

**INDEPENDENT LIVING SERVICES ADVISORY COUNCIL**

**2021 ANNUAL REPORT TO THE SECRETARY**

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## **Executive Summary**

Section 409.1451(7), Florida Statutes (F.S.) states, “The secretary shall establish the Independent Living Services Advisory Council for the purpose of reviewing and making recommendations concerning the implementation and operation of s. 39.6251 and the Road-to-Independence Program.” The 2021 Independent Living Advisory Council (the Council) is comprised of child welfare professionals from community-based care lead agencies (CBCs), direct service providers, advocates for youth in care, young adults who receive or have received services and funding through the Road-to-Independence Program, representatives from headquarters, the Department of Juvenile Justice, the Department of Education, youth advisory boards, CareerSource Florida, Inc., and the Statewide Guardian Ad Litem Office. The Department has designated the Council as one of Florida’s citizen review panels for the Federal Fiscal Year 2021, in support of the requirements of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act.

Section 409.1451(7)(b)(1.), F.S., states “The advisory council shall report to the secretary on the status of the implementation..., efforts to publicize the availability..., the success of the services..., problems identified..., and recommendations for department or legislative action.” During the 2020 Legislative Session, Senate Bill (SB) 80 amended s.409.1451(7)(b)(2.), F.S., impacting the Department of Children and Families’ (the Department) report to the Governor, the President of the Senate, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives, stating, “The report must also include the most recent data regarding the status of and outcomes for young adults who turned 18 years of age while in foster care, relating to education, employment, housing, financial, transportation, health and well-being, and connections, and an analysis of such data and outcomes.”

Over the past year, the Council listened to various presentations relevant to Postsecondary Education Services and Support (PESS) and Aftercare Services under the Road-to-Independence Program and Extended Foster Care (EFC), referenced in s. 39.6251, F.S. However, the information presented did not include recent or relevant data to fulfill the responsibilities added from SB 80 that became effective October 1, 2021. The Council has discussed a plan for next year to ensure the statutory mandated report include data informed recommendations.

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## **2021 Council Presentations**

Topics pertinent to independent living transition services were discussed throughout the year. The title of those presentations and a summary of the Council’s conclusions have been reduced to writing with the assistance of members of the Council.

1. February - My Pathway to Success Plan: Dietra Barfield

During the February Council meeting, members discussed the My Pathways to Success Plan (My Pathways) and how it is being implemented statewide. Children and Families Operating Procedure (CFOP) 170-17, Chapter 2, introduces the My Pathways as the universal form to be used during transition planning. The form is designed for a “youth or young adult ...to detail the goals, choices, and decisions for obtaining or maintaining the services necessary to successfully transition to adulthood.” My Pathways also provides details on the transition services outlined in the youth or young adult’s case plan and identifies and explains roles of the supportive adult or designated staff assisting in services.

Council members discussed present challenges to implementation. Barriers included youth partially or not completing the plan, lack of staff training on the subject matter, and comprehension of some subject areas. Suggestions to address implementation challenges were offered such as making the plan more youth friendly and adding sections to record follow ups to each goal. It was also proposed that in-service training be provided for staff on how to assist the youth with completing the My Pathways. The training should incorporate methods for improving youth engagement.

Although there was healthy and much needed discussion on the topic of transition planning, the Council was unable to effectively gauge the status of the implementation for young adults participating in EFC. There is no requirement for young adults in PESS or Aftercare Services to complete the My Pathways. The Council concluded that to better assess the execution of transition plans, agencies would need to communicate their day-to-day operation and present relevant data to reflect those eligible young adults were engaged in amending their My Pathways as they progressed through the program.

2. March - Formalizing Relationships and Ready for Life Brevard: John Watson

Preserving family relationships so that young adults have a permanent connection with at least one committed adult who provides a safe and stable parenting relationship is expressed in s. 409.1451, F.S., The Road-to-Independence Program. Section 409.1451(7)(b)(2), F.S., further states that the Department’s report, reflecting the Council’s recommendations, must also include the most recent data regarding the status of and outcomes for young adults relevant to connections.

In March, the Council had the opportunity to discuss permanent relationships for youth and how to effectively formalize them. To illustrate formalizing permanent connections and offer insight on how to incorporate into programming, Ready for Life Brevard was invited to present. Pamela M. Bress, Esquire - Executive Director, and Corrie Dunkin, Communications Operations Manager with Ready for Life Brevard Inc. talked about their mentor match program for young adults ages 15-25.

After their presentation, the Council asked the team several questions, including how this could be incorporated into a formalized agreement that could be implemented in other areas of the state. The conversation shifted to how the Council could suggest standardizing a formal process for establishing and maintaining permanent connections (referred to as a Permanent Connections Agreement) for youth transitioning to adulthood that could be utilized in Florida. Both Co-Chairs of the Council decided that having a follow-up meeting to analyze and discuss FosterClub's Permanency Pact would be beneficial to the Council's recommendation. The Council also mentioned the importance of tracking and recording the existence of these permanent relationships, whether that be through existing or additional surveys.

The Council concluded that while this is an essential topic for our young adults and one that we are interested in obtaining information from CBCs, there was no available data. Additional information is needed to strengthen the Council's 2020 recommendation to the Department to develop a workgroup to assist in the creation of a permanent connections agreement and a process for maintaining the relationships.

### 3. April - FosterClub's Permanency Pact and Relational Permanency: Thomas Fair

As a follow up to the March presentation, the Council invited the FosterClub's Director of Youth Programs and the Selfless Love Foundation's (SLF) Executive Director to present. FosterClub's presentation was requested to describe in more detail how the Permanency Pact works so that the Council could consider implementation in Florida. SLF partnered with FosterClub to further demonstrate the importance of relational permanency and the difference between legal permanency.

The Council discussed how permanent connections or supportive adults are currently being captured and what those relationships look like. It was noted that youth in foster care already have many connections from their home communities, like family, and often need assistance maintaining and possibly mending relationships of the past. The importance of discovering those potential supports was stressed.

A consensus was reached that there needs to be someone responsible or accountable for formalizing a permanent connections agreement and that caregivers, foster parents, or group home staff may not be the appropriate party to lead this activity. Policy and procedure would need to be drafted clarifying staff roles and responsibilities, ensuring that youth in transition at least reach relational permanence before leaving the foster care system.

### 4. May - PESS Transition and Campus Coaching: Christine Frederick

In May, the meeting goal was to focus on the transition to independence through PESS, discuss previous years' recommendations on the subject, and explore the effectiveness of

the postsecondary services through presentations from Christine Frederick, CEO of FLITE Center; Eileen Geisler, Aftercare Specialist for ChildNet; and Dr. Steve Rios, Senior Director of the Positive Pathways Program administered by Educate Tomorrow.

The Council learned about the collaboration in Broward County to better support local youth in transition. FLITE Center engages youth in care as they are aging out and works alongside ChildNet to ensure each youth has an approved housing plan centralized around their individual needs. FLITE Center discussed pieces of its comprehensive model for assuring youth are not homeless, even if they become ineligible for PESS, and tactics for working with youth to help them regain eligibility to bridge them back to PESS funding.

FLITE Center reported how this model could help other communities struggling to get youth to participate in PESS and with those challenged with finding sustainable housing for PESS youth. FLITE Center discussed its ability to leverage independent funders to help support innovative approaches to maintaining youth engagement and compliance.

During Dr. Steve Rios' presentation, the Council discussed that many of the same challenges that exist with housing also exist with education. There was also discussion about the need for clarification of responsibilities for the campus-based coaches or liaisons. They were provided with a 3-4-week training to better support the young adults with appropriate resources. There was also discussion about the need to look at which colleges the young adults are applying to attend and consider the housing options and apartment availability in the areas. There was further discussion about campuses becoming more aware of foster students who cannot leave campus during holiday breaks and how to better support them during that time. The last point discussed was recent legislation that allows youth under the age of 18, to receive a tuition waiver when they are trying to attend college early. This was previously a barrier that has now been addressed.

#### 5. June - Financial Literacy and Life Skills: Meliza Frias

Per s. 39.6035, F.S., "during the year after a child reaches 16 years of age, the department, and the community-based care provider, in collaboration with the caregiver and any other individual whom the child would like to include, shall assist the child in developing a transition plan. The transition plan must address specific options for the child to use in obtaining services . . . including financial literacy." Additionally, subsection (1)(c) specifically states that the Department must "provide information for the financial literacy curriculum for youth offered by the Department of Financial Services." Financial literacy is also included as part of Aftercare Services under s. 409.1451, F.S. Financial literacy encompasses one of the cornerstones of independent living skills to ensure youth achieve self-sufficiency. Therefore, the Council elected to have a presentation on the subject.

Ms. Regina Watson, Director of Independent Living Services at Camelot Community Care

in Hillsborough County presented on the topic. During the presentation Ms. Watson presented the Finance Your Future online tool. This financial literacy online platform was developed by Florida Department of Financial Services. The tool was created to be user-friendly and allows users to explore real world topics in financial literacy, such as the importance of saving, how credit cards work, or how to obtain a credit report. It also includes challenging games and activities for the youth to engage in hands-on learning.

Secondly, Ms. Watson discussed putting the tools into practice. Camelot has made efforts to integrate utilization of this resource into staff workflow, by completing the tool with the youth at their office, making it part of monthly training, assigning specific lessons to their young adults, and creating their own profiles to walk the youth through the lessons. The Council inquired whether the tool is geared to youth of all learning levels and Ms. Watson provided guidance on how to personalize the tool so that the lessons are specific to the youth's reading or comprehension level. This is vital as we serve youth with special needs who may require specialized accommodations.

Lastly, the Council discussed some of the difficulties experienced in their respective circuits with financial literacy. The consensus was that it is often challenging to get youth and young adults to use the tool and complete the lessons, despite some circuits offering incentives for the completion of the financial literacy course.

The Council concluded that this is an essential topic for our young adults and one that we are interested in obtaining more information from all circuits regarding participation rates in completing the Finance Your Future tool, lived-experience feedback from the youth that utilize it, whether it meets the needs of youth from all educational levels, how youth success is being tracked, and most importantly, whether the tool successfully educates our youth on key financial matters or how it can be improved from a young adult's perspective to better serve their needs.

#### 6. July - Aftercare Services: Raul Catuy

Cal Walton, the Statewide Youth and Young Adult Transition Services Specialist with the Department, provided an update to the Council on the status of Aftercare Services. His presentation provided an overview of the training and meetings that the statewide independent living points of contacts had in November and December 2020. The purpose was to discuss updates to the application and plan along with guidance detailed in CFOP 170-17.

Mr. Walton provided an overview of the results from the gathering of representatives from each CBC, youth with lived foster experience, and the Department's youth advisor. He presented concerns from the young adults about the aftercare application being confusing; therefore, a revision to Aftercare Services Application and Plan was drafted for amendment into the rules in Florida Administrative Code (F.A.C.).

During the presentation, Mr. Walton communicated that independent living stakeholders and staff provided input that the Department would consider in drafting relevant CFOP updates, including terminations, services, and timeframes. The hope is that these items will improve the implementation and operation of Aftercare Services.

In addition, there was a brief discussion comparing the My Pathways and the Aftercare Services Plan. The discussion related to similarities and duplicate request for information captured in both forms led to the suggestion of utilizing the My Pathway as the form used to detail a young adult's transition in lieu of developing a separate Aftercare Services Plan. No decisions were made to revise F.A.C., relevant to the proposed solutions, as further discussion and evaluation was needed.

Mr. Walton elaborated that Aftercare Services were statutorily intended to be short term and financial assistance in this program was designed to be used as a last resort, leveraging other community resources. During the discussion it was determined that many CBCs administered Aftercare Services differently, and possibly not as intended. The Council realized that more information was needed to determine how agencies are managing this program. Until there is clarity on agency's procedures for implementation, capacity, and resources, the Council cannot make recommendations to improve the effectiveness of Aftercare Services or the need for revisions to policies that outline the program.

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### **Council's Recommendation**

The Council has produced recommendations to the Department for consideration since 2006. Prior annual reports can be reviewed on the Department's Independent Living Services Publications & Reports webpage. That initial 2006 report alone hosted four recommendations for the legislature and 10 recommendations for the Department. After briefly reviewing previous reports, it appears all the Council's recommendations have received adequate Department response, but not all have been accepted or moved to action.

This year the Council discussed why many prior recommendations made to the Department had previously failed to move to action. The Council decided to focus on data-driven recommendations and solutions rather than directing attention to topics of concern. Recommendations based on data more accurately identify problems experienced with the services, as well as barriers to the effective and efficient integration of services. Additionally, data is imperative to validate the successes that the system of services has achieved.

The Council concluded that we could best meet statutory obligations by receiving feedback directly from the CBCs that serve our young adults. The Council is not equipped to conduct complex program evaluation and has limited information to complete a thorough review of



the implementation and operation of services. The Council acknowledges that the administration of services varies from area to area; thus, to make recommendations that can impact the needs of our young adults we must first begin by analyzing and gathering data regarding the CBCs current program practices.

Future presentations should provide information relevant to the administration of EFC, PESS, and Aftercare Services.

The Council is requesting that the Department require each CBC to provide the following information by January 31, 2022:

1. **Staffing Structure** Section 409.1451(7)(a), F.S., states “The advisory council shall keep the department informed of problems being experienced with the services, barriers to the effective and efficient integration of services and support across systems, and successes that the system of services has achieved.” By CBCs identifying the number of child welfare professionals dedicated to working with recipients of EFC, PESS, and Aftercare Services, the Council can gain insight to the capacity to serve, support, and reach all eligible young adults.
2. **Service Array** Section 409.1451(7)(b)(1), F.S., states “The advisory council shall report to the secretary on the status of the implementation of the Road-to-Independence Program, efforts to publicize the availability of the Road-to-Independence Program, the success of the services under the program...”. By CBCs providing this information the Council will gain insight into agencies and providers’ ability to provide a comprehensive array of accessible, individualized services to meet the unique needs of eligible young adults.
3. **Outcome Data** Section 409.1451(7)(b)(2), F.S., states “The report must also include the most recent data regarding the status of and outcomes for young adults who turned 18 years of age while in foster care, relating to education, employment, housing, financial, transportation, health and well-being, and connections, and an analysis of such data and outcomes.” The most recent and relevant data will allow the Council to begin assessing program outcomes, further assisting in the status of implementation and operation.
4. **Administration** Section 409.1451(7)(e), F.S., states “The advisory council shall be afforded access to all appropriate data from the department, each community-based care lead agency, and other relevant agencies in order to accomplish the tasks set forth in this section.” With the collection of relevant information on staffing structure, service array, and outcome data, the Council can truly begin to assist in analyzing the efficiency of EFC, PESS, and Aftercare Services.

## **2021 Council Members**

Brandie McCabe: Director of Youth Initiatives, Selfless Love Foundation (Co-Chair)

Christine Frederick: CEO, FLITE Center

Demarco Mott: Chair, Citrus FCN Youth Advisory Council

Dietra Barfield: Independent Living Manager, Safe Children Coalition

Dominic Watson: Executive Director, Neighbor to Family

Eileen Geisler: Independent Living Aftercare Specialist, ChildNet Broward

Eva Mae Sugg: Senior Program Attorney, Guardian ad Litem

Ginger Rockey-Johnson: Child Advocate Manager, Guardian ad Litem (Co-Chair)

Janelle King: Interagency Youth Engagement & Restorative Practices Specialist, DCF (Secretary)

Jared Ochs: Director of Communications and External Affairs, Florida Department of Education

John Watson: Youth Council Specialist, Selfless Love Foundation

Meliza Frias: Advocacy Manager, Florida Foster Care Review

Morgan Donovan: Career Development Manager, Embrace Families

Raul Catuy: CEO, Reconnecting the Dots LLC

Regina Watson: Director of Independent Living Services - Hillsborough County, Camelot Community Care

Sabrina Scott: Director of Independent Living, Vita Nova Inc.

Shauntraí Curry: Statewide Transition Coordinator, Florida Department of Juvenile Justice

Stephanie Lucas: Independent Living Specialist, Children's Network of Southwest Florida

Tara Thompson: Chief of Operations, Community Partnership for Children

Thomas Fair: Advocate

Warren Davis: Policy Analyst, Career Source Florida

*Special thanks to Mr. Cal Walton, Youth and Young Adult Transition Services Specialist, DCF, for his support.*



# **Response to the Independent Living Services Advisory Council 2021 Annual Report**

Department of Children and Families

December 31, 2021

Shevaun L. Harris

Secretary

Ron DeSantis

Governor

## INTRODUCTION

Since the establishment of the Independent Living Services Advisory Council (the Council) in 2002, the Council has provided recommendations concerning the implementation and operation of independent living services as part of a comprehensive report to the Legislature. As required in s. 409.1451(7), Florida Statutes (F.S.), the Department of Children and Families' (the Department) is submitting responses to the Council's recommendations as part of the Council's 2021 Annual Report, which covers the 2020-21 state fiscal year.

## ILSAC RECOMMENDATION FOR THE COLLECTION OF DATA RELATED TO STAFFING STRUCTURE, SERVICE ARRAY, OUTCOME DATA, AND ADMINISTRATION DATA FROM EACH COMMUNITY-BASED CARE (CBC) LEAD AGENCY

### DEPARTMENT RESPONSE

The Department supports the recommendation from the Council to obtain data and information from each CBC lead agency contracted with the Department. Therefore, the Department partnered with the Council to provide information and data to support their goal to enhance services provided to young adults in the independent living programs.

1. **Staffing Structure.** The Department shared the staffing structure of the CBCs with the co-chairs of the Council. The document outlines when independent living specialists are assigned as a secondary and primary worker within each CBC, as well as the capacity of staff that support the independent living population in each CBC catchment area.
2. **Service Array.** The Department shared the statewide CBC resource list maintained by the Department. This list outlines services and resources that the CBCs utilize within their catchment area to support the youth and young adults in their area. The listing includes education, employment, housing, mentoring, tutoring, mental health, substance abuse, and parenting resources. In addition, the list provides the type of life skills assessments and life skills programs.
3. **Outcome Data.** The Department initiated a Florida Safe Families Network (FSFN) change request form in May 2021 to create a report to capture data related to young adults ages 18-23 years which would include contact for seen/not seen; medical, dental, and vision appointments; education status; employment status; living arrangement/placement setting; type of program enrollments; identifying high risk behaviors; and completion of life skills assessments. The development of this report is currently pending.
4. **Administration.** The Department supports the use of data sharing. In addition, the Department is available to assist with data requests from the CBCs. The Department has already provided and will continue to provide to the Council, access to information to access and analyze the efficiency of the Departments post age 18 programs. The Department will continue to provide administrative support through the statewide Youth and Young Adult Transition Services Specialist and to the Council as appropriate.

### ADDITIONAL RESPONSE

With the passage of Chapter 2021-169, Laws of Florida (Senate Bill 80), section 414.56, Florida Statutes, was created establishing the Office of Continuing Care. The Office of Continuing Care offers free, one-on-one help for young people who are about to or have recently transitioned out of foster care, aiming to make the leap into adulthood a positive experience. Services are

designed to connect youth between the ages of 18 and 26 who have or will age out of foster care in Florida and include: connecting youth to existing resources in their area to help them thrive as an independent young adult, guiding youth in accessing special services available to former foster youth, and providing a support system to help these youth with the next steps on their path to adulthood. The Department will work in collaboration with ILSAC to inform youth of this valuable resource.