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Report to The Honorable Nancy L. Johnson, U.S. House of Representatives

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FOSTER CARE

Effectiveness of Independent Living Services Unknown

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Health, Education, and
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The Honorable Nancy L. Johnson
Chairman, Subcommittee on Human Resources
Committee on Ways and Means
House of Representatives

Dear Madam Chairman:

Each year approximately 20,000 youths exit the foster care system with the expectation that they will be able to live self-sufficiently.[1] After exiting the system, many of these youths face serious problems, including homelessness, lack of employment stability, incarceration, and early pregnancy. Recently, a congressional subcommittee raised concerns in hearings that the federal Independent Living Program (ILP), designed to help foster care youths make the transition to living independently, does not give youths leaving foster care the necessary life skills to complete basic education, find and maintain employment, or otherwise live self-sufficiently after leaving care. The Congress is currently considering legislation that would double program funds and expand services for youths in foster care and those who will leave foster care.

All states provide independent living services to youths about to leave the foster care system. Because of your concerns that little is known about the level of services offered to these youths and whether the services match their needs, you asked us to (1) describe the extent of services provided under ILPs, and (2) discuss what is known about the effect of these services on youths' ability to live on their own.[2] In conducting this work, we reviewed relevant literature and 1998 annual ILP reports submitted by the states to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). We also interviewed state and federal officials and independent living experts and visited independent living programs in four locations—Contra Costa County, California; Baltimore City and County, Maryland; New York, New York; and the San Antonio region, Texas. In addition, to obtain national information on additional services offered by state ILPs, we surveyed all 50 states and the District of Columbia. We conducted our work between January and September 1999 in accordance with generally accepted

[1]When youths who have not been reunited with their families or adopted attain age 18, federal reimbursement is no longer made to states for the youths' maintenance in foster care. However, some states allow youths to remain in care, at state expense, until age 21.

[2]We testified on these issues in May 1999 and this report expands on that information. See Foster Care: Challenges in Helping Youths Live Independently (GAO/T-HEHS-99-121, May 13, 1999).

government auditing standards. (A more detailed discussion of our scope and methodology appears in appendix I.)

Results in Brief

States provide a wide range of services to better ensure that foster care youths are prepared to live on their own after they leave the foster care system. Those services—funded by federal, state, local, and private dollars totalling at least $131.5 million in 1998—include assisting youths in attaining their educational goals, such as completing high school or passing the General Educational Development (GED) test and attending postsecondary schools; as well as assisting youths in finding and maintaining employment.[3] In addition, youths attend classes in daily living skills, covering such topics as money management, hygiene, housekeeping, and nutrition, and receive instruction in areas that help youths interact successfully with adults, such as conflict management. Other transitional services, such as supervised practice living arrangements and after-care services, allow youths to try living on their own prior to leaving the foster care system and provide temporary assistance to ease the transition to independence. However, state and local administrators told us that their ILPs cannot always provide all of the assistance administrators and youths say is needed to help youths learn to live on their own. For example, some programs do not have fully developed links with employers to provide job leads, lack opportunities for youths to practice skills in real-life settings, and fall short on the number of supervised practice living arrangements needed for youths to become more proficient at living self-sufficiently.

Even though the federal ILP was established in 1985, few national or local studies have been completed to assess the effectiveness of independent living services in helping youths through the transition to living on their own after foster care.[4] We identified only one national study that has been completed to date, which found that services provided by ILPs have the potential to improve outcomes for youths. In addition, although several states indicated they have completed studies that measure general youth outcomes, such as education and employment status, only a few attempted to measure the helpfulness of ILP services in youths' ability to attain self-sufficiency. While HHS is tasked with overseeing implementation of ILP, it has done little to determine program effectiveness and has no

[3]Some states were unable to identify the amount of additional state, local, or private funds spent on their ILPs.

[4]Although ILP was established in 1985, funds for payments to the states were not appropriated until 1987.

established method to review the states' progress in helping youths in the transition from foster care. For example, HHS primarily relies on state annual program reports for effectiveness information and has no other monitoring efforts in place. However, the content and quality of the reports vary and they contain little information on program outcomes. HHS officials told us they recognize these deficiencies and the need to improve monitoring efforts. To begin the improvement process, HHS issued a contract in September of 1998 to analyze 10 years of annual state ILP reports to determine, among other things, which states are producing good ILP reports that could be models for other states and what measures HHS can take to improve state reporting and evaluation. We are making recommendations to HHS concerning the need to enhance HHS' and states' accountability for preparing youths to live on their own.

Background

Adolescents in foster care, especially those who have been in care for a number of years, face numerous challenges in preparing to become self-sufficient adults once they leave the foster care system. Several programs help foster care youths in their transition to independent living, but only one—ILP—is specifically designed to serve this population.

The transition from the foster care system to self-sufficiency can be difficult. Research has shown that many former foster care youths have serious educational deficiencies and rely on public assistance. For example, a 1991 study of foster care youths interviewed 2.5 to 4 years after they left care found that 46 percent had not finished high school.[5] Additionally, almost 40 percent were found to be a cost to the community through their dependence on such programs as public assistance and Medicaid. Similarly, the University of Wisconsin recently studied youths who had been out of care between 12 and 18 months, and found that 37 percent had not finished high school and 32 percent were receiving public assistance.[6] In addition, former foster care youths often find themselves lacking adequate housing. The Westat study reported that 25 percent of the youths were homeless at least 1 night, and the University of Wisconsin study found that, after leaving care, 14 percent of the males and 10 percent of the females had been homeless at least once. Additional difficulties may further impede youths' ability to become self-sufficient. The Westat study found that 51 percent of the youths were unemployed

[5]Westat, Inc., A National Evaluation of Title IV-E Foster Care Independent Living Programs for Youth (Washington, D.C.: HHS, 1991).

[6]Mark E. Courtney and Irving Piliavin, Foster Youth Transitions to Adulthood: Outcomes 12 to 18 Months After Leaving Out-of-Home Care (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin, 1998).

and 42 percent had given birth or fathered a child. Likewise, the University of Wisconsin found that 39 percent of the youths were unemployed, and that 27 percent of the males and 10 percent of the females had been incarcerated at least once.

ILP—the primary program designed to help foster care youths become self-sufficient—authorizes federal funding for states to establish and implement services to assist youths aged 16 and over in making the transition from foster care to independent living. Originally authorized in 1985 by P.L. 99-272 for a limited period, the program was reauthorized indefinitely as part of the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1993 (P.L. 103-66), which also increased federal funding to the current level of $70 million per year. A portion of the federal funds—$45 million—is distributed to states as an entitlement based on each state's proportion of all youths receiving federal foster care maintenance payments in fiscal year 1984.[7] States are also eligible to receive a proportional share of the remaining $25 million in federal funds to match the funds they provide.

HHS estimates that almost 77,000 youths aged 16 to 20 were in foster care as of September 1998. While approximately 40 percent of the youths in this age range will return to their biological families, almost 20,000 adolescents per year leave the foster care system and are expected to live self-sufficiently. Eligible ILP participants include youths aged 16 and over for whom federal foster care payments are being made.[8] At their option, states may use ILP funds for foster care youths not receiving federal assistance and former foster care youths who were in foster care after the age of 16. Likewise, states may provide services to any of these youths until the age of 21. Youth participation in ILP services is voluntary.

Other federal programs may also provide some assistance to this population, but are not designed to specifically provide services to foster care youths. For example, HHS' Transitional Living Program for Homeless Youth provides funds to communities for housing and independent living services to homeless youths. A variety of other programs may also assist

[7]Under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, federal matching funds are provided to states for foster care maintenance costs. These funds cover a portion of the food, housing, and incidental expenses for foster care children from families who would have been eligible for benefits under the former Aid to Families With Dependent Children program using 1995 eligibility criteria. States are responsible for any foster care costs they incur for children not eligible for federal support.

[8]States can receive federal foster care maintenance payments for eligible children while they are in foster care family homes, private for-profit or nonprofit child care facilities, or public child care institutions. Youths become ineligible for federal foster care maintenance payments at age 18 or, at a state's option, age 19 if a child in foster care is a full-time student in a secondary school and is expected to complete the educational program prior to turning 19.

youths. For example, Job Corps, under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Labor, enrolls youths aged 16 to 24 who are economically disadvantaged, in need of additional education or training, and living under disorienting conditions such as a disruptive homelife. In addition, other agencies, such as the Departments of Justice, Education, and Housing and Urban Development, have education and employment assistance programs targeted to disadvantaged and at-risk youths. Service agencies in the states may also provide assistance to youths, including educational, juvenile justice, mental health, public assistance, and substance-abuse service agencies.

The federal government provides most of the funding for ILP. In addition, HHS is responsible for assisting state child welfare systems by promoting continuous improvement in the delivery of child welfare services. In this regard, HHS central office staff are responsible for developing ILP-related policies, procedures, and regulations, and for ensuring their implementation by the states. HHS' regional office staff serve as the local ILP contacts for the states, review and approve state applications for ILP funds, and review the annual state ILP reports. Regional staff also provide technical assistance to the states and clarification on program requirements. In addition, the University of Oklahoma's National Child Welfare Resource Center for Youth Development, under cooperative agreement with HHS, is responsible for providing ILP training and technical assistance to the states in coordination with the regional offices.

HHS issued instructions to states in December 1993 outlining allowable ILP services including education and employment assistance, instruction in daily living skills, and other support services to ease youths' transition to independent living. In addition, states must provide written transitional independent living plans based on an assessment of each youth's needs and may establish outreach programs to attract individuals eligible to participate in the program.

Multiple Services Assist Youths in Achieving Independence, but ILPs Fall Short in Key Areas

To better ensure that foster care youths are prepared to live on their own, state ILPs provide an array of services using a combination of federal, state, local, and private funds. These services include assistance with completing education and finding employment; instruction in the basic skills needed to live independently, such as money management, hygiene, housekeeping, and nutrition; and transitional services, such as supervised practice living arrangements (see appendix II). However, state and local administrators told us that their current ILPs fall short in key areas. For example, some

programs do not sufficiently seek out employment opportunities in the community and offer few opportunities for youths to participate in real-life practice opportunities or esteem-building experiences. Moreover, some programs could not provide enough housing or other transitional assistance to both youths still in care and those who have left care. To address these shortcomings, a few locations have added specialized stuff and programs, such as developing partnerships with local businesses for part-time youth employment.

ILP Services Supported by Federal, State, and Other Funds

To provide ILP services, states use federal annual ILP funds of $70 million, $25 million in state matching funds, and additional dollars provided by a variety of sources. For example, our survey showed that 35 states reported spending additional state, local, and private funding on their ILPs totaling at least $36.5 million (see table 1).[9] Also, 20 states reported receiving in-kind ILP donations such as mentoring services, use of facilities for training, attorney services, drivers' education training, college scholarships, books, school supplies, clothing, computers, gift certificates, and household supplies for youths.

Table 1: Categories of Non-Federal ILP Funding

Type of funding	Range of funding among reporting states	Total funding reported
State (20 states)	$75,000 to $11 million	$22.8 million
Local (7 states)	$1,000 to $6.5 million	$13 million
Private (7 states)	$1,500 to $295,000	$0.7 million

Because federal funds can only be used to serve youths aged 16 to 21, more than one-third of the states reported using some additional funds to provide services to some youths younger than 16. During federal fiscal year 1998, the states served a total of 2,169 youths under age 16. Our review of state annual ILP reports showed that approximately 42,680 youths aged 16 or older—only about 60 percent of all eligible youths—volunteered to receive ILP services in 1998, and officials in the states we visited noted that attracting youths to participate in the program is a challenge.[10]

[9]Thirty-five states reported spending additional dollars beyond the federal funds and state match, but not all of these states reported the amounts spent in each category.

[10]Although not all states included participation figures in their annual reports, we determined that at least 42,680 youths in 40 states received some type of independent living service during 1998.

Education and Employment Assistance Offered, but Few Pathways From Foster Care Developed

According to our review of annual state ILP reports, 41 states reported assisting youths with preparing for, or completing, education or vocational training.[11] Of these 41 states, 26 offered assistance, such as tutoring or remedial training, to help youths graduate from high school or receive a GED; 28 states helped youths prepare for vocational school, for instance through vocational testing or referral; and 33 states helped youths pursue postsecondary education, such as through educational planning or assessments, assistance in applying for financial aid or college admission, or campus tours.[12] Further, 21 states awarded some tuition aid or scholarships for college or vocational schools, and 20 helped pay for other educational expenses such as books, training materials, uniforms, college entrance exam fees, or college application fees.

In total, 40 states reported providing employment services to youths. Of these, 28 states assisted youths with job readiness, including instructing them in how to write resumes, how to interview for and maintain a job, and how to complete job applications; and 24 states helped youths with job search. Moreover, 18 states helped with job placement. For example, for several youths with negligible work skills, the District of Columbia contracted for job placement services that included a job coach, on-the-job assistance with work problems, transportation assistance, mentoring, and periodic group sessions.

Although all four areas we visited provided assistance with education and employment, we found that the ILPs did not provide services that fully matched foster care youths to appropriate employment pathways. For example, officials in three of the sites told us that vocational opportunities for youths were limited for several reasons. State and local coordinators in Texas indicated that few apprenticeship positions are available, while ILP coordinators in Baltimore City and New York reported a lack of vocational education programs that youths can afford and a lack of ILP funds to pay for such programs. These officials also reported that culinary arts and technology-related programs—two programs popular with foster care youths—are relatively expensive. Of the four sites we visited, only Texas

[11]We reviewed 1998 annual state ILP reports from 45 states plus the District of Columbia. However, because no standard report format exists, states do not consistently report services offered during the previous year. We counted only those states that specifically mentioned providing a particular service either throughout, or in some portion of, the state in their 1998 report, although others may have provided the service but not included this information as part of their program description. According to an HHS ILP official, annual reports from Alaska, California, New York, South Carolina, and Wyoming were not available at the time of our review.

[12]Many of these states reported providing all the educational services mentioned.

offers statewide tuition waivers for all state-supported vocational, technical, and postsecondary schools.

Our field visits also revealed that connections between the ILP and potential employers were not thoroughly developed. For example, ILP coordinators in one location told us they did not have time to establish relationships with very many employers and that employment development efforts in their location are largely informal. State officials in California and Maryland indicated that they believe more public-private partnerships are needed to provide youths with employment opportunities. In addition, New York City officials told us that they are just beginning to devise ways to link with employers to enhance youths' job prospects. Several officials also pointed out that more staff need to be assigned to this task if it is to be accomplished.

Some locations are attempting to address these training and employment shortcomings. For instance, Maryland established a partnership between the ILP, the United Parcel Service (UPS), the Living Classroom Foundation, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. This program provides employment opportunities, according to UPS officials, to expose youths to a significant and demanding first job that teaches them invaluable, transferable workplace skills. UPS supervisors work closely with youths to identify barriers and access other resources if needed (such as mentoring, counseling, or job readiness programs), and strive to instill leadership skills and develop the youths' potential. For example, the youths attend career and academic goal-setting sessions with a UPS School-to-Work Specialist. Moreover, UPS supervisors maintain close contact with youths after they have been hired to ensure their success on the job. Transportation to the work site is provided and on-site college-level classes are available, as well as opportunities to combine working for UPS with working for other area employers such as banks, grocery stores, and drug stores. UPS planned to hire 75 foster care youths during the first year of the partnership.

States Provide Assistance in Learning Daily Living Skills, but Opportunities to Practice Skills Are Lacking

In our review of annual state ILP reports, we found that 46 states report training youths in daily living skills such as money management, health and safety, nutrition, housekeeping, parenting and sexual responsibility, and interpersonal and other social skills. The four areas we visited also offer training in daily living skills. For example, in Contra Costa County, California, youths attend a series of living skills workshops that cover, among other topics, how to prepare a budget and how to open and use a

checking account. Likewise, life skills classes in the San Antonio, Texas, area meet for 8 weeks and cover core areas, including personal and interpersonal skills, health and safety, money management, and planning for the future. In New York City, life skills classes provide instruction on housekeeping, health care, interpersonal skills, food management, transportation, and family planning, among others.

Although some daily living skills are taught in a classroom setting, officials in the four states we visited stressed the importance of experiential learning, and independent living experts concurred that youths benefit from activities in which they can practice the skills learned. State and local program officials acknowledged the importance of activities that allow youths to perform—and perhaps initially fail at—daily tasks until they become proficient. According to local officials and service providers, many foster youths have learned to depend on the child welfare system for their care and thus may not have been exposed to everyday experiences other teens take for granted, such as cooking, grocery shopping, driving, or taking excursions outside their communities. To address this, Texas and California conduct a program called "Independent City"—a simulated community in which young persons are assigned an income and must apply for jobs, sign leases for apartments, arrange for utilities, open checking accounts, and buy cars.

In addition to the need to gain practical living experience, officials in three of the locations we visited reported that youths need to learn interpersonal skills, such as conflict management, communication, and decision-making. Officials report that youths who do not master these other skills may have difficulty finding and maintaining employment. To learn these skills, youths may participate in classroom-based training or in recreational events. In New York City, for example, one service provider takes youths to Broadway plays or restaurants to allow them to learn how to interact in social situations, including how to behave and how to order from a menu. After the activity, youths meet with the coordinator to discuss lessons learned. Other opportunities for youths to develop social skills, such as team-building and leadership, are provided by teen conferences, retreats, and youth advisory boards. For instance, Maryland holds an annual statewide teen conference where youths attend workshops on self-empowerment, conflict resolution, and goal achievement. Texas offers wilderness challenge and ropes courses to strengthen problem-solving and team-building abilities. Moreover, according to our review of annual reports, 22 states have youth advisory boards that work to improve policies and services affecting foster youths. The Youth Advisory Board in

Massachusetts, for example, meets with the commissioner of the social services department quarterly to express concerns and recommendations regarding agency foster care services and policies.

Further, officials in the four states we visited emphasized that youths need to be able to form and maintain relationships with others. Establishing a connection to an adult is so important, according to Texas state officials, that one goal of the state's ILP is for every young adult to have a significant adult in his or her life when he or she leaves foster care. To help youths receive this type of social support, many states use mentoring programs. According to a study of 29 child welfare programs' mentoring services, these services can take many forms: some link adult mentors to youths to assist them in making the transition from foster care to adult living, while other programs involve workplace mentoring where the employer provides jobs, monitors the work experience, and offers career development opportunities to young persons.[13] Officials in all the locations we visited viewed mentoring programs as one method to provide youths with a vocational role model and opportunities to practice independent living skills, as well as opportunities to form connections to adults who serve as positive role models.

We found that opportunities to practice daily life tasks and to develop self-esteem were limited in some of the locations we visited. Program officials in two locations and foster care youths in three locations told us that issues such as safety regulations for group homes inhibit or prevent certain activities, such as practicing cooking. In addition, esteem-building experiences are often limited to a small number of youths. For example, local officials in Texas reported that opportunities for foster care youths to participate in postsecondary school conferences or extended outdoor activities were limited. In addition, programs offering adult mentors serve a small number of youths. For example, a foster care service provider in Texas—contracted by the state specifically to develop mentor programs—reported difficulty finding mentors.

[13]Edmund V. Mech and others, "Mentors for Adolescents in Foster Care," Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Aug. 1995).

Housing and Other Transitional Support Services Provide Bridges to Adulthood, but Obstacles Impede Self-Sufficiency

Transitional living arrangements allow youths to live on their own and practice becoming proficient at managing their lives while still receiving supervision and financial support. Our survey showed that more than 80 percent of the states provided transitional practice living arrangements to some youths while they are still in foster care to allow them an opportunity to experience independent living for a period of time. About 37 percent of the states offered housing to some youths after they left the foster care system. In Baltimore County, Maryland, for example, the Challengers Independent Living program seeks to provide youths with the means to cope with independence once they leave foster care. In this program, foster care youths can reside for 18 to 24 months in apartments furnished and supervised by the service provider and receive a weekly stipend to purchase clothing, food, and household supplies. They are also responsible for cleaning the apartments and doing their own laundry. Each youth's foster care payment covers the cost of rent, utilities, and administration of the program. Program staff also offer educational, vocational, clinical, and home-life support, including additional independent living skills training. Similar programs, such as the Real Solutions Transitional Living Program in San Antonio, Texas, are available to young adults who have left foster care. This privately funded program provides youths with a group living arrangement for up to 3 years, normally from ages 18 to 21, while they adjust to self-sufficiency.

Additional transitional support services provided by the states include counseling, programs for youths with special needs and disabilities, and after-care programs for youths who are no longer in the foster care system.[14] Officials in the states we visited said that many youths have mental health issues that need to be addressed. Some states noted in their annual ILP reports that individual or group counseling may help address issues that act as barriers to independent living for the teen population, such as drug abuse, or may increase the youths' ability to utilize independent living skills they were taught. Thirty-one states indicated in their annual reports that they offer some type of counseling service, such as individual, group, or peer counseling. In Illinois, for example, support groups provide a forum for youths to express their feelings about being in foster care, as well as to identify issues and fears about leaving it. Seven states offered specialized programs for developmentally disabled youths and four states offered services for those with emotional or behavioral problems.

[14]HHS data for 1998 identified 20 percent of foster youths between the ages of 16 and 20 as having a disability.

To assist youths who have exited foster care, our survey showed that, in federal fiscal year 1998, 30 states provided formal services for a period of time after foster care, serving a total of 7,830 youths between the ages of 11 and 24. The majority of these states reported providing a full range of services, including education and employment assistance, training in daily living skills, and individual and/or group counseling. In addition, 21 states reported providing other services and assistance such as mentoring, transportation assistance, medical coverage, and clothing. Our field visits confirm that some states offer after-care services. For example, Florida reports serving former foster care youths through tuition assistance, counseling, opportunities to attend conferences and receive skills training or to serve as mentors or co-trainers, referrals to other agencies for assistance in finding a job or housing, transportation assistance, and opportunities to use the resource library.

However, we noted some concerns about these services. For example, the number of transitional living arrangements is limited. Our survey showed that 38 states served 6,320 current foster youths and 12 states served 1,787 former foster youths.[15] Officials in the four areas we visited confirmed that the number of supervised transitional housing sites is very limited and that they could not provide adequate housing for both youths in care and those who have left the system. One transitional housing provider in Texas indicated that the program has space for only 6 youths, while an additional 80 to 100 youths with no place to live upon exiting foster care could benefit from this type of housing program. A transitional housing provider in a second location explained that program staff carefully screen youths for readiness to handle the responsibilities of managing their own place to live and, because of limited capacity, accept only the most promising teens into the program. In addition, some officials noted that their after-care services are limited and that they believe youths could benefit from more services than they can offer. For example, in Texas, after-care services are available for only 6 months after the youth exits care. The services consist mainly of referrals to other service agencies, visits to colleges, and a small stipend for 4 months. After-care services in Baltimore County and New York City are limited to referring the youths to other agencies that can assist them.

[15]According to our survey, 43 states reported providing transitional housing to current foster care youths and 19 states reported providing this service to former foster care youths in fiscal year 1998. Only 38 and 12 states, respectively, provided the number of youths served.

Information on Program Effectiveness Is Limited

Given the significant challenges that youths face in moving from foster care to adulthood, it is important to understand how effective the ILP is in better ensuring outcomes for foster care youths. However, little information is available to help in understanding the outcomes these programs achieve. HHS has not taken an active role in identifying whether state ILPs are providing services that increase youths' chances of becoming self-sufficient once they leave the foster care system or in sharing information among the states.

Few National and Local Studies on ILP Effectiveness

Few studies that address ILP effectiveness have been conducted on a national or local level. Only one national study has been completed since ILP was established in 1985. This study—conducted by Westat, Inc., with funding from HHS—found that services provided by ILPs have the potential to improve outcomes for youths. The study found that skills training in particular areas led to better outcomes (e.g., health training aided youths in gaining access to health care), although no one skill area had a consistent effect across all outcomes assessed. More comprehensive effects were achieved when youths were taught a combination of skills. Youths who received training in managing money, obtaining a credit card, and buying a car, as well as help in how to find a job and gain access to appropriate education opportunities, were more likely to keep a job for at least a year.

Two other studies are currently under way; study results are due in fall 1999. The Child Welfare League of America recently developed a state survey on independent living services to gather comprehensive information on ILP topics such as the population served, the type of foster care placement and permanency plan for these youths, fiscal information on ILP funds, ILP policies, transitional living arrangements, and model programs. In 1997, the Annie E. Casey Foundation awarded a grant to the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement at the University of Southern Maine and the National Resource Center for Youth Services at the University of Oklahoma to define the current knowledge base regarding the transition of youths out of foster care and to examine effective practices and policies which may improve opportunities for youths to become fulfilled, productive adults.

In addition, 12 states told us they had conducted follow-up studies of youths who had left foster care and 14 additional states reported they had a follow-up study under way or were planning such a study. Eight states provided a copy of completed studies; only three of these studies asked

former foster care youths about the effectiveness of independent living services they received while in care. For example, an evaluation of the Wayne County, Michigan, ILP attempted to contact former ILP participants to obtain information on their current situations.[16] However, none of the former clients could be located and the study was changed to a survey of youths currently participating in an ILP or those receiving after-care services. Of the 61 youths surveyed, over 80 percent indicated that their quality of life improved after they received independent living services. Youths judged housing and health care services more effective than other services, and judged employment services among the least effective. A study of 26 youths in Nevada about 3 months after leaving foster care showed that most of the respondents believed the ILP helped prepare them to some extent for making the transition to living on their own, including preparing them to find a place to live, prepare meals, budget money, and locate community resources.[17] However, 53 percent of the youths were not satisfied with their independent living services. Finally, in a 1995 North Carolina study comparing 44 ILP participants and 32 nonparticipants who left foster care between 1992 and 1995, 65 to 73 percent of the participants felt that ILP services were helpful to some extent in preparing them for independent living, although no specific area of ILP assistance stood out. Fifty-five percent of the ILP participants started living independently immediately after leaving foster care, compared to only 12 percent of nonparticipants. Similarly, 30 percent of the ILP participants were paying all their housing expenses within 1 to 3 years after leaving foster care, as compared to 19 percent of nonparticipants. According to the study, these and other housing-related findings indicate a definite, though gradual, movement toward independent living that is more pronounced for ILP participants than for nonparticipants.

We identified three additional local studies that show positive effects of ILP services and link participation in ILP with improved education, housing, and other outcomes—from Baltimore County, Harris County (Houston, Texas), and New York City. In the Baltimore County study, youths who received ILP services were more likely to complete high school, have an employment history, and be employed when they left foster care.[18] In the Harris County study, the author found that graduates of the Texas ILP

[16]Moore & Associates, Inc., Final Report: An Evaluation of the Wayne County Independent Living Coalition, submitted to the Michigan Family Independence Agency (Sept. 1998).

[17]Hailu Abatena, "Independent Living Initiative Program: A Follow Up Survey Report of the Youth Released from Foster Care in Nevada in 1996" (Henderson, Nev.: Nevada Research, Evaluation, and Planning Consultants, undated).

[18]Maria Scannapieco and others, "Independent Living Programs: Do They Make A Difference?" Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal, Vol. 12, No. 5 (Oct. 1995).

achieved full-time employment earlier and were more likely to complete high school or a GED at a younger age than youths who did not receive independent living services.[19] The New York City study of independent living services provided by Green Chimneys Children's Services showed that 75 percent of the youths had completed high school or a GED, 72 percent had full-time employment when they left care, and 65 percent had savings accounts.[20]

HHS Slow in Leading Efforts to Determine ILP Effectiveness

A 1994 HHS Office of the Inspector General (OIG) report and a 1995 Harvard University study both recommended HHS take a stronger role in managing ILPs. However, HHS has been slow in leading efforts to determine if state ILPs improve the ability of youths leaving the foster care system to live on their own.[21] The OIG report made two broad recommendations: (1) that HHS' Administration for Children and Families (ACF) should restructure its ILP application and program reporting procedures to more adequately support state plans and to gain an accurate national picture of independent living efforts, and (2) that ACF should focus its management and program reporting efforts on sharing information among the states. The OIG report noted that the lack of accurate national information on independent living efforts weakens basic accountability and hinders efforts to improve programs and to determine effective practices. In addition, the Harvard study recommended that greater emphasis be placed on sharing information, with HHS' regional offices taking the lead in exchanging information among these offices and the states for which they are responsible. According to the study, only 3 of the 10 regional offices provided technical assistance to states beyond policy interpretation.

Currently, HHS has few strategies in place to review the states' progress in helping youths in the transition from foster care. HHS primarily relies on annual state ILP reports and summary statistics from these reports for information about ILP effectiveness. According to HHS staff, no additional monitoring strategies are in effect. There are two problems with relying on the annual reports to determine ILP effectiveness. First, as the OIG report noted and we confirmed during our review of annual state reports, states' approaches to program reporting and the quality of their program reports

[19]Jane T. Simmons, "PAL Evaluation Final Report," unpublished report submitted to Harris County (Texas) Children's Protective Services (Mar. 6, 1990).

[20]Gerald P. Mallon, "After Care, Then Where? Outcomes of an Independent Living Program," Child Welfare, Vol. 77 (Jan./Feb. 1998).

[21]Office of Inspector General, "Independent Living Programs for Foster Care Youths: Strategies for Improved ACF Management and Reporting," HHS (#OEI-01-93-00090, Nov. 1994); and Kari Burrell and Valeria Perez Ferreiro, Policy Analysis Exercise (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, Apr. 12, 1995).

vary greatly. According to the OIG report, many state reports do not adequately address the intensity of services or the range of efforts made for youths in various placement settings. Likewise, states use various definitions of terms, which the OIG reported can result in duplicate counts and inconsistent statistics. To illustrate, the term "to be served" can mean in one state that a youth has received an assessment, while in another state it means that the youth was enrolled in a formal life skills course. Second, states are required to report certain information to HHS on the status of ILP participants 90 days after program completion—such as whether the youths are employed, have completed high school or a GED, or are living independent of public assistance. However, states inconsistently report this information and question the value of the data because they believe that 90 days may be too soon to judge youths' independence. For example, the OIG found that some states provide information on youths 90 days after discharge from foster care, while other states look at youths' status 90 days after completing the discrete ILP. Our review of 1998 annual state reports reveals that few reports address the effectiveness of services and outcomes for youths, making these reports an ineffective means of consolidating information on program effectiveness across the nation. To illustrate the difficulty in obtaining this outcome information, our nationwide survey showed that while 29 states attempt to contact ILP youths in response to the 90-day requirement, only four states reported success in contacting more than half of the former foster care youths. The majority of the states could locate only some or a few.

HHS officials told us that they recognize deficiencies in the annual state ILP reports, and that the agency needs to improve its monitoring of the program. However, because no other data currently exist with which to determine program effectiveness, HHS issued a contract in September 1998 to conduct an analysis of 10 years of annual state ILP reports so it can begin to fill the data gaps. According to project staff, this analysis represents HHS' first attempt since ILP began to summarize what states are doing with their ILP funds. Project objectives include identifying which states are producing ILP reports that could be used as models by other states, as well as what measures HHS can take to improve state reporting and evaluation.

Conclusions

The Congress has identified adolescent foster youths as an important part of the foster care population and raised questions about whether states are doing enough to prepare youths to live self-sufficiently. Unfortunately, serving the population of youths about to leave the foster care system is

difficult. Research has shown that many pitfalls are encountered by these youths once they are on their own. Information on the services foster care youths need to help them become independent is critical to the success of ILPs. However, states do not routinely receive information on what has worked best in other states and have inconsistently applied HHS regulations on following up with youths. HHS has not analyzed information from state ILPs to develop a national perspective on what services are most needed and which services are less important in preparing youths to live on their own once foster care ends. We believe HHS should take steps to build a system of reporting and monitoring tools that would provide policymakers and program officials with the necessary information to assess the effectiveness of ILPs.

Recommendations

To enhance HHS' and the states' accountability in preparing youths to live on their own after leaving the foster care system, the Secretary of HHS should develop a uniform set of data elements and a report format for state reporting on ILP so that analysis of ILP information can be conducted using consistent data and the results shared with the states; and concrete measures of effectiveness for assessing state ILPs, such as the number of youths with stable employment and housing at the time they leave foster care and at specific intervals thereafter.

Agency and Other Comments

We requested comments on this report from HHS and state ILP officials in the four states we visited. HHS, New York, and Texas provided technical comments, which we incorporated where appropriate. In addition, New York's comments mentioned the need for additional incentives to encourage youths' participation in the program. California and Maryland did not comment.

We are sending copies of this report to the Honorable Donna E. Shalala, Secretary of Health and Human Services; state ILP coordinators; state child welfare agencies; and other interested parties. Copies will also be made available to others on request. If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please call me at (202) 512-7215. Other major contributors to this report are listed in appendix III.

Sincerely yours,

Cynthia M. Fagnoni, Director
Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues

Contents

Abbreviations

ACF	Administration for Children and Families
GED	General Educational Development
HHS	U.S. Department Health and Human Service
ILP	Independent Living Program
OIG	Office of the Inspector General
UPS	United Parcel Service

Scope and Methodology

To identify what is currently known about the services provided by Independent Living Programs (ILP) and the effect of these services on youths' ability to live on their own, we reviewed the relevant literature on problems former foster care youths face in living independently, 1998 annual ILP reports submitted by the states to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) (see appendix II)[22], and studies showing the effectiveness of ILP services. We also interviewed experts on independent living services. We obtained the perspectives of representatives of the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Youth Development, the National Independent Living Association, the Child Welfare League of America, and the Casey Family Program. In addition, we interviewed officials of HHS' Children's Bureau and Family and Youth Services Bureau.

We developed a state survey to obtain national information on additional services offered by state ILPs and on additional funds spent beyond the federal dollars and required state matching funds. In April 1999, we surveyed ILP coordinators in each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia. We received responses from all states and the District of Columbia, and from these responses we obtained general information on (1) additional state, local, and private funds spent on ILPs, (2) the number of youths younger than age 16 served who were served and the services provided to them, (3) the extent of after-care programs, (4) the states' ability to follow up with youths after leaving care, and (5) the extent of transitional housing services. We also obtained information on outcome studies conducted by the states. We did not verify the information obtained through the survey. However, we conducted telephone interviews with state respondents to clarify answers, as needed.

To obtain information on the services offered by states to youths leaving care and the problems states face in meeting their needs, we visited independent living programs in four locations—Contra Costa County, California; Baltimore City and County, Maryland; New York City, New York; and the San Antonio region, Texas. We chose these four locations because our analysis of the literature and discussions with key independent living experts identified these localities as having ILPs that provide critical services to help youths become self-sufficient, such as postsecondary tuition waivers and well-developed employment links in the community. California and New York also have large populations of foster

[22]We reviewed 45 annual state reports, plus the report from the District of Columbia. At the time of our review, reports were not available from Alaska, California, New York, South Carolina, and Wyoming. HHS subsequently received reports from Alaska, California, New York, and South Carolina, but these were received too late to be included in our analysis. Wyoming did not submit an annual report because the state did not use federal ILP funds in 1998.

care youths. In each state, we met with state ILP officials to obtain an overview of how the program is implemented throughout the state. At the local sites, we met with a variety of staff and clients, including ILP coordinators, case workers, private service providers, and current and former foster care youths. Where available, we met with youth advocacy organizations.

Figures From Our Review of Annual State Reports

Figure II.1: Specific Education Services Reported by States During 1998

States	Specific Education Services: High School or GED[a]	Vocational[b]	Postsecondary[c]	States	Specific Education Services: High School or GED[a]	Vocational[b]	Postsecondary[c]
Alabama	✓	✓	✓	Montana			
Alaska				Nebraska		✓	
Arizona			✓	Nevada	✓	✓	✓
Arkansas		✓	✓	New Hampshire	✓	✓	✓
California				New Jersey	✓		✓
Colorado		✓	✓	New Mexico	✓	✓	✓
Connecticut				New York			
Delaware				North Carolina		✓	✓
District of Columbia	✓	✓	✓	North Dakota		✓	
Florida	✓	✓	✓	Ohio	✓	✓	✓
Georgia	✓		✓	Oklahoma	✓	✓	✓
Hawaii	✓		✓	Oregon	✓	✓	✓
Idaho	✓	✓	✓	Pennsylvania	✓	✓	✓
Illinois	✓		✓	Rhode Island			
Indiana	✓	✓	✓	South Carolina			
Iowa		✓	✓	South Dakota	✓		
Kansas	✓	✓		Tennessee	✓	✓	✓
Kentucky	✓	✓	✓	Texas		✓	✓
Louisiana		✓		Utah			✓
Maine			✓	Vermont			
Maryland	✓			Virginia	✓	✓	✓
Massachusetts	✓	✓	✓	Washington			
Michigan			✓	West Virginia	✓	✓	✓
Minnesota	✓	✓	✓	Wisconsin	✓	✓	✓
Mississippi			✓	Wyoming			
Missouri				**Totals**	**26**	**28**	**33**

Note: Delaware and Missouri provided education services but did not specify the type of services in their 1998 annual reports.

[a]High school or General Educational Development (GED) services enable participants to seek a high-school diploma or its equivalent. Tutoring is an example of such services.

[b]Vocational services enable youths to participate in appropriate vocational training and may include vocational testing or referral.

[c]Postsecondary education services enable youths to prepare for or attend college or university. These services may include educational planning, assistance obtaining financial aid or college admission, or college testing preparation.

Source: State annual ILP reports for 1998.

Figure II.2: Specific Employment Services Reported by States During 1998

States	Specific Employment Services				States	Specific Employment Services			
	Job Readiness [a]	Job Search	Job Training	Job Placement		Job Readiness [a]	Job Search	Job Training	Job Placement
Alabama	✓	✓			Montana				
Alaska					Nebraska				
Arizona	✓	✓	✓		Nevada	✓	✓	✓	✓
Arkansas	✓	✓		✓	New Hampshire	✓			
California					New Jersey				✓
Colorado	✓	✓			New Mexico				
Connecticut					New York				
Delaware				✓	North Carolina				✓
District of Columbia	✓	✓		✓	North Dakota	✓			
Florida	✓	✓		✓	Ohio	✓	✓	✓	✓
Georgia	✓	✓			Oklahoma	✓	✓		
Hawaii					Oregon	✓	✓		✓
Idaho			✓		Pennsylvania	✓			✓
Illinois	✓			✓	Rhode Island				
Indiana	✓	✓			South Carolina				
Iowa		✓			South Dakota	✓	✓		
Kansas	✓	✓			Tennessee	✓	✓		
Kentucky	✓	✓			Texas	✓	✓		
Louisiana					Utah		✓	✓	
Maine					Vermont				
Maryland	✓	✓	✓	✓	Virginia	✓			✓
Massachusetts	✓	✓		✓	Washington	✓			
Michigan	✓		✓	✓	West Virginia	✓			
Minnesota			✓	✓	Wisconsin		✓	✓	✓
Mississippi	✓	✓		✓	Wyoming				
Missouri		✓			**Totals**	**28**	**25**	**9**	**18**

Note: Louisiana, Nebraska, and Vermont provided employment services, but did not specify which services.

[a]Job readiness services can include information on how to prepare for a job, such as how to prepare a resume or complete job applications, or how to maintain employment.

Source: State annual ILP reports for 1998.

Figure II.3: Specific Daily Living Skills Training Reported by States During 1998

States	Specific Daily Living Skills Training							States	Specific Daily Living Skills Training						
	Money Management[a]	Health and Safety[b]	Locating and Maintaining Housing	Food and Nutrition[c]	Community Resources[d]	Career Planning	Social Skills[e]		Money Management[a]	Health and Safety[b]	Locating and Maintaining Housing	Food and Nutrition[c]	Community Resources[d]	Career Planning	Social Skills[e]
Alabama	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	Montana[f]							
Alaska								Nebraska	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
Arizona		✓	✓		✓	✓		Nevada	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Arkansas	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	New Hampshire		✓				✓	✓
California								New Jersey			✓		✓		✓
Colorado	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	New Mexico	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Connecticut		✓		✓			✓	New York							
Delaware							✓	North Carolina		✓	✓		✓		
District of Columbia	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	North Dakota	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
Florida	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	Ohio	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Georgia	✓	✓				✓	✓	Oklahoma	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
Hawaii						✓		Oregon	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Idaho	✓	✓	✓			✓		Pennsylvania			✓				
Illinois	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Rhode Island	✓		✓			✓	
Indiana	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	South Carolina							
Iowa	✓		✓					South Dakota	✓				✓	✓	✓
Kansas	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	Tennessee	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Kentucky	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	Texas	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
Louisiana	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Utah	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Maine	✓				✓	✓	✓	Vermont	✓		✓			✓	✓
Maryland	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	Virginia	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Massachusetts	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	Washington	✓	✓		✓			✓
Michigan		✓			✓			West Virginia		✓				✓	✓
Minnesota	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Wisconsin	✓				✓		✓
Mississippi	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Wyoming							
Missouri		✓					✓	**Totals**	**34**	**34**	**33**	**21**	**29**	**22**	**37**

[a]Money management can include instruction in budgeting or opening a bank or credit card account.

[b]Health and safety can include information about substance abuse, hygiene, parenting, first aid, and leisure.

[c]Food and nutrition can include information about how to shop for groceries or prepare and cook food.

[d]Community resources can include information about access to resources such as medical care, legal services, transportation, and recreation.

[e]Social skills can include activities to improve self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, problem-solving, leadership, and sexual responsibility.

[f]Montana reported providing daily living skills but did not identify specific training offered.

Source: State annual ILP reports for 1998.

Figure II.4: Specific Financial Assistance Provided by States During 1998

States	Specific Financial Assistance					States	Specific Financial Assistance				
	Stipends, Incentives [a]	Education Tuition [b]	Other Education Expenses [c]	Transportation Expenses [d]	Start-Up Assistance Items [e]		Stipends, Incentives [a]	Education Tuition [b]	Other Education Expenses [c]	Transportation Expenses [d]	Start-Up Assistance Items [e]
Alabama	✓					Montana	✓	✓		✓	✓
Alaska						Nebraska				✓	✓
Arizona	✓				✓	Nevada		✓	✓		✓
Arkansas		✓	✓	✓	✓	New Hampshire	✓			✓	
California						New Jersey	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Colorado		✓				New Mexico					
Connecticut	✓					New York					
Delaware						North Carolina		✓			
District of Columbia	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	North Dakota	✓			✓	✓
Florida	✓	✓	✓		✓	Ohio			✓	✓	
Georgia		✓	✓			Oklahoma		✓	✓	✓	✓
Hawaii						Oregon			✓		
Idaho		✓		✓		Pennsylvania	✓	✓			
Illinois	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Rhode Island	✓		✓		✓
Indiana			✓			South Carolina					
Iowa						South Dakota		✓	✓		✓
Kansas		✓			✓	Tennessee	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Kentucky	✓					Texas	✓	✓			✓
Louisiana	✓			✓	✓	Utah				✓	
Maine		✓	✓			Vermont					
Maryland				✓	✓	Virginia	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Massachusetts	✓		✓		✓	Washington				✓	✓
Michigan				✓	✓	West Virginia	✓		✓	✓	✓
Minnesota	✓			✓	✓	Wisconsin	✓	✓			✓
Mississippi	✓		✓		✓	Wyoming					
Missouri	✓	✓	✓		✓	**Totals**	**23**	**21**	**20**	**20**	**26**

[a]Financial incentives or stipends can include incentives for completing training or units of training in daily living skills.

[b]These services include tuition waivers or scholarships.

[c]These services include books, training materials, uniforms, college exam fees, and college application fees.

[d]These expenses can include fares for buses, trains, or airplanes; or gas for youths' automobiles.

[e]Start-up assistance includes items such as utility deposits or household items (e.g., furniture, dishes, and linens).

Source: State annual ILP reports for 1998.

GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

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Staff Acknowledgments

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Related GAO Products

Youth Mentoring Programs: Fiscal Year 1998 (GAO/HEHS-99-129R, May 28, 1999).

Foster Care: Challenges in Helping Youths Live Independently (GAO/T-HEHS-99-121, May 13, 1999).

Foster Care: Increases in Adoption Rates (GAO/HEHS-99-114R, Apr. 20, 1999).

Juvenile Courts: Reforms Aim to Better Serve Maltreated Children (GAO/HEHS-99-13, Jan. 11, 1999).

Child Welfare: Early Experiences Implementing a Managed Care Approach (GAO/HEHS-99-8, Oct. 21, 1998).

Foster Care: Agencies Face Challenges Securing Stable Homes for Children of Substance Abusers (GAO/HEHS-98-182, Sept. 30, 1998).

Foster Care: Implementation of the Multiethnic Placement Act Poses Difficult Challenges (GAO/HEHS-98-204, Sept. 14, 1998).

Child Protective Services: Complex Challenges Require New Strategies (GAO/HEHS-97-115, July 21, 1997).

Foster Care: State Efforts to Improve the Permanency Planning Process Show Some Promise (GAO/HEHS-97-73, May 7, 1997).

Child Welfare: Complex Needs Strain Capacity to Provide Services (GAO/HEHS-95-208, Sept. 26, 1995).

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