

Improving the Quality of Services to Youth in Substitute Care

A Report on Surveyed Youth in Foster Care FY 2009

Texas Department of Family and Protective Services

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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, (79th 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 report¹). 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.

- 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;

¹ The FY 2007 report can be found: http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/documents/Child_Protection/pdf/2008-09-01_Youth_Survey_Report.pdf

- 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.

Improving the Quality of Services to Youth in Substitute Care

Overview

Since the passage of Senate Bill 6 (79th Legislative session, 2005), DFPS continues to undertake several activities designed to improve the overall preparation for adult living provided to 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 2009, DFPS conducted two surveys of youth in Texas foster care. The first survey, the Annual Random Youth Survey, is conducted annually from a pool of randomly selected youth in 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. The second survey is the optional Youth Questionnaire. This questionnaire, administered upon discharge from foster care, is part of an ongoing effort to gather feedback about the quality of a youth's most recent placement and how that placement helped prepare the youth for adult living. In addition, the questionnaire obtains information about the adults who were of assistance to the youth.

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 Texas Legislature, 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."²

In response to Senate Bill 6, DFPS also developed the Transitional Living Services Program (TLSP). The goal of the Transitional Living Services Program is to ensure

² Legislation regarding some services can be located in Senate Bill 6, Section 1.51 (79th Legislature, 2005; Texas Family Code, Subchapter B, Chapter 264, Section 264.121.).

greater consistency and quality in services to foster youth. The annual youth survey results provide feedback for continuous quality improvements to the Transitional Living Services Program.

This report will summarize the results of the two surveys conducted in 2009 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

In response to Senate Bill 6, the Annual Random Youth Survey was developed with input from alumni of the Texas foster care system and CPS staff. The current version of the survey was modified in order to capture data required by the Federal government's National Youth in Transition Database initiative. These modifications do not detract from the Legislative intent in Senate Bill 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 July and October 2009, Regional Youth Specialists contacted a group of randomly selected youth ages 14 to 17 by phone and completed 356 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, access to financial and health benefits, and the adoption process. They were also asked to provide suggestions for improvement of these services. Additionally, youth were asked basic questions about their experiences with homelessness, substance abuse services, and incarceration.

The survey questions were grouped using 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 33 to 39 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 for the youth responding with either a Yes or No.

Since all survey youth are either underage or still in school if over 18, it is not surprising that the majority (96 percent) of the youth surveyed were currently enrolled in some type of formal educational process. A small percentage (4 percent) were employed full time.

Table 1

Item	Response Yes	Response No
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Employed full time	4% (14)	96% (341)
Employed part time	16% (55)	84% (292)
On-the-job training in last year	22% (77)	78% (276)
Currently receiving Social Security payments	9% (31)	90% (315)
Currently receiving educational financial aid to cover educational expenses	4% (14)	96% (337)
Receiving any financial resources or support from other sources not noted above	14% (49)	84% (294)
Currently enrolled in and attending high school, GED classes, post-high school vocational training or college	96% (340)	4% (14)

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-one youth (93.5 percent) responded in the affirmative, 22 (6.2 percent) said no, and one youth (.3 percent) declined to answer.

Table 2

	Have you ever been ...	Have you ever been ...	If yes, within the last two years?
	Yes	No	Yes
Homeless?	14% (49)	85% (301)	18% (9)
Referred for Alcohol/Drug Abuse Assessment or Counseling?	12% (38)	88% (273)	50% (19)
Confined to jail/prison/juvenile detention for alleged crime?	18% (55)	82% (255)	58% (32)
Given birth or fathered a child that was born?*	4% (9)	96% (241)	44% (4)

* Only asked of youth aged 17.

While Table 2 shows responses to questions about homelessness, substance abuse services, and criminal behaviors, Table 3 reflects information gathered about access to health insurance.

None of the 16 youth who stated that they have insurance in addition to Medicaid are employed full-time and only three are employed part-time. As such, any additional insurance for most of the Medicaid-covered youth is non-employer related.

Table 3

Item	Response	Response	Response
	Yes	No	Don't Know
Are you on Medicaid?	99% (348)	1% (5)	Not an option
Have health insurance other than Medicaid?*	5% (16)	76% (253)	19% (63)
* If yes to other health insurance, does it cover:			
Medical services?	94% (15)		
Mental health services?	56% (9)		38% (6)
Prescription drugs?	69% (11)	6% (1)	13% (2)

* One respondent declined to answer

Survey Category 3 - The Adoption Process

Twenty-four percent of the responding youth (n=82) participated in the adoption process and were asked to rate the quality of the adoption services they received.

Results: As shown in Table 4, 76 of 82 youth rated their adoption experiences. Thirty-eight percent rated the adoption process as good to very good, 36 percent rated it as adequate, and 26 percent rated the experience as poor to very poor.

Table 4

Adoption	Very Good-Good	Adequate	Poor-Very Poor
How do you rate the adoption process?	38% (29)	36% (27)	26% (20)

When asked in open-ended questions about the adoption process, several said they were happy with their new families and that the process worked very well for them. Others stated that they had little choice in the adoption process and that caseworkers often did little to explain the options available to them. The youth also felt that the process took too long and that there was no follow-through. These results suggest improvements in communication are needed throughout the adoption process to allow for more youth interaction.

Youth also expressed fear and doubt that someone would not want to adopt an older child. Some said they did not want to be adopted because they were fearful of losing health benefits upon being adopted. Some youth speculated that they may not be as emotionally connected with their adoptive family as they are with their biological family.

Survey Category 4 - Services and Training

Results: Youth were asked about three broad categories of services and trainings. One category--Life Skills Training--includes training on health and safety, housing, transportation, job readiness, financial management, life decisions, responsibility, and personal and social relationships. A second category--Educational Services Training--

includes vocational training and assessment, Graduate Equivalence Diploma (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 services categories were rated by the youth on a quality scale. The options available included ratings of poor, fair, good, and outstanding quality. For youth who did not receive specific categories of services, a "did not receive" response was provided. Detailed data on the specific support service categories are shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Item	Response	Response	Response
	Outstanding -Fair	Poor	Did Not Receive
Life Skills Training	63% (225)	1% (2)	35% (123)
Educational Services Training	40% (143)	1% (3)	58% (202)
Counseling/Therapy/ Mentoring Services	76% (271)	5% (19)	18% (63)

Several youth provided comments and suggestions for improving support services. Youth cited a need for more caseworkers and a need to have more personal time with caseworkers. Youth felt that, because of high caseloads, workers were unable to give them personal attention and were unresponsive to their needs. The youth wanted workers to listen and allow the youth to have more autonomy in their lives.

Some respondents were unsatisfied with their foster care. They felt that CPS should have a more rigorous screening process for foster parents. Additionally, several respondents felt that CPS should try to keep siblings together, or at least give the youth the freedom to visit their families.

There also appears to be a need for additional education services and information on the day-to-day difficulties of adulthood. Youth felt a particular need to have more college preparation classes, instruction on financial planning, driver's education, and housing and job information. Several youth cited their financial situations as problematic and desired more money to spend at their own discretion.

Youth Questionnaire

Youth leaving care are asked to complete 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 affords youth the opportunity to comment on the quality of their most recent placement and indicate if that placement helped prepare them for adult living. The focus of the questionnaire is on that particular placement and on the individuals who assisted youth in foster care rather than on the services they received while in care. A total of 414 questionnaires were received from youth who exited care in the latter half of

FY 2008 and through October of FY 2009. A five point helpfulness scale with anchors of extremely helpful and extremely unhelpful were used to gather responses to all but one item on the questionnaire. The remaining item used a satisfaction scale with extremely satisfied and extremely unsatisfied anchors.

The questionnaire recorded the respondents' views on their last placement, their preferences for foster home or foster group home living, and the quality of assistance offered them by their CPS caseworkers, Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), therapists, mentors, and attorneys ad litem.

Results: Overall, youth provided positive feedback about their last placement and the assistance they received (see Table 6). When asked, "How satisfied were you with your last placement?" Seventy-one percent responded that they were satisfied or extremely satisfied. Eighteen percent were somewhat or extremely unsatisfied. A smaller percentage (10 percent) reported being neither satisfied nor unsatisfied.³ Seventy-three percent preferred a foster home placement to a group home placement.

When asked if their last placement helped them deal with problems, 71 percent of youth rated their last placement as being extremely helpful or somewhat helpful in that regard. A higher percentage (74 percent) reported that their last placement was extremely or somewhat helpful in preparing them for adulthood.

³ Due to rounding of the numbers, totals will not necessarily equal 100 percent.

Table 6

Items	Extremely-Somewhat Satisfied/Helpful	Neither Satisfied/Helpful Nor Unsatisfied/Unhelpful	Extremely-Somewhat Unsatisfied/Unhelpful
How satisfied were you with your last placement?	71%	10%	18%
How much did your last placement help you deal with problems?	71%	13%	16%
How well did your last placement prepare you for adulthood?	74%	11%	16%

Youth were asked about the helpfulness of staff during their last placement, including foster parents, caseworkers and other support staff involved in their cases. As shown in Table 7, placement staff, caseworkers, and therapists were most helpful.

Attorneys ad litem were reported as being somewhat or extremely helpful by 39 percent of the youth who had contact with, or were knowledgeable of the attorneys ad litem. Thirty percent of the respondents had not had contact with their attorney ad litem. Another 15 percent of the surveyed youth were unaware of the attorney ad litem, however some youth may never have had an ad litem as these attorneys are often dismissed from the suit when DFPS takes Permanent Managing Conservatorship of a child or youth.

Table 7⁴

How helpful was:	Extremely-Somewhat Helpful	Neither Helpful Nor Unhelpful	Extremely-Somewhat Unhelpful	Not Applicable	
How helpful were your staff at your last placement?	82%	6%	13%	0%	
CPS caseworker?	73%	8%	19%	0%	
CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate)?	46%	9%	12%	33%	
Therapist?	65%	10%	13%	13%	
Big Brother/Big Sister or Mentor?	34%	6%	6%	53%	
				Did not have contact	Did not know I had one
Attorney ad litem?	39%	6%	11%	30%	15%

Qualitative Results: Respondents stated that it was important for staff and foster parents to allow youth to develop responsibility. Many youth expressed a desire to practice skills before leaving their placements. Some youth indicated that they were not given opportunities to assume adult responsibilities such as purchasing food, paying bills, driving cars, and managing money. Some requested more freedom to seek jobs.

Youth expressed the need for additional preparation for job training and job searching as well as a need for more skills assessments. Youth specified the need for more money management preparation, and assistance on college preparation. Youth wanted more assistance from Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) classes and from their placements and caseworkers. In addition, youth expressed a desire for mentors that have been through the foster care system. Such mentors have a greater understanding of the youths' experiences and can provide advice based upon their own experiences in the foster care system.

⁴ Note that with the “Not-Applicable” responses removed, the “extremely or somewhat helpful” percentages increase as follows: CASA = 68 percent, therapist = 74 percent, and Big Brother or Sister = 73 percent.

Youth who preferred a foster family home living arrangement stated that these homes provided a more family-like environment. Several youth indicated that they were given more one-on-one attention in the foster family home. These same youth reported they were allowed to attend public school, participate in after-school activities, and interact with other youth outside the family setting. In addition these youth felt loved and cared for by their foster families. The youth felt this type of living arrangement provided them with feelings of a normal family environment.

Individuals who preferred foster group home living arrangements felt they were not forced to build a bond with foster parents. Rather, they wanted to establish relationships with peers and learn from each other's experiences. These youth 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.

As reported above, 73 percent of the respondents rated their CPS caseworkers as "extremely or somewhat helpful". However, comments received on the youth questionnaire indicated dissatisfaction with the lack of caseworker contact and involvement in the youths' everyday lives. Youth would like to keep the same caseworker and requested that their caseworker be more available. Youth also suggested that caseworkers be given smaller caseloads in order to meet the needs of the youth. Many youth wanted a stronger emphasis placed on preventing sibling group separation and ensuring more visitations with biological family members.

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, 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 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, youth felt education was lacking in the areas of college prep classes, financial planning, and driver's education. Housing and job information were inadequate according to some youth.

With regard to financial benefits and access to benefits, a number of suggestions were received to improve the financial services available to youth. Accordingly more work is needed to ensure that youth are aware of, and have access to, available financial programs.

Since information on support services, financial benefits, and the adoption process are addressed by the PAL 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 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. PAL is required for youth 16 and 17 years of age and is optional for 14 and 15 year olds based on availability of funding. Therefore, some 14 and 15 year old youth may not yet be informed of the benefits and services for transitioning youth.

Current Transitional Living Services Program Efforts

DFPS provides programs and services for youth aging out of care through the Transitional Living Services Program. The Transitional Living Services Program, within 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 21, 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, 2005). During the 81st Legislative Session, House Bill 1912 directed DFPS to expand the Transitional Living Services Program to include youth 14 years of age and older. The bill also required DFPS foster care providers to provide or assist youth in obtaining experiential life skills for purposes of improving their transition to independent living. Furthermore, a September 1, 2010 report to the Legislature will provide stakeholder workgroup recommendations for modifying the PAL curriculum to include online training options and additional training modules that meet individual youth needs.

It is important that DFPS establish 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:

- PAL services;
- Education services;
- Transition planning;
- Youth transition centers;
- Circles of Support;
- Extended care and return to care programs;
- STAR Health and transitional Medicaid;
- Health care benefits for former foster youth in Higher Education;
- 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 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 that 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 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, 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 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, 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 \$5000 financial assistance per year to help them reach their post-secondary educational goals. In FY 2008, 654 young people participated in the Educational Training Voucher Program in Texas, as compared to 610 participants in FY 2007 and 435 participants in FY 2006. DFPS recently outsourced administration of the Educational Training Voucher Program to Baptist Child and Family Services-Health and Human Services of San Antonio. The

contract between Baptist Child and Family Services-Health and Human Services and DFPS is effective from June 1, 2009 through September 30, 2010.

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 tuition and fee waivers cover the cost of public post-secondary education in colleges, universities, or vocational programs. Tuition and fee waiver exemptions are available for youth who were formally in foster care or who were adopted from foster care. For 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.

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

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. 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.

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 an array of comprehensive 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 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 into Center services. 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.

During the 81st legislative session, \$200,000 was appropriated to expand transition centers in Texas through one-time \$25,000 developmental grants. Eight (8) communities were identified as areas to expand transition centers. These areas include:

- Region 1 (Amarillo/Dalhart)
- Region 2 (Abilene/Wichita Falls)
- Region 4 (Tyler/Longview)
- Region 9 (Midland/Odessa) and
- Major urban areas in Tarrant, Lubbock, Cameron, and Hidalgo counties.

These Centers are expected to become operational in fiscal years 2010 and 2011.

Circles of Support

Circles of Support 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 Circles of Support 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.

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 to receive extended care services 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 when the youth meets the following provisions:
- Attend full-time high school regularly up to the end of the month of their 22nd birthday; or
- 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 21st birthday. (The number of hours enrolled must be acceptable to the department and consistent with the transition plan.); or
- Attend full time GED classes regularly up to the end of the month of their 19th birthday. (The number of hours enrolled must be acceptable to DFPS and consistent with the transition plan); or
- Allows for admission to a college or to a vocational program not to exceed 3 ½ months following the end of the month in which they graduate from high school or complete the GED.

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 in order to:

- Attend full-time high school regularly up to the end of the month of their 22nd birthday; or
- 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 21st birthday. (The number of hours enrolled must be acceptable to the department and consistent with the transition plan.); or
- Attend full-time GED classes regularly up to the end of the month of their 21st birthday. (The number of hours enrolled must be acceptable to the department and consistent with the transition plan.); or
- 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 21st birthday.

This opportunity became effective November 1, 2007 for youth 18 to 20 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 worker, other DFPS staff, or Statewide Intake to initiate services.

With the implementation of Fostering Connections, beginning October 1, 2010, a youth who ages out of foster care at age 18 will continue to be eligible for extended foster care provided the youth is:

- Regularly attending high school or enrolled in a program leading toward a high school diploma or high school equivalence certificate; or
- Regularly attending an institution of higher education or a post-secondary vocational or technical program; or
- Actively participating in a program or activity that promotes, or removes barriers to, employment;
- Employed for at least 80 hours per month; or
- Incapable of doing any of the above due to a documented medical condition.

STAR Health and Transitional Medicaid

Senate Bill 6 (79th Legislature, 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 foster care, and young adults who have left foster care but continue to receive Medicaid services. HHSC contracted with Superior HealthPlan Network to provide and coordinate healthcare services for current and former foster 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 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.

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

Senate Bill 10 (80th Legislature, 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 32.0247, and are enrolled in a 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 on their 18th 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; and
- 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.

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. The website can be found at: 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 Youth Foster Care Handbook, and the DFPS website.

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. A curriculum was designed and launched as Basic Skills Development 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. 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 Youth Leadership Council 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*⁵, Extended Care, Return to Care, and the development of the Texas youth-friendly website.

The Statewide Youth Leadership Council last met in October 2009. Some of the areas covered in the meeting included:

- Robin Chandler, Legislative Director for Representative Eddie Rodriguez, presented to the group about House Bill 1912 and received input about the transition services the council members received or are currently receiving.
- Amy Fitzgerald, Supreme Court of Texas Permanent Judicial Commission for Children, Youth and Families, collected information from the council members through a written survey and group questions. Information collected will be useful in determining whether children and parents receive adequate legal representation in child protection cases, identifying opportunities for improvement in court procedures and efficiencies, developing recommendations for alleviating fiscal impact to county budgets and facilitating discussion of best practices among practitioners, parents and children.
- Council members provided input for the t-shirt selection for the Statewide PAL event college conference at Texas A&M University to be held February 5-6, 2010.
- Staff provided information about the National Youth in Transition Database and received ideas from council members about staying in contact with youth through social networking sites for data collection at 17, 19 and 21 years of age.

⁵ CPS Policy outlining the protections provided to foster youth.

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 foster care who are preparing for adult living.

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

Comments provided in the survey responses highlighted the expectation of the youth that the Transitional Living Services Program strives to meet its goal of providing consistent 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 in a shorter period of time, 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 for programs, support services, and the benefits available to prepare for adulthood is a priority. Youth in foster care receive information regarding services and benefits available to them before, during, and at the conclusion of their involvement in the PAL program. Furthermore, DFPS will continue to inform foster youth through 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 the services 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 information on those same services was made available. This suggests the need to review the curriculum in light of the various learning styles of youth. Adjustments to how this information is disseminated are expected 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 their 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 need for increased access to their caseworkers, DFPS has implemented a weekly performance report that measures the face-to-face contacts between caseworkers and youth in foster care. Since initial implementation, the rate at which caseworkers visit youth in care has more than tripled and the contacts have remained at high levels. Policy also has been revised to ensure quality and variety of contacts. Also to address youths' concerns regarding the ability to reach their caseworkers at work, DFPS began providing state issued cellular phones to all caseworkers. This decision also costs far less than the current mode of reimbursing caseworkers for business use of personal cellular phones.

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 transition 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.