

1201 – Child Placement Services

VII. ADOLESCENT SERVICES: NC LINKS

A. Introduction

In December of 1999, the Congress enacted Public Law 106-69, the John Chafee Foster Care Independence Act (<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/resource/chafee-foster-care-program>). This Act replaced the Independent Living Initiative as described in Public Law 99-272, and made substantial changes in the federal efforts that target youth in the foster care system and young adults who have been discharged from foster care. The law has since been amended to include Education Training Vouchers for youth aging out of foster care and youth who are adopted after their sixteenth birthday. This program is described later in this section.

LINKS: THE NORTH CAROLINA FOSTER CARE INDEPENDENCE PROGRAM

The name of the North Carolina program, **NC LINKS**, is not an acronym, and therefore doesn't "stand" for anything. Instead, it is a word that captures the purposes of the Chafee Act and the intent of North Carolina: to build a network of relevant services with youth so that they will have ongoing connections with family, friends, mentors, the community, employers, education, financial assistance, skills training, and other resources to facilitate their transition to adulthood.

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT APPROACH AND MRS PRINCIPLES

Youth development is the process through which adolescents become adults. This process is the result of the interaction between the adolescent, and all that he or she is, and the environment. All adults have been through this process. For many adults, the process included some negative experiences; however, the vast majority of adolescents do become self-sufficient adults.

Adolescents in foster care are also engaged in this normal but sometimes chaotic process of youth development. Because of their personal history, many of these youth are facing additional barriers to achieve positive outcomes, such as a history of abuse or neglect. Research has shown that caring adults can influence positive outcomes for all adolescents. While there is no guarantee, positive outcomes are much more likely to occur if:

- Youth are engaged in making the decisions that affect their lives;
- Youth are recognized and valued for their strengths and the resources they are to themselves;
- Youth have a variety of opportunities to learn and to try out their new skills in a supportive environment; and

- Youth have increasing responsibility for themselves for handling issues that confront them.

The parallels between the Positive Youth Development Approach and MRS / Family-Centered Practice are clear: The youth is viewed as the expert on his or her own needs. The agency encourages the youth's active participation in services and decision making. The approach to the youth is strengths-based, acknowledging that all youth have strengths. The agency treats the youth with respect and supports his or her right to self-determination and to make decisions about his or her life. It supports the youth's right to be heard and to be understood. It avoids premature judgments about the youth, and remains open to new information. It promotes the sharing of power. It engenders partnership between the youth and the agency.

The traditional foster care system is formed around the protection of children. Children are removed from their families only when supportive services are not adequate to ensure safety. Children remain in foster care only when, despite the efforts of families and agencies, permanent placement is not possible.

Teens in foster care who are, in essence, a family of one, may be denied these critical aspects of family-centered practice:

- decisions about their lives are frequently made for them without their involvement;
- the focus of the agency's work is often on fixing the youth's problems, rather than on building on their strengths;
- liability concerns take precedence over allowing youth to learn through experience or to take over responsibility for aspects of their lives.
- Programmatic barriers result in delaying the maturational process and make positive outcomes far less likely.

The LINKS program is based on positive youth development principles. In this approach, the LINKS social worker **intentionally** creates and/or allows opportunities for youth to experience growth-enhancing interactions with their environment. Rather than treating the youth as an **object** who has no say in decisions, or as a **recipient** who needs to be repaired, the agency interacts with the youth as a **resource**, a person with unique experiences and abilities who can become self-sufficient if given needed information and a supportive environment.

The following example illustrates these three approaches to Jeff, a 17 year old youth who wants to go back to live with his mother, an alcoholic who has often broken promises to seek treatment, to visit, to bring him home from the group home for holidays, etc. The agency is seeking TPR because Jeff has been in care for almost two years. Jeff is furious about this, and says that no matter what the agency does, he will go back to his mom when he is 18.

Object	Recipient	Resource
<p>The local child welfare agency continues with its petition to terminate parental rights. It cannot find justification for exempting the agency from this ASFA requirement. The agency will not even consider allowing Jeff to visit his mother given her lack of progress and the liability issues they could face were something to happen.</p>	<p>The local child welfare agency refers Jeff to a therapist to help him with his anger and frustration with his mother. The social worker meets with Jeff regularly to develop an alternative plan which includes his signing a CARS agreement and continuing in school so he can get his diploma, even though he will be 19 when he finishes. Jeff expresses no interest in this option. The agency explains the benefits of the LINKS Special Funds program, and how the agency will be able to help him set up his own place, to rent an apartment, and to get further training. When Jeff does not participate in some of his planning meetings, the plan is discussed without him.</p>	<p>The local child welfare agency accepts Jeff's plan to return to his mother's home and stops the TPR proceedings. The services agreement includes increasing visitation with the mother, including school holidays. Jeff will be responsible for arranging his own transportation. The focus of social work time will be on helping Jeff to develop strategies to cope with issues that confront him. The agency makes available services and resources that Jeff needs to explore his plans, always open to the option of changing the plan if this does not work out as he hopes.</p>

When the agency respects the youth as a resource, it recognizes that this is Jeff's life and ultimately Jeff's decision to make. Jeff needs to explore his choices when he has the support he needs to make his plans work or to make different choices if they don't.

While it is rarely appropriate to treat a youth as an object (such as when they are sick and have to get medical treatment) or occasionally as a recipient (such as insisting that a sexually aggressive youth attend group therapy sessions,) it is only when the youth is treated as a resource that they can make rapid progress toward responsible adulthood. The LINKS program is unique in that its total focus is on helping youth to make that transition. Other aspects of foster care case management and child protective services have different responsibilities to these youth. Taking a youth development approach is difficult for many LINKS social workers, who often want to protect youth from making mistakes and to step in to exert well-meaning influence on their decisions.

The role of the LINKS social worker must change when the agency takes a youth development approach. The role becomes that of a teacher, a coach, and an advocate.

- **Teacher:** As a teacher the social worker works with the youth to determine what he or she needs to know in order to proceed toward self sufficiency. This may mean preparatory training in life skills, driver's education, work or volunteer experience, money and credit management etc. As teacher, the social worker is alert to planned and spontaneous opportunities that will encourage positive youth development.
- **Coach:** Coaching includes on-the-spot teaching as well as allowing experience to do the teaching and encouraging youth to figure out their own solutions. For example, if youth are given the responsibility for reading a map and following directions for an outing and become lost, the social worker might wait for the youth to figure out what to do rather than rescuing him from the situation. Learning what to do when lost is an important life skill!
- **Advocate:** As advocate, the social worker not only speaks on behalf of youth but also seeks opportunities for youth to advocate on their own behalf. As advocate, the social worker may work diligently to keep agency staff aware about the program. An advocate may challenge the usefulness of outdated existing agency policy that thwarts youth development. An advocate has a critical role in helping the agency to learn about an individual youth's strengths and abilities, rather than always making decisions that are focused on problems.

The Responsibilities of the LINKS Liaison

The responsibilities of the LINKS liaison expanded significantly with the passage of the John Chafee Foster Care Independence Act and the resulting NC LINKS program. Every county is required to designate one or more persons who will assure that required LINKS services are provided to their county youth and young adults. Among the responsibilities of the county LINKS liaison are:

- Develop a good working relationship with eligible teens and young adults, their caregivers, supporters and social workers, using a positive youth development approach that will provide a challenging and supportive environment which will help their preparation for adulthood;
- Work cooperatively with eligible county youth and young adults to develop and conduct a relevant and effective county LINKS program;
- Engage the broader community in providing a supportive learning and living environment for teens and young adults from the foster care system, which may include engaging community partners in mentoring youth in jobs, providing tangible supports to the LINKS program, sponsoring achieving youth, training youth in groups about subjects such as banking, credit, car purchases, comparison shopping, and other life skill areas;

- Develop budget for operation of the county LINKS program;
- Verify eligibility for LINKS and for LINKS Special Funds; assure that ineligible youth and young adults are not served using additional Federal IV-E funds.
- Register eligible youth for LINKS Special Funds; submit requests for reimbursement of Special Funds to the state LINKS coordinator on behalf of county. Assure that expenditure of LINKS funds are allowable;
- Refer eligible young adults for ETV;
- Consult with state coordinator as needed;
- Conduct diligent outreach efforts to all young adults ages 18-21 who aged out of foster care in the county and provide appropriate services to those young adults;
- Creatively advocate for teens in foster care and for young adults who have aged out of foster care; encourage youth to be self-advocates and leaders;
- Prepare an annual plan for the county LINKS program;
- Respond to requests for data from the state coordinator;
- Participate in LINKS training offered through the Staff Development Section (LINKS 101, 201 and Groups Course, as appropriate);
- Participate in Regional training and meetings with state LINKS coordinator when schedule allows;
- Participate in monthly conference calls with county liaisons and state coordinator when schedule allows;
- Assure transportation for county youth to attend regional events such as SaySo conferences, Real World, and LINK-UP conferences and participate actively with youth and other adults in attendance;
- Meet with liaisons from other counties to consolidate or coordinate services as appropriate.

B. LINKS is an Outcome-Based Service

The Federal government has identified seven outcomes that they will monitor to assure that Chafee-funded independent living services are effective. Our goal in North Carolina is for every youth and young adult who lives or has lived in foster care as a teenager to achieve the following outcomes by age 21.

LINKS program staff should be constantly alert to ways in which they can promote accomplishment of these outcomes.

1. All youth leaving the foster care system shall have **sufficient economic resources to meet their daily needs.**
2. All youth leaving the foster care system shall have a **safe and stable place to live.**
3. All youth leaving the foster care system shall attain **academic or vocational/educational goals** that are in keeping with the youth's abilities and interests.
4. All youth leaving the foster care system shall have a **sense of connectedness** to persons and community. This means that every youth, upon exiting foster care, should have a personal support network of at least 5 responsible adults who will remain supportive of the young adult over time.
5. All youth leaving the foster care system shall **avoid illegal/high risk behaviors.**
6. All youth leaving the foster care system shall **postpone parenthood** until financially established and emotionally mature.
7. All youth leaving the foster care system shall have **access to physical and mental health services**, as well as a means to pay for those services.

LINKS liaisons are encouraged to track and review progress toward these outcomes to provide guidance for all program activities. Strategies that are not effective should be revised.

Outcome #1: Youth has Sufficient Economic Resources to Meet Daily Living Needs

1. If youth is a dependent child, the family provides sufficient resources for basic daily living needs.
2. Job stability for youth or young adults, as indicated by at least six months in the same job during the previous year.
3. The youth or young adult pays own portion of daily living expenses or contributes to an agreed-upon amount.
4. If unable to pay own portion of expenses, the youth has stable and consistent income/resources, such as SSI or stable financial support, that is sufficient to pay his bills.

Some examples of program elements for youth capable of eventually earning sufficient resources to meet their daily needs include:

- Job readiness skills;
- Conflict resolution skills;
- Vocational interest testing;
- Volunteer work for younger and older youth in their fields of interest;
- Competency-based training for the work environment, e.g. money and time management, credit management, conflict management, personal conduct in a work environment, tax preparation, etc.;
- Experiences preparing for employment while in custody, such as part-time employment, participation in school-to-work programs, job sharing or apprenticeships, and job coaching;
- Part-time or full-time employment for youth 16 and older;
- Youth responsibility for saving own money and paying part of their personal expenses;
- Driver's education and driver's license before discharge;
- Vocational Rehabilitation testing and training, when appropriate; and
- Transitional education and training resources such as Job Corps, Americorps, college or vocational training, military options, WIA/JobLinks, etc.

Additional or alternative program elements for young adults with unrealized potential to support themselves completely (those continuing their education/training, currently unemployed, or temporarily disabled) and who need temporary financial support:

- Family/extended family/community support;
- Public assistance, e.g. TANF, Food Stamps, Work First, Section 8 or other public housing, etc.
- Vocational Rehabilitation;
- Educational/Vocational scholarships and grants as well as other post-secondary school assistance; and
- CARS/Voluntary Placement Agreement with the local child welfare agency while attending school full time.

Program elements for disabled or developmentally delayed young adults who will continue to need financial support may include:

- Life skills training to help young adults be as independent as possible;
- Eligibility determination for SSI and Medicaid;
- Extended family/community support;
- Public assistance;
- Sheltered workshops/supported employment programs;
- Supported housing programs;
- CAP-MR/DD adult programs; and/or
- Assisted living programs for adults.

Outcome #2: Youth has a Safe and Stable Place to Live.

1. The youth is living in a stable housing situation and can afford the cost.
2. The housing situation is not hazardous and is not in high-crime area.
3. The youth has not been victimized since discharge.

Some examples of program elements include:

- Learning about housing/utility costs for various types of housing in the intended home community;
- Learning to evaluate safety; using police and crime statistics, news reports, etc. as resources to learn about the location of safe neighborhoods;
- Learning to enhance personal safety in the home including basic knowledge about home repair and avoiding common hazards;
- Learning to avoid danger and to defuse volatile interpersonal situations;
- Learning basic non-lethal self-protection techniques;
- Having a stable place to live upon discharge, with a primary and backup discharge plan to minimize the likelihood of homelessness resulting from a disrupted plan;
- Having trusted friends who can offer temporary sanctuary, if needed; and

- Making concerted efforts toward permanence for every youth prior to discharge, including learning about adult adoption procedures.

Outcome #3: Youth is Attaining or has Attained Academic or Vocational Educational Goals in Keeping with His/Her Interests or Abilities

1. Youth is on or above grade level or, if not, is receiving assistance to attain grade level.
2. Youth's stated educational and vocational goals are openly explored.
3. Education/vocational training is reasonable given level of academic/vocational ability and interests.

Some examples of program elements include:

- Proactive remedial academic assistance for youth who are not achieving grade level: educational testing, tutoring, computer-based learning, vocational interest/ability testing, tutoring based on academic deficits etc.;
- Early exposure to a variety of academic/vocational schools and possible means to attend those schools;
- Positive reinforcement for achievement of steps toward personal academic and/or vocational goals- recognition, rewards, privileges, etc.; and
- Developing strong working relationships between the local child welfare agency and the public school to establish in-school mentors and advocates for participating youth.

Outcome #4: Youth has Connections to a Positive Personal Support System

1. Youth has a broad-based personal support system of at least 5 adult supporters who are not related to the agency and who are personally interested and invested in the youth's future.
2. Youth has a responsible caring adult outside the child welfare system to call on for support or advice.
3. Youth has consistent, welcoming place to visit, if desired.

Some examples of program elements include:

- Helping all youth to seek out lifetime connections and permanence while in care and beyond; providing information on adult adoptions to youth and adults that are in family-like relationships;

- Build on the youth's existing support system;
- Build tribal connections for American Indian youth;
- Assure cultural connections as appropriate to individual self-identity;
- Provide opportunities to meet responsible caring adults, e.g. through volunteerism, faith communities, athletics, clubs, etc.;
- Re-explore birth family, former foster families, etc. as potential support resources;
- Involve youth in activities that build healthy life-long interests; and
- Build relationships between teens and the business community- e.g. mechanics, plumbers, electricians; potential employers, and other business professionals.

Outcome #5: Youth is Avoiding Illegal / High Risk Behaviors

1. No convictions, detentions, or incarcerations since discharge.
2. Leisure activities and source of income are legal activities.
3. Youth has a support system that includes positive role models.
4. Youth is drug and alcohol-free, does not have needle/sexually transmitted diseases.

Some examples of program elements include:

- Building peer community within the LINKS program that expects, rewards and supports pro-social, positive behaviors;
- Creating open discussions about handling pressures regarding drug and alcohol use;
- Providing education and exposure to realities of drug/alcohol abuse- involve volunteers from former LINKS participants or other young adults who were involved in illegal/high risk activities and have learned the negative effects of that experience;
- Encouraging watchfulness on part of staff, family, caregivers, etc. and providing education regarding signs of gang involvement, drug and/or alcohol abuse, etc.;
- Assuring early intervention/timely treatment for substance or alcohol abuse problems;

- Providing specific preventive health education re: AIDS, hepatitis, the impact of STDs and other health risks; and
- Helping youth to become connected with family members, mentors and other caring adults who care about what goes on with the individual youth from day to day and who are regularly engaged with the youth. Visits with family members are protected and are never denied as a form of “punishment” for the youth or the family.

Outcome #6: Youth is Postponing Parenthood until Financially and Emotionally Capable of Parenting

1. Is not a parenting or pregnant teen.
2. If youth has given birth or fathered a child, is purposefully and effectively avoiding another pregnancy.
3. Has responsible adult assistance or guidance in parenting any offspring.

Some examples of program elements:

- Open, gender-specific group, mixed group and/or individual discussions about intimate and friendship relationships and respect for personal boundaries;
- Sex and abstinence education;
- Using “Baby Think-it-Over” computerized infant simulators for boys and girls;

Education about impact of parenthood on income, education, vocational plans;

- Adoption presented as a caring option, perhaps involving persons who have adopted infants or who have relinquished their child to talk to the group or individuals;
- Responsible parenthood instruction for boys and girls- babysitting instruction, supervised and unsupervised opportunities to be around small children in a caregiving role;
- Pregnancy prevention posters and audio-visuals; and
- Coordination of LINKS program with Adolescent Parenting Program/Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Programs.

Outcome #7: Youth has Access to Physical, Dental and Mental Health Services

1. Routine physical, dental and mental health preventive care are provided while in care.
2. Identified physical, dental and mental health needs are being treated quickly and appropriately.
3. Youth has insurance that will cover the cost of physical/dental/mental health care after discharge.
4. Self care/self monitoring is sufficient to avoid serious physical/ dental/ mental health crises.

Examples of program elements:

- Exploring availability of health insurance through the family, employment or school;
- Establishing Medicaid/Health Choice eligibility;
- Visiting free/low cost services through Mental Health Clinic, Public Health, free clinics, etc.;
- Providing information and instruction on self-care- medication information, health maintenance, when to worry; what to do if seriously ill; avoiding contagion, etc.;
- Providing opportunities for youth to grieve the losses in their lives that connect to their experience with foster care: death; loss of relationships; loss of time with family; loss of trust; etc.; and
- Providing resource materials and referrals, including internet web sites specific to youth's identified needs and concerns.

In addition to these seven outcomes, North Carolina's goal is that all youth leaving the foster care system shall have **a sense of well-being**, with **a positive sense of personal and cultural identity**.

Some examples of attributes that signify accomplishment of these two outcomes are:

1. Youth demonstrates a positive outlook on life.
2. Youth demonstrates resilience in overcoming past problems as well as in facing new problems.
3. Youth has a positive self identity as a person of worth.
4. Youth has a positive sense of the history of his/her culture.

5. Youth is able to handle prejudice/discrimination without violence.
6. Youth is culturally competent and is at least tolerant of other cultures.
7. Youth is able to assert self appropriately in the face of discrimination.

Some examples of program elements include:

- Youth are given opportunities to develop a strong reality-based sense of self worth within a program that consistently advocates youth development.
- Youth resilience is recognized, acknowledged, and nurtured even when it is contrary to systemic expectations.
- Youth are taught skills for nurturing their own resilience, such as decision making, self-care, recreational activities, and confidence-building experiences.

Youth are supported in their participation in activities that develop skills, talents, spiritual development, positive relationships, recreational interests, physical and intellectual conditioning.

- Involvement in these activities is considered a part of the overall transitional plan and is not denied as a form of “punishment”. The agency accesses appropriate funds to help the youth to participate in positive developmental experiences.
- Youth are given opportunities to develop leadership and self-advocacy skills through organizations such as Say-So and through participation in statewide and national conferences that promote youth development.
- Youth are given opportunities to construct and maintain life books.
- Youth are given opportunities to learn to openly discuss their experiences of being in foster care and any resulting negative feelings about themselves.
- Youth experience positive exposure to a variety of cultural groups, learning the value of diversity.
- American Indian youth are given opportunities to strengthen their tribal connections.
- Youth are given opportunities to maintain cultural connections as appropriate to individual self-identity.
- Youth are given opportunities to provide group leadership in learning about different cultures.

- Youth participate in sensitivity exercises regarding all types of discrimination, including that based on race, gender, and sexual orientation.
- Youth receive assertiveness training.
- Youth learn about civil rights, including their own.

C. Eligibility for LINKS Services

In North Carolina, all youth who are now 13 or older and are not yet 21 and who are or were in a local child welfare agency foster care after the age of 13 are eligible for LINKS services, with two exceptions. Otherwise eligible youth are not eligible for LINKS funds if:

- they have personal reserves of more than \$10,000, or
- they are undocumented residents or illegal aliens.

For the purposes of this policy, being in “foster care” means that the child was removed from the home and is receiving 24 hour substitute care, and the local child welfare agency has placement and care responsibility. Non-paid relative care is included in this definition if the child is not living in the removal home. Youth who, as teenagers, have been discharged from foster care and were reunified, placed with relatives, adopted, married, or emancipated remain eligible for LINKS services until their 21st birthday.

Note: Detention facilities, forestry camps, training schools, and any other facility operated primarily for the detention of children who have been determined to be delinquent are not considered foster care placements.

Eligibility for LINKS services and funds requires that the youth be an active participant in his or her planning, including sharing in the responsibility for designing and implementing their transitional plan. Youth involvement in case planning must be documented in the case record and reflected on the case plan. Youth and young adults who refuse services, who refuse to be active participants in designing the case plan, and/or who refuse to do their part in resolving problems cannot be provided LINKS services or resources.

Eligibility for LINKS services is intentionally broad, in order to permit agencies to serve youth and young adults who need the services and who are willing to do their part in resolving problems.

D. Priorities for Services Delivery

Most counties cannot provide LINKS services to all youth and young adults who meet the eligibility criteria and must prioritize the use of their resources. The following priorities are guidelines for prioritizing LINKS services.

1. Required Services

Local child welfare agencies must offer and provide appropriate services to youth and young adults ages 13-21 that are in agency custody and to young adults who aged out of agency custody at age 18 and who are not yet 21. Outreach efforts are required for young adults who aged out of care and who are not yet 21 to determine their current situations, their interest in continued services, and their need for resources through the LINKS Special Funds program.

- Eligible teens and young adults in foster care or on Contractual Agreement for Residential Services / Voluntary Placement Agreement (CARS/VPA) agreements ages 13-21 **must** be offered skills training, counseling, education and other appropriate support and services to assist their transition to self-sufficiency. Agencies have the responsibility for teaching skills necessary for teens to become self-sufficient and for providing opportunities to use those skills within a supportive environment.
- Young adults who “aged out” of foster care (were in foster care on their eighteenth birthday) **must** be offered any needed assistance for which they are eligible. LINKS Transitional Housing Funds are available to reimburse counties for the cost of rent, rent deposits or room and board arrangements for young adults who aged out of care. In addition, other LINKS Special Funds are available to help with non-housing expenses, such as utilities, furniture, etc.

Note: Young adults who age out of NC foster care or were adopted from NC foster care as teenagers are eligible for Education/Training Vouchers and NC Reach Scholarships to defray the costs of attendance at post secondary education or vocational training institutions.

E. Other Program Elements of NC LINKS

The State is required by law to make LINKS benefits and services available to American Indian children in the state on the same basis as other children. North Carolina interprets this responsibility to include all Native American children, regardless of Federal recognition status. State statute effective July 27, 2001 established an understanding between local child welfare agency and the Indian tribes on Indian child welfare issues, including LINKS services that effect Indian teens that are placed in foster care.

Particular effort shall be given to identifying American Indian youth who are eligible for the LINKS program, and to eliminating barriers to their participation in the LINKS program. Focus of LINKS involvement should include helping Indian youth maintain cultural ties to their tribes.

1. Serving Ineligible Youth

Some youth are ineligible for LINKS-funded services, but need what the program offers. The primary focus of the LINKS program should always be on serving those teens that are eligible for the funds.

However, if other youth can be served without using any Federal funds, including LINKS funds, and without displacing an eligible youth, the county can opt to include them in the program. The following are examples of ineligible youth who may want and need services. There may be other examples that arise, which would be handled in the same way.

a. Youth in care who are not yet 13 years of age, or young adults who were in care as teens but are now over the age of 21

If a youth or young adult is in need of involvement with the LINKS program and would be a constructive addition to the program, they can be served if their involvement does not require additional expenditure of LINKS funds and no eligible youth is denied services in order for the ineligible person to participate. One way to involve young adults over the age of 21 is to have them participate in leadership roles in the program. Young adults who are experiencing difficulty in their transition can be particularly effective leaders for youth who are preparing to go out on their own.

b. Youth receiving CPS In-Home Services

Much concern has been raised regarding the lack of local child welfare agency services to teens who have been subjected to abuse or neglect but who remain in their own homes with agency services. LINKS funds cannot be used to provide services to teens in conjunction with CPS Services unless the youth qualifies as a person who was previously in foster care as a teen. These youth may, however, participate in ongoing LINKS programming if that seems appropriate, so long as no additional costs are incurred due to that youth's participation, and so long as no eligible youth is denied services in order for the ineligible youth to participate.

c. Undocumented Immigrant Youth

State foster care funds help provide for housing and limited emergency medical assistance for undocumented children who enter foster care through child protective services.

Note: No federal funds can be applied to assistance or services for undocumented persons.

If an otherwise eligible youth is disqualified from LINKS because of residency status, the agency can serve him or her so long as no Federal funds are used to provide those services. Once legal residency is established, LINKS funds may be used to provide services.

d. Ineligible siblings of LINKS participants

Occasionally the sibling of a teen will be in care and will want to participate in LINKS activities. If the sibling is sufficiently mature to participate, and no eligible youth or young adult is denied services due to his/her participation, and if participation does not require additional expenditure of LINKS funds, then they can participate.

e. Youth with personal reserves of \$10,000 or more

Youth are not eligible for LINKS funds if they have personal reserves of more than \$10,000. As is true with other ineligible youth, services may be provided if no additional LINKS funds are used to provide the service and if no eligible youth is denied services because of participation by the ineligible youth. A youth with excess reserves may, of course, pay for costs of full participation in LINKS activities.

In order to provide services to a youth who is not eligible for LINKS funding:

- (i) Assure that the inclusion of the youth involves no additional cost to the agency, or, if the inclusion of the youth does involve additional cost, the additional costs will be paid through other funding sources (family, the youth, private donations, county funds, etc.).
- (ii) If the participant is in agency custody, document in the Family Services Case Plan what service is requested and provided as well as how the additional cost is being managed.
- (iii) If the ineligible participant is not in agency custody, document in the LINKS program documentation what service is requested and how any additional cost will be managed.

Financial Aspects of the LINKS Program, including LINKS allocations, Special Funds, and the Education Training Voucher program are now described in the Child Welfare Services Manual; Chapter XIII; Child Welfare Funding Manual

(<http://info.dhhs.state.nc.us/olm/manuals/dss/csm-78/man/>).

F. Youth Involvement in Planning for Services

As mentioned in the first section, it is critically important that youth be involved in the planning process at all levels: from the identification of issues that need to be addressed through definition of goals and activities and the identification of personal and systemic resources. All youth need and want an opportunity to have a say in their lives, to be taken seriously, and to have adults understand them.

A highly effective means of demonstrating openness to youth in the planning process is to have youth invite family, mentors, friends, and/or other supporters to their service plan reviews. This arrangement accomplishes several goals-

- it gives the youth more ownership of the planning process;
- it gives significant persons in the youth's life an opportunity to engage in the planning process; and
- it helps the agency to identify support persons that may have been previously unknown to them. Some states that use this strategy have discovered multiple permanency resources among the supporters identified by youth.

Confidentiality issues can be handled by having participants sign a confidentiality form that states that the participants are aware that information shared during the meeting is confidential, and that they agree not to divulge any information shared without the expressed permission of the youth.

1. Assessment Tools for Youth Ages 13-21

Life skills assessments for youth 13-18 must involve both the youth and a person who knows the youth's skills and abilities first-hand, such as a family member or caregiver. The purpose of the assessment is to determine the youth's strengths and skill areas as well as the need for additional training or experiences. This enables the LINKS social worker to engage youth in teaching and program leadership as well as learning opportunities. Proper use of the tools provides a "roadmap" for identifying skills and resources youth need to achieve their goals.

The Strengths/Needs Inventory, which is available through Independent Living Resources, Inc. (<http://ilrinc.com/>), is a good interview tool that helps the youth and social worker (or other caring person) share their interests. Some agencies use the Strengths/ Needs Inventory in conjunction with the automated tools. It is not a stand-alone assessment. This is available through the LINKS 101 training or directly through Independent Living Resources, Inc.

a. Preferred and Recommended Assessment Tool:

The Casey Life Skills Assessment (CLSA) is available free over the internet at <http://www.caseylifeskills.org/>. The CLS tool also has a version for Spanish-speaking adolescents. The tool assesses the behaviors and competencies youth need to achieve their long term goals. It aims to set youth on their way toward developing healthy, productive lives. Examples of the life skills CLSA helps youth self-evaluate include:

1. Maintaining healthy relationships
2. Work and study habits
3. Planning and goal-setting
4. Using community resources

5. Daily living activities
6. Budgeting and paying bills
7. Computer literacy
8. Their permanent connections to caring adults

The CLSA is designed to be used in a collaborative conversation between an educator, mentor, social worker, or other service provider and any youth up to age 21. It is appropriate for all youth regardless of whether they are in foster care, kinship care, live with their parents, or reside in a group home. Youth will complete the assessment online and their answers are available instantly to be reviewed with the youth in a strengths-based conversation that actively engages them in the process of developing their goals. A resource guide is also available to help caregivers and providers create a learning plan that can help youth gain the skills they need.

Child welfare agencies and youth-serving providers may register with Casey Life Skills to create an account that lets them administer the assessment to youth and access all of the sites reporting tools. Registration is free and instantaneous. Records of the youth to whom agencies have administered an assessment are stored for later reference. The CLSA is helpful in meeting the requirements of transitional planning for youth.

Assessments for young adults 18 to 21 may be completed using the CLSA, if appropriate. However, the focus for young adults who seek LINKS services is typically about one or more life crises that they are struggling to handle. In these situations, informal assessments conducted in an interview/discussion are frequently more appropriate. The discussion should be documented in the case narrative. Some of the issues to be addressed in the discussion are:

- What is the young adult's overall assessment of the crisis?
- What has he/she tried so far? How did that work?
- What does he/she think is needed which would help to work through this situation both now as well as in the future? Assess with the young adult additional resources that may be available. The plan should address both the short term "fix" and long-term problem avoidance. For example, a loan or grant may help a money shortfall, but assistance with budgeting may prevent a similar shortfall in the future.

- What part of this solution does he/she need the agency to do, and what part is he/she willing to do in resolving this situation?
- How will the young adult and agency know if the plan is working? When does the plan need to be reviewed?

The results of this discussion will be formulated into a plan that reflects the description of the statement, resources that will be used, the young adult's and agency's activities that will contribute to resolution of the problem, time frames for review, and dated signatures of the young adult and agency representative.

2. Transitional Living Plans for Youth Ages 13-21

Public Law 113-183 (<https://www.congress.gov/113/plaws/publ183/PLAW-113publ183.pdf>) requires that "if a child has obtained 14 years of age, the agency must document the services needed to assist the child to make transition from foster care to successful adulthood. In addition, if a child has an IEP (Individual Education Plan) Vocational Rehabilitation must also complete an assessment for youth 16 and over. Coordination of these assessments is advisable. This law refers to the need for a transitional plan.

a. Elements of the Transitional Living Plan

The Transitional Living Plan, which is attached to the court report and attached or outlined in the Out of Home Services Agreement, should contain the following elements:

- the estimated date of discharge from out of home care;
- the youth's anticipated living arrangement after discharge, as well as a fully developed alternate discharge plan;
- supportive adults who are working with the youth as he/she progresses toward discharge;
- specific goals that relate to the youth's transition to self-sufficiency, including educational and vocational training, the development of a personal support system, building independent living skills, the assurance of safe and secure planned and alternative living arrangements after discharge, and steps toward assuring any other unmet desired outcome;
- the agreed-upon steps to be taken to meet the goals, the youth's responsibility for aspects of the plan, and the responsibility of the agency and other persons who will assist the youth to accomplish those steps;

- the date of the plan; and
- signatures of the youth, local child welfare agency representative, and other participants responsible for the plan activities.

3. Emancipation Plan (90 days prior to 18th birthday)

Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-351) requires that within 90 days prior to a youth aging out of foster care custody at age 18, the agency shall develop a plan with the youth to discuss his or her plans for emancipation from agency custody. As with any services for youth, the plan should be personalized at the direction of the youth, be as detailed as he or she chooses, and include specific options regarding how to access housing, health insurance, education, local opportunities for mentoring services and continuing services, sexual health, services and resources to ensure the youth is informed and prepared to make healthy living decisions about their lives. To this end, the DSS-5315 Plan for Emancipation from Foster Care Custody (<http://info.dhhs.state.nc.us/olm/forms/dss/dss-5315-ia.pdf>) shall be developed with the youth that includes the required elements mandated by federal law. While the Transitional Living Plan is developed to address independent living needs of the youth while in care, the Emancipation Plan is considered an extension of the Transition Plan as it provides details and resources for the youth after he or she exits care. Additionally, the Emancipation Plan provides the youth with a portable document regarding resources they may need when they are out of care as well as to gain information from the youth regarding their plans and contact information.

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (P.L. 111-148) also requires the plan to include information on the importance of designating someone to make health care treatment decisions on behalf of the youth if the youth is unable to do so and does not have or want a relative who would otherwise be so designated under North Carolina law to make such decisions. This requirement provides the youth with an option to execute a health care power of attorney or health care proxy. The North Carolina Department of Secretary of State maintains an Advance Health Care Directive Registry which provides a document for those who wish to execute an health care power of attorney. The document entitled, "Health Care Power of Attorney" may be accessed at: <http://www.secretary.state.nc.us/ahcdr/forms.aspx>.

Counties shall ensure that information is provided that assists the youth in clearly understanding that the individual designated as their health care agent will have broad powers to make health care decisions for the youth when the youth is unable to make those decisions or cannot communicate their decision to other people. It is important that the youth and the person they designate as their health care agent discuss the

youth's wishes concerning life-prolonging measures, mental health treatment, and other health care decisions. Except for any specific limitations or restrictions expressed, the youth's health care agent may make any health care decision the youth could make for themselves.

The Emancipation Plan meeting should be structured as a Child and Family Team Meeting, which creates an environment in which youth can invite their family and other support persons to help finalize this plan. For information on the Child and Family Team Meetings, please refer to Chapter VII – Child and Family Team Meetings.

While the Emancipation Plan is to be developed 90 days prior to the youth exiting foster care, counties should prepare and fully engage a youth in his or her plan development well in advance of the 90-day period. The social worker may meet with a youth to discuss the plan's purpose and the importance of how the youth are expected to participate in the development of the plan, who they can invite to the planning sessions to represent their needs, how it differs and is similar to the Transitional Plan, and what topics can and will be discussed. For instance, it may take more than one planning session to develop the final Emancipation Plan as there are several aspects to the plan such as housing, health insurance, transportation, education, and employment. Counties may find it useful to utilize their LINKS support groups and/or SAYSO to develop youth led recommendations on what youth need to know prior to transition planning session. These activities and recommendations will assist the youth in developing their own plans of emancipation.

On page one of the document, the agency indicates its willingness to enter into a CARS agreement with the youth. If there are conditions for offering a CARS agreement, or if the agency is not willing to offer a CARS agreement, the rationale should be stated on the form. The information requested on pages 2 and the first part of page 3 should be provided by the youth. Referral information for agencies, which includes contact information, should be prepared by the social worker, based on where the youth intends to live after discharge. The agency will need to make arrangements to have the following documents available to give to the youth at the time of the meeting:

- Original or certified copy of the youth's birth certificate (http://vitalrecords.nc.gov/documents/App1_BirthCert_GN_fill-in_20150504.pdf)
- A Social Security card issued by the Commissioner of Social Security (<http://www.socialsecurity.gov/online/ss-5.pdf>)
- Copies of all DSS-5243 Child Health Status Component (<http://info.dhhs.state.nc.us/olm/forms/dss/dss-5243.pdf>) forms, the latest complete Immunization Record and all other medical records

- Copies of all DSS-5245 Child Education Status Component (<http://info.dhhs.state.nc.us/olm/forms/dss/dss-5245-ia.pdf>) forms or Education Record Summary and all other educational records
- Copies of any legal documents that the youth might need for employment or benefits, including verification of eligibility for Extended Foster Care Medicaid, legal residency documentation, a letter verifying agency custodial responsibility at age 18, etc. and
- The original and signed copy of the emancipation plan.

The entire emancipation plan should be copied for agency files. The original plan as well as original or certified documents should be provided to the youth in a permanent binder to take from the meeting. Copies of the discharge documents shall be retained in the youth's record. Reimbursement from the county LINKS allocation or LINKS Special funds may be used to pay for the required documents, costs of copying, and a protective portable file in which these documents may be stored.

G. Consumer Credit Reports

Significant concern exists that foster children are vulnerable to being victimized by identity theft because their personal information passes through many hands, increasing the chances that someone will open an account in their name or use their Social Security number. Since children typically have no credit records, it makes it easier for thieves to link their unused Social Security numbers to other names and birth dates. Most parents, caretakers and foster parents see no reason to suspect a problem, which means the theft can go undetected for years. In some instances the suspected theft may be someone of the youth's own family or a foster parent. Additionally, youth may voluntarily allow a family member or friend to obtain credit or services in their name with the assumption that the bills will be paid in a timely because they are not aware of the consequences of damaged credit. As a result, youth who age out of care may be greatly challenged by credit issues upon exiting the system. Additionally, they lack a support system to help them resolve their credit issues. These problems hinder the youth's ability to access resources and obtain basic services such as housing, transportation and employment, thus thwarting their successful transition to adulthood.

To this end, federal legislation requires that each child in foster care under the responsibility of the State who has attained 14 years of age receives without cost a copy of any consumer credit report year until they are discharged from foster care and must be assisted (including, when feasible from their court-appointed advocate) in interpreting the credit report and resolving any inaccuracies in the report. Counties are strongly encouraged to maintain this requirement for youth who sign Contractual Agreements for Residential Services. While the legislation mandates that the credit checks begin at age 14, there is nothing that precludes the local child welfare agency from implementing this requirement for younger youth in care, particularly if there is suspicion that the youth is a victim of identity theft.

It is important to note that this is a two-step mandate for the local child welfare agency:

1. provide the credit report; and
2. provide any needed assistance in resolving any inaccuracies with the report.

The intent is for the child welfare agency to work with the youth in reviewing the credit report, resolve any issues and help the youth understand the importance of conducting a credit check so that they will continue the practice upon their exit from care. Counties may collaborate and/or contract with community based providers to fulfill this requirement. A copy of the credit report must be placed in the youth's case file as well as evidence of discussion with the youth about the report and efforts to resolve any inconsistencies. Planning for obtaining the credit report should be included in the youth's Transitional Plan as well as the DSS-5315 Plan for Emancipation From Foster Care Custody (<http://info.dhhs.state.nc.us/olm/forms/dss/dss-5315-ia.pdf>) form. For more information on obtaining a free credit report visit the Federal Trade Commission consumer fact website at <http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/pubs/consumer/credit/cre34.shtm>.

H. LINKS Services to Youth

1. Youth in foster care ages 13-18

Counties will serve all youth in this age group who are in foster care. Public Law 113-183 requires states to provide services to youths in care ages 14 and older that will assist the youths to make the transition from foster care to successful adulthood. North Carolina's Child and Family Services Plan designates all teenagers in foster care as being "at risk of remaining in care until they are 18," thus making the eligibility pool for LINKS services very broad. Developmentally, young people in this age group are more interested in peers and group activities than are older teens. They are often more open to exploring the resources that will be available to them, and usually respond well to opportunities to do so. They enjoy activities that will help to prepare them to handle responsibilities, such as role playing the experience of being in a judicial review hearing. They like to volunteer, particularly when volunteering genuinely helps other people. By serving this age group, agencies have an earlier start in assuring that young people have and will continue to seek out strong personal support systems, and in helping youth explore family and other adult relationships that youth find supportive.

Among the activities included in services to youth 13-15 are:

- An individualized life skills assessment designed for younger adolescents and completed by the youth and caregiver. The assessment identifies strengths and needs for life skills training and the need for other learning opportunities;

- With the youth, developing written service agreements specifying the responsibilities of the agency and youth to accomplish immediate and intermediate goals that lead toward successful transitions to adulthood as well as implementation of services identified as needed by the youth and agency to achieve the goals;

Note: Youth 12 years and older have the legal right to be involved in the development of the service plans if they are cognitively and emotionally able to participate. Agencies are encouraged to have youth take on a leadership role in their planning meetings.

- Life skills training based on training needs determined by the written assessment;
- Agency or contracted services that are provided to help youth to overcome barriers that are interfering with achievement of educational or vocational goals, self-sufficiency, relationships with family and significant others, etc.;
- Specific activities to develop and strengthen the youth's personal support system;
- For more mature youth 13 through 15, participation in the agency's LINKS activities for older youth;
- Opportunities to learn about resources available in the community, such as public transportation, health resources, resources for educational/vocational training, military service options, recreational organizations, participation in school activities, and volunteer opportunities;
- Opportunities to volunteer in a working environment in order to learn about possible vocational interests, to build a resume, and to give back to the community;
- Role playing potentially stressful activities, such as testifying in court or being interviewed for a job;
- Participating in local, state, and/or national trainings and conferences relevant to LINKS services to younger teens.

2. Youth in foster care ages 16-18

The child welfare agency is also **required** to provide LINKS Services to youth 16 to 18 who are in foster care or are participating in CARS arrangements. While a youth may refuse to engage in services, the

local child welfare must offer services on an ongoing and frequent basis. A youth is more likely to engage in LINKS services if the services are relevant to his or her life. When circumstances or opportunities help to make that connection, the social worker or care provider should make a point to engage or re-engage the youth in services.

It is a federally required for youth to be fully involved in designing and implementing LINKS services in order for LINKS funds to be provided..

Among the activities included in services to youth 16-18 are:

- An individualized assessment by the youth and caregiver that identifies strengths and needs in self-sufficiency skills as well as other areas relevant to adult functioning;
- With the youth, developing written individual transitional plans spelling out the responsibility of the agency and youth to accomplish a successful transition to self-sufficiency. Transitional plans are developed concurrently with the service agreements. Note: Youth 12 years and older have the legal right to be involved in the development of the service plans if they are cognitively and emotionally able to participate.
- Skill development activities that are as close to real life as possible; i.e., hands-on activities combined with or instead of classroom lecture, interesting activities that lend themselves to a variety of learnings, etc. These activities should be related to learning needs identified in the assessments and may include activities related to budgeting, housing, career planning, money management, basic home maintenance, health maintenance, avoidance of high risk behaviors, prevention of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, job seeking and job maintenance, etc..
- Services directly related to educational and/or vocational needs such as tutoring to assist youth to achieve grade level, learning about and visiting educational/training institutions, paying for placement tests, providing transportation to and from classes, tools, work clothing or equipment necessary to vocational training, etc..

Assistance with locating and maintaining employment.

- Formal counseling and informal personal support to help the youth handle the losses connected with being in foster care, grief, anger and other difficult emotions.

- Development and nurture of a personal support network with family, friends, and other caring adults; exploration of relationships while still in agency custody to determine realistically their opportunities for involvement after discharge, and etcetera.

Other services to this age group might also include:

- Helping youth to attend meetings such as Strong Able Youth Speaking Out (SAYSO) (<http://www.saysoinc.org/>), training, state and national youth conferences, or other youth events that help youth to build competence and self-confidence.
- Coordinating services with other counties or state services to provide experiences for youth in custody to meet with other youth in foster care.
- Helping the youth to purchase goods or services needed to help him or her to become self sufficient.

3. Youth aged out of foster care

Counties are **required** to make diligent efforts to locate and offer needed services to young adults who:

- were discharged from a local child welfare agency foster care at age 18, and
- who are not yet 21 years of age, and
- who may be in need of further services.

Outreach services should include:

- Diligent, persistent, and ongoing efforts to locate and contact aged out young adults whose whereabouts are unknown to determine their current status and to offer access to needed resources.
- Once located, an assessment of the young adult's current situation, barriers that they are experiencing, efforts they have made to overcome those barriers, and plans and strategies for agency assistance if requested.
- Engagement of the young adult in planning, determination of what responsibility the young adult will

handle, and choice of services that will supplement his or her own efforts.

- Informing the young adult of the availability of Education/Training Vouchers for vocational and/or educational training to enhance employment opportunities.
- Reimbursement to the counties through LINKS Special Funds for assistance with completion of high school or GED, job training, utilities, furniture, uniforms, equipment, or other items or services that are needed to facilitate achieving self-sufficiency
- Assistance in strengthening a personal support network that will continue to be available through adulthood.
- Access to existing county LINKS program services.
- Transitional housing assistance for young adults:
 - a). who have aged out of care; and
 - b).are moving to a permanent living arrangement; and
 - c).need assistance with rent, rent deposits, or room and board arrangements.

Transitional housing assistance includes help with housing costs as well as agency services to learn to handle the responsibilities that accompany living on one's own. Counties may use Transitional Housing Funds to pay for room and board at residential colleges or vocational training schools if these costs are not being paid by other Federal sources.

Young adults 18 to 21 from other states who have aged out of foster care **must** be offered LINKS services through their new (NC) county of residence if they request it. In addition, the LINKS social worker should notify the state LINKS coordinator in this circumstance in order to determine what financial assistance can be provided through the home state.

Young adults who age out of foster care in North Carolina and move to other states have the right to receive Independent Living services from their new state of residence. The state LINKS coordinator should be contacted to help coordinate these services and resources.

Counties are strongly encouraged to provide outreach services to young adults who were discharged before age 18, who are not yet age 21, and who need and are requesting further services.

I. Contractual Agreements for Residential Services (CARS)

According to state law, N.C.G.S. § 108A-48

(http://www.ncleg.net/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/HTML/BySection/Chapter_108A/GS_108A-48.html) the State Foster Care Benefits Program states:

- 1) The Department is authorized to establish a State Foster Care Benefits Program with appropriations by the General Assembly for the purpose of providing assistance to children who are placed in foster care facilities by county departments of social services in accordance with the rules and regulations of the Social Services Commission.
- 2) No benefits provided by this section shall be granted to any individual who has passed his eighteenth birthday unless he is less than 21 years of age and is a full time student or has been accepted for enrollment as a full time student for the next school term pursuing a high school diploma or its equivalent, a course of study at the college level, or a course of vocational or technical training designed to fit him for gainful employment.

To this end, counties are encouraged to offer young adults who have been in county custody the opportunity to remain in a licensed foster care facility while continuing their education. The DSS-5108 Contractual Agreement for Residential Services (CARS) (<http://info.dhhs.state.nc.us/olm/forms/dss/dss-5108.pdf>) allows for state assistance with payment of the standard board rate to the facility. A CARS agreement is simply a voluntary agreement between the young adult and the agency that allows for State foster care board payment to a licensed foster care facility. The youth is not in local child welfare agency custody. Rather he has voluntarily agreed to be in the agency's placement authority for the duration of the agreement. A CARS agreement differs from a VPA agreement in that the young adult, rather than his parents or guardian, is exercising his legal authority to request the placement arrangement.

CARS agreements may be offered to:

- Legally competent young adults 18-21 who aged out of the county's foster care custody at age 18;
- Legally competent young adults 18-21 who were discharged from the county's custody prior to age 18, but are now requesting this service;
- Legally competent and legally emancipated youth ages 16-18 who are requesting the service; and
- Legally competent young adults who aged out of custody in another North Carolina county.

Young adults who have been declared legally incompetent have been determined by the courts to be unable to make legal decisions in their own behalf. In rare instances, it is appropriate for a young adult's legal guardian can sign a CARS agreement on his behalf, though may be more appropriate to refer the young adult to Adult Services for follow-up

services. The following questions should be considered to determine whether or not a CARS agreement is appropriate for a legally incompetent young adult:

- Is the young adult attending a school or vocational program that is designed to result in his being employed?
- Is the young adult learning living skills and behaviors that will prepare him to live independently within the next two years? For the purposes of this question, independent living could include a group setting if the individuals within the setting are able to conduct their responsibilities as independent adults, such as cooking, eating, shopping, self-care; recreation, involvement with friends and family, involvement with their faith community, and transportation.

A CARS agreement is a voluntary agreement between the young adult and the agency.

- The agency agrees to provide payment to assist with the cost of housing while the young adult is in an academic or vocational training program, and to provide foster care services and other services for which the young adult is eligible. The state pays half the standard board rate and the county pays the balance of cost of care.
- The agreement clarifies that the young adult's eligibility for LINKS services, including LINKS Transitional assistance, scholarship assistance through the ETV or Postsecondary Educational Support Scholarship, and eligibility for the Extended Foster Care Medicaid program are not contingent upon nor related in any way to the young adult's participation in a CARS agreement.
- The young adult agrees to "remain enrolled in a full-time program of academic or vocational training, or accepted for full-time enrollment for the next term in an academic or vocational program in order for foster care assistance payments to be paid on his/her behalf." The young adult further agrees to "discuss any problems arising from the placement with the social worker, and to handle his/her responsibility to work through any problems that are within the young adult's control." The young adult further agrees to "notify the agency and placement provider in advance if he/she decides to leave school, the vocational program, or foster care."
- Both the local child welfare agency and the young adult have the right to end the CARS agreement at any time. If the agreement is not terminated by one of the parties, it will automatically be terminated on the young adult's twenty-first birthday.

Foster Care Services Provided to Young Adults on CARS Agreements

1.) Agency Reviews:

When a foster youth is 18-21 years of age and signs a CARS agreement, he or she is participating as an equal party in a contractual agreement with the local child welfare agency.

The Out of Home Services Agreement form is no longer appropriate or required. However, it is important to meet regularly with the young adult to assure that the conditions of the agreement are met and that the young adult is

on track for his or her transition to self-sufficiency. Agency reviews of the agreement should be conducted every six months in a format similar to the Child and Family Teams. Persons involved with the young adult (employer, caregiver, representative of school, friends, family, et cetera) should be invited by the young adult to these planning sessions.

Agency participation should include the social worker, supervisor, LINKS liaison in addition to any community representatives that may have relevant input. Six month reviews offer a formal opportunity to review the living arrangement and to make rule modifications as appropriate, to consider the effectiveness of services provided by the agency and to modify the services provided. Form DSS-5108A (<http://info.dhhs.state.nc.us/olm/forms/dss/dss-5108A.pdf>) gives structure to the CARS review.

2) Assessments

The Casey Life Skills Assessment is an appropriate tool to help young adults track their progress toward mastery of life skills and to arrange for additional assistance as needed. Assessments should be completed every six months, prior to the CARS review. These assessments can be accessed on line at: <http://www.caseylifeskills.org/>.

3) Services

Young adults on CARS agreements remain eligible for all LINKS services and resources, and will continue to be eligible until age 21 regardless of their status on CARS. The LINKS liaison is normally assigned as agency contact, although this decision is made by the county agency. A menu of service options include but are not limited to:

- Involvement with ongoing LINKS activities at the agency, especially as youth leaders;
- Life skill training;
- Crisis management;
- Assistance to strengthen personal support system;
- Assistance in obtaining employment;
- Negotiation with employers, creditors, placement providers, etc.;
- Accessing LINKS Special Funds for transitional needs; and
- Information and referral to appropriate community resources.

LINKS Coordinators are usually a good resource to help young adults to become familiar with resources that can help them achieve positive outcomes. Workforce Investment Programs for young adults, Vocational Rehabilitation, state and federal

scholarship programs and community college programs are just a few of the community based resources outside of the local child welfare agency that can help students transition successfully, and collaboration between the local child welfare agency and these agencies should be maintained. LINKS liaisons are tracking data on young adults who age out of county custody, and should be informed of any changes in the CARS agreement or in the student's situation.

Paying for the Cost of Care on a CARS Agreement

Often, older youth age out of foster care in a therapeutic placement that costs significantly more than the standard board rate. Whenever possible, the agency should be planning ahead to step the youth down to a less structured placement well before their 18th birthday. Most therapeutic foster care placements are highly structured and do not allow youth sufficient opportunity to develop the life skills and experiences needed to transition successfully. While IV-E funding may have been used to help with the costs of placement prior to the youth's 18th birthday, these funds cannot be used to pay for the young adult's placement beyond the 18th birthday unless the young adult qualifies for mental health residential treatment as an adult.

The county typically pays the difference between the placement costs and the state contribution to the board payment.

Placement in Unlicensed Homes

There are circumstances in which the young adult student can live with a suitable relative or unrelated adult while he is in school if the provider receives some help with the cost of care. State foster home funds cannot be used to help pay for these placements unless and until the care provider is licensed as a foster parent, but counties can use county funds for this purpose if they choose to do so. If the youth is working and can contribute to the cost of room and board, this is a good way to help them learn about costs of living. If the student is receiving ETV or the new Postsecondary Education Support Scholarship, housing costs can be included as costs of attendance. LINKS Housing funds can also be used to offset these costs, up to the allowable limit.

These arrangements are not CARS Agreements, and there are no state requirements for reviews. Counties are required to provide services to all young adults who aged out of their county custody, so requirements for offering LINKS services continue regardless of the placement.

J. Permanency for Adolescents

1. Development of Permanent Placement Resources

Successful adoption recruitment strategies for teens are very different from those directed at locating families for younger children. Traditional adoption recruitment efforts tend to attract families seeking to adopt infants and young children. If those same strategies are used to attempt to attract families interested in

adopting teens, the rate of success is minimal. There are logical reasons for this:

- Teens in foster care are, first and foremost, teenagers. Average teens from average families are at a developmental stage that is typified by pulling away from family, not by joining into a family.
- Teens in foster care are unfairly prejudged as being emotionally disturbed, delinquent, violent, and/or generally incapable of being part of a family.
- Many adoption recruitment workers would rather put their energies in getting more younger children adopted, rather than focusing on the few teens who need adoptive placement.
- Most families would not consider adopting a teen unless they knew him or her personally.
- Most teens would not consider being adopted, unless they knew the potential adoptive parent personally.
- Many teens resist the concept of adoption for a variety of reasons: they may not want to change their name (although they do not have to do so), or they may feel that accepting adoption means that they would not see their relatives again, (although this may be worked out). They may feel that they do not deserve a permanent home. They may be concerned that if they agree to adoption, no family would step forward to provide a permanent home for them. They do not want to be rejected again.
- Many agencies do not make a concentrated effort to help teens to create new connections with caring adults, nor do they ask the youth to help them identify adults that they already know and trust.

2. General Recruitment for Permanent Homes

As with all recruitment efforts, outreach efforts should be targeted to the communities that have a racial, ethnic, racial, religious, and cultural background similar to the youth for whom we are recruiting. Educational presentations should be held to advertise the need to find permanent homes for teens and preteens. The specified purpose of these events is to encourage the community to help to prevent homelessness of teens exiting the system. We know that youth leaving the foster care system as adults without strong personal support systems are much more likely to face homelessness than those who do have these relationships. During these presentations prospective adoptive parents should be given an opportunity to hear directly from adolescents in foster care and to learn about the type of “parenting” that is needed by these teens.

Advertising for these events are distributed where the people are likely to see them: supermarket bulletin boards, ethnic newspapers and media, leaflets in restaurants, announcements in churches, mosques, and synagogues, within tribal organizations, etc.

3. Youth-Specific Recruitment

All teens in foster care have some emotional attachments to others in order to have survived. They have created their own “families.” These “families” may consist of friends, parents of friends, current and/or former foster parents, teachers, coaches, cottage parents, maintenance staff, relatives, older siblings or friends who are now adults, neighbors, church members, Guardians ad Litem, social workers, employers, counselors, etc. We need to ask these youth about these connections and to help them strengthen these relationships. There are often more than a dozen people currently in each youth’s life that could be approached about offering a permanent home to the youth. Asking youth to invite persons of their own choosing to participate in their planning reviews helps us to know who some of these people are.

In addition to identifying existing resources, we have the responsibility to help youth to develop connections that may develop into lifelong supportive relationships. Some of the program activities that can help this process are:

- establishing a mentor program within the LINKS program, matching the youth with a volunteer who has similar interests;
- researching the interest of relatives, neighbors, and friends who were once involved with the youth as a younger child but have since lost contact;
- contacting older siblings who are now on their own;
- helping the youth to develop Eco-maps to identify their support systems;
- involving youth in volunteer activities that also engage adult volunteers from faith and civic groups, such as blood drives, environmental restoration, working one on one with disabled children, fund drives for community recreation programs, etc.; and
- involving community persons in the LINKS program as volunteers.

Even if these activities or efforts do not result in adoptive placements, they will help youth to develop the kinds of friendships and supports that they will need as adults.

4. Adult Adoptions: Requirements and Procedures

If the youth is in a foster placement that has demonstrated commitment to a long term relationship with the youth, but does not want to interfere with his or her eligibility for educational or medical assistance, the agency should make that family aware of the possibility of adult adoption. Prospective adoptive parents should also be informed of the Education/Training vouchers that are available not only for youth who age out of foster care at age 18, but also for youth whose adoptive placement out of foster care is finalized after their 16th birthday. They should also be informed of the NC Reach Scholarships that provide scholarship assistance to youth adopted on or after their 12th birthday. North Carolina's adoption law does not restrict adoption to children. Adults may also be adopted. For purposes of the adoption law, an adult is defined as an individual who is at least 18 years old, or, if under the age of 18, is either legally married or has been emancipated under applicable state law.

5. Requirements for Prospective Adopting Parents (Adult Adoption)

If more than one person wants to adopt, they must be married to each other. Unmarried adults may not adopt together; but one person of the couple can adopt in such a situation. If the adopting parent is married, but the spouse does not want to adopt, the Clerk can be asked to waive the requirement that the spouse join in the adoption petition.

The adopting parent(s) must have lived in North Carolina for at least six months or the adoptee must have lived here for at least six months.

No home study or pre-placement assessment is required in an adult adoption and neither the local child welfare agency nor other adoption agency is involved.

6. Filing the Petition

Once the North Carolina residency requirement is met, the adoption petition can be filed in the county where the adopting parent lives or where the adoptee lives. The Clerk of Superior Court located in the courthouse of each county has adult adoption forms. The DSS-5163 Petition for Adult Adoption (<http://info.dhhs.state.nc.us/olm/forms/dss/dss-5163-ia.pdf>) is filed by the adopting parent(s) on their own or through an attorney.

Attached to the adoption petition are the DSS-5164 Consent to Adoption by Adult Adoptee (<http://info.dhhs.state.nc.us/olm/forms/dss/dss-5164-ia.pdf>) and, if the person adopting is the adoptee's stepparent, the DSS-5165 Consent to Adult Adoption by Spouse of Petitioner (<http://info.dhhs.state.nc.us/olm/forms/dss/dss-5165-ia.pdf>), unless the Clerk waives this requirement. All forms are located at the following web site: <http://info.dhhs.state.nc.us/olm/forms/forms.aspx?dc=dss>.

7. Revocation by Adoptee

An adoptee can revoke his consent at any time before the final adoption decree is entered.

8. Notices

Once an adult adoption petition is filed with the Clerk (and the filing fee paid), the adopting parent(s) gives notice of the adoption to:

- a. any adult children of the adopting parent; and
- b. any parent, spouse or adult child of the adoptee listed in the adoption petition.

However, the Clerk may waive the requirement that notice be given to the adoptee's parent for cause.

Any person who is entitled to notice of the pending adult adoption may waive that right to notice in writing. A person entitled to notice has the right to respond within 30 days and present evidence on whether the proposed adoption is in the best interest of the adoptee. They cannot prevent or stop the adoption, unless the Clerk agrees with them that adoption is not in the adult adoptee's best interest and dismisses the petition. That decision by the Clerk could be appealed within 10 days to a district court judge.

9. Affidavit of Adoption Expenses; Hearing on Final Decree

After notice has been given to the persons mentioned above, and if no one wishes to be heard or the Clerk finds their concerns are without merit, the adopting parent(s) file a DSS-5191 Affidavit - Disclosure of Fees and Expenses (<http://info.dhhs.state.nc.us/olm/forms/dss/dss-5191-ia.pdf>) that lists any money they spent in connection with the adoption, such as legal fees. The Clerk can then schedule the hearing on the final decree of adoption (DSS-5166 Decree of Adult Adoption - <http://info.dhhs.state.nc.us/olm/forms/dss/dss-5166-ia.pdf>). The adopting parent and adoptee must both appear at this hearing unless the Clerk waives this requirement, in which case an appearance for either or both parties can be made by an attorney authorized in writing to make an appearance. The Clerk normally waits 30 days before entering the final decree to allow for the required notices to be given, but the decree can be entered earlier if all consents and notices are complete.

10. New Birth Certificate Optional

In addition to the decree of adoption, the Clerk sends the DSS-5167 Report to Vital Records for Adult Adoption (<http://info.dhhs.state.nc.us/olm/forms/dss/dss-5167-ia.pdf>) to Vital Records in Raleigh, which sets out the name of the adoptee and adoptive parent(s) and orders a new birth certificate entered in those names, if the adult adoptee desires an amended birth certificate. Once a

new birth certificate is prepared, the adoptee will be notified and can purchase copies from Vital Records.

11. Legal Status of Birth Parents

The decree of adoption ends the legal parent/child relationship between the adult adoptee and his biological or previous adoptive parents, except that a birth parent who is married to an adopting stepparent retains parental rights. This means that the birth parent is relieved of all legal duties and obligations. The adoptee will no longer inherit from the birth parent unless the birth parent has a will and specifically names the adoptee as a beneficiary.

There is no separate termination of parental rights action brought against the adult adoptee's parents. Adult adoptions are "open" adoptions in which the parties know each other and can decide what relationship to have with each other after the decree of adoption is entered.

However, after the decree of adoption is entered, the adoptee is considered the child of the adoptive parent(s) for all purposes, including inheritance.

K. Training for Staff and Foster / Adoptive Parents

The Chafee Act requires that agency staff, foster parents and other providers who work with adolescents receive training specific to working with teens. This training should also be made available to adoptive parents who either have adopted or who are planning to adopt a teen. Training should include topics such as:

- Normal child and youth development;
- How child and youth development are influenced by the foster care experience;
- Strategies to help children and youth successfully handle the impact of abuse, neglect, and placement disruptions;
- Co-parenting with the child/youth's biological family in order to improve family connections even for youth who are not reunified with their family;
- Establishing a mentoring relationship with teens;
- Appropriate discipline; helping teens build self-discipline;
- Accessing community resources for teens and their caregivers;
- Using "teaching moments" to impart needed information;
- Talking with teens about difficult subjects, such as relationships, sexuality, sexual orientation, substance abuse, risk avoidance;

- Helping teens to identify and strengthen their personal support systems;
- Encouraging teens to identify and build on their own strengths and interests; and
- The caregiver's role in implementing transitional plans.

Note: Agencies must use Title IV-E Training funds designated for training adults, since LINKS funds cannot be used to train social workers, foster parents, or other adults in a caregiving role.

L. Placement Services for Foster and Adoptive Parents

Raising an adolescent is a challenging, rewarding, frustrating, exhausting, and exhilarating experience for anyone. Foster and adoptive parent support groups, buddy systems pairing experienced and new foster or adoptive parents, foster parent associations and community resources are extremely important resources that help adoptive and foster placements avoid disruptions. Similarly, youth need opportunities to withdraw for short periods in order to deal with the frustrations and anxieties that accompany being in a foster or adoptive placement. Visits with families and friends, and sponsored participation in conferences, workshops and camps offer needed breaks while providing new information and skill building.

M. Independent Living as a Coordinated Service of Foster Care

Every child who experiences out-of-home care, from toddler to teen, should receive developmentally appropriate training and exposure to experiences that encourage the consistent development of independent living skills. While LINKS Funds cannot be used to provide such services before the child is 13 years of age, foster parents and social workers can address the need by intentionally creating opportunities for the child to learn how to make good choices, to become self-confident, to handle personal responsibility, and to develop a network of resources.

A key to helping youth in foster care placement develop adult living skills and attitudes is the positive **attitude of the worker**. Often youth lose developmentally critical information due to placement instability. It is easy to overlook the possibility that youth may not have been exposed to common life experiences, and easier yet to interpret that their failure to participate in simple tasks is due to a lack of motivation or rebellion, rather than a lack of information.

Some agencies are concerned that eligible youth do not want to participate in their LINKS programs. Perhaps the most critical step in developing or redesigning LINKS services is the meaningful involvement of the youth to be served. For programs with 8 or more eligible participants, this could take the form of establishing a youth advisory committee made up of natural youth leaders who perform an integral role in the development of the program to be offered. Natural leaders are those to whom other youth look for leadership. This may or may not coincide with the adult's perspective of leadership qualities. These youth advisors will learn from their role as leaders,

organizers and implementers. Participating youth appreciate their voice being heard. Even mistakes provide excellent teaching opportunities, and youth learn that failure is not fatal. Staff members should promote flexibility in programming, so long as the basic general purposes of the LINKS program are being addressed. For all programs, youth involvement also means meeting with individual youth, their supporters, and their service providers to identify goals and activities that will help youth to achieve self-sufficiency.

Some aspects of LINKS programming are best accomplished through group activities. For most counties with few eligible youth, group services are not usually offered. There are ways to create groups even in the smallest counties, and agencies are encouraged to do so. Some options are to:

- co-sponsor a group with another agency that serves teenagers, such as schools, Workforce Investment Act programs, 4-H, Mental Health or Community Based Alternatives. Costs above and beyond those incurred by eligible youth may not be paid with LINKS funds.
- co-sponsor a group with neighboring county LINKS programs, planning for monthly, quarterly and/or semiannual youth events. Small counties may qualify for salary supplements if the participating counties serve a combined total of 9 or more eligible youth ages 16 to 21 and/or aged out young adults.
- Encourage youth in agency custody to participate in skills courses through schools, agricultural extension programs, recreation programs, community resource centers, and other such programs.

N. Tracking Outcomes

One requirement of the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act is “to cooperate in national evaluations of the effectiveness of the services in achieving the purposes of the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program.” A critical component of these evaluations is the collection of data regarding outcomes as well as data regarding the specific services provided to youth through the program.

County departments of social services that receive federal funds through the LINKS program share in the responsibility of gathering and reporting this information. The National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) (http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/systems/nytd/about_nytd.htm) is the data reporting system that will be used to determine the relationship between the types and intensity of services and the outcomes achieved. In addition to tracking the data required by NYTD, counties may wish to begin tracking their own longitudinal data on teens who participate in the LINKS program, including the types of services provided by the agency and the outcomes achieved as young adults.

Demographic Information:

- Name / SIS ID

- Gender
- Race / Ethnicity
- Date of Birth
- Date of Entry into Foster Care (most recent episode)
- Whether or not the youth is a member of a Federally recognized Indian tribe
- Marital status
- Number of children parented by this individual
- Last grade completed

Educational Information:

- Currently attending educational or vocational school?
- Special education
- Driver's education provided
- Highest educational certificate received

Foster Care Information:

- Date of most recent assessment and case plan
- Types of LINKS services needed
- Types of Planned and Spontaneous Services provided or paid for by a local child welfare agency
 - Academic support, e.g. tutoring, scholarship assistance
 - Post-secondary educational support
 - Driver's education
 - Career preparation
 - Employment programs or vocational training
 - Budget and financial management

- Housing education and home management
- Planned supervised Independent Living
- Health education and risk prevention
- Mentoring

Participation:

- LINKS services provided by the agency
- Whether the youth did/did not participate in LINKS program. If not, why not.
 - Refused
 - Not Needed

Employment Information:

- Current full or part time employment
- Employment experience
- Hours and wages sufficient for self-support?

Income Other Than Work:

- Social security
- Scholarship
- TANF

Housing Information:

- Safe and stable Housing?
- Homeless in previous year?

Personal Support System:

- Connection to responsible, caring adult(s)
- Access to health care (free or has insurance)

High Risk Behaviors (behaviors that endanger physical or mental health):

- Substance abuse (alcohol/drug)
- Risky sexual behaviors
- Domestic violence in intimate relationships
- Other criminal/delinquent activities
- Incarceration

The job of LINKS county coordinator can be demanding, rewarding, frustrating and fulfilling at the same time. It is a job that gives us an opportunity to make a significant and positive difference for teens in foster care as well as young adults who have left the foster care system.