

Last-Minute Spending Deal Includes Boosts for Child Welfare

Housing vouchers for young adults who aged out of foster care quietly becomes law

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After months of on-again, off-again negotiations that seemed doomed as recently as last week, Congress has approved a deal on annual funding and coronavirus relief that includes more than \$400 million in federal support for child welfare systems. **The deal also enshrines into law a stable housing initiative to support young adults who age out of foster care, a group at dangerous risk of experiencing homelessness.**

The deal includes several of the child welfare provisions that were approved by the House over the summer as part of the HEROES Act. Pat Lawler, CEO of multistate child welfare provider Youth Villages, called their inclusion in the bill “a lifeline” for older foster youth. “We know that young people who reach adulthood in foster care often struggle to meet basic needs during normal times, said Lawler, in an email to *The Imprint*. “The pandemic has hit them hard. They’ve lost jobs and work hours and they’re struggling with food and housing insecurity — most without any family supports,”

Older Youth and Young Adults

The deal includes \$400 million for the John Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, \$50 million of which goes to the college voucher program that supports tuition and other costs for current and former foster youth. The rest of this boost funding can be used for independent living costs (including housing) to support current and former foster youth up to the age of 27. The maximum amount of the college vouchers was also temporarily raised from \$5,000 per student to \$12,000.

It also requires that states with a federally funded extension of foster care to age 21 (just over half of states fit that description) must allow those young adults to remain in care for the time being. And if they have already aged out since the pandemic began, a state must allow them to return to care.

The federal funds for extended foster care flow from Title IV-E, the main child welfare entitlement. For those older foster youth who are not eligible under the rules of IV-E, the bill permits states to use their Chafee independent living money to prevent them from aging out during the coronavirus pandemic.

Housing After Foster Care

For years, a group of advocates led by former foster youth have been pushing for a bill called the Fostering Stable Housing Opportunities Act (FSHO, one of the greatest bill acronyms ever developed). **The main tenet of the bill – on-demand vouchers to help support those leaving foster care – was actually put into effect last year as an executive branch initiative by Housing and Urban Development Secretary Ben Carson. His likely successor in that job, former U.S. Rep. Marcia Fudge (D-Ohio), was an early supporter of FSHO.**

This deal incorporates the addition of these vouchers into law. **FSHO would enable a young adult to obtain a voucher for three years through any public housing authority in the country for three years, with an additional two years of eligibility if they are receiving family self-sufficiency supports.**

“It means that older youth who are in foster care never have to fear being homeless,” said Ruth White, executive director of the National Center for Housing and Child Welfare. “Youth may have other plans or they may decide that they are not interested in signing a year-long lease and settling down in their own place. But the stability of a housing choice voucher for three years is there if they choose it. If they are enjoying that stability and want to be rewarded for working, they can voluntarily enroll in self-sufficiency program and extend the platform for an additional two years for a total of five.”