

## Who We Are:

The National Research Collaborative for Foster Alumni and Higher Education (NRC-FAHE) connects researchers, those with lived experience in foster care, and practitioners dedicated to improving college access, persistence, and success for students with foster care experience. Guided by a focused research agenda, the Collaborative promotes innovation, amplifies youth voices, and informs policy to create lasting change in higher education.



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# Welcome

from Dr. Angelique Day, PhD, MSW

## Happy New Year and Welcome to Newsletter Issue number 22!

As anticipated, we are seeing a lot of attention from the current administration on the desire to invest in career and technical education and support for apprenticeship programs.

The administration is pulling together a workgroup that will be tasked with supporting the administration to on the following priority areas related to the implementation of the new Fostering the Future for American Children and Families [Executive Order 14359](#):

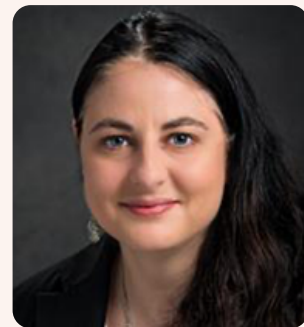
- Development of the Fostering Future Initiative, including encouraging partnerships with the private sector, academic institutions, not-profits, etc.
- Development of an online platform for transition aged youth in and from foster care.
- Strategies to reallocate ETV and Chafee funds to promote educational success, occupational advancement, financial literacy and self-sufficiency.
- Strategies for States so that youth in foster care can benefit from the use of educational scholarships created through tax-credited donations to scholarship-granting organizations.

As I receive more information on the formation of this workgroup, I will be recruiting our members to volunteer to participate. Please look out for those invitations through [our listserv](#).

Congress has been moving to codify many aspects of the EO into law. [HB 6221](#) (Nunn, R-IA) has wide bipartisan support and is expected to pass this legislative in the current legislative session.

This bill provides an important step forward to expand the education training voucher to cover costs associated with being able to participate in career and technical education and apprenticeship programs. Considering we have been underspending the ETV in many states across the U.S., this provides an opportunity to ensure these critical dollars are not at risk of being permanently fiscally reduced in the upcoming appropriation discussions.

I look forward to seeing many of you at [SSWR](#) in the coming week. We have been scheduled for a very early morning session, but I hope I can make it worth your time to [join me](#) bright and early on Friday morning, Jan 16<sup>th</sup> at 7am EST.



**Angelique Day, PhD, MSW** is a Professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Washington-Seattle.

Much of her research focuses on foster care youth, including examining the differences in college retention rates between foster care youth and other low-income first-generation college students, and examining “youth voice” and its impact on child welfare, education and health policy reform. Dr. Day leads the Policy Review team for the NRC-FAHE.

# Program Highlight

## PUSH - University of North Texas

Interview with Peer Coach:

### Ariel Citizen, Junior, Criminal Justice Major



My name is **Ariel Citizen**, and I am a junior at the University of North Texas, majoring in Criminal Justice with a minor in Sociology. I am on track to graduate in Fall 2026. One of my proudest accomplishments is serving as a Peer Coach with the PUSH (Persevere Until Success Happens) Program at UNT. In this role, I support and engage students in the program, helping them access the resources they need to succeed academically, personally, and professionally.

**NRC-FAHE: What motivated you to get involved in the PUSH program?**

**ARIEL CITIZEN:** What motivated me the most to get started in the PUSH program was probably my mom. She heard a little bit about what UNT had and the PUSH program, so she called Brenda, who is the foster care liaison at UNT. My mom was just asking Brenda all these questions. I would say I wasn't that eager to get into it at first because you hear foster care, and you almost feel like you don't want to be associated with it a little bit.

You take a step back because it's your story. University is a new experience. You want to do something different, but I went to Brenda, and she explained to me they have options for school supplies and other resources. It just started making me feel this is really a place for connections. They really have anything that you need. If they didn't have it, they would try to get you the next best thing. Seeing how welcoming they were and how eager they were to help, you can tell that these people truly cared about the students at UNT. That made me motivated to get more involved in the program.

**NRC-FAHE: How did PUSH first support you when you started?**

**ARIEL CITIZEN:** I would definitely say, when I first started, what I probably needed most of the time was school supplies and the little stuff, ways to get my textbooks. I think I first went to them at the beginning of the year, when they were giving out these little care bags that had a whole bunch of school supplies in them, like blankets.

In the spring, they have these textbook vouchers that allow you to go to the library on campus and see all the resources they have. You can get all the books and stuff that you need.

**NRC-FAHE: What types of emotional or mental health support has PUSH provided?**

**ARIEL CITIZEN:** PUSH has given me emotional support by creating a safe space where I can talk about anything that I've been through or anything that I'm going through, whether it's school, whether it's home, just being in a community. It gives me a sense of belonging, making me see and feel like I'm not the only one that has these experiences or similar experiences.

You can be around people who understand at least somewhat of what you're going through. If you ever feel overwhelmed, if you ever just want to talk, if you ever need anything, you know, even if it's hard, they'll always find a way. If I need any type of resource, they're one phone call away or one e-mail away.

**NRC-FAHE: What are some of the biggest challenges you faced as a student who was previously in foster care?**

**ARIEL CITIZEN:** I feel like some of the biggest challenges I've faced were probably having to do everything on my own. As a foster care student, you feel like you're doing everything for the first time on your own. You don't have anybody to walk you through anything, and I'm first-generation. I have people in my family who have been to college, but nobody has graduated from college yet.

When I first started, there was a gap of trying to figure out what works and what doesn't work by myself. I think the hardest part was just not having that person to lean on or that extra help.

# Program Highlight

PUSH -  
University  
of North Texas

Interview with  
PUSH Director:

**Brenda Sweeten,  
MSSW, LCSW**



**Brenda Sweeten, MSSW, LCSW,** is a Clinical Professor and Director of Field Education in the Department of Social Work at the University of North Texas (UNT). A Licensed Clinical Social Worker with 30 years of experience, her work has centered on advocacy in the Texas child welfare system. In 2012, Brenda founded Persevere UNTil Success Happens (PUSH), a campus-based support program for students with foster care experience and serves as UNT's Foster Care Liaison Officer. She is currently working on a pilot program adapting the Fostering Success Coaching Model for use by peer coaches to improve engagement, retention, and tuition waiver use among students with lived experience in foster care. Brenda serves on various boards and advisory councils, including CASA of Denton County, and is past president and current board member of Education Reach for Texans, a nonprofit dedicated to helping former foster youth succeed in higher education.

**NRC-FAHE:** What inspired the creation of PUSH?

**BRENDA SWEETEN:** Our PUSH program at UNT was founded in 2012 after several events inspired its creation, the biggest being that I had heard directly from multiple students who were previously involved with the foster care system about the barriers they faced when attending college. I ended up introducing a couple students and the three of us together went to our Dean of Students office to request the development of a program that supports students that have been in foster care. Our student affairs folks initially suggested we start a student organization, so we started with that directive and named our organization, PUSH, an acronym for Persevere UNTil Success Happens. The organization was the start of a significant grassroots effort on our campus that today has evolved into a campus-based support program and is still supporting students with experience in foster care. The students named it and branded it, both of which hold a great deal of significance to them. When we eventually developed our campus support program, I insisted that we keep the original PUSH name because it's kind of a legacy name for our former students who are now UNT Alumni. I thought that was important.

**NRC-FAHE:** What are the core goals of the program?

**BRENDA SWEETEN:** In Texas, we have higher education foster care liaison officers which is a role that has been legislatively mandated since

2015. When the bill passed to create these positions, it essentially legitimized the work we were already voluntarily doing to support students.

To begin supporting our students with lived experience, a major goal is to first identify who they are through various means, like through their self-identification on the FAFSA and our Apply Texas application, and to see who is using a Foster Care or Adoption Tuition and Fee Waiver.

After we identify them, we actively work to engage students and build trust. We then connect them to the unique benefits, services and resources for which they qualify, or simply need to be successful. We want to provide helpful support, whatever that might look like. And of course, most importantly, we want to retain our students and see them graduate.

**NRC-FAHE:** What kind of emotional or psychological support is available to students?

**BRENDA SWEETEN:** We recognize that in working with students with lived experience there needs to be a great deal of sensitivity and patience extended to them as they are navigating the higher education space at our university.

We are a big university, so we are fortunate to have a lot of resources on our campus including a Student Health and Wellness Center and the Counseling and Testing Center that provide healthcare and free counseling and testing services.

# Article Highlight:

## Secondary and Postsecondary Education Outcomes of Students with Experience in Foster Care: Systematic Review of the Literature From 2000–2023

Nathanael J. Okpych,  
Kenyon Whitman,  
Jane Lee, Liz Neria-  
Piña, Lisa A. Jackson,  
and Maddy Day

### Study Summary

We conducted a systematic review of publications between 2000 and 2023 to estimate secondary and postsecondary education rates for students with experience in foster care (SEFC). Studies had to meet six criteria to be included in our review: (1) have a representative sample of youth in U.S. foster care on or after their 13th birthday; (2) have a response rate of at least 60% (if data were collected by survey); (3) report a high school/GED completion rate for YEFC who were at least 21 years old, or a PSE enrollment rate for YEFC at least 21, or a PSE degree completion rate for YEFC at least 25 years old; (4) study participants had to have been in U.S. foster care at some point in 2000 or later; (5) published in 2000 or later; and (6) written in English.

Our initial search yielded 2,802 unique publications. Our research team reviewed the publications in two rounds. In each round, reviews were conducted independently and we met to reach consensus when discrepancies arose. In the end, 17 publications met all six inclusion criteria. These 17 publications were based on data from five source studies. One source study was national in scope, and the rest were studies based on representative samples of YEFC from one state or multiple states.

### Key Findings

Based on these 17 publications, we estimate the high school/GED completion rate to range from 69% to 85%, the postsecondary enrollment rate to range from 29% to 64%, and the postsecondary degree completion rate (both 2-year and 4-year degrees) to range from 8% to 12%. The lower college enrollment rates tended to be from studies that did only looked at enrollment up to age 21 (i.e., they missed youth who enrolled in college when they were older).

To put these high school diploma/GED and college degree completion rates perspective, we compared rates of YEFC to rates in the general population of young adults aged 25-29 from the National Center for Education Statistics. The high school/GED completion rate for YEFC (69-85%) was lower than the national rate (95%). The college degree completion rate for YEFC (8-12%) was nearly five times lower than the national rate (49%).

Few of the 17 studies assessed racial differences in the education outcomes. In the studies that did, few statistically significant differences were found. Asian or Pacific Islander YEFC tended to have the highest rates of college enrollment and degree completion.

### Implication

Our study has implications for future research, policy, and practice. In terms of research, we recommend that the existing National Youth Transition Database (NYTD) questions on education be fixed so that it will provide an estimate of YEFC who had ever enrolled in PSE by age 21 (which it currently does not) (Okpych, 2023), and for researchers to partner with state child welfare agencies to extend NYTD surveys beyond age 21 to capture later outcomes. States can also combine administrative data systems to track SEFC's educational outcomes, which is currently done in states like California. These will provide researchers, policymakers, and child welfare administrators important information on PSE outcomes. It will also allow them to drill down to examine racial disparities across regions and over time.

In terms of policy, our findings show that educational outcomes of YEFC are below national averages. This calls for redoubled efforts to close these gaps. One recommendation is for the federal government to set aside funding for campus support programs for YEFC, similar to funding carved that is out for independent living services through the 1999 Chafee law.

Since more rigorous research is needed on these and other programs, a small percentage of the funding should be set aside for evaluation to identify core elements of effective campus support programs. A second policy recommendation pertains to meeting the basic needs insecurity, which other studies have found is prevalent and disruptive for YEFC. Some examples include expanding the availability of state tuition waivers, increasing the max ETV amount to keep up with inflation (similar to Pell grants), and giving YEFC priority for work-study.

In terms of practice, pre-college readiness programs like GEAR Up, Upward Bound, and First Star have the ability to engage students in foster care, however, they are often limited by funding and resources to include SEFC at scale. Additional professional development is needed for high school teachers, counselors, and administrators to equip them to address the unique challenges faced by YEFC. In terms of PSE, colleges and vocational programs need to take steps to identify YEFC on their campus and provide professional development training to staff who are charged to work with SEFC. As noted above, campus-based support programs have shown promising findings on improving short-term PSE outcomes for SEFC, but evidence is limited and more rigorous research is needed. Programming and support services in PSE should be available to students beyond what may be considered traditional ages because YEFC often take them longer than their peers to graduate.



**Nate Okpych** is an Associate Professor at the University of Connecticut's School of Social Work. He studies the transition to adulthood for youth with foster care backgrounds, focusing on factors, policies, and programs aimed at increasing postsecondary education access and success.

Dr. Okpych earned his PhD from the Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy and Practice at the University of Chicago. He also holds masters degrees in biostatistics and epidemiology (University of Chicago), social work (Rutgers University), and clinical psychology (Duquesne University).

Dr. Okpych's research is informed by his professional experience providing mental health services to youth in residential, school, and community settings, as well as working for several years in college residence life.



Kenyon Whitman



Jane Lee

**CO-AUTHORS**



Liz Neria-Piña



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Maddy Day

**Citation:**

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# Fostering the Future for American Children and Families

[Executive Order 14359](#)

Carson Ball, MSWc

On November 13th, 2025, President Trump signed an executive order with the stated goals of expanding services for foster youth aging out of care, increasing partnerships with faith-based organizations and modernizing technology used by the nation’s state-managed child welfare systems. The order is signed at a time when youth aging out of foster care are especially vulnerable as critical supports like Medicaid and SNAP face cuts in funding.

## Framework and Implementation

The executive order’s goal of modernizing the foster care system is admirable. Many people involved in foster youth advocacy welcome the public attention an executive order brings, and many foster care organizations eagerly await productive actions toward equitable foster care reform. While the order outlines steps toward transformative change, the change itself should be grounded in evidence-based frameworks and realistic implementation.

## Modernization and Support

The benefits of the executive order are many. From streamlining data collection and reporting, to the introduction of more diverse partnerships, the executive order aims to help states recruit and retain foster caregivers and better match youth with stable homes and opportunities. The focus on support for youth transitioning out of foster care is especially welcome as this population often faces significant barriers. For this group, federal and state agencies

will partner with diverse organizations in the hopes this will expand educational pathways, career opportunities, and mentorship programs. This broadening of the support network for transition age youth will attempt to expand the expertise and resources needed to address gaps in services and empower communities to participate directly in supporting vulnerable youth.

## Subject to the Availability of Appropriations

A potential issue with the implementation of the order’s stated goals will be its dependence on unsecured government spending. Any reform must secure clear funding to move beyond the aspirational stage. In addition, child welfare in the U.S. is complexly decentralized and state-run. Even with federal guidance and technical assistance, state-by-state variation in political resolve, capacity and funding limit the effectiveness of reforms.

This extends to the reallocation of funds returned by states. The “returned funds” the order outlines are frequently unpredictable, irregular, and inadequate. If the states are unable to substantially return, or if the yearly spending has changed this redistribution effort is in danger of failing. All of this is to say, without substantial federal funding or enforceable mandates, any modernization efforts will stall in under-resourced states.

## Non-state Actors and Limited Leverage

The order relies heavily on partnerships with nongovernmental agencies in the profit and nonprofit sectors. While private-sector and nonprofit partners can be helpful as supplementary supports, shifting long-term responsibility for vulnerable youth onto actors that are less accountable to public scrutiny could hamper transparency efforts and long-term success. Moreover, if these partnerships are unable to deliver their promised support, there is little guarantee of sustained beneficial outcomes.

This lack of leverage runs the risk of under-investing in public infrastructure while asking communities and shareholders to manage their fragmented sections of social harm.

### **The Logic of a Limited Public Option**

While the metrics of educational success, occupational advancement, financial literacy and self-sufficiency are crucial, without public support the needs of a complex collective like transitioning foster youth can never be fully realized. The emphasis on self-sufficiency could cloud evidence that suggests success depends on structural equity and support not individual effort. The relinquishment of collective responsibility extends to educational scholarships as well. From a social policy perspective, relying on tax-credited donations to scholarship-granting organizations shifts responsibility to wealthy donors or corporations, instead of investing directly in public education or state-funded support systems. This may lead to a privatization of opportunity.

### **Predictive Modeling and Scorecards**

Although data-driven tools can improve efficiency, they also raise ethical concerns. Over-reliance on predictive risk modeling can reinforce biased decision-making, punish already marginalized groups, and dehumanize child welfare support by treating children primarily as numbers in data sheets. The scorecards are especially at risk of creating perverse incentives. This might look like states prioritizing metrics over actual quality of life improvements by cycling youth through unstable placements or under-reporting issues that don't meet scorecard expectations. In addition, faith-based partnerships are explicitly incorporated into the scorecard. This creates a possible evaluation bias toward quantity of partnership rather than quality of care.

Like the online platform, which hopefully makes it easier for transitioning youth to find services for which they are eligible, actual services must first be fully funded and stabilized for the scorecard or online platform to find real success.

### **Faith-Based Organizations**

While faith can be an integral part of an individual's quality of life, language like "adherence to basic biological truths," raises concerns over possible conflicts with child protection principles, non-discrimination, and best practices in child welfare. All organizations receiving state monies, regardless of affiliation, should be held to the same standards outlined in the Fourteenth Amendment and its Equal Protection Clause. Similarly, the risk of privileging any ideological actors in the foster-care space should be accounted for and mitigated against.

### **Hope Moving Forward**

The critiques offered here are cautionary tales to an overall hopeful narrative. The national attention and intended reform brought by this executive order to youth aging out of foster care may serve as a foundation to build more transformative structural change in an overburdened system. As the National Foster Youth Institute's formal statement reads, "This executive order is another step toward expanding those opportunities and helping more young people move into adulthood with confidence and support." [1]

[1] [With New Executive Order, Trump Thrusts Foster Care into National Spotlight](#)

# Policy Dive

## The Fostering the Future for American Children and Families Act

[HB 6221](#)

Lexi West, MSW

The [Fostering the Future for American Children and Families Act](#) (HB 6221) codifies key directives from [the “Fostering the Future” Executive Order](#) and expands Education and Training Voucher (ETV) eligibility to explicitly cover short-term, career-focused programs including registered apprenticeships and certificate programs. No other changes are made to core ETV eligibility, funding levels, or administrative structures, but this clarity addresses longstanding barriers for students who have experienced foster care (SEFC) pursuing non-degree workforce pathways. This [positively impacts](#) foster alumni seeking rapid-entry occupations in high-demand fields like skilled trades, health care, mining, and IT.

**The Issue:** Despite [chronic ETV underspending in many states](#), federal child welfare funding faces appropriation risks that could permanently reduce these critical dollars for postsecondary supports. Even before recent reforms, ETV programs served only a fraction of SEFC due to [narrow allowable uses](#) that prioritized traditional college degrees over apprenticeships and short-term credentials aligned with employer demand. Since HB 6221 does not increase base ETV funding, states relying on outdated guidance risk leaving dollars on the table while SEFC face barriers to viable career pathways.

While the “Fostering the Future” Executive Order provides initial momentum, federal agencies lack statutory authority to mandate ETV expansions without congressional action. Congress should not defer this to appropriations riders or state waivers, which create [uneven implementation and administrative burden](#). Congress should enact HB 6221 immediately to unlock ETV potential and protect funding amid fiscal pressures.

**Moving Forward:** The persistent ETV underspending and narrow allowable uses are causing training disruptions that will have lasting consequences for SEFC entering the workforce. There is far too much at stake for Congress to risk permanent funding cuts; outdated assumptions about postsecondary pathways should not hinder bipartisan reforms. Ensuring ETV dollars reach apprenticeships and credentials is [an investment](#) in [SEFC stability](#), essential to reducing reliance on public systems and building a skilled workforce.

**Recommendation:** Please contact [your elected officials in Congress](#) and ask them to pass HB 6221 in the current session to codify ETV expansions for apprenticeships and career technical education, ensuring SEFC can access rapid-employment pathways during ongoing workforce shortages.

# Conferences & Webinars

## **National Conference for Hidden Student Populations**

**Date:**

February 25–27, 2026

**Location:**

SpringHill Suites  
Athens, GA or virtual

**About:**

NCHP Conference: NCHP is a collaborative effort led by Fellows of five institutions in the US to uncover the individual strengths and institutional barriers for hidden college student populations. This national conference was the first research conference dedicated to this multidisciplinary area of study.

**Presented by:**

NCHP

**Information link:**

[Register for the conference here!](#)

## **NASPA Annual Conference:**

**Date:**

March 7-11, 2026

**Location:**

Kansas City, MO

**About:**

NASPA is dedicated to advancing student affairs in higher education. Our programs and services empower professionals to foster student success. We hope to see you to connect with colleagues and participate in critical professional development that will inspire and support you in the work you do on campus.

**Presented by:**

NASPA

**Information link:**

[Click the link for more info.](#)

In case you missed it!

## **What Works in Pre-college Programs for Foster Youth? Evidence from a Systematic Review**

**Date:**

November 17, 2025

**Location:**

Virtual

**About:**

This presentation synthesizes findings from a systematic review of pre-college programs for foster youth, examining program characteristics, participant outcomes, and implications for expanding these critical pathways to higher education.

**Presented by:**

Terrell Richardson, Ph.D.  
Candidate

University of Alabama  
School of Social Work

**Information link:**

[Watch the webinar at this link!](#)

Have an event you would like featured?

Let us know!

[nrc.fahe@gmail.com](mailto:nrc.fahe@gmail.com)

# Thank you!

Thank you to our leadership team:

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**Check-out the Website!**  
[NRC-FAHE.org](http://NRC-FAHE.org)