youth transitioning to adulthood. The results of the survey are shared with community partners, CPS management and staff, and youth in care for the purpose of further improving the substitute care experience for all children and youth.

### **Annual Random Youth Survey**

The Annual Random Youth Survey is required by S.B. 6, 79<sup>th</sup> Legislature, Regular Session, 2005. Youth at least 14 years old receiving substitute care services were randomly selected from the population of youth in the conservatorship of DFPS. Three hundred sixty-six youth throughout the state were asked about the quality of substitute care services and programs, their recommendations for improvements to support youth in care, and other information DFPS considered relevant to program enhancement. Data obtained from the youth were grouped into four categories: 1) employment, financial, and educational information; 2) resources, family, and health information; 3) the adoption process; and 4) services and training.

- **Employment, Financial, and Educational Information:** Questions in this category gathered responses on youth employment, receipt of Social Security benefits, educational financial aid, and status within a formal educational process. For youth surveyed, the results show that:
  - Three percent were currently employed full-time.
  - Twelve percent were currently employed part-time.
  - Sixteen percent completed an apprenticeship, internship, or other on-the-job training.
  - Seven percent received Social Security benefits.
  - Ninety-two percent were enrolled in some type of formal educational process but only four percent received educational financial aid.
  - Fifteen percent received financial resources or support other than financial aid or Social Security benefits.
- **Resources, Family, and Health Information:** Information provided by the youth showed the following:
  - Ninety-three percent said there was an adult he/she could go to for advice or emotional support other than the caseworker.
  - Sixteen percent have experienced homelessness; just under a quarter of those had experienced it in the last two years.

- Twelve percent have been referred for substance abuse services; half of those had been referred in the last two years.
  - Seventeen percent have been confined to jail/prison/juvenile detention; fifty-seven percent of those had been in the last two years.
  - Seven percent of youth aged 17 or older have become parents; all but one of the seven youth became parents in the last two years and none were married to the other parent of the child.
  - Ninety-six percent receive Medicaid benefits, while three percent have health insurance other than Medicaid.
- **Adoption Process:** Youth who had participated in the adoption process were asked to rate their experiences.<sup>1</sup> Of the youth who indicated that they had participated in the adoption process and were still in substitute care:
    - Twenty-six percent rated the process as “poor” to “very poor.”
    - Thirty percent rated it as “adequate.”
    - Forty-two percent rated the process as “good” to “very good.”
  - **Services and Training:** The final set of questions focused on the services and training provided while in substitute care. High percentages of youth who received the following services rated them from “good” to “outstanding” in quality:
    - Life skills (83 percent)
    - Counseling/Therapy (79 percent)
    - Education services (77 percent)

These Adoption Process and Services and Training findings are consistent with the results from last year's survey. (See the fiscal year 2009 report<sup>2</sup>. The executive summary is attached as Appendix A). Poor ratings were assigned by five percent of youth to counseling/therapy services. Three percent of the youth rated life skills training poorly and three percent found educational training to be poor.

### **Transitional Living Services Programs**

CPS provides programs and services for youth aging out of care through its Transitional Living Services program. This program provides transition and discharge services for youth ages 14 and older who are likely to remain in substitute care or licensed foster care until at least age 18. The program also supports youth who have aged out of licensed foster care during their young adult years. Programs and services provided to eligible youth include:

- Experiential Life Skills Training (youth ages 14 and up)
- Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) services
- Education and Training Vouchers

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<sup>1</sup> Since only youth still in care were surveyed, these results reflect the perceptions of youth who had started but not completed the adoption process or for whom an adoptive placement did not result in a consummated adoption. Youth who were successfully adopted would not still be in care and were not surveyed.

<sup>2</sup> The fiscal year 2009 report can be found at [http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/documents/about/pdf/2009-12-01\\_YouthSurvey.pdf](http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/documents/about/pdf/2009-12-01_YouthSurvey.pdf).

- College Tuition and Fee Waivers
- Extended Foster Care for youth up to 21 or 22 years of age
- Return to Care for youth up to 22 years of age
- Circles of Support/Transition Planning
- Continuous Medicaid for youth up to 21 years of age
- Health Care Benefits for youth in Higher Education (21-22)
- Expansion of transition youth centers across the state
- Texas Youth Connection website
- Texas Youth Hotline
- National Youth in Transition Database

# **Improving the Quality of Services to Youth in Substitute Care**

## **Overview**

The passage of S.B. 6, 79<sup>th</sup> Legislature, Regular Session, 2005, resulted in changes within Child Protective Services (CPS) designed to improve the overall preparation for adult living services provided to youth in the conservatorship of the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS). The Annual Random Youth Survey required by S.B. 6 is one of a variety of methods CPS uses to gather feedback from youth in substitute care who have received services, including licensed foster care services. The survey is conducted annually from a pool of randomly selected youth in substitute care and licensed foster care. The focus of the survey is to measure the quality of substitute care services, obtain recommendations for improvements to support youth in care, and collect information about other factors DFPS considers relevant to program enhancement.

This report reviews the methodology and outcome of the survey, summarizes the overall results, and describes the ongoing efforts toward program improvement undertaken by CPS. These results will be shared with community partners, CPS management and staff, and the adolescents themselves in the interests of further improving the substitute care experience for all children.

## **Senate Bill 6**

S.B. 6, 79<sup>th</sup> Legislature, Regular Session, 2005 requires 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."<sup>3</sup>

In response to S.B. 6, DFPS also expanded the Transitional Living Services program. The goal of this program is to ensure greater consistency and quality in services to youth in licensed foster care. The Annual Random Youth Survey results provide feedback to strengthen continuous quality improvements to the program.

This report will summarize the results of the Annual Random Youth Survey conducted in 2010 along with the program improvement efforts undertaken in response to identified

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<sup>3</sup> Legislation regarding some services can be located in Section 1.51, S.B. 6, 79<sup>th</sup> Legislature, Regular Session, 2005; Texas Family Code, Subchapter B, Chapter 264, Section 264.121.).

needs. These efforts are expected to enhance the foster care experience for all youth and better prepare youth for adult living.

### **Annual Random Youth Survey**

The Annual Random Youth Survey was developed with input from alumni of the Texas foster care system and CPS staff. The survey was updated in 2009 in order to gather data required by the Federal government's National Youth in Transition Database initiative. These modifications do not detract from the legislative intent in S.B. 6 to have youth provide input on the quality of substitute care services, and to suggest improvements and program enhancements that better support youth in care.

Between June and October 2010, regional youth specialists and Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) staff contacted a group of randomly selected youth ages 14 to 17 by phone and completed 366 interviews with 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 substitute care, their access to financial and health benefits, and, if relevant, the adoption process. They were then asked to provide suggestions for improvement of these services. Additionally, youth were asked basic questions about their experiences with education, employment, homelessness, substance abuse services, and incarceration.

The survey questions were grouped into the following categories: 1) employment, financial and educational information; 2) resources, family and health information; 3) the adoption process; and 4) services and training. Respondents were not required to answer every question. Hence, response numbers vary across the questions. Among the 11 regions across the state, the numbers of youth participating in this survey ranged from 29 to 36 per region.

#### **Survey Category 1 – Employment, Financial and Educational Information**

*Results:* Youth were asked questions about their current employment, financial assistance, and educational enrollment. Table 1 shows the results. Since all survey youth are underage, it is not surprising that the majority (92 percent) of the youth surveyed were currently enrolled in some type of formal educational process and only 11 percent had either a high school diploma or General Equivalency Diploma (GED). Three percent were employed full time.

**Table 1**

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Did Not Answer</b>
Employed full time	3% (11)	97% (355)	
Employed part time (three youth answered yes to both full and part time employment and were counted under full time)	12% (43)	87% (320)	1% (3)
On-the-job training in last year	16% (58)	83% (305)	1% (3)
Currently receiving Social Security payments	7% (26)	86% (316)	7% (24)
Currently receiving educational financial aid to cover educational expenses	4% (14)	94% (345)	2% (7)
Receiving any financial resources or support from other sources not noted above	15% (56)	84% (306)	1% (4)
Currently enrolled in and attending high school, GED classes, post-high school vocational training or college	91.5% (335)	8% (29)	0.5% (2)
High school diploma or GED	11% (40)	87% (319)	2% (7)

\* Not all rows will total to 100% due to rounding.

### **Survey Category 2 – Resources, Family, and Health Information**

*Results:* Prior to asking the youth the questions in Table 2, each was asked if there is at least one adult, other than their caseworker, to whom they can turn for advice or emotional support. Three hundred thirty-nine youth (93 percent) responded in the affirmative, 23 (6 percent) said no, and 4 youth (1 percent) did not answer.

**Table 2**

<b>Have you ever been ...</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Did Not Answer</b>	<b>If yes, within the last two years?</b>		
				<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Did Not Answer</b>
Homeless?	16% (59)	83% (303)	1% (4)	22% (13)	58% (34)	20% (12)
Referred for Alcohol/Drug Abuse Assessment or Counseling?	12% (44)	72% (263)	16% (59)	51% (30)	12% (7)	16% (7)
Confined to jail/prison/juvenile detention for alleged crime?	17% (61)	67% (245)	16% (60)	57% (35)	26% (16)	16% (10)
Given birth or fathered a child that was born?***	7% (7)	82% (88)	11% (12)	86% (6)	14% (1)	

\* Not all rows will total to 100% due to rounding.

\*\*\*Only asked of youth aged 17.

None of the youth age 17 or older who indicated that they had a child said they were married to the other parent of the child at the time the child was born.

Table 3 reflects information gathered about access to health insurance. None of the 12 youth who stated that they have insurance other than Medicaid are employed full-time and only 1 is employed part-time. As such, any additional insurance for most of the Medicaid-covered youth is non-employer related.

**Table 3**

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Don't Know</b>	<b>Did Not Answer</b>
Currently on Medicaid	96% (353)	3% (11)	Not an option	0.5% (2)
Have health insurance other than Medicaid?	3% (12)	69% (254)	24% (87)	4% (13)
If yes to other health insurance, does it cover:				
Medical services?	67% (8)			33% (4)
Mental health services?	42% (5)		17% (2)	42% (5)
Prescription drugs?	42% (5)		17% (2)	42% (5)

\* Not all rows will total to 100% due to rounding.

**Survey Category 3 - The Adoption Process**

Thirty-one percent (112) of the responding youth participated in the adoption process and were asked to rate the quality of the adoption process.<sup>4</sup>

*Results:* Forty-two percent rated the adoption process as good to very good, 30 percent rated it as adequate, and 26 percent rated the experience as poor to very poor.

**Table 4**

<b>Adoption</b>	<b>Very Good-Good</b>	<b>Adequate</b>	<b>Poor-Very Poor</b>	<b>Did Not Answer</b>
How do you rate the adoption process?	42% (47)	30% (34)	26% (29)	2% (2)

When asked in open-ended questions about the adoption process, 16 youth said they were happy with their new families and that the process worked very well for them. Four youth stated that they had little choice in the adoption process and that caseworkers often did little to explain the options available to them. Fifteen youth stated either they did not wish to be adopted or the adoption fell through. Twenty youth felt that the process took too long. Finally, 12 youth had complaints about the safety and quality of the adoptive

<sup>4</sup> Since only youth still in care were surveyed, these results reflect the perceptions of youth who had started but not completed the adoption process or for whom an adoptive placement did not result in a consummated adoption. Youth who were successfully adopted would not still be in care and were not surveyed.

home into which they were placed. These results suggest improvements in communication are needed throughout the adoption process to allow for more input from youth who are involved in the adoption process.

**Survey Category 4 - Services and Training**

*Results:* Youth were asked about three broad categories of support services and trainings. The Life Skills Training category includes training on health and safety, housing, transportation, job readiness, financial management, life decisions and responsibility, and personal and social relationships. The Educational Services Training category includes vocational training and assessment, GED classes, and college examination preparation. The final category, Counseling, Therapy, and Mentoring Services, includes volunteer and mentoring programs, the Texas Youth Hotline, and uninterrupted medical coverage until age 21, as well as additional traditional services. Support service categories were rated by the youth on a quality scale. The rating options available were poor, fair, good, or outstanding quality. For youth who did not receive specific categories of support services, a "did not receive" response was provided. Detailed data on each of the support service categories are shown in Table 5.

**Table 5**

	<b>Outstanding-Good</b>	<b>Fair</b>	<b>Poor</b>	<b>Did Not Receive</b>	<b>Did Not Answer</b>
Life Skills Training	52% (189)	8% (28)	3% (10)	38% (138)	>1% (1)
Educational Services Training	41% (149)	9% (34)	3% (10)	47% (172)	>1% (1)
Counseling/Therapy/Mentoring Services	69% (252)	13% (48)	5% (19)	13% (47)	

\* Not all rows will total to 100% due to rounding.

Most youth (90 percent) did not have any improvements to recommend. However, several youth provided comments and suggestions for improving support services. Although the question asked for "improvements and enhancements for any of these areas," referring to the service categories discussed above, several youth commented on issues with caseworkers. One youth stated he or she had too many caseworkers to get to know them, another said that his or her caseworker was changed without warning, and one youth stated it was difficult to reach his or her caseworker.

There also appears to be a need for additional education services and information on the day-to-day realities of adulthood. Twelve youth asked for one or more of the following: increased educational assistance, more job readiness classes and help finding employment, better life skills training, the option to start PAL classes at a younger age enabling them to take more classes, and additional assistance learning about benefits they

were eligible for. Three youth cited their financial situations as problematic and desired additional clothing vouchers; they wondered why they no longer received five dollars allowance a week. A few youth requested additional help dealing with anger issues.

Six comments focused on what the youth viewed as unnecessary restrictions and a desire for more autonomy. Youth commented on policies such as requiring background checks on their friends' parents before being allowed to spend the night at their friend's house, not allowing older youth to be home without adult supervision, and preventing prospective adoptive parents from adopting due to old criminal records. Youth also wanted to be able to visit friends and siblings more often or for longer periods of time. One youth simply stated that he or she wanted to make his or her own decisions.

Some respondents were dissatisfied with their foster care placements. One youth felt that some placements are unsafe, another said the facility where he or she was placed was "not good" and he or she did not like being there, and a third also stated he or she did not like the current placement. Three youth complained of being in overly restrictive environments and wanted to be moved into a home environment and have their level of care dropped. One youth commented that Medicaid services are difficult to access, require significant travel, and that the services are not convenient or of good quality.

Finally, a few youth commented on the survey itself, stating the questions were difficult to understand, that they were not relevant to the younger youth, or that they did not understand the purpose of the survey.

### **Summary of Results**

The Annual Random Youth Survey indicates that in many areas youth are satisfied with the quality of services and benefits made available to them and there is a need for improvement in other areas. Results showed that the youth would like more information about support services, financial benefits, the adoption process, and more adult living preparation and training.

While support services received high marks from those who had received those services, youth cited gaps in their relationships with caseworkers and expressed a need for additional services addressing education, employment, and general preparation for adult living. Youth seemed concerned about finances and employment opportunities and expressed a need for additional assistance in this area. Youth wanted more of their caseworkers' 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.

Since information on support services and financial benefits are addressed by the PAL Life Skills Training class curriculum, this information may need to be communicated in additional ways to reach all youth. Some of the respondents had attended classes where the information was covered, but they indicated they had not been informed. This

suggests a need for varied styles of teaching, as well as more opportunities to receive this information to increase the retention. The PAL program is required for youth 16 and 17 years of age. Therefore, some 14 and 15 year old youth taking the survey may not yet be informed of the benefits and services for transitioning youth since they have not yet received PAL classes.

## **Transitional Living Services Program History and Current Efforts**

DFPS provides programs and services for youth aging out of care through the Transitional Living Services program. The program provides transition and discharge services for youth ages 14 and older who are likely to remain in foster care until at least age 21, and in some cases up to age 22. The program also works 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. The originating legislation regarding specific services available through the program can be found in Section 1.51, S.B. 6, 79<sup>th</sup> Legislature, Regular Session, 2005.

H.B. 1912, 81<sup>st</sup> Legislature, Regular Session, 2009 directed DFPS to expand the Transitional Living Services program to include youth 14 years of age and older. The bill also required DFPS' licensed foster care providers to provide or assist youth in obtaining experiential life skills for purposes of improving their transition to independent living. Further, H.B. 1912 required DFPS to submit a comprehensive transitional living services plan to the legislature describing improvements to the CPS Transitional Living Services program. The plan was required to incorporate best practices and recommendations from a stakeholder workgroup made up of youth, foster parents, and individuals with expertise in transitional living services that was formed to assist CPS in implementing H.B. 1912.

Recommendations from the workgroup addressed modifications to the PAL curriculum including online training options and additional training modules that meet individual youth needs; ways to ensure each youth receives individualized assessments tailored to their needs; and ways to ensure transitional living services to youth with disabilities are appropriate and meet the needs of these youth. In addition, the plan incorporated best practices that addressed other issues identified by the workgroup such as identifying caring adults who can form lasting relationships with youth and developing resources for residential providers to access experiential learning activities. The results of this effort can be found in the Transitional Living Services Plan submitted to the Governor and Texas Legislature in September 2010 available on the DFPS website.<sup>5</sup>

The Transitional Living Services program established a baseline of services to ensure that 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:

- Experiential Life Skills training (youth ages 14 and older)
- Preparation for Adult Living services
- Education and Training Voucher program
- College Tuition and Fee Waiver
- Youth Transition Centers
- Circles of Support/Formal Transition Planning

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<sup>5</sup>The plan can be found at [http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/documents/Child\\_Protection/pdf/2010-09-03\\_Transitional\\_Living\\_Services\\_Plan.pdf](http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/documents/Child_Protection/pdf/2010-09-03_Transitional_Living_Services_Plan.pdf).

- Extended Care and Return to Care programs
- STAR Health and transitional Medicaid
- Health care benefits for former foster care youth in higher education
- Texas Youth Connection website/Texas Youth Hotline
- Youth Involvement
  - Youth Leadership Council
  - Youth Specialists
- National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD)
- Annual Random Youth Survey

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](http://www.dfps.state.tx.us).

### **Experiential Life Skills Training (youth ages 14 and older)**

Foster parents and other child care or residential providers are required to include training in independent living skills through practical activities such as meal preparation, use of public transportation, money management, and basic household tasks for youth ages 14 and older. The experiential learning that occurs in a youth's placement and PAL activities experienced in a classroom or training setting (see below) should compliment one another and are discussed and addressed in each "core life skill area" within the youth's service and transition plan.

### **Preparation for Adult Living (PAL)**

CPS policy requires every youth age 16 and older in paid substitute care to receive PAL services. Youth in non-paid substitute care are eligible for services but provision depends on funding availability. 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 that they will need to become self-sufficient adults. Supportive services and benefits are provided to eligible youth ages 16 to 21. PAL services include:

- Life skills assessment (Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment)
- Life skills training in health and safety, housing and transportation, job readiness, financial management, life decisions/responsibility and personal/social relationships
- Educational/vocational services
- Supportive services (based on need and funding availability), such as:
  - Graduation items
  - Counseling
  - Tutoring
  - Driver's education
  - Mentoring
- Transitional living allowance up to \$1,000 (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)

- Case management to help youth with self-sufficiency planning and resource coordination

Memorandums of understanding between the Texas Workforce Commission 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 workforce services between the two agencies. Services may include: financial assistance, job skills training, access to computers, and job preparedness and placement. The services vary depending on the local resources and agreements.

### **Education Services**

The Educational Training Voucher program is a federally-funded and state-administered program. Young people ages 16 to 23 may be eligible for up to \$5,000 financial assistance per year to help them reach their post-secondary educational goals. Eligible youth include youth in foster care and who are at least 16 years old, youth who have aged out but are not yet 21<sup>6</sup>, youth adopted from foster care after age 16, and youth who entered permanency care assistance after age 16. For academic year 2009-2010, a total unduplicated count of 1,219 youth were served in the Educational Training Voucher program, as compared to 641 in academic year 2008-2009, 610 participants in fiscal year 2007, and 435 participants in fiscal year 2006. A total of \$2.3 million was awarded in Educational Training Voucher grant funds.

DFPS contracted with BCFS Health and Human Services for administration of the Educational Training Voucher program. The contract between BCFS Health and Human Services and DFPS is effective from June 1, 2009 through September 30, 2011.

Other education services may 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 assist youth with secondary school educational needs and requirements in order to maximize the benefits of the school setting.

State-paid college tuition and fee waivers cover the cost of public post-secondary education in colleges, universities, or vocational/technical programs. Tuition and fee waiver exemptions are available for youth who were formally in foster care; youth placed from substitute care into a non-parental permanent managing conservatorship after September 1, 2009; or youth who were adopted from substitute care after September 1, 2009. For other adopted youth, a signed adoption assistance agreement between DFPS and the adoptive parents under Subchapter D, Chapter 162, of the Texas Family Code is required. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) reported 2,293 former foster care students and 278 adopted students received tuition fee waivers for academic year 2008-2009, compared to 2,030 foster care students and 224 adopted students for academic year 2007-2008. In academic year 2008-2009, a total of

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<sup>6</sup> Youth have to enroll in ETV before age 21 but may be eligible for assistance until age 23 if they are attending/passing courses.

\$5,695,731 in tuition and fee revenue was forgone by schools in the form of waivers. In addition, youth utilized 25 percent of the waivers at public universities, 69 percent at community colleges, 4 percent at technical colleges, and 2 percent at public state colleges. In academic year 2009-2010 THECB reported 2,764 exemptions were granted to foster care students and 453 exemptions to adopted students. The exemptions totaled \$7,690,569 in tuition and fee waiver which were forgone by schools in the form of waivers. During this same academic year, youth utilized 28 percent at public universities, 67 percent at community colleges, 3 percent at technical colleges, and 2 percent at state colleges.

Critical support from colleges across the state also strengthens PAL youth services. Many colleges offer services to PAL youth such as mentoring programs, a variety of 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, a national organization, to help connect alumni and transform the child welfare system.

### **Transition Planning/Transition Plan Reform**

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 identified the services that are needed for each youth to accomplish goals for transition. The use of the standardized transition planning services across the state and incorporation into the child's plan of service helps ensure all youth are receiving consistent services. As a result of the H.B. 1912 workgroup recommendations, DFPS is initiating a long-term effort to make changes to the format and use of the transition plan document, this initiative is referred to as the Transition Plan Reform. CPS has convened an internal workgroup to conduct the process of revising the transition plan document. Also, as a result of the H.B. 1912 workgroup, CPS created and is utilizing a transition tracking system (electronic and paper copy) that tracks necessary transition tasks on a yearly basis to ensure that all services and resources are being utilized.

### **Youth Transition Centers**

These centers, which are funded and supported by their local communities in partnership with the Texas Workforce Commission, DFPS, and Casey Family Programs, provide a comprehensive array of services. The centers are one-stop locations that include access and referrals to supportive service partners and community resources. Services may include employment assistance, training, educational support, and various transitional living services geared specifically to meet the individual needs of current and former foster care youth ages 15 to 25. Additional services such as PAL classes, job search and job readiness classes, food and housing assistance, and substance abuse/mental health counseling may be incorporated. Transition Centers may also serve as a central clearinghouse where local partners such as Workforce Solutions, local community

colleges, the Texas Youth Commission, or the Texas Juvenile Probation Commission can meet on a regular basis to jointly serve the diverse needs of the youth. Transition Centers are located in Austin, Beaumont, Central Texas, Corpus Christi, Dallas, El Paso, Houston, Kerrville, and San Antonio.

The 81<sup>st</sup> Legislature appropriated \$200,000 to expand transition centers in Texas through one-time \$25,000 developmental grants. From these grants DFPS contracted to operate six Transition Centers in:

- Region 1 - Lubbock
- Region 2 - Abilene
- Region 3 - Tarrant County
- Region 4 - Tyler
- Region 9 - San Angelo
- Region 11 - McAllen

All of these centers are either currently operational or expected to become operational in fiscal year 2011. Grantees are expected to describe how partners and other collaborations will be involved in providing services to youth and in sustaining these centers once DFPS funds end.

### **Circles of Support**

Circles of Support is a youth-driven process based on the Family Group Decision Making model and is offered to youth 16 years of age and older on an annual basis until the youth ages out of CPS care. It is a facilitated meeting between the youth in foster care and participants identified by the youth as “caring adults” in their support system. The Circles of Support participants consist of relatives, licensed foster care providers, teachers, 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.

### **Youth's Personal Documents and Youth Transition Portfolio**

H.B. 1912 and S.B. 983, 81<sup>st</sup> Legislature, Regular Session, 2009, required CPS to provide certain personal documents to youth at age 16 and again at age 18. These documents include the youth's birth certificate, a Social Security card or replacement Social Security card, a personal identification card issued by the Texas Department of Public Safety, immunization records, information contained in the youth's Health Passport, and proof of enrollment in Medicaid. At least 90 days before a youth turns 18 and leaves DFPS conservatorship, all personal materials including the above referenced documents and other information are provided to the youth to help with their transition to adulthood. For youth that turn 18, this information is provided in the form of a Youth Transition Portfolio which includes an *Almost 18?* Letter that explains services, benefits, documents and contact information that youth will need when leaving DFPS conservatorship.

## **Extended Care and Return to Care Programs**

With the implementation of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, as of October 1, 2010, a youth who ages out of foster care at age 18 may continue to be eligible for extended licensed foster care provided the youth signs a voluntary extended foster care agreement on or before age 18. The number of youth still in licensed foster care over the age of 18 is increasing every year as a result of the opportunity for youth to receive extended care and return to care services.

The Extended Care program allows a youth to extend their stay in placement up to the age of 21 or 22 when the youth signs an agreement before the age 18 and meets any of the following provisions:

- Regularly attend full-time high school up to the end of the month of their 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday
- Regularly attend an institution of higher education or a post-secondary vocational or technical program (can extend care up to age 21 only)
- Actively participate in a program or activity that promotes, or removes barriers to, employment (can extend care up to age 21 only)
- Employed for at least 80 hours per month (can extend care up to age 21 only)
- Incapable of doing any of the above due to a documented medical condition (can extend care up to age 21 only)

The CPS services provided through the Return to Care program allow youth who have aged out of the foster care system to return to CPS paid care to:

- Attend full-time high school regularly up to the end of the month of their 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday
- Attend a full-time certified vocational or technical program regularly that allows for a young adult to be hired into the workforce up to the end of the month of their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. (The number of hours enrolled must be acceptable to the department and consistent with the transition plan.)
- Attend full-time GED classes regularly up to the end of the month of their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. (The number of hours enrolled must be acceptable to the department and consistent with the transition plan.)
- Return on a break from college or technical or vocational program for at least one month, but no more than 4 months, up to their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday

The Return to Care program became effective November 1, 2007 for youth 18 to 22 years old. Information on returning to care 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 staff, other DFPS staff, or Statewide Intake to initiate services.

## **STAR Health and Transitional Medicaid**

S.B. 6, 79<sup>th</sup> Legislature, Regular Session, 2005 required the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) to develop a new health care delivery system. The new "STAR Health" model included children in foster care, young adults who choose to stay in licensed foster care, and young adults who have aged out of DFPS conservatorship but

continue to receive Medicaid services. HHSC contracted with Superior HealthPlan Network to provide and coordinate healthcare services for current and former foster care youth in the state of Texas. Through a contract with Superior HealthPlan 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 receive 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
- A Medical Advisory Committee to review health provider services for quality and assurance purposes

Young adults ages 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.

### **Health Care Benefits for Former Foster Care Youth in Higher Education Programs**

S.B. 10, 80<sup>th</sup> Legislature, Regular Session, 2007 required HHSC to provide health care benefits to certain former foster care youth who are at least 21 years of age or older, but younger than 23 years old, who would be eligible to receive assistance as an independent foster care adolescent under Chapter 32, Human Resources Code, Section 32.02471, and who are enrolled in an institution of higher education located in Texas. These health care benefits became effective October 1, 2009.

Benefits are provided to individuals who:

- Are at least 21 years of age or older but younger than 23 years of age
- Were in foster care the day before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday
- Are enrolled in an institution of higher education located in Texas
- Are not receiving adequate health coverage as defined by HHSC
- Meet income limits
- Have countable resources of less than or equal to \$10,000

Applicants may request an application by calling Centralized Benefits Services toll-free at 1-800-248-1078 or calling 2-1-1 toll free.

### **Medical Power of Attorney**

On March 23, 2010, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act amended sections of the federal Fostering Connections to Success Act that requires states to ensure that youth aging out of substitute care have information about the importance of having a health care power of attorney and the importance of designating an individual to make health care treatment decisions on behalf of the youth. During the development of the youth's transition plan and within 90 days before a youth leaves care, youth in CPS substitute

care are provided with information regarding designating a medical power of attorney to make health care treatment decisions on behalf of the youth.

### **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, Texas Foster Care Handbook for Youth, links to the Transition Centers, and other useful information. It is also the location of the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) survey. This past fiscal year, major renovations were made to the site for easier access to information. Texas 211, a program of the Texas Health and Human Services Commission, provides Texas citizens connect to over 60,000 state and local health and human services programs by phone or internet. Youth formerly in foster care can simply call or enter their zip code on-line and obtain information on multiple services offered in their area. The website can be found at: [www.texasyouthconnection.org](http://www.texasyouthconnection.org).

The Texas Youth Hotline (1-800-210-2278) is an ongoing resource to increase youths' 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 Foster Care Handbook for Youth, and the DFPS website.

### **ACCESS GRANTED - Texas Foster Care Handbook for Youth**

The Texas Foster Care Handbook for Youth was originally published in May 2004 and was developed by a committee that consisted of PAL staff and the Statewide Youth Leadership Council. In January 2011, CPS released an updated version of the handbook that involved feedback and ideas from youth in foster care and CPS youth specialists on the current content of the handbook. These youth worked in collaboration with DFPS staff and an independent graphic designer to ensure that youth in foster care are provided with a fun, youth-friendly handbook that contains as much information as possible that children and youth will need while in the conservatorship of DFPS.

### **Extended Care and Return to Care Brochure**

A brief program description regarding the Extended Foster Care and Return to Care program has been combined into one brochure for distribution to youth transitioning from licensed foster care. These brochures are provided to youth at least 90 days before turning age 18 and upon leaving foster care.

### **Youth Specialists and the Youth Leadership Council**

Beginning in fiscal year 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. The statewide Youth Leadership Council is made up of youth from each region currently in foster care or who recently left care. The purpose of the Youth Leadership Council 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 Statewide Youth Leadership Council last met on October 23, 2010. They meet on a regular (quarterly) basis and at times most convenient to the youth. Major achievements of the Statewide Youth Leadership Council from October 2005 to the present include:

- Improvements to the statewide newsletter for youth, providers, and other stakeholders
- Improvements to the DFPS youth-friendly website (Texas Youth Connections)
- Improvements to the transition plan and policy
- Recommendations to the revision of the Texas Foster Care Handbook for Youth
- Input in the Extended Care and Return to Care programs
- Input into the Foster Care Redesign initiative
- Input into Fostering Connections initiative
- Input into the National Youth in Transition Database
- Input on the H.B. 1912 subcommittee workgroups

### **National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD)**

The National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) is a data collection system created to track independent living services and states successes in preparing youth for the move from foster care into adulthood. Texas will survey youth who are in foster care when they are age 17 and then conduct follow-up surveys of some youth at age 19 and again at age 21. Data collection began October 1, 2010.

### **2010 Annual Random Youth Survey**

The Annual Random Youth Survey, the focus of this report, is one of the services provided by Transitional Living Services program.

## **Conclusion**

DFPS continually seeks the input of youth in foster care to improve the delivery of DFPS services. To that end, several efforts are being made to enhance services for the youth in care who are preparing for adult living.

Based on feedback from youth specialists and PAL staff, DFPS made several improvements to the survey tool for the fiscal year 2010 Annual Random Youth Survey. DFPS also made efforts to improve the timeliness of initial contact with youth to ensure the data collected reflects their most current placement, conducted the surveys on weekends and after school/work hours when youth are more readily available, tracked attempted youth contacts, and sought to improve representation of youth in residential treatment centers.

While youth continue to express the desire for more flexibility in funding, the PAL and Educational Training Voucher 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 Educational Training Voucher program. Therefore, while DFPS cannot increase or alter the funding methodology, continued efforts to guide youth through the process are made through the Transitional Living Services program.

Ensuring that youth receive the information they need about programs, support services, and benefits available to them to help prepare for adulthood is a priority for DFPS. Youth in care receive information regarding services and benefits available to them before, during, and at the conclusion of their involvement in the PAL program. Further, DFPS will continue to inform youth in foster care through transition planning meetings, Circles of Support, youth events, and teen conferences, as well as through the information packet given to youth in care 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 the services available to them. Several youth indicated that certain services had not been received despite the fact that they participated in a class where information on those same services was made available. This suggests the need to review the curriculum and make adjustments for the various learning styles of youth to improve retention.

Regions continue to explore potential mentoring programs and collaborations that will utilize both formal (e.g., Big Brothers/Big Sisters) and informal (e.g., church members, teachers, and coaches) youth mentors. The involvement of DFPS youth specialists increases the chances of a positive mentor relationship through the development of regional youth leadership councils. These councils support mentoring relationships by engaging alumni and youth in joint activities.

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 gather youth input will inform ongoing program improvements. DFPS continues to work towards implementing changes in both policy and practice to ensure staff are taking the extra step to improve transitional living services for youth. The efforts of DFPS to create and continuously improve programs, services, and activities for transitioning youth represent a larger commitment to deliver the highest quality of care for vulnerable Texans.

## Appendix A

### A Report on Surveyed Youth in Foster Care FY 2009

#### 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 within Child Protective Services (CPS). The Transitional Living Services Program 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. The Transitional Living Services Program also supports youth who have aged out of foster care during their young adult years. Programs and services provided through the Transitional Living Services Program include:

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

This report discusses the results of two surveys of youth in foster care: the Annual Random Youth Survey and the Youth Questionnaire. Additionally, this report describes the ongoing efforts of CPS to improve services to transitioning youth. The results of the survey and questionnaire are shared with community partners, CPS management and staff, and youth in foster care for purposes of further improving the foster care experience for all children and youth.

##### **Annual Random Youth Survey**

The Annual Random Youth Survey is required by Senate Bill 6, (79<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislature, 2005). Youth at least 14 years old receiving substitute care services were randomly selected from the foster care population. Three hundred fifty-six youth throughout the state were asked about the quality of the substitute care services and programs, about recommended improvements to support youth in care, and about other factors DFPS considers relevant to program enhancement. Substitute care services were grouped into four categories: 1) employment, financial and educational information; 2) resources, family and health information; 3) the adoption process; and 4) services and training.

- **Employment, Financial and Educational Information:** Questions for this category of services gathered responses on youth employment, Social Security, educational financial aid, and status within a formal educational process. The results show that:
  - Only four percent were currently employed;
  - Sixteen percent were employed on a part-time basis;

- Ninety percent did not receive Social Security benefits;
  - Ninety-six percent were enrolled in some type of formal educational process but only four percent received additional educational financial aid.
- **Resources, Family and Health Information:** Information provided by the youth showed the following:
    - Twelve percent have, at some point, been referred for substance abuse services.
    - Eighteen percent have been confined to jail/prison/juvenile detention.
    - Four percent of youth aged 17 or older have become parents.
    - Ninety-nine percent are on Medicaid, while only five percent have additional health insurance.

When asked if the youth had ever experienced homelessness, 14 percent stated that they had. Eighty percent of these youth indicated that their experience with homelessness occurred two or more years ago.
  - **Adoption Process:** One set of questions asked youth who had participated in the adoption process to rate their experiences. Of the 24 percent who indicated that they had participated in the adoption process:
    - Twenty-six percent rated the process as “poor” to “very poor;”
    - Thirty-six percent rated it as “adequate;” and
    - Thirty-eight percent rated the process as “good” to “very good.”
  - **Services and Training:** The final set of questions focused on the services and training provided while in foster care. High percentages of youth rated the following services from “fair” to “outstanding” in quality.
    - Life skills (63 percent)
    - Counseling/Therapy (76 percent)
    - Education services (40 percent)

These findings are consistent with the results from last year's survey (see the 2008 report<sup>7</sup>). However, as the data indicate, more than one-fourth of the youth participating in the adoption process rate it poorly. Poor ratings were also assigned by five percent of youth to counseling/therapy. One percent of the youth rated life skills training poorly and one percent found educational training to be poor.

### **Youth Questionnaire**

The Youth Questionnaire was created by alumni of the Texas foster care system and CPS staff to obtain feedback from youth upon being discharged from care. 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. The primary focus is on those individuals who assisted youth in foster care rather than the services received while in care. A total of 414 questionnaires were received in the latter half of FY 2008 and through October of FY 2009.

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<sup>7</sup> The FY 2007 report can be found: [http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/documents/Child\\_Protection/pdf/2008-09-01\\_Youth\\_Survey\\_Report.pdf](http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/documents/Child_Protection/pdf/2008-09-01_Youth_Survey_Report.pdf)

- Seventy-one percent of the exit survey respondents indicated they were either “satisfied” or “extremely satisfied” with their last placement;
- Seventy-three percent preferred a foster home placement to a group home placement;
- Seventy-one percent rated their last placement as being helpful in dealing with problems; and
- Seventy-four 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 services and benefits available to them. However, comments made in the qualitative sections suggest that improvement is still needed within the program for service enhancement. Based on youth comments, areas for improvement include:

- An increase in the time and attention provided by caseworkers;
- Smaller caseloads to accommodate more access to caseworkers;
- Provide more information about all options available to youth when they exit foster care;
- Improve responsiveness of caseworkers when youth voice concerns and opinions;
- Provide more advice from adults (caseworkers, counselors, mentors, etc.) in order for youth to make their own informed decisions;
- Increase training to prepare youth for adult living; and
- Make clear the processes for securing financial and health benefits.

DFPS continues to gather information from youth using surveys, forums and conferences. In addition, the Transitional Living Services Program continuously strives to improve and expand services in order to ensure that more youth receive services that are necessary to successfully transition to adulthood. The Annual Random Youth Survey, together with the Youth Questionnaire, provide valuable feedback that will be used to improve the services for youth transitioning to adult living.