

BETTER FUTURES FOR FOSTER YOUTH POLICY TOOLKIT

Pre-Release Edition

Prepared by: The Fostered
Founder & Executive Director: Adrian Gaspar
Website: the-fostered.org
Email: adrian@the-fostered.org

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. About The Fostered
2. Introduction to the Toolkit
3. Pillar 1: Education Justice
4. Pillar 2: Health & Wellbeing Justice
5. Pillar 3: Legal & Transformative Justice
6. Pillar 4: Housing Justice
7. Pillar 5: Economic Justice
8. Pillar 6: Immigration Justice

ABOUT THE FOSTERED

The Fostered is a brand-new nonprofit organization founded and led by Adrian Gaspar, a former foster youth and experienced policy professional. Our mission is to drive transformative change that improves the educational, health, economic, legal, housing, and immigration outcomes for youth who have experienced foster care.

We are committed to collaboration, centering youth voices, and building sustainable systems that ensure all foster youth can thrive during and after care.

INTRODUCTION TO THE TOOLKIT

This pre-release version of the [BETTER FUTURES FOR FOSTER YOUTH POLICY TOOLKIT](#) outlines six interconnected pillars for systemic reform. The framework draws on research, lived experience, best practices in child welfare, and findings from national and state-level reports. Final content will be shaped through youth input, stakeholder feedback, and coalition collaboration during our **Future by Design** listening tour.

PILLAR 1: EDUCATION JUSTICE

Vision: Every young person in Texas’s foster care system will have equitable access to high-quality education, individualized supports, and pathways to postsecondary success—eliminating systemic barriers that currently depress academic achievement for youth in care.

CURRENT STATE

Foster youth in Texas face persistent educational disparities due to instability, trauma, and systemic breakdowns in coordination between child welfare and education systems.

- According to Texas DFPS data, **fewer than 50% of youth in foster care graduate high school on time**, and many leave care without a diploma or GED.
- Casey Family Programs found that **youth in foster care are twice as likely to be suspended or expelled** compared to their peers, and **only about 20% enroll in postsecondary education**.
- The **MD V. ABBOTT** federal litigation has repeatedly cited failures in DFPS and education agency collaboration, including inadequate “Child Find” efforts to identify students eligible for special education or Section 504 supports.
- Foster Care Liaisons, required by Texas Education Code, are often under-resourced and lack the authority or time to coordinate effectively between schools and DFPS caseworkers.
- National research shows that foster youth are significantly overrepresented in court-connected schools, where exclusionary discipline and justice involvement hinder learning opportunities. This highlights the need for education agencies and child welfare to share the responsibility for maintaining educational stability instead of treating it as a separate program.

Recent funding trends show a substantial rise in Texas’s investment in the Chafee Program and Education and Training Vouchers (ETVs), which increased from about \$13 million in SFY 2020 to over \$25 million in SFY 2022. This nearly 90% growth emphasizes both growing demand and a broader recognition of how essential postsecondary supports are in promoting stability and opportunity for youth aging out of care. However, without systemic infrastructure and interagency coordination, these funds could be underused or ineffective. A strategic plan is necessary to integrate educational supports, such as tuition waivers, ETVs, and trauma-informed academic advising, into a clear and accessible pathway to achieving credentials.

REFORM EFFORTS

Existing reforms have aimed to address gaps but remain fragmented:

- **Foster Care Liaisons:** Each school district is required to designate a liaison, but many juggle this responsibility with multiple other roles.
- **Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)** provisions: Intended to ensure educational stability, including school of origin provisions and immediate enrollment rights.
- **Higher Education Tuition & Fee Waivers:** Available for former foster youth, but low awareness and barriers in documentation limit uptake.
- **Local collaboratives** between school districts, DFPS, and court-appointed advocates (e.g., Texas CASA) have improved information-sharing but are not universal or consistently funded.

TRANSFORMATIVE EDGE OF REFORM

We must move beyond piecemeal fixes toward systemic alignment, treating foster youth educational outcomes as a shared, high-priority accountability measure across DFPS, TEA, and HHSC.

Key areas to push the reform edge:

- **Mandating joint accountability** between agencies for graduation, literacy, and postsecondary enrollment metrics.
- **Expanding trauma-informed training** to all educators who serve youth in care, drawing on Dr. Bruce Perry's neurodevelopmental research on how trauma disrupts brain function and learning.
- **Embedding mental health and academic supports** in schools, informed by Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) research that links multiple childhood traumas to long-term cognitive and health challenges.
- **Ensuring Child Find compliance:** Enforce and monitor identification of special education and Section 504 eligibility for all youth in care.

TRANSFORMATION EFFORTS

A truly transformed system would:

- **Create a Foster Youth Education Strategic Plan** co-developed by DFPS, TEA, HHSC, advocates, and youth, with measurable goals and timelines.
- **Establish regional education coordinators** jointly funded by TEA and DFPS to work directly with Foster Care Liaisons, caseworkers, and courts to ensure stability and support.
- **Integrate educational progress into permanency planning**, making it a central focus in court reviews.
- **Develop a centralized student record and case management portal** accessible to all relevant agencies, eliminating delays in transcript transfers and service plans.
- **Fund targeted tutoring and credit recovery programs** specifically for youth in care, available year-round.
- **Expand postsecondary transition supports**, including on-campus coaches, career counseling, and targeted financial aid.

END STATE

In the end state, foster youth educational outcomes match or exceed state averages. Schools no longer require separate Foster Care Liaisons because educational equity for youth in care is embedded in the DNA of both child welfare and education systems. DFPS, HHSC, and TEA share responsibility and resources to ensure every youth leaves care with a diploma or credential, a postsecondary plan, and the academic skills to thrive.

PILLAR 2: HEALTH & WELLBEING JUSTICE

Vision: Every young person who has experienced foster care will have equitable access to holistic, trauma-informed healthcare, mental, physical, and developmental, so that wellness becomes the norm, not the exception.

CURRENT STATE

Foster youth in Texas face disproportionate health challenges compared to their peers, with elevated rates of physical illness, unmet dental needs, untreated chronic conditions, mental health disorders, and developmental delays.

- The 2022 Texas DFPS Data Book notes that more than **60% of children in foster care** have at least one diagnosable mental health condition.
- In SFY 2022, Medicaid spending by Texas's child welfare agency increased by 10% since 2020, reaching \$10 million. However, this figure only represents a small part of the Medicaid investments supporting foster youth, as other agencies like HHSC handle many expenses and are not included in child welfare-specific reports. **This gap in data highlights ongoing issues with service coordination and oversight.**
- Studies from Casey Family Programs show foster youth are **nearly twice as likely** to suffer from PTSD as combat veterans.
- ACES (Adverse Childhood Experiences) research indicates that early trauma profoundly alters neurological development, increasing risks for depression, substance use, and poor physical health. Dr. Bruce Perry's work has shown that chronic stress and instability in childhood can impair brain architecture, affecting impulse control, learning, and emotional regulation.

The **MD v. Abbott** federal litigation has repeatedly identified systemic failures in Texas's foster care system, including:

- Over-reliance on psychotropic medications as first-line treatment.
- Inconsistent access to qualified mental health providers, particularly in rural areas.
- Lack of trauma-informed care training for caregivers and facility staff.

REFORM EFFORTS

Recent reforms include the implementation of **Texas Health Steps** to improve EPSDT (Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic, and Treatment) compliance, DFPS rules on psychotropic medication monitoring, and expanded Medicaid coverage for youth aging out of care until age 26.

However, gaps remain:

- Fragmented coordination between DFPS, HHSC, and local providers.
- Limited availability of culturally competent and LGBTQIA+-affirming health services.
- Insufficient preventive care, with most interventions occurring only after crises.

TRANSFORMATIVE EDGE OF REFORM

Transformation requires shifting from reactive, crisis-based health interventions to **preventive, community-based, and youth-centered care**. This means integrating mental, behavioral, and physical healthcare into a single coordinated system that follows youth across placements and into adulthood.

TRANSFORMATION EFFORTS

- **Universal Trauma-Informed Training:** Require all foster caregivers, caseworkers, and service providers to complete evidence-based training, such as Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI) or Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics (NMT), rooted in Dr. Perry’s research.
- **Health Navigation System:** Create a statewide network of Foster Youth Health Navigators to help youth and caregivers access care, schedule appointments, and manage chronic conditions.
- **Mobile Integrated Health Units:** Partner with FQHCs and community health systems to deploy mobile health teams offering medical, dental, and mental health services in rural and underserved areas.
- **Comprehensive Medicaid Wraparound:** Ensure Medicaid coverage includes non-traditional therapies like EMDR, art therapy, equine therapy, and culturally specific healing practices.
- **Data-Driven Oversight:** Establish a centralized health outcomes dashboard tracking foster youth well-being indicators across the state, modeled on the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) framework.

END STATE

All foster youth in Texas—regardless of race, gender identity, placement type, or geography—have guaranteed, equitable access to holistic, trauma-informed, and culturally competent healthcare. Health outcomes are on par with or better than the general population, and systems proactively support well-being before crises occur.

PILLAR 3: LEGAL & TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE

Vision: Foster youth will have consistent, high-quality legal advocacy across every system that shapes their lives, ensuring rights are protected, voices are heard, and justice is defined by healing rather than punishment.

CURRENT STATE

Foster youth in Texas face significant legal vulnerabilities, both within the child welfare system and in broader justice and administrative contexts.

- Youth in care frequently lack access to consistent, qualified, and **trauma-informed legal counsel**. While Texas law requires attorney ad litem representation in certain dependency cases, many youth only meet their attorney shortly before hearings.
- According to Texas Appleseed and Texans Care for Children, **foster youth are overrepresented in the juvenile justice system**, often for behaviors directly tied to trauma and instability in placements. National studies of dual-system involvement confirm that many foster youth are drawn into courts not for serious offenses, but for behaviors linked to trauma and instability. In effect, **they are being criminalized for the circumstances of foster care itself**.
- School-based disciplinary policies disproportionately affect foster youth, leading to suspensions, expulsions, and juvenile justice involvement.
- Almost half of all federal and most state/local child welfare funds in Texas go toward out-of-home placements. This focus highlights a system that allocates more resources to custodial care than to legal empowerment or protecting rights. **Shifting even a small part of placement funding to legal advocacy could significantly enhance youth outcomes.**

The **MD v. Abbott** litigation has noted systemic barriers in ensuring children's legal rights are protected, particularly regarding placement safety, due process in removal and placement changes, and access to necessary services.

REFORM EFFORTS

Some progress has been made:

- Expansion of court-appointed special advocates (CASA) in many jurisdictions.
- Legislative reforms aimed at reducing foster youth entry into the juvenile justice system, including school discipline reforms.
- Growing adoption of trauma-informed judicial practices in family and juvenile courts.

Still, major gaps persist:

- No centralized, statewide system to connect foster youth with **pro bono legal services** for education, housing, immigration, or civil rights issues.
- Inconsistent training requirements for attorneys on child development, trauma, and cultural competence.
- Lack of systematic tracking of legal outcomes for youth in care.

TRANSFORMATIVE EDGE OF REFORM

The transformative goal is to ensure **all foster youth have year-round access to specialized, trauma-informed legal advocacy**, covering not just dependency court, but also education law, disability rights, immigration, housing, and justice system defense.

TRANSFORMATION EFFORTS

- **Centralized Legal Access Network:** Establish a state-funded Foster Youth Legal Access Portal, managed by a coalition of Protection & Advocacy agencies and nonprofit legal service providers, to match youth with qualified attorneys across disciplines.
- **Universal Legal Representation Guarantee:** Require appointment of an attorney for all youth in care—regardless of case type—until case closure or age-out, with the option for continued representation in young adult programs.
- **Specialized Pro Bono Panels:** Develop panels of attorneys trained in school discipline, special education, housing law, and immigration, who can be rapidly deployed for foster youth cases.
- **Court Data Transparency:** Require courts and DFPS to track and publish anonymized data on foster youth legal representation, case outcomes, and access to advocacy services.
- **Youth Legal Rights Education:** Implement a statewide program to educate foster youth about their legal rights, modeled on “Know Your Rights” toolkits used in immigration advocacy.

END STATE

Every foster youth in Texas has **consistent, high-quality legal counsel** from entry into care until successful transition to adulthood. Youth can access representation for school, housing, immigration, and criminal matters without cost or delay. Legal systems operate with a trauma-informed, youth-centered approach, and justice involvement due to foster care–related instability is rare.

PILLAR 4: HOUSING JUSTICE

Vision: No youth will age out of foster care into homelessness. Every young person will leave care with safe, stable, and affordable housing as the foundation for independence and belonging.

CURRENT STATE

Foster youth face some of the most severe housing challenges of any young adult population.

- National data from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) shows that **nearly 20% of youth who age out of foster care experience homelessness within two years.**
- In Texas, DFPS data confirms that youth exiting care, especially those without permanent family connections, face extreme housing instability, often cycling between shelters, couch-surfing, or living in unsafe environments.
- The MD v. Abbott litigation has documented that instability begins before youth even leave care, with frequent placement changes, “aging out” from temporary or emergency facilities, and insufficient transitional housing planning.
- Guardianship assistance expenditures increased by 10% from SFY 2020 to 2022, indicating progress toward permanency. However, without simultaneous expansion of housing infrastructure and navigation services, permanency alone does not guarantee stability.

REFORM EFFORTS

Existing supports include:

- Transitional Living Services (TLS) and Supervised Independent Living (SIL) programs.
- HUD’s Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) voucher program, which provides housing choice vouchers for youth leaving foster care.
- Nonprofit and local initiatives offering supportive housing, rental assistance, and life-skills training.

However:

- FYI vouchers are limited by local housing authority capacity and restrictive eligibility rules.
- SIL slots are often scarce, with eligibility cutoffs that leave many youth without stable housing.
- There is no statewide strategy to coordinate housing, employment, and wraparound services.

TRANSFORMATIVE EDGE OF REFORM

Housing justice for foster youth means **guaranteeing that no young person ages out of care into homelessness.** This requires building systems that provide stable, affordable, and developmentally appropriate housing with integrated support services, before and after care.

TRANSFORMATION EFFORTS

- **Statewide Housing Guarantee:** Legislate a “No Youth Ages Out into Homelessness” mandate, backed by state funding for rental subsidies and transitional housing.
- **Expanded FYI Voucher Access:** Partner with HUD to expand eligibility and ensure every eligible youth receives a voucher, with case management for housing search and retention.

- **State-Funded Down Payment Assistance:** Create a program modeled after the Texas State Affordable Housing Corporation (TSAHC) initiative, specifically for former foster youth pursuing homeownership.
- **Housing Navigation & Stability Teams:** Deploy regional teams to connect youth to housing resources, mediate with landlords, and provide crisis intervention.
- **Integrated Housing & Employment Hubs:** Co-locate housing programs with job training centers, so that stability in housing supports economic independence.

END STATE

Every young person leaving foster care in Texas has **safe, stable, and affordable housing from the day they exit care**, with access to ongoing support services, pathways to homeownership, and connections to the community. Housing instability and homelessness among former foster youth become the rare exception, not the norm.

PILLAR 5: ECONOMIC JUSTICE

Vision: All youth transitioning from foster care will have the resources, skills, and opportunities to achieve lasting financial stability, moving from survival to economic empowerment and thriving adulthood.

CURRENT STATE

Youth leaving foster care face steep economic barriers to independence.

- Research from Casey Family Programs and Chapin Hall shows that **only about half of youth leaving care are employed by age 24**, and those who are employed earn significantly less than their peers.
- Texas DFPS data reflects a similar trend, with many youth relying on unstable, low-wage jobs without benefits or advancement opportunities.
- Financial literacy and asset-building programs are inconsistent statewide, and access to affordable childcare, transportation, and postsecondary financial aid is limited.
- In SFY 2022, funding for Education and Training Vouchers (ETVs) increased significantly, nearly doubling to over \$25 million. Meanwhile, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funding in Texas decreased by 11%, dropping to \$287 million. **This change emphasizes a shrinking safety net and highlights the need to expand economic support beyond just education.**

The **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)** studies and trauma research from Dr. Bruce Perry demonstrate that chronic trauma impacts executive functioning, stress regulation, and decision-making skills critical for managing finances, sustaining employment, and navigating adult responsibilities. Without intentional intervention, these impacts carry into adulthood, creating lasting barriers to financial stability.

REFORM EFFORTS

Current supports include:

- Tuition and fee waivers for eligible foster youth at public colleges and universities.
- Education and Training Vouchers (ETVs) providing limited funds for postsecondary costs.
- Transitional living programs offering some job-readiness training.

However:

- ETVs are capped and cannot cover the full cost of attendance, living expenses, and unexpected emergencies.
- Tuition waivers do not cover housing, books, food, or transportation, which remain significant barriers.
- Workforce training opportunities are not universally trauma-informed or tailored to foster youth needs.

TRANSFORMATIVE EDGE OF REFORM

Economic justice for foster youth means ensuring **every young person leaves care with the resources, skills, and connections to achieve lasting financial stability**—not just survive.

TRANSFORMATION EFFORTS

- **Universal Basic Assets for Former Foster Youth:** Establish state-funded Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) seeded with startup funds for housing, education, transportation, or business creation, matched through public-private partnerships.
- **Living Wage Guarantee for First Year Out:** Fund paid apprenticeships, internships, and service-year positions at a living wage for youth in their first year post-care.
- **Debt-Free Postsecondary Completion:** Expand tuition waivers to cover all educational costs, including housing, food, books, and technology.
- **Trauma-Informed Workforce Development:** Require all workforce training providers serving foster youth to integrate trauma-informed practices, mentoring, and mental health support.
- **Childcare & Transportation Assistance:** Guarantee access to subsidized childcare and transportation vouchers for youth pursuing work or school.

END STATE

Every youth leaving foster care in Texas has **a living wage job or sustainable income stream, no education-related debt, and access to essential supports like childcare and transportation.** Financial instability is no longer an inevitable outcome of aging out of the system, but an avoidable challenge supported by proactive investment in economic empowerment.

PILLAR 6: IMMIGRATION JUSTICE

Vision: Immigrant foster youth will leave care with secure legal status, documentation, and full access to education, housing, and employment—free to build their futures without fear or exclusion.

CURRENT STATE

Immigration status compounds the challenges of foster care, leaving many youth especially vulnerable as they approach adulthood.

- Youth without status face barriers to postsecondary education, lawful employment, housing assistance, and public benefits.
- Texas DFPS and national data show that **immigrant youth in care are often not connected with timely legal representation**, leading to missed opportunities for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS), asylum, or other immigration relief.
- HUD and the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services note that immigrant foster youth are more likely to experience homelessness upon leaving care due to ineligibility for certain housing supports.

Trauma research underscores that **prolonged uncertainty about legal status compounds stress and can exacerbate PTSD, anxiety, and depression**, further undermining youth’s ability to plan for the future.

REFORM EFFORTS

Existing supports include:

- Some DFPS caseworkers receive training on immigration relief options.
- Limited partnerships exist with legal aid organizations and Protection & Advocacy agencies.
- A few counties coordinate with pro bono attorneys for SIJS filings.

However:

- These supports are **not systematic or guaranteed statewide**.
- There is no central database or referral system to connect foster youth with immigration counsel.
- Language access and culturally responsive services remain inconsistent.

TRANSFORMATIVE EDGE OF REFORM

Immigration justice means ensuring that **no child leaves Texas foster care without legal status, documentation, and a pathway to full participation in civic life**.

TRANSFORMATION EFFORTS

- **Office of Immigrant Youth Advocacy:** Create a state-funded office dedicated to unaccompanied and immigrant foster youth, tasked with coordinating legal services, policy advocacy, and interagency collaboration.
- **Universal Access to Immigration Counsel:** Guarantee every immigrant foster youth is connected with a qualified, trauma-informed immigration attorney through partnerships with legal aid organizations, P&As, and bar associations.

- **Centralized Referral & Case Tracking:** Build a secure system for caseworkers, attorneys, and advocates to track immigration relief applications and deadlines.
- **School & Justice Representation:** Expand pro bono legal representation to school discipline hearings and juvenile justice matters to protect immigrant foster youth from compounding legal harm.
- **Status-to-Success Pipeline:** Develop wraparound services for newly documented youth, including education access, job placement, and civic engagement opportunities.

END STATE

All immigrant foster youth in Texas **leave care with secure legal status, complete documentation, and the skills and resources to succeed as full members of their communities.** Immigration status is no longer a barrier to housing, employment, or education for those who have experienced the foster care system.

CONCLUSION

Texas's child welfare system spent over \$2 billion in SFY 2022. This is not a system lacking resources. It needs better direction, coordination, and courageous realignment. When we fund fragmented responses, we maintain fragmented outcomes. When we invest in integrated, equity-driven, and youth-informed reform based on both evidence and lived experience, we build a future where every youth who has experienced foster care has the power, resources, and support to thrive.

We provide this policy toolkit as both a guide and a call to action. We invite stakeholders, decision-makers, and especially young people to help shape the systems that influence their lives.