

**YOUNG  INVINCIBLES**

# IMPROVING OUTCOMES

**Job Training and Readiness for Youth Exiting  
the Illinois Foster Care System**

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# Introduction

In the past years, the state of Illinois has worked towards becoming a leader in establishing equitable opportunities and access for all participants in the workforce. More specifically, Illinois has made efforts in establishing new workforce pipelines to elevate women and people of color through apprenticeships. Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker announced in August 2021 the creation of the Illinois Works Jobs Pre-Apprenticeship Program, a \$10 million investment to ultimately diversify the building trades and construction industries<sup>1</sup>. That September, the Pritzker Administration released an additional \$4.4 million for career training grants for at-risk youth, and announced the prioritization of job readiness and training for all workers in the state<sup>2</sup>. In 2022 and 2023, the Pritzker Administration has kept fueling investments in the workforce.

Through generous support from the Polk Bros. Foundation, Young Invincibles sought to determine how some of the most vulnerable young adults, those exiting the foster care system, fare when it comes to obtaining career training and job readiness services given the increased attention and financial investments in workforce development. From the research YI and Chicago Jobs Council compiled in our 2020 report, [The Third Pillar of Apprenticeships: Integrating Diversity Across Illinois' Apprenticeship System](#), it became evident how frontline staff working with the most vulnerable youth were often unprepared or under resourced to help youth leaving the foster care and criminal justice system connect with quality jobs or training opportunities. There was also widespread confusion about policies surrounding how this information could be shared with young adults and who is responsible for sharing what information.

Young Invincibles delved into this topic, starting with speaking with young adults who had left the Illinois foster care system. While a myriad of challenges arose in connecting with these



1 <https://dceo.illinois.gov/news/press-release.23669.html>

2 <https://www.wifr.com/2021/09/23/gov-pritzker-announces-44-million-investment-expand-workforce-training>

young adults, YI conducted interviews with stakeholders and research wherever accessible. Over the course of a year and half of this work, it became clear that many young adults who enter and exit the foster care system are not being provided enough resources and development to reach well-paying jobs, which are often the key to financial independence and stability.<sup>3</sup>

This report will include the current landscape of workforce readiness resources for foster youth in Illinois, the challenges in developing career readiness skills and pipelines, and practices that can help improve outcomes for youth exiting the foster care system, which should be the ultimate goal of the state and affiliated stakeholders.

The author of this report would like to thank: the young adults that have shared their experiences and stories with YI, the team at Lawrence Hall for their insights and all the work they are leading, the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity for the continuous efforts to always improve our workforce system, and Shreya Vallampati a graduate student of the University of Chicago whom has taken up an internship with Young invincibles for a part of her 2023 semester.



<sup>3</sup> <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/Employment%20Programs%20for%20Young%20People%20with%20Histories%20of%20Foster%20Care.pdf>

# Landscape Overview

As of March 2023, the foster care system in Illinois serves approximately 20,377 children and youth in care.<sup>4</sup> Oftentimes, these children and young adults enter state care due to living in unsafe living conditions, abuse, neglect, abandonment, incarceration, or after a death of caretakers. The state has the third highest rate of young adults aging out of the system annually with approximately 1,200 young adults leaving foster care every year.<sup>5</sup> According to the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), as of March 2023, foster youth is made up of 42 percent African American, 44 percent White, and 11 percent Hispanic youth.<sup>6</sup> These figures become even more significant as African American youth represent 15 percent and Hispanic youth represent 17 percent of the total population in Illinois.

One thing is for certain, these children and young adults have experienced traumatic events that have a longer lasting impact on their well-being and self sufficiency. Youth in state care are not able to rely on family or biological parents for emotional, social, practical or financial support. Youth in the foster care system are in vulnerable positions; statistically, they are more likely to have lower educational attainment, fewer employment opportunities and worse mental health outcomes while in and after exiting state care. Majority of young adults age out of the foster care system without the necessary skills and resources to successfully transition into adulthood. Often, they are severely disadvantaged compared to others their age and are unable to find jobs to sustain themselves. This puts them at a higher risk of facing homelessness, unemployment, engaging with the criminal justice system, and substance abuse thus trapping them in a vicious cycle.<sup>7</sup>

From data collected by Let It Be Us, an organization dedicated to finding secure homes for foster youth, 50 percent of those that age out of foster care have received a high school diploma and 3 percent that leave the system attain a college degree. Roughly, 40 percent of foster youth that age out of the system at 18 will experience homelessness in an 18 month period after leaving.<sup>8</sup>

One caseworker told us “A lot of these kids have nobody else to turn to when they exit here, and with lack of trust in anybody it can be very difficult for youth to engage with programs post care. We must begin to introduce them to these programs before they are out of the door if we want to improve outcomes. I can’t do that if I don’t even know where to send them that can truly help them into success.” These challenges therefore require increased resources and support for youth as they prepare to navigate life foster care.

<sup>4</sup> <https://dcfs.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/dcfs/documents/about-us/reports-and-statistics/documents/youth-in-care-by-demographic.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.childrenshomeandaid.org/lovinghomes/adult-connections/#:~:text=Illinois%20has%20the%20third%20highest,youth%20aging%20out%20each%20year.>

<sup>6</sup> <https://dcfs.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/dcfs/documents/about-us/reports-and-statistics/documents/youth-in-care-by-demographic.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-019-09499-4>

<sup>8</sup> <https://letitbeus.org/foster-care-stats/>



# Services and Programs for Aging Out Youth

There are programs across the state and country that have attempted to improve job outcomes for foster youth, but a majority of these programs are still falling short of what is needed for young adults exiting state care to thrive. We have reviewed a few programs that have been implemented and analyzed the effectiveness of these programs.

## LifeSet (Illinois)

The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) received funding in 2021 by Youth Villages, a national non-profit organization dedicated to helping children and families live successfully, to implement their LifeSet program.<sup>9</sup>

In Illinois, young adults can continue to receive support from DCFS after their 18th birthday through Transitional Living Programs (TLPs) and Independent Living Programs (ILPs) that assist individuals into safe living conditions throughout their transition into adulthood. LifeSet has become an integration into TLP and ILP programs under DCFS that further supports individuals through their needs to become self-sufficient. To be eligible for LifeSet, young people must be between 17.5 and 20 years old. Participants meet weekly with a specialist that provides an extensive individualized service to help youth reach personal goals related to education, housing, independent life skills, and meaningful connections with committed adults to support throughout adulthood. As of September 2022, LifeSet was being implemented in Illinois by three providers: Hoyleton, Lawrence Hall, and UCAN Chicago. A notable advantage to the LifeSet program is that young people can enroll even if they do not meet traditional TLP/ILP eligibility requirements, such as having a high school diploma or General Education Development (GED).

From a review conducted by Chapin Hill in February of 2023,<sup>10</sup> there have been lots of successes from this program from the eyes of youth engaged. Many have expressed that they were able to receive more individualized consistent support on top of support their case worker provides. Often, foster youth have a harder time establishing relationships and trusting individuals, however many feel they can trust their LifeSet specialist to fully support them. In the 2023 review, it is mentioned that several young people expressed how LifeSet provided opportunities for personal growth and for learning about the “real world.” One young woman explained that LifeSet “allow[s] me time to grow and get used to what the real world is gonna be like.”

9 <https://youthvillages.org/services/lifaset/>

10 <https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/LifeSet-Youth-Brief-Phase-II-Final.pdf>



**LifeSet allows me time to grow and get used to what the real world is gonna be like.**



Another described learning “a lot about being in the real world, financial-wise and relationship-wise, that I didn’t know before. I’m glad I learned it before I move [at 21].”

Although this program has helped several youth as they transition into adulthood, LifeSet is only currently being serviced at three state care locations for youth. This program effectively leverages partnerships with TLPs and ILPs to aid youth in additional services beyond just independent living. Additionally, not all youth are aware of the additional support that LifeSet can provide and many shared that they were unaware of their caseworker placing them for recommendation into the program. With the success of this program, Illinois should seek to expand availability and communication about the program to all caseworkers and youth aging out.

## SPIDER (Illinois)

The Service Provider Identification and Exploration Resource (SPIDER)<sup>11</sup> is a free, comprehensive service resource database for youth and families in Illinois to be connected to nearby organizations that offer support programs. Programs listed offer mental health services, caregiver support, educational advocacy, vocational and employment training, mentoring, enrichment programs like leadership development and after school programs and much more. The database is available at [spider.dcf.illinois.gov](https://spider.dcf.illinois.gov).

During our conversations with young adults who aged out of foster care, many have expressed being unaware that this was an available resource to them or how to navigate on their own. Young adults aging out will often show reluctance to reach out or establish support from new providers that may be listed on SPIDER, often because of their lived experiences. Many feel that they will not be met with commitment to their well-being and have less trust in these services.

Without the personal connection of a case worker or support specialist to guide them through this process, many will decide to not commit to engaging with SPIDER or any of the listed programming.

<sup>11</sup> [https://dcfs.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/dcfcs/documents/brighter-futures/documents/cfs\\_1050-11\\_spider\\_brochure.1.0.pdf](https://dcfs.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/dcfcs/documents/brighter-futures/documents/cfs_1050-11_spider_brochure.1.0.pdf)

Although this database offers a vast amount of social services when analyzed for programming specific to foster youth and job readiness there are very minimal resources listed. When searching for Job Training under the General Support Services service type with the filter for foster care, only seven services are listed across all of Illinois with very few providing actual job training or connections into the workforce. To further support foster youth, this database should seek to include additional job training program options for those in or exiting care. To start, IDCFS should seek to incorporate Pre-Apprenticeship and Apprenticeship programming provided by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity to this filtered list.

## Illinois Youth Investment Program (Illinois)

Through the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) and Department of Human Services (DHS) the Illinois Youth Investment Program (IYIP) was established and has been shared through DCEO's Illinois Work Center database.<sup>12</sup> As described by DHS, the IYIP is a multi-faceted approach to youth employment that invests in the future of Illinois' at-risk transition-age youth (16-24). This approach to youth employment accounts for the youth's employment barriers as well as the physical, emotional, social, and mental health needs while helping them to secure and sustain long-term and/or career employment thereby ensuring a greater likelihood of success and self-sufficiency. To be considered for the program, an individual must experience at least one risk factor that may make it hard for them to get or keep a job and being a young adult that has engaged with state care at any point will meet this factor.

IYIP takes a very unique approach when working with youth to meet their job readiness and development needs by identifying four program categories for participants;

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**Category I** - Short-term, Summer Employment  
 (Work-based Learning; Career Development Experience; and Pre-Apprenticeship programs)
- 
**Category II** - Targeted Long-term Employment  
 (Targeted long-term employment and Youth Apprenticeship programs)
- 
**Category III** - Career Development - Industry-linked Long-term Employment  
 (Registered Apprenticeship; Non-Registered Apprenticeship; and Recognized Postsecondary Credentials (Industry-Linked Credentials, Certifications, or Licenses))
- 
**Category IV** - Expansion of Industry-Linked Career Development Opportunities  
 (Registered Apprenticeships; Non-Registered Apprenticeships; Youth Apprenticeships; and Recognized Postsecondary Credentials (Industry-Linked Credentials, Certifications, or Licenses)<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.illinoisworknet.com/DHSyouth/Pages/Default.aspx>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.dhs.state.il.us/page.aspx?item=126652>





These different program categories and connections to direct workforce experience allows for individuals to approach IYIP from various experience levels and needs. This flexibility is a big advantage of IYIP and the programming it provides. Further benefits include full and part-time paid job placements, case management services that include life skills, counseling, and educational enhancement opportunities. IYIP programming is still being provided across the state and is offered through 35+ partnering organizations. As an example, you can find a flier to an IYIP program being hosted at Employee Connections Inc. [here](#).<sup>14</sup>

IYIP is a program model that takes a hyper focused approach on ensuring that at-risk youth have the proper development and connection to meaningful workforce programming. However, when speaking to a caseworker in Chicago, she mentioned being unaware of this resource or that her clients could use it. There has still not been a connection made between youth exiting state care to programming like IYIP.

### Find Your Future (Chicago, IL)

Kaleidoscope, a non-profit organization in Chicago, seeks to enhance children and families wellbeing by delivering innovative, individualized care and strengthening community connections. The organization runs [Find Your Future](#) to assist former youth-in-care who are attending college to obtain a paid internship experience with a business partner. It is unclear how long Kaleidoscope has been operating this program; however in 2019, they secured 10-week internships for 24 current and former foster youth through their Find Your Future program. This engagement is a stepping stone for many youth that can set them up for future success.

The program requires current enrollment in a post-secondary institution. This requirement could potentially act as a barrier to entry. In Illinois, about [35 percent of youth](#) in Illinois who turn 17 while in foster care enrolled in college; of those, only 8 percent graduate with a degree or certificate. These numbers indicate that not all youth that are aging out of foster care are seeking to pursue a college degree, and those that attempt to are not always met with the needed resources to complete a degree. By requiring college enrollment for eligibility, the Find Your Future program can provide assistance for only a fraction of the youth leaving the system each year. Of course, any programs providing assistance are sorely needed, and there are cost and logistical restrictions that may prohibit expansion of the program.

Those who do participate in the Find Your Future program receive professional training such as learning and practicing social and dining etiquette, building financial knowledge, writing résumés, conducting mock interviews, and preparing students to engage with their future work placements in a proactive manner. The program also provides additional support that meet the unique needs for those who exit foster care. Participants have a program coordinator who conducts regular check-ins to prioritize the well-being of the interns and to connect them to any resources they may need. I

14 [https://www.myemployeeconnections.com/pdf/IYIP\\_Flyer.pdf](https://www.myemployeeconnections.com/pdf/IYIP_Flyer.pdf)

In 2019, Kaleidoscope had 24 young adults participate in Find Your Future, and all participants were placed into an internship. From their experiences, Kaleidoscope reports that all of 24 participants claimed acquiring new skills, and 83 percent felt they improved their financial self-sufficiency. Although this program is providing the needed connection to professional development for young students, it is inaccessible for a majority of youth who exit foster care that decide not to pursue higher education.



## Challenges in Illinois

1. One of the emerging challenges to improving job outcomes for young adults aged out of the foster care system is the lack of basic needs support post state care; including social services and interpersonal life skills development. Oftentimes, the biggest concern for case workers as youth transition out of state care is to ensure that they have the necessary physical transitional living space to prevent homelessness. From speaking with youth who have aged, one recent individual explicitly expressed his experience as he transitioned out, “it felt like just another placement without any other additional support. None of my needs were met when it came to trying to find a good job or connected to workforce training.” While speaking with an adult that had aged out in 2015, she shared that when seeking for further developmental support she was advised and directed to look at options through higher education although that was not a viable option for her. In her experience, she was not given the needed support to sustain herself by finding employment or developing the skills needed for a sustainable job. Through these experiences, many young adults lose trust in

- case workers and are less likely to reach out for support post-state care.
2. A growing challenge is the lack of capacity that many frontline workers have to become proficient in yet another topic. From speaking with case workers that assist young adults through their time in care and as they exit, many are not equipped with the needed resources or information to direct young adults to workforce programs that meet their needs as they transition into independence. From connecting with one case worker in Chicago, she expressed the hardship of trying to support youth from a variety of ages ranging from newborn to 18 years of age, and in some programs until they are 21. For her and many other case workers, this takes an extensive amount of knowledge on available resources for all ages and can become difficult to specifically address workforce training for aging out youth.
  3. The lack of state-level resources and training for frontline staff who could take on the role of being a workforce navigator for youth exiting care and case workers that seek to assist youth. Many case workers are not workforce experts, and while some may have access to workforce navigators at their state care facilities or partnerships not everyone has the resources to direct individuals to professionals that can support aging out youth. Many are just unaware of best practices and program availability being offered by DCEO and DHS that can support their youth.
  4. There is a lack of job-readiness learning and opportunities that are provided by foster homes across Illinois. Some homes, like Lawrence Hall, have begun to hire their own dedicated workforce professional staff to further support their youth. In a time where many young adults may not see higher education as a viable option for development and learning, we must also be ready to prepare and direct them into workforce programs.

## IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR FOSTER YOUTH IN ILLINOIS

The challenges outlined above can be resolved. Solutions will require stakeholder collaboration and of course, financial investments from the state and other entities. However, should the recommendations be implemented, it is likely that foster youth exiting the Illinois foster care system will enter the workforce more prepared and more likely to succeed, achieve financial independence, and become reliable taxpayers contributing to the financial security of their families and communities.

**Recommendation #1:** *All state care homes in Illinois should have a workforce development professional or job readiness program, staffed by a trained professional who can direct young adults to employment programming or resources, such as child care financial assistance, that meet their unique needs.*



Case workers are taking on large caseloads with varying ages and needs, it has not been a focal point on assisting young adults to be ready for employment. To depend on case workers to direct young adults on all of their needed living needs post state care is a disservice to both those exiting and case workers. There needs to be additional support through either programming or trained professionals that can help young adults as they move into independence and the workforce.

A great example of a state care facility taking lead in this direction is Lawrence Hall in Chicago. They have established their own internal job readiness programming, [MY TIME](#), specifically for those that are aging at from 17-21. Leaders at Lawrence Hall have also begun to hire an Employment Mentor and Workforce Manager. These are extra supports and individuals at a foster home to specifically help young adults move into the workforce. All state care facilities should implement this strategy to best help youth get into employment and independent living.

**Recommendation #2:** *The Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity should develop statewide workforce navigators that can specifically support youth exiting state care facilities and other youth facing similar barriers such as housing insecure youth or youth exiting the criminal justice system.*

The state should look to implement workforce navigators across regions in Illinois who can complement the work of in-house job readiness staff and provide resources that are statewide, should youth move around the state. Navigators should be able to share and direct resources for workforce programs like Pre-Apprenticeship, Apprenticeship, Illinois Youth investment Program, and LifeSet. This extra layer of personal contact to help assist individuals, case workers, and foster parents instead of having to navigate online resources.

**Recommendation #3:** *DCEO should develop training to help skill current and new case workers and navigators to better understand the needs and assistance needed by youth exiting state care. One thing is for certain and that is that not every case worker is equipped to assist youth in being job ready or be able to direct young adults programming that serves to improve their workforce outcomes. DCEO should have training opportunities for case workers that specifically work with youth in foster care on how to prepare and direct individuals to not only our Pre-Apprenticeship and Apprenticeship programs but also workforce resources that can be leveraged to find and keep a job. If we are not equipping our case workers with the needed knowledge to provide success post state care then we will not see an improvement to employment outcomes for young adults.*

To further create a line of support for young adults exiting care, we should also provide training for state workforce navigators that are currently helping adults across the state into workforce programs. These navigators have all the needed information when it comes to directing to workforce programming, however they are ill equipped to help individuals that exit state care for their full needs. If Illinois was to develop their navigators to better work with this population, we can potentially see an increase in young adults participating in our statewide apprenticeship efforts to establish a more equitable workforce.





**Recommendation #4:** *Illinois should seek to further fund organizations like Chicago Youth Opportunities that directly seek to support foster youth and their needs with a trauma informed approach.*

Young adults that have engaged with our state care system are more than likely to have a traumatic experience in their life that impacts their day to day lives. Chicago Youth Opportunities ensures to meet young adults where they are and with an understanding of the experiences they have gone through while in and out of state care. Many youth will engage with other workforce programming, however many are not inclined to finish due to the fact that many programs do not understand the needs of their experiences. Illinois should fund programs that also put foster youth at the forefront with their needs to reach better employment outcomes for these young adults. YI urges DCEO to utilize money from Illinois Works to assist in funding a Pre-Apprenticeship program that is specific to foster youth. Many of these young adults not only interact with state care but also are more than likely to interact with our penal institutions or have a record. Illinois should utilize funding from our R3 program to further invest and develop programming for youth that exit state care to improve workforce outcomes.

**Recommendation #5:** *DCEO/State should harness the power of their Spider database to further centralize programming specific to foster youth and workforce development. This database should be utilized more effectively by case workers, workforce programs, and state agencies to better facilitate partnerships and pathways for foster youth, provide information on best practices, and help all state agencies access shared resources. Urge state care facilities and organizations that lead workforce development programming to work together to establish partnerships that seek to assist foster youth.*

State care facilities and workforce programming providers could do a better job of establishing connections and partnerships. There are workforce programs across the state that are having trouble recruiting and retaining individuals to complete their programming into a successful career trajectory. State care facilities are unaware of all the programs available and the need for young adults to engage in these programs. For example, Lawrence Hall has been able to establish a healthy relationship with Manufacturing Renaissance, a pre-apprenticeship provider, to create a pipeline for young adults that are ready to engage in their programming. With this relationship Lawrence Hall is able to connect young adults to programming that fits their needs, and Manufacturing Renaissance is able to ensure they have young adults to participate in their programming. State care facilities across the state should follow this lead to establish better relationships with existing workforce programming.

YI aims to work with State agencies and sister organizations to amplify the voices of young adults that have engaged with state care facilities, ensuring they are being heard and being represented in rooms passing legislation. Based on our research and direct interaction with youth grappling with these issues we present our key recommendations to improve employment opportunities for young adults aging out of the foster care system.



## CONCLUSION

Evidently, there is not enough attention being placed on youth exiting our state care facilities to ensure that they reach their full potential and obtain a good-paying job. There will be a need for stakeholders in workforce development, workers in the child care system, and state agencies to come together and communicate across these lines of support. There are programs in our workforce that can support and uplift our youth, however they are not reaching the hands of youth in care. Through this piece of research we provide recommendations from the lens of frontline child care workers, foster youth, and workforce development stakeholders. There is a need for multiple solutions to ensure that we can give the best outcomes for youth that age out of our foster care system, and that begins with further communication between all stakeholders involved. Young Invincibles will continue to push this dialogue by elevating the insights in this report to policy makers, state agencies, workforce development leaders, and child care professionals.

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