

Youth Matter

**OUT-OF-HOME PROGRAM HANDBOOK
FOR MARYLAND'S YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE**



Nothing Matters More to a Child Than a Home



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Out-of Home Program Handbook for Maryland's Youth in Foster Care

*Nothing Matters
More to a Child Than a Home.*

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Welcome & Introduction...

Maryland's Handbook for Youth in Foster Care

If you are a Maryland youth in out-of-home placement, commonly known as foster care, this handbook is for you. It covers need-to-know topics identified by youth who have been through foster care. The handbook does not cover every issue you may face in your transition to adulthood. You are unique and have had your own life experiences, so your questions and answers will differ based on your experiences.

This handbook answers some of your MAJOR questions and concerns. Although you may be heading into the world on your own, you are not alone! If you need additional information be sure to speak with your caseworker.



What is Covered in this handbook?

The **Maryland Department of Human Resources, Social Services Administration** (DHR/SSA) created this handbook for Maryland foster youth entering foster care for the first time, as well as youth already in foster care.

The goals of this handbook are simple:

- Provide you with an overview of the foster care system, court process, and resources available.
- Inform you of your rights and responsibilities while you are in foster care.
- Describe what happens when you are older and leave foster care.
- Identify the people that will work with you while in foster care.
- Explain the Place Matters Initiative and how it helps you to create permanency, safety, and a healthy well-being for yourself.
- Teach you how to use the Ready By 21 Benchmarks to develop goals in your transitional plan.
- Make clear the importance of developing life skills.
- Explain how you use the Casey Life Skills Assessment tool to assess your life skills.

These goals are important ways to **empower you, promote self-advocacy, and engage you** in preparing for life after foster care. The handbook covers lots of topics, so it is important that you use it as a guide to navigate through the foster care system.

What is foster care?

What Does it Mean to be Placed in Foster Care?

Being in foster care does not mean you did anything wrong or are guilty of anything. Children and youth come into foster care for different reasons. **Foster Care** provides a safe placement for children who cannot remain safely in the home of their parent(s)/caregivers. The children are in the custody of the Local Department of Social Services (LDSS) by court order. Unlike adoption, foster care is temporary; it is not designed to last forever.

Youth come into care for many reasons:

- Physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse or neglect
- Family crisis or conflict between the youth and parents/caregiver
- Voluntary placement by parents or care caregiver
- Parents or caregiver are not able to keep you safe
- A judge decides that a youth needs to be placed in foster care to give a family time to make the changes needed for a youth's safe return home.

Always remember that you were not removed from your home because of something you did.



Placement with Siblings

If you are in foster care, you are not living with your parent(s) and you may not be living with some or all of your siblings. Even though you are not living with your family, it is still important that you keep a strong and healthy relationship with them.

When you and your sibling(s) are removed from your home, you have the right to be placed together in the same foster placement if possible. However, if after reasonable efforts the LDSS is not able to locate a placement for both you and your sibling(s), or it is not in your best interest to be placed with your sibling(s) the LDSS does not have to place you and your sibling(s) together.

“Reasonable efforts” means that the LDSS has tried to place you and your sibling(s) together, but could not find a foster care placement for you together.

If you have not been placed with your sibling(s), the LDSS should keep looking for a placement where you can all live together. This applies whether your siblings are full, half, or adopted.

Where you are placed depends on your needs.

Your caseworker tries to find a placement that can be a home for you in or close to your neighborhood. It is important that you tell your caseworker about family and friends that may provide a good home or be a support for you.

The most common types of placement include:

- Foster Home: Therapeutic or Non-Therapeutic
- Kinship Home
- Group Home: Therapeutic or Non-Therapeutic
- Residential Treatment Center
- Semi-Structured Supervised Independent Living
- Semi-Independent Living Arrangement (SILA)

Where will I live?

Definitions of Different Kinds of Foster Care Placements

Below is a diagram of different kinds of foster care placements available in Maryland. Your caseworker will work with you to identify the most appropriate placement.

Placement	Definition	Special Notes
Foster Home (Therapeutic or Non-Therapeutic)	<p>A placement where you live with an individual or family that was approved by the LDSS. Foster parents receive special training and their home is subject to inspection and approval.</p>	<p>A relative or family friend may want to care for you, but a comprehensive evaluation is needed to determine the family's ability to take care of you before they are approved as a foster home.</p>
Kinship Home	<p>A placement with a relative that is approved by your caseworker to care for you. This means that their home is safe and they can provide for your basic needs.</p>	<p>Sometimes these relatives get approved to be official foster homes, but they do not have to do that for you to live there.</p>
Group Home (Therapeutic or Non-Therapeutic)	<p>A residence where there are at least three (3) children in your age range who are the same sex as you and have the same type of placement needs.</p>	<p>Continuous 24-hour care and supportive services are provided in group homes.</p>

Placement	Definition	Special Notes
<p>Residential Treatment Center (RTC)</p>	<p>A live-in health care facility where you receive a series of intensive medical and mental health services if you need them.</p>	<p>RTCs are short-term placements until you are stable. They are supervised 24-hours a day. You may or may not attend a school on-site at the RTC.</p>
<p>Independent Living (IL)</p>	<p>A supervised and supported apartment-style residential unit with or without a roommate. Units are located throughout the community.</p>	<p>You must meet appropriate guidelines set by your LDSS and desired Independent Living Program. Participants are monitored and provided supportive services through the selected ILP.</p>
<p>Semi-Independent Living Arrangement (SILA)</p>	<p>A living arrangement for youth, ages 16 through 21, under supervision of the LDSS. You receive a stipend and may live in an apartment, room or on a college campus where you practice living independently.</p>	<p>You must apply for this program. Your LDSS will provide supervision to assist you in transitioning to independent living.</p>

What are my rights as a child or youth in foster care?

Rights of Children & Youth in Foster Care

While in foster care, you have certain rights, including the ones listed here. If you feel your rights are not being protected, talk to your caseworker and/or your lawyer about your concerns.

As a child or youth in foster care, you have the right:

- **To be free from abuse, neglect and exploitation.**
- **To fair treatment**, whatever your gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, religion, national origin, disability, medical problems, or sexual orientation.
- **To visit and have regular contact with your parents, siblings, and other family members (unless a court order limits your contact) and to have your caseworker explain any restrictions to you and write them in your case record.**
- **To know:**
 - *Why you are in foster care?*
 - *What will happen to you?*
 - *What is happening to your family (including siblings) and how the local department of social services is planning for your future?*
- **To attend court hearings, speak with the Judge and/or Master, and receive a copy of the court documents for your records.**
- **To actively participate in your case planning process.**
- **To be placed in school within five (5) days of entering an out-of-home placement.**
- **To be involved in your educational planning.**
- **To request a meeting with your caseworker and foster parents if there are concerns about your current living arrangement.**
- **To have your own bed while in foster care.**
- **To speak and be spoken to in your own language when possible.**

- **NOT** to share a room with an adult.
- To receive meals in your foster care placement.
- To store your belongings in a safe place.
- To have privacy when you take a bath, shower, and get dressed.
- To contact your caseworker, attorney, and/or CASA worker (when appropriate).
- To receive medical, dental, vision care, and developmental & mental health services that are paid for through the Medical Assistance Program. *These services include a yearly physical and eye and dental examinations twice a year.*
- To tell your caseworker that you are no longer interested in foster care after your 18th birthday.
- To remain in foster care until your 21st birthday if you are not prepared to exit care.
- To return to foster care if you leave foster care after you are 18 years old up until 20.6 years old and meet the criteria for Enhanced After Care (see criteria discussed on page 35).
- To receive an annual credit report, and assistance in fixing inaccuracies (if you are at least 14 years old or older).
- To participate in age or developmentally appropriate activities.
- To receive an “Annual Notice of Benefits” brochure every year.

At any time you feel your rights are not being met or violated, then you should contact your caseworker or attorney.

**KNOW
YOUR
RIGHTS**





COURT PROCESS The different



The LDSS investigates reports of child maltreatment related to abuse or neglect. Based on their findings it may require court involvement to decide the best course of action.

1



Shelter Care Hearing

24
Hours or
Next Court
Day

You and your family will be asked to attend court to determine if there is a good reason that you cannot go home. If you have any questions, ask your attorney or your caseworker to explain the court hearing, placement, or anything that bothers you.

2



Adjudicatory Hearing

Within
30
Days
of Coming
into Foster
Care

Your family and the local department of social services (LDSS) presents information to the judge to determine whether the allegations in the presented information are true. Everyone will be represented by an attorney.

3



Disposition Hearing

This hearing will determine whether you are a **Child In Need of Assistance (CINA)** and the nature of the court's intervention to protect your health, safety, and well-being.

Within
30
Days
After
Adjudicatory
Hearing

Possible Disposition Interventions:

- Allegations are dismissed and you are returned home
- You are returned to your parents or another caretaker under an Order of Protective Supervision (OPS)
- You are committed to the custody of the local department of social services (LDSS) which means that you will remain in a foster care placement and will not be returning home at this time.
- Custody or guardianship is awarded to a relative or non-relative

- You are co-committed with Department of Health & Mental Hygiene and/or Department of Juvenile Service
- LDSS may seek **termination of parental rights** at the beginning of your case.

Evidence is presented to the court and the judge decides whether there is enough evidence to terminate your parents' rights. The court considers your best interest when deciding whether or not to terminate parental rights.

types of court hearings.

The court hearing is the time when you, the caseworker, your parent(s), and the lawyers meet with a judge to review the progress on your family’s goals and determine the next steps. Shown is an illustration of the typical legal process that the court uses to make decision about you and your family.

4  **Permanency Plan Hearing, the purpose is to:**

- Determine a permanency goal for your future.
- Decide if you can safely return home.
- Decide if you will remain in foster care.
- Decide if it is necessary to begin the process to terminate your parents’ rights.

No Later Than **11** Month After Removal From Home

Possible Review Hearings

5  **Guardianship Review Hearing**

A guardianship review hearing occurs when the LDSS reports a child has not been placed for adoption within 180 days of the date of the guardianship order or when an adoption is not finalized within two years of termination of parental rights. The court looks at efforts to achieve an adoption.

Reviews are Held Every **6 to 12** Months

 **Permanency Review Hearing**

Permanency review hearings take place every six (6) months after the disposition hearing, for as long as you remain in care. At each permanency review hearing, the court may ask you about your desired permanency goal(s) to make a determination during the hearing as to what is the *BEST* permanency plan for you. The court will also state reasons why the selected permanency plan goal(s) is in your best interest.

Every **6** Month After Disposition Hearing

 **Voluntary Placement Hearing**

This is a hearing to obtain judicial determination as to whether continuing a voluntary placement is in your best interest.

Every **6** Month After Placement

Tips for Going to Court



Ordinarily, court proceedings are formal and it may be a new experience for you. There are a lot of rules when you go to court. It may be intimidating, so here are some tips to help you feel more comfortable and prepared for court:



Wear **clean** clothes.



Address the judge or magistrate as **"Your Honor."**



The judge may ask you questions about school, your foster home and contact with your family. When you talk to the judge, answer the judge's questions honestly. If you do not understand something, ask your lawyer to explain it to you. If you do not feel comfortable addressing the court, then tell your attorney so that he/she can speak on your behalf.



You **cannot bring** food to court. Once you are in the courtroom, you **cannot wear** a hat and you have to turn your cell phone off. Do **not** chew gum.



Ask your attorney questions.



You need to be **respectful** of everyone at the hearing even if you do not agree with what they are saying to the judge. Everyone has a chance to speak and you will need to wait your turn.



You will probably have to wait for your case to be called. You may want to **bring a** book to read or something to do while you are waiting.

**Court can be an empowering and exciting experience.
Sometimes it can be scary...but with preparation,
you will pull through.**

Definitions of Terms You May Hear In Court

Child In Need of Assistance (CINA): is a child who requires court intervention/involvement because the child has been abused or neglected, has a developmental disability or mental disorder; and/or the child's parent(s), guardian, or custodian are unable or unwilling to give proper care and attend to the child's needs.

Limited guardianship: gives the individual or the agency limited control over the day-to-day decision making process for a child in the areas of mental health, medical health, education, and out-of-state travel purposes.

Custody: the right and requirement to provide ordinary care for a child and determine placement.

Custodian: a person or governmental agency to who custody of a child has been given by order of the court.

Reasonable Efforts: are efforts made by the local department of social services to provide assistance and services needed to preserve or reunify families, achieve the permanency goals, and/or meet the well-being needs of the child.

Rights of the Parent and Child:

- Right to notice of the court hearing/proceedings
- Right to a hearing
- Right to counsel (parent and youth)
- Reasonable efforts to keep family together; or if the child has been removed from the family, then the right to reunify with the family.

Court Hearing Process:

Shelter Care Hearing: is a court hearing to determine whether temporary placement outside of your home is necessary.

Adjudicatory Hearing: determines whether the allegations in a petition are true.

Disposition Hearing: The judge will also decide if you are a CINA. If so, then the nature of the court's intervention to protect your health, safety, and well-being will be determined.

Permanency Hearing: determines progress on achieving permanency goals and update/change goals, if needed.

Permanency Plan Review Hearing: updates the court on the progress related to permanency, safety, and overall well-being

Termination of Parental Rights: this eliminates the rights and responsibilities your parents have to you.

Voluntary Placement Hearing: determines whether continuing a voluntary placement agreement is in your best interest.

Guardianship Review Hearing: reviews all efforts with achieving adoption.

People that will support you:

People Involved in Your Case

While you are in foster care, you will meet with different types of professionals. These individuals are involved in making sure you are safe and your family meets their goals so you can return home. The list below tells you the key people involved in helping you and your family:

Caseworker/Social Worker: If you are removed from your home, a lead caseworker/social worker from the local department of social services will be assigned to work with you and your family.

Independent Living Coordinator (ILC)

ILCs are responsible for helping transitional youth, ages 14 -21, with accessing transitional services, information about resources and life skills development.

Social Worker Through a Therapeutic Placement Provider: If you are placed with a private provider, an additional social worker will be assigned to work with you.

Foster Parent(s): A licensed or approved caregiver who provides care while you are placed in their home. They are available to go to court and sometimes the judge will ask them about you.

**YOUR
SUPPORTIVE
ADULTS!**

◆ Caseworker/Social Worker ◆ Foster Parent(s) ◆ ILC
◆ Therapeutic Foster Parent(s) ◆ Attorney for the Child

Therapeutic Foster Parent: Is a licensed caregiver that provides specialized care related to your behavioral, emotional, and/or medical needs.

Kinship Caregiver: A relative that will care for you in their home. This type of care is the preferred type of placement your caseworker will try to find for you.

Attorney/Lawyer: Your attorney/lawyer is a specially trained professional that provides legal advice to you and advocates for what you want in court. You are entitled to your own attorney/lawyer. Your family and the LDSS have their own attorneys/lawyers. Your attorney will meet with you before each court hearing to make sure you know what to expect and to know what you want to happen in court.

Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA): A trained volunteer appointed by the court that ensures the needs and interests of a child in judicial proceedings are fully protected. The CASA writes a court report that is submitted to the court with recommendations about how the CASA thinks your best interest can be met.

Judge: A judge is in charge of the court hearings and is responsible for listening to you and others involved in your life. The judge makes decisions about your life. The judge does not leave the courtroom to investigate your life, so he or she listens to what you and others say about your life.

Magistrates: A judicial officer empowered to conduct certain hearings. A magistrate is an attorney who is appointed by the court to help a judge with hearing cases. A magistrate's decisions are recommendations and are not final until reviewed and accepted by a Judge.

◆ Kinship Parent(s) or Caregiver ◆ Magistrate or Judge
◆ Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)

Person	Responsibilities
Caseworker/ Social Worker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protect your safety. • Protect your rights. • Answer your questions and give you the information you need. • Make arrangements for the services you need. • Make a visitation plan for you and your family. • Visit you, your family, and your caregivers regularly. • Explain to you and your caregivers why you are in foster care. • Help you and your family work out issues and make changes. • Help you make plans for your future.
Foster/ Therapeutic Foster/Kinship Parent or Caregiver	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help in your growth and development by encouraging your success in areas such as school and daily life skills. • Show understanding, give guidance and unconditional acceptance. • Participate in meetings regarding your case plan and other case-related meetings with staff. • Prepare you for your next move whether it is going home, to another placement, or independent living. • Make sure you get medical and dental care. • Work with you and your caseworker to make sure your case plan is developed and implemented. • Help you, or get you help, to deal with your thoughts and feelings about being in foster care. • Follows the reasonable and prudent parent standard. • Insures that you have regular opportunities to engage in age or developmentally appropriate activities.

Person	Responsibilities
<p>Court Appointed Special Advocate/ CASA</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assigned to the child to help with permanency process. • Advocate for the best interests of abused and/or neglected children in courtrooms and communities. • Submits a court report with recommendations about how the CASA thinks your best interest can be met.
<p>Attorney/ Lawyer</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The attorney will represent you and your interests in court. • The attorney is responsible for contacting you before court hearings to get your input on your case. • The attorney will visit you at your placement. • Most of what you say to your attorney stays between you and your attorney.
<p>Judge or Magistrate</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Judge/Magistrate leads the court hearing. • At least once per year you will meet with the Judge/Magistrate one-on-one. • The Judge/Magistrate listens to all information presented by attorneys and then makes a decision about how your case should proceed. • The Judge/Magistrate can require you, your parents and/or your Caseworker to do certain tasks.

How do I visit with my family?

Visits and meetings

All children and youth in foster care have the right to visitation, ongoing contact with and/or knowledge of your parents, siblings, extended family, and friends.

Visits/Contact with Siblings

If it is not possible for the LDSS to find a home for you and your sibling(s) together, the agency must set up a plan for you to be able to visit your sibling(s), unless the Judge decides it is not in you or your siblings' best interest for you to have contact. This applies to full, half, or adopted siblings who are in foster care. If you have any questions about visiting your siblings, please call your caseworker or lawyer for more information.

Visits/Contact with Parent(s)

You have the right to see your parent(s) unless the court decides it is not in your best interests to do so. The visits may be supervised or unsupervised, depending on what the court thinks is best. If you do not want to see your mom or dad, or if you have any other questions about contact with them, speak with your lawyer and case worker.

Visitation with Relatives

You have the right to visit your relatives if the judge decides that the visits are in your best interests. A "relative" is someone related to you by blood, marriage, or adoption. Your caseworker will notify all adult relatives upon your entrance in foster care. If you have any questions about visiting your relatives, please call your caseworker or lawyer for more information.

**Your caseworker will notify all adults relatives
upon your entering foster care.**

What is Permanency Planning?

The “Place Matters” initiative is an approach that promotes **safety, permanency**, family strengthening, **well-being** and accessing community supports/resources in the state of Maryland. This initiative focuses on ensuring that you are in a home that is safe and provides an environment where you have an opportunity to grow into a healthy adult. Maryland’s goal is to make continuous efforts to maintain your current living arrangement, so that you can have a stable place to live. Having a stable place to live is important because it allows you to create healthy relationships with others, maintain an on-going connection with friends in the community, and helps you to focus on other goals (i.e. finishing school, getting a job, developing into an adult).

Permanency planning is the LDSS’s process of creating a plan specifically identifying where and with whom the child shall live.

Types of Permanency Plans

The goal of foster care is to implement a plan for permanency for you.

Listed below are the 6 types of permanency plans in order of priority:

- Return to parent(s) (reunification);
- Adoption by a relative;
- Custody and guardianship to a relative;
- Adoption by a non-relative;
- Custody and guardianship to a non-relative; or
- Another planned permanent living arrangement in foster care (**APPLA**): **is only used for youth 16 years and older.**

What does LGBTQ mean?

We know that being in foster care can be difficult in the beginning, and we want to do everything we can to make sure you feel safe and respected. This section will help you understand what your rights are as a youth in care who identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or questioning (LGBTQ). You will also learn who to turn to for help if you have any questions or concerns that you would like to share. If you don't identify with this population, then this section will provide you with information on LGBTQ rights.

Your Rights as an LGBTQ Youth in Care

DHR/SSA is committed to all young people living in spaces where they can be open and honest about their identities. What this means is that you have the right to express your own individual sense of:

- **Gender Presentation:**
As long as you are dressed appropriately, you can wear the clothing, accessories, and/or hairstyle that suits your gender identity (i.e. someone born male has a right to wear a dress, someone born female has a right to wear men's clothing).
- **Gender Identity:**
Everyone is assigned a sex (male or female) at birth, but that doesn't always mean that we identify with that sex. You have the right to openly identify as whatever gender you are. Check out our terms and definitions section for information about gender and sex.
- **Sexual Orientation:**
You can date peers of the same sex, openly identify as who you are, and engage in other age appropriate activities for LGBTQ youth (such as participating in a Gay Straight Alliance at your school).

Should I tell my Caseworker about my Sexual Orientation and/or Gender Identity?

Choosing to share this information with your caseworker is your right. Information about your sexual orientation and/or gender identity can help us make the most informed decisions with you about your housing,

education, and healthcare. We want to ensure you have everything possible to succeed in life while you are in care.

What we promise **not** to do is try to change your mind, share information with anyone whom we are not legally mandated to or, make you feel ashamed about who you are. We **will** keep the information as confidential as possible, help you find LGBTQ affirming resources if you wish, and support you.

There are many reasons why someone may choose to not disclose information about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. We know that sometimes coming out to family (biological or resource) can be a scary idea, especially if you are concerned that your family may not be accepting. We are committed to protecting your safety.

If you have fears about sharing your identity with people you are close to, or feel like you may be unsafe if you come out in your placement and/or school, talk to your caseworker.

How I can be an Ally

If you are in care and don't identify as LGBTQ, you still have an important role in building safe spaces for all young people in foster care. You can make sure LGBTQ youth feel supported by:

- Not using derogatory words
- Asking other youth what name and pronouns (she, her, he, his) they prefer
- Speaking out when you hear someone say something that is belittling to LGBTQ youths
- If someone shares something with you about their identity, keep it private
- Join your school's Gay Straight Alliance

Website Resources

The following is a list of helpful resources at the forefront of addressing the needs of LGBTQ youth in foster care:



Advocates for Youth

<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/>



Equality Maryland

<http://equalitymaryland.org/>



Free State Legal Project

<http://freestatelegal.org>



Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Community Center of Baltimore and Central Maryland (GLCCB)

<http://www.glccb.org/>



Getting Down to Basics

<http://www.lambdalegal.org/publications/getting-down-to-basics>



The Point Foundation

<http://www.pointfoundation.org/>



The Opening Doors Project

http://www.americanbar.org/groups/child_law/what_we_do/projects/openingdoors.html



What are Ready By 21 Services?



Ready By 21 Services provide transitional services to youth in foster care, 14 through 20 years of age, regardless of permanency plan or placement type. The goal is preparation for life after foster care and to assist youth with making a successful transition to adulthood. Transitional services provide basic living skills in partnership with your resource provider and caseworker. You also have the opportunity to participate in individual and group life skills building classes and activities. Together you, your resource provider, and caseworker assess your proficiency in life skills. The assessment outcomes are used to determine your ability to live on your own. Your goals and services are personalized based upon your needs.

Through the delivery of transitional youth services, you are encouraged to take an active role in planning the activities and services you need to become self-sufficient. These services also focus on developing and enhancing your social and emotional support systems, social skills, proficiency in education, and employment status and goals.

Transitional services should address your:

1. Maturity level;
2. Developmental need;
3. Education status and goals;
4. Social and emotional supports;
5. Financial resources other than LDSS; and
6. Vocational goals.

Transitional planning begins at age 14. All youth in foster care MUST complete their [MARYLAND YOUTH TRANSITIONAL PLAN!](#) The plan shall include:

- Agreed upon goals, steps to be taken to meet your goals, and deadline for completing goals;
- Identified services that will help you accomplish your goals;
- The responsibility of the agency and other persons to assist you with those steps and meeting deadlines;
- The date when the plan was reviewed or updated; and your signature, the local department of social services (LDSS) caseworker, and other participants responsible for the plan and activities.
- Joint participation of you, your family member(s), and other supportive adult(s) that are not your case worker or foster parent.
- Documented education and health status, visitation plan, court participation, and signed acknowledgment form of your rights in foster care.

Ready By 21 Benchmarks

Age 14



Education: *You Should...*

- Begin to participate in life skills classes and begin to acquire skills that are appropriate to your functioning level.
- Begin to obtain the needed student service learning hours towards graduation.
- Understand graduation requirements.
- Have basic literacy and numeracy skills.
- If applicable, have an appropriate identification of special education.
- If applicable, have an appropriate parent surrogate identified.



Employment: *You Should...*

- Obtain a work permit from the school.
- Begin to explore career interests.



Health: *You Should...*

- Participate in sessions on sexual relationships- sexual education that includes forms of birth control, how to practice safe sex, practices to avoid sexually transmitted diseases.
- Understand:
 - the risks associated with drug and alcohol use.
 - the importance of preventive and routine health care.
 - the importance of medications and how to use medicine properly.
 - your diagnosis (if applicable).
- Identify the providers that you will use.
- Communicate your needs to the psychiatrist/therapist.



Housing: *You Should...*

- Live in an approved safe placement with a caring, competent adult.



Financial Literacy/Resources: *You Should...*

- Have a bank account (savings and/or checking) and understand how to utilize services from the bank.
- Demonstrate the ability to purchase items and understand the purchase process including cost, sales tax, and tips.
- Be provided with a free credit report at the age of 14 and annually thereafter.



Family and Friends Support: *You Should*

- Develop an understanding of positive, safe relationships.
- Develop a photo history.
- Be assisted in developing a genogram.



Ready By 21 Benchmarks

Age 15/16



Education: *You Should...*

- Have a concrete plan detailing how you will complete high school, earn a certificate of program completion, or obtain a GED,
 - an awareness of colleges, trade schools, or technical trainings and what is needed to reach goals.
 - an opportunity to participate in a driver's education program.
- Obtain a driver's license or Maryland identification card.
- Disconnected youth shall have an established re-engagement plan.



Employment: *You Should...*

- Receive assistance in the exploration of employment and/or occupational interests and the skills and/or training required for possible fields of interest.
- Understand
 - what minimum wage means.
 - how to access transportation to and from work.
- Develop a realistic concept of the type of jobs available to youth.
- Explore options for summer youth employment.
- Engage in work experience, job shadowing and/or volunteer activities.
- Be aware of appropriate attire for job interviews and work.





Health: *You Should...*

- Be provided with information that shall assist you in understanding the importance of medical conditions, family medical history, and how to be responsible with a healthy diet and exercise regiment.
- Understand the importance of maintaining medical documents.
- Be able to identify supports.
- Understand safe and healthy relationships (in regards to dating).



Housing: *You Should...*

- Be able to
 - go shopping for food, prepare simple food and meals, and safely store food.
 - identify a safe haven for short stay housing, if needed.
- Begin to acquire necessary household items and caring for them, whether school-based or prepaid.



Financial Literacy Resources: *You Should...*

- Safely and effectively manage your money;
- Establish alternatives to using check cashing services, payday lending, etc.
- Understand basic financial skills – checking/savings, loans/contract/budgets, and credit cards use.
- Establish savings goals.
- Have a budgeted clothing allowance.



Family and Friends Support: *You Should...*

- Identify appropriate, committed adult supports.
- Understand the importance of developing lifelong relationships with caring adults.

Ready By 21 Benchmarks

Age 17/18



Education: *You Should...*

- Obtain the necessary student service-learning hours to graduate.
- Have a concrete plan for postsecondary education, employment and/or training.
- Complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), unless otherwise noted.
- Include transition plans in your specific educational goals and financial assistance plans.
- Understand how to utilize the Maryland Tuition Waiver and/or Educational Training Vouchers (ETV).
- Enroll in college, or if not interested in college, take advantage of vocational programs that allow certifications to be earned.
- Understand service needs and receive information on how to access Disability Support Services (if applicable)
- Register to vote and understand the voting process.



Employment: *You Should...*

- Have an opportunity to participate in an internship, externship or volunteer opportunity relevant to a career field of your choice.
- Understand the opportunities that will allow you to increase employment skills.
- Be assisted in developing a resume.
- Have had at least two summer jobs by age 18.
- Be engaged in planning for employment that shall increase your earnings and marketable potential.
- Be educated about the employment transition services and resources available for youth with special needs (if applicable)
- Receive assistance in enrolling in any desired occupational skills training.





Health: *You Should...*

- Understand the importance of following through with medical care and appointments.
- Be able to ask the doctor questions and obtain information needed to understand your health and any existing medical conditions.
- Understand the importance of medical insurance and take advantage of obtaining the services needed with your medical insurance.
- Be able to identify and utilize community resources.
- Understand your rights.
- Be referred to other programs/services for additional assistance prior to exiting care if disabled (if applicable).
- Be provided with information that shall assist you in understanding the importance of designating a health care agent and information on how to exercise the option to execute a health care agent appointment that designates another individual to make health care treatment decisions if you become incapacitated.



Housing: *You Should...*

- Be able to identify possible housing options, if needed, including prospective roommates, subsidized housing,
- Have a “safety plan” if current housing fails.
- Understand housing history.
- Understand tenant rights and tenant- landlord relationships.
- Understand the importance of safety and being selective in who is allowed to enter your personal space.
- Possess the life skills needed to maintain an apartment and make some independent decisions.





Financial Literacy/Resources: *You Should...*

- Have basic knowledge of entitlement programs, qualifications and how to apply/receive assistance with application for SSI (Social Security Insurance), MA (Medical Assistance), TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), TCA (Temporary Cash Assistance), WIC (Women, Infants and Children), etc.
- Obtain a free credit report.
- Understand how to avoid identity theft or correct it.
- Understand the benefits of remaining in care until age 21.
- Understand the policy, eligibility requirements, and supportive services of After-Care Services that you can receive if leaving care prior to age 21.
- Obtain your original birth certificate and social security card.



Family and Friends Support: *You Should...*

- Develop a community resources guide.



Ready By 21 Benchmarks

Age 19/21



Education: *You Should...*

- Have access to postsecondary supportive services (e.g., financial aid, counseling, tutorial).
- Be aware and engage with community supports if you have a disability (if applicable).



Employment: *You Should...*



- Continue to maintain progressive, responsible work experience opportunities within your chosen career path.
- Understand unfair job practices and know how to seek guidance.



Health: *You Should...*

- Understand how to obtain medical services after you leave care.
- Be aware of health care coverage options if you are not insured through the employer.
- Understand how to manage any medical condition you may have.
- Be able to identify the providers you will use for health, dental, and mental health care.
- Have updated medical records and a mental health evaluation upon exiting care.
- Be assisted in applying for medical assistance, if needed.





Housing: *You Should...*

- Possess the life skills required to maintain housing, with support.
- Be prepared for SILA or private vendors that provide independent living services.
- Be living in a stable placement.
- Have a plan developed that includes a budget and all services needed to maintain an apartment or home.
- Have a developed plan for living after foster care.



Financial Literacy/ Resources: *You Should...*

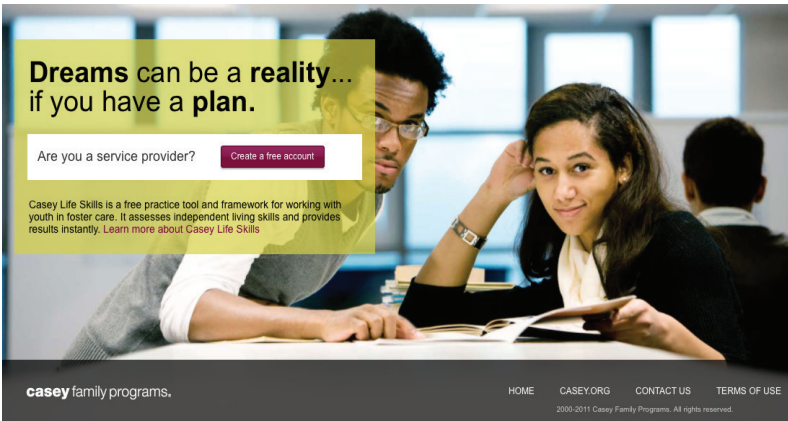
- Understand the importance of financial investments.
- Maintain a financial cushion.
- Understand the need for budgeting funds and shall demonstrate the ability to manage money, and obtain necessary resources.
- Understand budget management, priority spending, and the income sources to be used to supplement payment for your expenses.
- Be able to maintain a savings account.



Family and Friends Support: *You Should...*

- Obtain adequate child-care services, if applicable.
- Learn how to positively develop relationships with your family of origin.





**Dreams can be a reality...
if you have a plan.**

Are you a service provider? [Create a free account](#)

Casey Life Skills is a free practice tool and framework for working with youth in foster care. It assesses independent living skills and provides results instantly. [Learn more about Casey Life Skills](#)

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Life Skills

Learning to live independently is a lifelong process and for most youth this development is continuously supported in a family setting. For foster youth in Maryland, life skills are provided to ensure that you have the opportunities to become self sufficient and make a successful transition into adulthood. Life skills trainings provide you the opportunity to experience “the real world” while receiving a hands-on, do-it-yourself experience in the following areas:

- Education
- Employment skills
- Health
- Housing
- Financial Literacy
- Family and friend support
- Understanding community resources

Life skills trainings provide a much-needed bridge between foster care and adulthood, allowing you to form a community connection while in care that you can continue to access following discharge. This approach to engaging you while aging out of foster care will produce better outcomes as you will be equipped with the skills and abilities to transition into adulthood.

Casey Life Skills Assessment

In Maryland, every youth age 14 to 21 must have an annual life skills assessment to determine their strengths and weaknesses to prepare them for adulthood. The State of Maryland utilizes the **Casey Life Skills Assessment (CLSA)** tool for individual youth assessment. The Casey Life Skills Assessment tool is a free-on-line resource available at <http://www.caseylifeskills.org>. The assessment provides an indication of skill level and readiness for living on your own. It is designed as a first step for improving life skills in conjunction with goal setting, action planning, instruction, learning, and application. The Casey Life Skills Assessment tool was developed to be developmentally appropriate, culturally sensitive, gender appropriate, useful for setting case goals, and appropriate for youth such as yourself. The individual assessment is to be updated as needed, but at minimum annually.

With this information, you, the caregiver, and service provider can select areas for improvement and build on strengths. Completing the CLSA is the first step in this assessment process. It is most useful when both you and a caregiver complete the CLSA. It heightens awareness of and increases your involvement in planning and learning life skills that include instruction about: decision making, time management, educational and vocational planning, home maintenance, emergency and safety plans, personal hygiene, physical and mental health care, understanding legal issues that impact your care, hobbies and positive leisure activities, employment readiness and retention, money management, nutrition and meal planning, social relationships, using public transportation, activities of daily living and problem solving.



Aftercare Services

All youth in Maryland must exit foster care by their 21st birthday. However, at any point after your 18th birthday, you can make the decision to leave foster care. If you choose to leave foster care, your LDSS offers aftercare services to support you within your environment or allow you to return to foster care under a voluntary placement agreement. Below is a brief description of the two types of aftercare services offered at your LDSS.

Before making the decision to leave foster care at 18, make sure you have received a copy of your “Notification of Benefits” Brochure.

Short-Term Independent Living Aftercare Services

Short-Term Independent Living Aftercare Services provides services to you if you were in care on or after your 18th birthday up to your 21st birthday. These services provide you with an opportunity to continue learning and practicing independent living skills, as indicated in a Service Agreement with the local department of social services. The goal of the program is to help you recognize and accept personal responsibility and services for making a successful transition into adulthood. (Any youth left in foster care at or after their 18th birthday is eligible for aftercare services until they reach 21, but not eligible for replacement into a paid foster care living arrangement). Youth that exited foster care through adoption or guardianship after their 16th birthday are eligible.

Enhanced After Care Voluntary Placement Agreement

Enhanced After Care Voluntary Placement Agreement allows youth to re-enter the foster care system after the age of 18 years old if they meet certain criteria. One of the important criteria is that the youth must have exited foster care after their 18th birthday but have not yet reached the age of 20 years 6 months. The youth must sign a voluntary placement agreement in order to re-enter foster care and must comply with a list of terms and conditions. Please speak with your caseworker for further details.

What Important Documents Should I Have Before Leaving Foster Care?

Here's What Your Agency Must Provide You With

Before you leave foster care, you are required to have the following important documents from your local department of social services:

- Medical Insurance Card
- Maryland State Identification Card or Driver's License (if applicable)
- Birth Certificate
- Social Security Card
- Medical Records
- Family Medical History
- Immunization/Shot Records
- Educational Records
- Credit Report
- Resume

Keep these essential personal documents in a safe place, such as a lockable drawer or cabinet at your house.

Your caseworker will make sure you get these documents or notify you that they are in the process of being obtained. Your caseworker can also assist you if any documents are lost.

Other Types of Documents to Keep Safe

When applying for financial aid for college or vocational programs, be sure to record the date when these applications are submitted. Keep a copy in your safe place. Below is a list of financial aid applications and documents you must complete every year to pay for school:

- Education Training Vouchers (ETV)
- Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)
- Maryland Tuition Waiver (*Provided by school financial aid office*).
- Scholarship Application
- Student Verification Form

Electronic records should be saved on a computer AND backed up on a CD or an external hard drive.

Remember to keep these documents in a safe place.

Contact Information

Ask your caseworker to give you the names and telephone numbers of the following people:

LDSS Caseworker or Social Worker

Name: _____
Address: _____
Zip Code: _____
Telephone: _____
E-mail: _____

LDSS Caseworker or Social Worker's Supervisor

Name: _____
Address: _____
Zip Code: _____
Telephone: _____
E-mail: _____

LDSS Director

Name: _____
Address: _____
Zip Code: _____
Telephone: _____
E-mail: _____

Medical Doctor

Name: _____
Address: _____
Zip Code: _____
Telephone: _____
E-mail: _____

Attorney

Name: _____
Address: _____
Zip Code: _____
Telephone: _____
E-mail: _____

Terms and Definitions

Abuse - The physical, mental, or sexual injury of a child by a parent or other person who has permanent or temporary care, custody or is responsible for the supervision of a child, or any household or family member, if there are indications that the child's health or welfare is harmed or at substantial risk of being harmed.

Adoption - A legal process in which a person related or unrelated to you becomes the adoptive family for you and you are given all of the legal rights and privileges as if you were born to that family. Your birth parents no longer have any legal responsibilities or rights.

Adoptive Parents/Family - Persons who did not give birth to you, but selected you to be their child and a member of their family. Once you are adopted, they have all of the legal rights to be your parent(s).

Advocate - A person who acts or speaks on behalf of another person to get things done for that person.

Aftercare - These are services for youth between 18 though 21 if the youth decides to leave foster care.

Age or Developmentally Appropriate Activities - A suitable or appropriate activities for individuals of a certain age or capacities typical for the age group in the individual person.

Another Planned Permanency Living Arrangement (APPLA) - A permanency plan in which you are connected with a person(s) and a relationship is established, nurtured, and maintained so when you leave foster care you will have someone close to you that will be supportive to you.

Attorney (lawyer) - A person who is licensed to practice law and represents you and your best interests while you are in foster care.

Caregiver(s) - A caregiver is someone, typically over age 18, who provides care for another. It may be a person who is responsible for the direct care, protection, and supervision of children such as: birth parents, foster parents, group home staff, and child care staff.

Caseworker - The LDSS staff person that is assigned to your case to provide services to you and your family.

Chafee (John H.) Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 - A federal law that requires states to provide services to help youth transition out of foster care.

Child Protective Services (CPS) - A child welfare program responsible for investigating reports of child abuse and neglect.

Citizen Review Board for Children (CRBC) - A volunteer organization of community representatives that review the cases of children in foster care to provide recommendations regarding permanency plan goals.

Concurrent Permanency Plans - The process of providing for reunification services while simultaneously developing an alternative plan, in case it is needed. This practice can shorten the time to achieve permanency if reunification proves unsuccessful.

Commitment - The process through which the local department of social services obtains the legal responsibility for your care and placement (Also known as custody.).

Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) - A court-appointed volunteer that advocates for abused and neglected children in order to provide children with a safe and healthy environment in permanent homes.

Early Periodic Screening, Diagnostic, and Treatment Program (EPSDT) – A State medical program that requires that you receive health care services that include full medical, dental exams, immunizations (shots) and laboratory work.

Enhanced Aftercare - age 18, eligible to reenter care under an Enhanced Aftercare Voluntary Placement Agreement (EA-VPA) when other factors are met.

Foster Care – Continuous 24-hour care and supportive services provided for a child or youth in an approved family home, group facility or semi-independent living arrangement.

Foster Care Placement - An approved out-of-home placement where you will reside and receive care that will meet your daily needs of living.

Foster Parent - A licensed or approved caregiver responsible for providing for your daily needs of living which includes nurture, protection and care.

General Educational Development (GED) - Is a group of four subject tests that measures proficiency in science, math, social studies, reading and writing. When successfully passed, it certifies your high school-level academic skills.

Independent Living Coordinator - is the person that coordinates the services to older kids in foster care. They usually organize the training classes and youth advisory board in the local department.

Individual Education Program (IEP) and Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) - Educational Service Plans that are developed by the school to provide needed special education services.

Judge - Is a public official appointed to decide cases in a court of law. A judge is responsible for listening to you and others involved in your life. The judge makes decisions about what will happen to you.

LGBTQ - an acronym that stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning, and is used to designate a community of people who do not fit into dominate social morals due to their gender identity/expressions, their sexual practices etc.

Local Department of Social Services (LDSS) - Exist in all 22 counties and Baltimore City, provide services to citizens such as foster care, medical assistance, food stamps and financial assistance when people are in crisis. In Montgomery County, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) also provide these services.

Managed Care Organization (MCO) - This is a healthcare company that is selected to provide health care services to you.

Maryland Department of Human Resources (DHR) - Maryland's primary social service provider that oversees 23 local departments of social services and DHHS Montgomery County, assisting people in economic need, preventive services, and protecting vulnerable children and adults.

Medical Assistance - A joint federal and state social health care program for families and individuals with low income and resources that pays for health care services.

Mental Health Service - Services provided to assist individuals in coping with and adjusting to issues of everyday living that impact thoughts and behavior. The main goal is to make self-improvements and learn ways to cope with your concerns

Mentor - An individual, who listens, supports and encourages another individual. A mentor serves as a role model and helps you get through difficult times.

Neglect - Leaving a child or youth unattended or other failure to give proper care and attention (i.e. food, clothing, shelter, health care and education) to a child by a parent or individual who has permanent or temporary custody or responsibility for supervision of the child and if there are indications that the child's health or welfare is harmed or at substantial risk of being harmed.

Out-of-Home Placement - A term used to describe the placement of children and youth away from their parents, due to concern that they are at risk of significant harm.

Permanency Plan Hearing - A court hearing for the purpose of determining an appropriate permanency plan. You must have a permanency plan hearing within 12 months of coming into foster care and every 6 months thereafter until your permanency plan is achieved.

Reunification - Reuniting you with your parents or legal guardian

Residential Placement – A private or public facility that provides 24-hour care and supportive services for children and youth with medical or emotional needs.

Semi-Independent Living Arrangement (SILA) - A living arrangement for youth, ages 16 – 20, under the supervision of a local department of social services for you to practice living independently. As a participant, you will receive a subsidy and may live in an apartment, room, college campus or house in the community.

Service Agreement - A plan where a service is formally defined, agreed upon and signed by you and others invested in your care that spell out what each person must do to get to a mutually desired goal.

Shelter Care Order - The decision of a judge that gives the local department of social services the right to remove you from your home and place you in foster care.

Termination of Parental Rights (TPR) - A judge makes a decision that completely severs the parents' legal ties to the child and transfers such legal rights, including the right to consent to the child's adoption, to another person or local department of social services as the court believes best qualified to receive the child. The parent can no longer decide how the child is raised and taken care of. The child can be adopted without the parents' permission.

Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) - Temporary funds to assist needy families in crisis to achieve self-sufficiency

Treatment Foster Care (TFC) - A program in which foster parents are trained to provide care for children with disabilities or serious health care needs that require special services. Youth in treatment foster care have an extra caseworker called a TFC caseworker who sees them once a week and helps them if there is a crisis.

Voluntary Placement - A situation whereby your parent or guardian temporarily places you in foster care by signing a Voluntary Placement Agreement (VPA) with the local department of social services, instead of going to court. Voluntary placement is used to provide care for you when your parents are unable to do so or because of a crisis you or your family may be having. If you are in foster care voluntarily for more than 6 months, the court will hold a hearing to decide whether or not you should remain in foster care.

Youth Matter



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