



Influencing policy for youth transitioning from care: Defining problems, crafting solutions, and assessing politics[☆]

Mary Elizabeth Collins^{*}, Cassandra Clay

Boston University School of Social Work, 264 Bay State Road, Boston, MA 02215, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 November 2008

Received in revised form 27 January 2009

Accepted 28 January 2009

Available online 3 February 2009

Keywords:

Transition from care

Agenda setting

Child welfare policy

ABSTRACT

Qualitative interviews were conducted with policy and program stakeholders regarding the issue of youth transitioning from foster care. These interviews were designed for the purpose of collecting information related to “policy and program responses needed to improve outcomes for these youth.” Agenda setting theory provides the framework for interpretation of the data. The data suggest both positive and negative forces impacting the ability of this issue to gain serious attention from policymakers. Implications for further policy and theoretical development are provided.

© 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The challenges of youth transitioning from foster care to independent adulthood have been well documented by researchers (e.g., Barth, 1990; Cook, 1994; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Festinger, 1983; Lindsey & Ahmed, 1999; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Reilly, 2003). Homelessness, for example, has received substantial attention in outcomes studies. Recent studies reporting the percentage of former foster youth reporting episodes of homelessness include the following estimates: 12% (Courtney et al., 2001); 28% (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007); 36% (Reilly, 2003); and 37% (Collins & Ward, 2009). Data have continually shown this population faces numerous challenges and can suffer poor outcomes, particularly when transition-related assistance is not provided (Lindsey & Ahmed, 1999; Montgomery, Donkoh, & Underhill, 2006; Collins & Ward, 2009). Moreover, youth appear to have better outcomes when states allow them to remain attached to the foster care system after age 18 (Courtney, Dworsky, & Pollack, 2007).

Given the known risk of poor outcomes and the generally agreed upon vulnerable status of this population, these youth would appear to have legitimate claim to public attention and appropriate assistance. Yet, attention to their needs must compete with the countless needs of other vulnerable populations, also with significant claim. Nor is this the only issue with which severely overburdened child welfare systems are dealing. Thus, societal debate and decisions about intervention are required.

Public policy does not solely distribute goods and services based on demonstrated need, although need level may be one factor, among

others. Political processes often are core elements of decision-making processes. Consequently, policy-oriented theoretical frameworks are needed to understand policy development, policy choices, policy implementation, and policy effects. Based in the theoretical literature of agenda-setting this article utilizes qualitative data from interviews with 34 key stakeholders to assess perspectives on influencing state policy regarding youth transitioning from care, particularly as it relates to framing problems and policy solutions within political context. These interviews were conducted as part of a larger study examining youth transitioning from care, and were designed for the purpose of collecting information related to “policy and program responses needed to improve outcomes for these youth.”

2. Background context

In 2005, 812 youth turned 18 while in the care of the Massachusetts Department of Social Services (DSS).¹ This is a small number in comparison to the 9451 total children in placement as of December 31, 2005 and a total of 40,660 children on the caseload. Because of their comparatively small number, and perhaps for other reasons as well (e.g., less politically popular than small children, more likely to receive services from other agencies such as juvenile justice), adolescents generally have not received significant resources within child welfare systems (Collins, 2001).

Federal policy attention to address the circumstances of youth transitioning from care at age 18 began in 1985 with the passage of the Independent Living Initiative (P.L. 99–272) which amended Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to provide federal funds to states to help

[☆] This study was funded by The Home for Little Wanderers.

^{*} Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 617 353 3748.

E-mail address: mcollins@bu.edu (M.E. Collins).

¹ Legislation in July 2008 changed the name to the Department of Children and Families. This article continues to use the name Department of Social Services or DSS since that was the name at the time of the study.

adolescents in foster care develop independent living skills. More recent federal legislation, the Foster Care Independence Act (P.L. 106–169) passed in 1999, established the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program. Key provisions of this program included: a \$140 million capped entitlement requiring a 20% state match; an updated funding allocation formula based on the proportion of a state's children in Title IV-E and state funded foster care; expansion of eligibility — up to age 21 for those children who are “likely to remain in foster care until age 18” and those who have aged out of foster care without regard to their eligibility for Title IV-E funded foster care; allowable use of up to 30% of funds for room and board for those ages 18 to 21; and allowable extension of Medicaid coverage to young people ages 18 to 21 who were in foster care on their 18th birthday.

Certain provisions within the recently passed, *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008* (P.L. 110–350), are relevant to the transition-age population. This federal legislation allows states the option to extend Title IV-E foster care to the age of 21. It also amends the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program to add the purpose of providing services to youth who after age 16 leave foster care for kinship guardianship or adoption, and, it amends the Education and Training Voucher Program to permit vouchers for youth who after attaining age 16 enter into kinship guardianship or are adopted from care. Additionally, the law creates a new requirement that during the 90-day period prior to the youth's emancipation, the caseworker must develop a personalized transition plan as directed by the youth.

While there is no existing research comparing all states regarding their efforts to assist youth in the transition from care, there are indications that Massachusetts has been relatively active in working to provide support to this population. First, DSS offers an adolescent outreach program, funded from the federal Chafee program, to assist youth with the transition from care. This program consists of intensive, individualized life skills assessment and training to prepare youth for adulthood. Youth who receive services from this program have an outreach worker to assist with accomplishing tasks related to planning a successful transition (e.g., finding housing, enrolling in an educational program). A specialized life skills training curriculum is also utilized to provide instruction in life skills. Financial incentives are provided for youth as they complete different modules.

Young people can continue in care up to age 22 (and age 23 if they are finishing college) by signing a voluntary placement agreement and complying with a plan that includes education enrollment and/or employment. Furthermore, since 2005, DSS has allowed young people who have been discharged from care to return for voluntary services through age 22. These youth have access to outreach program staff who maintain contact with the youth and provide information and support to the youth as they continue their transition to independent adulthood. Foster care payments can be made directly to the young person to support housing and living expenses.

Other assistance that Massachusetts provides to this population is educational assistance (through the federal Educational and Training Voucher program) and through state funded resources, and Medicaid coverage provided for all youth who age out of DSS up to their 21st birthday. Additionally, consistent with federal policy, several permanency initiatives have been instituted both within the public child welfare agency and its contracted providers (Agosti & Morrill, 2007).

The study reported in this article was one component of a larger study commissioned by a statewide task force. The Task Force on Youth Aging Out of DSS Care was a “recommending entity” with a short-term assignment initially scheduled to conclude at the end of 2007. The task force consisted of individuals representing private providers, state agencies, and other organizations involved in helping this population. The task force raised funds from foundations to fund the current study. An RFP was issued indicating the desire for a study to gather information related to: 1) the quantity and quality of transitional services youth received or utilized while in care; 2) outcomes achieved

within 1–2 years of leaving custody; 3) relationship between services received and youth outcomes; 4) policy and program responses needed to improve outcomes for these youth. Data from stakeholder interviews to address component #4 are presented in this paper. Other papers from this study (e.g., Collins & Ward, 2009) focus on the services received and outcomes attained, and, therefore, also provide information to inform policy development; the focus here, however, is on the perceptions and political context for policy-making which can be highly relevant but are much less frequently studied. These qualitative data provide insight into perceptions regarding the framing of the “aging out” problem and policy solutions within political context.

3. Theoretical framework

Data from the stakeholder interviews are interpreted in this paper within the framework of agenda-setting theory. This body of theory addresses how certain issues attain status on the policy agenda, i.e., the “list of subjects or problems to which government officials, and people outside of government closely associated with those officials, are paying attention at any given time” (Kingdon, 2003, p.3). Although highly relevant to many social issues with which social work and human services are engaged, this theoretical framework is not widely applied in the literature of children and youth services. John Kingdon (2003) has suggested there are specific processes of agenda-setting that facilitate (or inhibit) a set of circumstances in advancing on the public policy agenda. In his conceptualization, “problems” are a key focus, but in addition “policies” and “politics” are also instrumental in determining whether issues receive agenda status.

Problem definition is a sub-genre of agenda-setting which specifically addresses the nature of problems and how they are framed in order to achieve the most political mileage (Cobb & Elder, 1983 ; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Best, 1995; Stone, 1977). It is well documented that while numerous issues constantly compete for attention on the policy agenda, “[T]he victors in this competition typically benefit from persuasive and compelling problem definition” (Portz, 1996, p.371). Some issue areas struggle to attain agenda status because significant actors have not been successful in achieving consensus on problem definition. Portz (1996) noted, for example, that attention to public education is often fragmented due to competing definitions. Problem definitions are not objective; they are matters of interpretation and social definition (Cobb & Elder, 1983, p.172). Problem definition, therefore, is central to the political process.

Certain factors will increase the likelihood that a condition will be recognized as a problem requiring attention of policymakers. One factor influencing problem definition is the extent to which the problem offends social values; i.e., there is a mismatch between observed conditions and the conception of an ideal state. A related factor is the extent to which the problem condition identifies existing deficits through comparisons (to other countries, other states, or an agreed upon norm, for example).

An overlapping body of literature that is sometimes included but often distinct is that which examines the social construction of a problem *population* (e.g., Schneider & Ingram, 1990). Nicholson-Crotty and Nicholson-Crotty (2004) found that a negative social construction of target populations was related to less spending on the population. Societal perceptions towards certain groups influence the construction of the problem and the ability of the population to claim favorable societal resources and attention. Rochefort and Cobb (1993) offer a four-pronged dichotomy: worthy–unworthy; deserving–undeserving; familiar–strange; sympathetic–threatening. Moreover, Schneider and Ingram argued that policies targeted at negatively constructed groups often attempt to modify behavior through coercive means, while those targeted at more positively constructed groups tend to rely on incentives (Ingram & Schneider, 1991; Schneider & Ingram, 1990). Additionally, they noted that politically weak target groups, who are

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/346969>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/346969>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)