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Challenges and strengths among Chafee Education and Training Voucher eligible youth: The rural service providers' perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores service providers' perspectives on youth-related factors that impact the utilization of the Chafee Educational and Training Voucher (ETV) Program in three relatively rural states. Findings derived from mail surveys ($N=105$) and in-depth interviews ($N=17$) with child welfare and educational service providers highlight challenges and innovations found in working with Chafee ETV eligible youth. Implications for practice include the need to improve service delivery for rural youth transitioning to post-secondary education in the following areas: connecting with youth who are initially reluctant to stay linked to the child welfare system; addressing possible gaps in emotional or social supports; and providing concrete services like housing, transportation, and health care.

1. Introduction

Research conducted over the last decade documents that youth exiting foster care face both systemic and individual challenges that result in low post-secondary school attendance (Courtney et al., 2005; Reilly, 2003; Stone, D'Antrade, & Austin, 2007; Wolanin, 2005). Despite the economic advantages of post-secondary education, foster care youth lag far behind the national trends (Goerge et al., 2002). Courtney et al. (2005) found that over a third of their sample of young people who aged out of care did not have a diploma or GED as compared to less than 10% of a similar national sample. Foster care youth take General Educational Development (GED) tests at six times the rate of the general population which is consequential, since those with GEDs are half as likely to attend post-secondary education compared to those with traditional diplomas (Pecora et al., 2006). Ultimately, only 20–30% of foster care alumni/ae attend any post-secondary education, and they have a bachelor's degree completion rate almost 10 times lower than the national average (Pace, 2007; Pecora et al., 2005). This has long term ramification since college graduates average $25,000 more/year than high school graduates and $35,000 more than those who do not complete high school (United States Census Bureau-Department of Commerce, 2007).

2. Chafee Educational and Training Voucher Program (Chafee ETV)

Over the past decade, federal policymakers have responded to the many educational and self-sufficiency challenges faced by adolescents in foster care. The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (PL106-169) established the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP) to promote self-sufficiency in youth remaining in foster care until their 18th birthday by encouraging life skills in such areas as completing high school, finding employment, securing housing, and developing money management strategies (Child Welfare League of America, 2005; Collins, 2004). Two years later, the Chafee Educational and Training Voucher Program (Chafee ETV) was enacted under Title 2 of the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Act and it is currently estimated that around 150,000 youth nationally meet the criteria to receive Chafee ETV funds (Fernandes, 2007). The Chafee ETV program provides up to $5000/individual a year toward the higher education expenses of this population including funds to defray costs for tuition/fees, room and board, transportation, and child care expenses. States may allow students to use these funds to pay for health insurance expenses, with the understanding that the student would then need to deduct those costs from his or her monthly living expense stipend (Nixon, 2005). Although Chafee ETV was enacted in 2001, it was not operative in most states until 2003–2004, making it a relatively new federal initiative with little longitudinal research as to its effectiveness (Courtney et al., 2005).

In addition to Chafee funds, there are older federal initiatives that can aid foster care youths' educational aspirations. Upward Bound

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began as part of the War on Poverty's Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and was expanded under the Higher Education Act of 1965 to encompass Talent Search and Student Support Services under what came to be collectively called the TRIO Programs (Walters, 2006). Given the family background of most foster children and their status as "wards of the state," foster care youth are assumed to be eligible for these programs. However, no special incentives exist for TRIO programs to reach out to these youth and such programs are already under funded, reaching only about 10% of students who are statistically eligible for their services (Kahlenberg, 2004).

Individual states have also established legislation to aid foster youth in pursuing their post-secondary educational goals. Although Chafee ETV eligible youth also qualify for other aid through Pell Grants, scholarships by the Orphan Foundation, Gates Millennium Scholarships, etc. (Davis, 2006), several states, including all of the Northern New England States, have enacted legislation to offer foster care youth free or reduced tuition at their public universities. These state initiatives became necessary as it was apparent that even in most public colleges, the maximum $5000/year provided under Chafee ETV was insufficient to cover all of a student's expenses, especially given that these youth may be less likely to have existing savings or family to provide financial support for their education (Shirk & Stangler, 2004).

Federal Chafee and TRIO programs, as well as individual state efforts, provide some service options for teens exiting foster care. However, research suggests that these foster care youth continue to both struggle and demonstrate resiliency as they transition to independence (Collins, 2001; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005; Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005).

3. Individual attributes and youth-related issues impacting Chafee ETV utilization

Although there may be some systemic barriers to post-secondary educational access, each youth is an individual who brings different strengths and challenges to their post-secondary journey. For example, as for all other young adults, the transition between the high school and post-high school years can be challenging for foster care youth (Courtney & Hughes Heuring, 2000; MacArthur Research Network, 2005; Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005). Levels of maturity can vary, although foster care youth are often expected to function more independently at an earlier age than the national trend, which now shows an increase (into the mid-20's) in the average age in which most American youth are completely self-sufficient from their parents (Pace, 2007). However, delaying post-secondary enrollment until a young adult is more mature is controversial, since there is some evidence that starting later may reduce the graduation rate by as much as 64%, particularly for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who may have poor academic preparation, lose contact with school personnel who support their admission's process, and who may lack the opportunity for contacts with similar students in their cohort who have started college before them (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005).

3.1. Desire to be emancipated from child welfare system

Courtney et al. (2005) found that youth who stayed connected to the child welfare system in some manner after age 18 were twice as likely to be enrolled in some form of post-secondary education and three times as likely to be enrolled in a 2–4 year college as their foster care peers who cut off all contact. However, youth who have negative experiences in foster care may seek emancipation from a system they view as not serving their interests (Collins, 2004; Keller, Cusick, & Courtney, 2007), even if this means they are forsaking an opportunity to continue their education.

3.2. Living arrangements and transportation

Chafee eligible youth exiting foster care need assistance with the concrete tasks they face, like deciding on housing alternatives. Youth need to decide whether it is better to get their own apartment (about 1/3 pick this option), live in a dorm where they may have to find a place to live during school breaks (about 10% face this problem), or try to make an arrangement to stay with foster or biological family members (about a third live with a biological family member) while attending a post-secondary program (Courtney et al., 2005). Finding reliable transportation or car insurance may also be a challenge for these youth, and while public transportation may be part of a solution in urban areas (Pecora et al., 2005), such transportation may be limited in more rural areas.

3.3. Youth not interested in pursuing post-secondary education

Some foster care youth may find that both the child welfare system and their public schools stereotype them and have low expectations of what they can achieve. They may be told that college or post-secondary vocational programs are not within their reach and they may not be encouraged to have the hopes, visions, or aspirations to see post-secondary education as a possibility (Wolanin, 2005). If that occurs, foster care youth may not be steered toward college prep courses; encouraged to take the SATs; sent on campus visits; or directed to the financial aid that is available. Foster care youth, for instance, must be told that it is necessary to check the box that says "ward/dependent of the state or courts" on the Free Application for Federal Student Loan (FAFSA) form in order to be eligible for all the financial aid to which these youth are entitled (Wolanin).

3.4. Gaps in supportive services

Youth transitioning from out-of-home care to post-secondary programs may benefit from a range of supportive services. Individual youth may have unaddressed or under-addressed cognitive, behavioral or physical limitations that require specific support services in order to make post-secondary education within reach (MacArthur Research Network, 2005; Pecora et al., 2005). For example, more than half (54%) of Chafee ETV eligible young adults face mental health issues; a rate twice that of this age group in general, as evidenced by the fact that one-quarter of all foster care alumni/ae have PTSD, six times the national average (Pecora et al., 2005). Such mental health concerns may be exacerbated by the neglect and/or abuse of their childhood, the trauma of removal from their biological family, and sometimes their experiences within the child welfare system. In part due to these issues, an essential task of making a successful transition to the post-foster care world can be to find health/mental health care and health insurance coverage; but the availability and accessibility options for these youth in this arena may be unclear (English, Stinnett, & Dunn-Georgiou, 2006; Redmond, 2003) particularly in rural areas. Health coverage varies from state to state and can depend greatly on the youth's circumstance when exiting foster care. For instance, the benefits and programs available may vary according to whether the student is living on a university campus and going to school full-time versus living in an apartment and taking a part-time course in a vocational program.

3.5. Complications related to attending multiple K-12 schools

For many youth in foster or group home care, school can enhance their resiliency by providing a safe haven from the chaos of their home lives, especially if they stay in one school environment long enough to be recognized for their abilities and have the opportunity to connect with adults who can act as mentors (Hines et al., 2005). However, many foster care youth experience repeated school transfers and research indicates that youth can lose as much as 4–6 months of educational