Youth Perspectives on the Family First Prevention Services Act

The Family First Prevention Services Act, enacted in February 2018, has triggered the most significant changes in child welfare policy and financing in decades. Young people who have experienced the foster care system have unique and important perspectives to contribute to the dialogue as Iowa takes steps to comply with and implement the new law. Over the summer, members of Insight considered the implications of major provisions of the Family First Act. These young adults strongly endorse the law’s emphasis on preserving and strengthening families, reducing the number and length of time youth are placed in large institutions, and extending supports to young adults who “age out” of the system to ensure their successful transition to adulthood.

Four key recommendations:

1. Ensure families of origin and relatives have the services that they need to prevent removal from the home or that allow relatives or fictive kin to become caregivers when removal is necessary.

2. Build capacity to offer high-quality alternatives to shelter and group care placements that meet the developmental and mental health needs of older youth.

3. Improve the quality of congregate care services. All foster care placements should be trauma informed and considered through an equity lens.

4. Take advantage of changes in the Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood by extending support to young people up to age 23.

Insight urges Iowa policymakers to take swift action to ensure the timely implementation of the Family First Act for the benefit of children, youth and families in Iowa.
1. Prevention Services

The Family First Act provides for federal cost-sharing of front-end prevention services. This funding becomes available only after a state limits congregate care placements. Insight believes that Iowa should implement prevention services as soon as possible and opposes delaying the congregate care limits.

Our Insights

- Improve the assessment process to ensure that the right resources and services are equitably provided to strengthen families while ensuring the safety and well-being of youth.
  - Incorporate both a youth and an equity lens when doing family assessments.
  - Insist on private conversations with young people, in addition to family interviews, when determining the need for prevention services or out-of-home placement.
  - Ensure that prevention services include evidence-based programs and mental health services for older youth.

2. Alternatives to Congregate Care

Changes in federal financing of foster care made by the Family First Act are intended to reduce lengthy placements of youth in large institutions, such as shelters and group care. Insight supports this policy and believes that increasing the availability of quality alternatives should be a high priority.

Our Insights

- Be more open to family members (and other adults known to the youth) as placement options, and provide financial and other support to make it possible for them to provide a home for a young person even if they aren’t licensed foster parents.
- Increase funding for foster parent recruitment and education efforts, including child-specific recruitment, and improve the placement process to include individualized matching of youth with foster homes.
- Require foster families to complete additional youth-informed training that covers adolescent development, trauma, and mental health issues before older youth can be placed with a non-relative foster family.

“WHEN WE LIMIT GROUP CARE,
THERE HAS TO BE A BETTER PLACE TO GO
— FOSTER PARENTS THAT UNDERSTAND
TRAUMA, MENTAL HEALTH, AND THAT WANT
AND KNOW HOW TO HELP TEENAGERS.”

Ask youth, not just parents, about people who could be a placement option.
In order to best support youth as they transition out of care, the state should evaluate the quality and effectiveness of placements and life skill opportunities for older youth. Insight urges the state to take advantage of the provision in the Family First Act allowing extension of services to age 23 under the Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood.

“Placing youth who have mental health issues with unprepared caregivers is detrimental to the youth.”

Insight members recognize that residential treatment services can be valuable for some youth who are involved in the child welfare system. The Family First Act requires that such services be provided by Quality Residential Treatment Programs. Insight believes that all foster care placements should be trauma-informed and considered through an equity lens.

3. Quality Residential Treatment
Insight members recognize that residential treatment services can be valuable for some youth who are involved in the child welfare system. The Family First Act requires that such services be provided by Quality Residential Treatment Programs. Insight believes that all foster care placements should be trauma-informed and considered through an equity lens.

Our Insights
- Implement quality assurance measures to ensure that appropriate trauma informed and mental health services are addressing the individual needs of each child.
- Evaluate if shelter and group care facilities are adhering to the reasonable and prudent parenting standard to provide normalcy for youth and require corrective action if necessary.
- Prioritize and provide funding to implement follow-up services to youth and their families for at least a year after a young person is discharged from a residential program.

4. Transition Services for Older Youth
In order to best support youth as they transition out of care, the state should evaluate the quality and effectiveness of placements and life skill opportunities for older youth. Insight urges the state to take advantage of the provision in the Family First Act allowing extension of services to age 23 under the Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood.

Our Insights
- Ensure that youth have stable housing before being discharged from care. Do not exit youth to homelessness.
- Make necessary changes and provide funding for the expansion of Chafee services to young people up to age 23.
- Make services more individualized and flexible as young people get older.

“Services need to be age appropriate and individualized in response to the unique strengths and needs of each young person.”

For youth ages 14-18
- Provide more experiential learning opportunities for young people to develop life skills.
- Increase utilization of Family Safety Risk and Permanency services to help youth prepare for the transition to adulthood.
- Improve Supervised Apartment Living placements and increase funding if necessary to ensure the safety and suitability of scattered site apartments.

For young adults age 18 and older
- Ensure that youth have stable housing before being discharged from care. Do not exit youth to homelessness.
- Make necessary changes and provide funding for the expansion of Chafee services to young people up to age 23.
- Make services more individualized and flexible as young people get older.
**Insight** is comprised of young people ages 18 - 26 who have experienced foster care and who want to make a difference for other youth. Members are passionate about improving Iowa’s child welfare and juvenile justice systems and advocating on behalf of young people who are still in care. Young people chose a tree for the Insight logo to symbolize the importance of having strong roots in family and community in order for youth to thrive.

Insight serves as an Advisory Board to the Youth Policy Institute of Iowa (YPII), meeting regularly to provide valuable input on programming, policy, and practice, and participating in a variety of forums to ensure that young people are part of the decision-making process.

“**IT’S NOT JUST ABOUT PASSING LAWS AND WRITING NEW POLICIES, IT’S THE IMPLEMENTATION.**”

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**Youth Policy Institute of Iowa**

was honored to support the young leaders of Insight as they considered the implications of the Family First Prevention Services Act and developed these recommendations. YPII is a nonprofit organization that concentrates on improving policies, programs and practices affecting young people transitioning from adolescence to adulthood, especially those who have been involved in Iowa’s child welfare or juvenile justice systems. The principles of authentic youth engagement, data-informed decision-making, and racial and ethnic equality and inclusion are foundational to YPII’s approach to programming and advocacy.

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