

## **Fostering Youth Transitions: House Bill 336 Summary**

The Idaho Foster Youth Advisory Board is advancing [House Bill 336](#), a bill that would support foster youth transitions into adulthood and update laws pertaining to qualified congregate care or group homes. The proposed legislation consists of two sections that accomplish the following:

**1. Advancing Options to Extend Care: Allows the state to better support successful transitions out of foster care and into adulthood by providing the option to extend care until they turn 21.**

- Extending the foster care age in Idaho statute will allow youth to choose to stay in care if they meet certain eligibility, such as working or attending post-secondary education.
- The choice of whether to extend care is entirely up to foster youth. By choosing to stay in care, youth will be able to draw down all of the benefits that come with being in foster care through age 20, including living expenses, work and training resources, and access to an independent living coach.
- Currently, Idaho does not provide significant or sustainable help during the first few years of transition from foster care to adulthood. Last year, 83 young people in Idaho were emancipated or aged out of foster care on their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.
- Studies show youth in extended care received more independent living services, progressed further in their education, had more access to health and mental health services, and experienced less economic hardship and involvement in the criminal justice system than did those who left care at age 18.

**2. Congregate Care Placements: Updates requirements for congregate care or group home placements and ensures that children who do not need this type of intense supervision are not kept in group settings.**

- If a child must be removed from home due to abuse or neglect, placement with relatives or foster parents should always be the top priority. For some children and youth with emotional and behavioral disturbance, placement in congregate care is necessary and appropriate.
- Today, Idaho has 14 in-state congregate care providers housing about 100 foster children and youth. The recommended updates come from a collaboration between congregate care providers, foster youth, the courts, tribal representatives, and child welfare experts.
- The specific congregate care updates will (1) set a shortened timeline for the department and courts to communicate and act on the child's behalf; (2) prioritize the best interest of the child when determining such placement; (3) require the department more closely monitor the child when in a group home; and (4) require ongoing evaluation of potential alternative placements such as family reunification, placement with a relative or foster family, or adoption.
- Grants are available to assist Idaho congregate care providers in meeting and maintaining qualification requirements.
- Without these changes, the ability of the state and congregate care programs to seek federal reimbursement for foster care placements will end as of September 30, 2021.

## **Fostering Youth Transitions: Advancing Options to Extend Care**

Idaho youth who “age out” of foster care at age 18 face significant challenges in meeting their needs for health care, education, employment, housing, and emotional support. **The Idaho Foster Youth Advisory Board is advancing a policy to allow the state to better support successful transitions out of foster care and into adulthood.**

### **❖ Transitioning into Adulthood without Family Support Can Be a Struggle for Foster Youth.**

All young people need healthy and permanent relationships with caring adults, reliable resources, and accessible opportunities that will ensure their well-being and success. Young people transitioning from foster care to adulthood need those essentials just as much as anyone else to navigate the twists and turns along the path to adulthood. But their course is often filled with even more obstacles and detours than the typical young person faces.

Without help from a parental figure in trying to find a place to live, staying in college, or buying a car, the lives of youth who age out of foster care can unravel quickly. About half of older teens age out of foster care versus being reunited or connected with a family. Last year, 83 young people in Idaho were emancipated or aged out of foster care on their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Currently, Idaho does not provide significant or sustainable help during the first few years of transition from foster care to adulthood. While Idaho does have a basic ‘Independent Living’ fund that youth can access at age 18 and as they transition away from foster care, the fund is limited and does not cover much more than a rental deposit and a few household supplies. New data confirm that unless policymakers, child welfare agencies, and advocates work to provide essential resources, adulthood will be tough for these young people.

### **❖ Idaho has the Opportunity to Provide Transition Supports to Foster Youth Until Age 21.**

The Fostering Connections Act of 2008 gave states the option to extend foster care up to age 21 and receive federal Title IV-E reimbursement for costs associated with supports for young people choosing to remain in care. Today, 25 other states have enacted this optional provision to extend foster care and connect youth to family, housing, employment, health care, and education.

If Idaho updates its statute to allow for the option to extend foster care beyond age 18, the child welfare and judicial systems, along with youth and community partners, can begin the process of launching a program of core support services to help young people who age out of foster care to bridge more successfully to adulthood.

#### **Specific goals of allowing the option to extend the foster care age until age 21 include:**

- Foster youth will be able to maintain a safety net of support while experiencing independence in a supervised living environment;
- Foster youth will have more time to obtain education and employment training, address the effects of trauma and develop permanent connections to supportive adults; and
- Foster youth will have the opportunity to gain the knowledge and skills needed for self-sufficiency and successful transition into adulthood.

The choice of whether to extend foster care beyond age 18 is entirely up to foster youth. The optional support is available to youth between the ages of 18 and 21 that meet certain eligibility:

- Working toward completion of high school or equivalent program (e.g. GED); or
- Enrolled in college, community college or a vocational education program; or
- Employed at least 80 hours a month; or
- Participating in a program designed to assist in gaining employment; or
- Unable to do one of the above requirements because of a documented medical condition.

❖ **Youth Choosing to Extend Foster Care Experience Significant Positive Outcomes.**

Youth that choose to extend foster care experience significant positive results as they transition into adulthood. Studies show youth in extended care received more independent living services, progressed further in their education, had more access to health and mental health services, and experienced less economic hardship and involvement in the criminal justice system than did those who left care at age 18. Specific outcomes include:

- Reduce risk of being homeless by about 30 percent,
- Reduce likelihood of pregnancy before age 21 by 28 percent,
- Reduce odds of arrest by 41 percent,
- Reduce odds of conviction of a crime by 40 percent, and
- Increase likelihood of completing a year of college by 3.5 times.

❖ **COVID-19 is Adding to the Urgent Needs of Youth Transitioning Out of Foster Care.**

As the nation grapples with the public health crisis of COVID-19, child welfare systems must prioritize the urgent and unique needs of older youth in foster care and those who have aged out of foster care without permanent family connections. These young people, who are especially vulnerable, rely on foster care systems for their safety, health, and well-being.

Now is the time to leverage state policies and resources and maximize federal resources and opportunities to support all young people over 18 who exited foster care in meeting their basic needs until at least age 21. These resources and policies should allow older youth to enter or reenter extended foster care.

**Extending foster care services beyond age 18 helps young people and their communities and is associated with positive outcomes. Idaho should leverage state and federal Title IV-E supports to ensure every foster youth is provided with the opportunity to successfully transition into adulthood and thrive.**

## **Fostering Youth Transitions: Congregate Care Placements**

If a child must be removed from home due to abuse or neglect, placement in the least restrictive, most family-like environment available should always be the top priority, such as placement with relatives or foster parents. For some children and youth with emotional and behavioral disturbance, placement in congregate care is necessary and appropriate.

This bill updates requirements for congregate care placements and ensures that children who do not need this type of intense supervision are not kept in group settings. Today, Idaho has 14 in-state congregate care providers housing about 100 foster children and youth. The recommended updates come from a collaboration between congregate care providers, foster youth, the courts, tribal representatives, and child welfare experts. Grants are available to assist Idaho congregate care providers in meeting and maintaining qualification requirements.

**The term “congregate care” is used to describe a several placement types:**

- Group homes,
- Psychiatric institutions,
- Emergency shelters, and
- Qualified Residential Treatment Facilities (QRTP).

**Examples of when congregate care placement is necessary include:**

- Some youth need access to intensive therapy or intensive medical care that might not be available in a home placement;
- Some youth may have behaviors that would endanger family members in a home; and
- Certain youth have experienced such profound relationship loss, that they need time to grieve and recover before being ready to be placed in a family setting.

**Today, entities must meet specific requirements to become a qualified congregate care provider in Idaho:**

- Provide discharge planning and family-based aftercare supports for six months post discharge;
- Registered or licensed nursing or clinical staff;
- Family outreach and facilitate family participation in child’s treatment;
- Trauma-informed treatment model; and
- Meet licensing requirements and accreditation by approved entities.

**This bill would update laws pertaining to qualified congregate care or group homes for children in foster care:**

1. Set a shortened timeline for the department and courts to communicate and act on the child’s behalf;
2. Prioritize the best interest of the child when determining such placement;
3. Require the department more closely monitor the child when in a group home; and
4. Require ongoing evaluation of potential alternative placements such as family reunification, placement with a relative or foster family, or adoption.