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Spotty Programs Constrain the Potential of Youth Aging Out of Foster Care, National Survey Finds

*Virginia Has One of Highest Percentages of Youth Leaving Foster Care Due to Emancipation;
The Possibilities Project Forming Task Force to Address Issue*

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RICHMOND, Va. (Nov. 14, 2017) – A new survey of U.S. states' supports for foster youth transitioning to independence finds pockets of innovation, but mainly reveals a patchwork of programs that often fail to reach vulnerable young people as they age out of foster care.

As America's foster care population grows, in no small part because of their parents' opioid addiction, the nation has a choice: face a crisis of young adults without housing, education or employment, or capture the potential of these young people and reap the rewards of ensuring they have a safe and stable adulthood.

Two Virginia-based organizations, Children's Home Society of Virginia and the Better Housing Coalition, commissioned Child Trends, one of the nation's leading nonprofit research organizations, to conduct a nationwide survey of extended foster care services to see what Virginia and other states could learn from each other as the number of youth aging out of foster care trends upward. The organizations also examined Virginia-specific services for foster care youth and compiled the results in a separate Virginia report. Thanks to generous support from the Robins and Brookfield Foundations, these reports will help point the way forward in better supporting youth transitioning out of foster care.

Released today, *Supporting Young People Transitioning from Foster Care* found bright spots of innovation and positive impact, but the report also reveals that states more commonly fall short in supporting young adults in six key areas: housing, education, employment and career development, financial capability, physical and mental health, and permanent relationships. Furthermore, states' programs lack proven records of effectiveness. As Congress considers legislation to update and strengthen policies and programs for youth transitioning out of foster care, the report can serve as a resource pointing toward effective and innovative practices serving these youth.

The Virginia-specific report found that although the Commonwealth is one of the two states in the survey that provided supports across all six areas, these services are not available to all youth across the state – nearly half of the services are only available in certain areas of the state. And Virginia has one of the highest percentage of youth exiting foster care due to emancipation, meaning they don't have a permanent, legal, familiar relationship in place, according to 2014 data.

Opioid epidemic sends more children into foster care

Five years ago, the number of children in foster care was on the decline. Today, with adults' drug addiction compounding abuse and neglect, there are 30,000 more children in foster care (in 2015, the latest year for which data is available) than there were in 2011.

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Over time, and without concerted improvement in how aged-out youth are supported, this increase in the number of children in foster care will translate into an increase in young adults who struggle to live on their own. Currently, about 23,000 youth in America age-out annually, never having found their forever families and facing significant challenges. Within two years, 25% of these young people are incarcerated, 20% are homeless, 42% drop out of high school, and 71% are pregnant or parents.

In response, Children's Home Society of Virginia and the Richmond-based Better Housing Coalition are reimagining how transitioning youth are supported with The Possibilities Project (TPP), an initiative the two organizations jointly launched in 2015. TPP is a best-practices-based service model providing youth transitioning out of foster care (ages 18-25) with stable housing and trauma-informed wraparound services. TPP is informed by research and developed to be replicable in communities across Virginia and the country.

"The Possibilities Project is having an early impact," said Nadine Marsh-Carter, president and CEO of Children's Home Society of Virginia. "All our participants have housing, nearly all have jobs, three-quarters are enrolled in post-secondary education or have completed career training, and they all have access to mentors and health care services. No single support makes the difference for aged-out foster youth. It's the combination of consistent, quality services that move these young people toward independence."

As they age out, foster youth aren't taking full advantage of extended services

Child Trends' report notes that although nearly every state reported that foster care services are available to young people up to age 21, more than three-quarters of respondents stated that most young people leave foster care before the maximum age permitted. Research shows that young people who remain in care until age 21 are more likely to be employed and attend college, and are less likely to be homeless, compared with those who leave care at age 18.

In 2016, Virginia joined 23 other states in formalized extended foster care plans using federal Title IV-E funding. Virginia's "Fostering Futures" program will provide supports for youth from the foster care system age 21. The Possibilities Project will work with the state to monitor who is participating, identify barriers to youth remaining in extended foster care, and track outcomes.

The report also stresses the importance of using evidence to inform policies and practices, and it emphasizes the role that safe and stable housing plays as a platform for supporting success in the other five areas.

"Housing is fundamental to the short- and long-term success of young adults who lacked that stability during their childhood," Better Housing Coalition President & CEO Greta J. Harris said. "The other pieces of success more easily fall into place once a person has a safe and stable place to live."

Ensuring this vulnerable population is well-positioned to overcome life's challenges would reap tremendous benefits for these young adults and their communities. One study referenced in the Child Trends report found that if youth transitioning out of foster care graduated from high school at the same rate as the general population of young people, those 7,000 additional graduates would earn more than \$1.8 billion more over their working lifetimes, and contribute \$430 million in additional taxes.

"While many states offer supports for youth aging out of foster care, this study shows that there is much room for improvement," said Elizabeth Jordan, director of policy communications and outreach at Child Trends.

Task force will use report to inform policy recommendations

The report's findings on the need to provide supports to transitioning youth, the importance of using research-informed programming, and the benefits of focusing on housing align with The Possibilities Project's model thus

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far. To further this work in Virginia, TPP is launching *The Task Force on Transitioning Youth* to make policy recommendations for improving access and services provided to youth aging out of foster care. The task force is comprised of experts from across the six key support areas, in addition to aged-out foster youth:

- Senator Barbara Favola
- Pam Kestner, Deputy Director of Housing at Department of Housing and Community Development
- Allison Gilbreath, Policy Analyst for Foster Care and Juvenile Justice, Voices for Virginia's Children
- Michael Farley, CEO of Elk Hill
- Chris Saxman, political coach and member of Virginia's House of Delegates from 2002-2010.
- Jon Barrett, VP of Property Management, Better Housing Coalition
- Nadine Marsh-Carter, CEO of Children's Home Society of Virginia
- Greta Harris, President & CEO of Better Housing Coalition
- Dietra Trent, Virginia Secretary of Education
- Sarah Mendoza, Peer Network Coordinator, Piedmont Virginia Community College
- Jenny Pokempner, Child Welfare Policy Director at the Juvenile Law Center

The task force aims to complete its work in mid-2018 and expects that its recommendations could be implemented in states facing the same challenges as Virginia.

Please visit www.thepossibilitiesproject.org to read the *Child Trends* report, learn more, stay informed, and support *The Possibilities Project* and *The Task Force on Transitioning Youth*.

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About the Children's Home Society of Virginia

Children's Home Society of Virginia is a 117-year-old full-service, private, nonprofit, non-sectarian licensed child-placing agency. CHS offers a continuum of care – finding permanent adoptive homes for children of all ages throughout the commonwealth; providing critical support services to birth families, adoptive families, and past and present adoptees; and supporting youth who have aged out of the foster care system. Please visit www.chsva.org for additional information.

About The Better Housing Coalition

The Better Housing Coalition is the Richmond region's largest nonprofit community development corporation. BHC works to ensure that every citizen in the Richmond region, regardless of their economic status, has good choices in where they live, and opportunities to reach their fullest potential. Please visit www.betterhousingcoalition.org for additional information.

About Child Trends

Child Trends is the nation's leading nonprofit research organization focused exclusively on improving the lives and prospects of children, youth, and their families. For 37 years, decision makers have relied on Child Trends' rigorous research and unbiased analyses to improve public policies and interventions that serve children and families. Please visit www.childtrends.org for additional information.

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