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Designing a Mentoring Program for Youth Who Have Extended Care & Support Agreements with the Department of Health and Human Services

Prepared by the Youth and Community Engagement
Team at the University of Southern Maine Catherine
Cutler Institute for the Maine State Legislature

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Request from the Legislature

This report is derived from: *HP 509, LD 802 Resolve, Directing the Department of Health and Human Services to Design a Mentoring Program for Youth Who Have Extended Care and Support Agreements with the Department.*

This legislation provides one-time funding to evaluate mentoring program options for youth with extended care and support agreements with the Maine Department of Health and Human Services Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS).

The Youth and Community Engagement Team (YCE) at the University of Southern Maine Catherine Cutler Institute has received these legislatively directed funds through the Youth Leadership Advisory Team (YLAT) contract addendum to complete this report.



Acknowledgements

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to everyone who contributed their time, insights, and expertise to this project. This report would not have been possible without the invaluable contributions of the following groups.

YLAT Participants: Young people with valuable lived experience provided their time, energy and thought partnership to develop research questions and participate in feedback sessions. Your perspectives on what truly sparks your interest, builds trust, and ideas for what would make a mentoring program feel safe and engaging are the most critical components of this work. You are the experts on your own lives, and your voices have directly shaped this report.

The mentoring programs: Thank you to the staff and leadership of the mentoring programs who were interviewed for this project. We are grateful to you for sharing your time, operational wisdom, and the vital lessons learned from your years of dedicated programming for youth in foster care. Your commitment to evolving and refining your practices in partnership with young people ensures that young people receive the high-quality, specialized support they deserve.

The Maine Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) Staff: We appreciate the OCFS staff members who took the time out of their demanding schedules to participate in our feedback sessions. Your frontline observations regarding what young people truly need from a mentoring program and how programs can best integrate and align with child welfare system deeply inform this report.

Thank you all for your shared commitment to improving outcomes, fostering belonging, and building stronger support systems for youth in care.



About the Catherine Cutler Institute

The Catherine Cutler Institute at the University of Southern Maine is dedicated to developing innovative, evidence-informed, and practical approaches to pressing health and social challenges. Over 175 staff engage in efforts in the following focus areas: Children, Youth and Families; Disability and Aging; Economic and Workforce Development; Environmental and Social Resilience; Justice Policy; and Population Health and Health Policy. Staff are skilled in a wide range of research and evaluation methodologies and statistical analytic skills.

Within the Institute, there are several key child welfare initiatives that are grounded in uplifting the voices of individuals with lived experience. The Youth and Community Engagement Team (YCE) is one of those initiatives within the Catherine Cutler Institute. As a part of the Institute, the YCE team works to strengthen communities in Maine so that all people experience health, well-being, and belonging. Since the late 1990s, YCE staff have been working with individuals and communities to leverage their leadership and build their skills, resources, and capacity. Statewide and nationally recognized initiatives provide opportunities for those who don't typically have a voice in decision-making to be heard, valued, and to have their input incorporated and valued.

Through the many Institute efforts that are grounded in uplifting the voices of individuals with lived experience, the YCE team has the unique opportunity to bring together the voices of those who have experience with the child welfare system including youth in care, alumni, caseworkers and future caseworkers, resource parents, and parents to inform policy, practice, and systems-change strategies.

The work of the YCE team also includes career and educational access and prioritizes leveraging opportunities for youth as they transition into young adulthood. A robust partnership between YLAT and the Maine Youth Transition Collaborative (MYTC) is made possible through the YCE team's leadership as a Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative site for Maine, and by support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The convergence of these resources allows YLAT to maximize the impact of state funds and to capitalize on a wide range of opportunities for the youth and alumni of Maine's foster care system.

Youth Leadership Advisory Team (YLAT)

The Youth Leadership Advisory Team (YLAT) works to enhance both the short-term experiences and long-term outcomes for all youth in foster care. YLAT is a partnership between YLAT members (made up of current and former youth in foster care), the staff at the Catherine Cutler Institute at the University of Southern Maine, staff of Maine's Department of Health and Human Services, and community members. At the center of YLAT are the young people in the foster care system who are dedicated to improving the system for themselves and future generations. Young people in YLAT bravely share their stories of hope, experiences, and insights as they advocate for themselves and work towards enhancing the foster care system for all youth. YLAT remains committed to creating successful, low-barrier leadership experiences for all youth in care regardless of their skill level or developmental capacity.

The foundation of YLAT is its monthly district meetings held in locations across the state. These gatherings serve as entry points where youth can enjoy food, connect with others, and develop their leadership skills organically. For many, it's a space where they can relax and connect with peers who understand their experiences, which helps to create a sense of belonging. Over time, these meetings also become steppingstones towards additional leadership opportunities. YLAT leaders have the chance to become YLAT Ambassadors, a role that provides a chance to learn and engage leadership and facilitation skills with other YLAT participants. For example, YLAT Ambassadors often co-facilitate leadership trainings and YLAT meetings in partnership with YLAT staff. YLAT members who show leadership skills and an interest can become a YLAT Ambassador and serve an informal role as near-peer mentors who share resources, are skilled in utilizing their lived experiences to increase belonging, and demonstrate that there is an opportunity to accomplish hopes and dreams beyond foster care.

Additionally, if YLAT youth are interested in deepening their skills, there are numerous trainings about strategic sharing, the policy process, and even opportunities to participate in trainings for adults who work with youth in care such as caseworkers, resource parents, and those in the legal field. Youth may also choose to participate in policy workgroup and leadership meetings with the Office of Child and Family Services to inform child welfare policy and practice. YLAT programming works to be responsive and aligned with the interests and needs of youth in care and works to improve experiences and outcomes for youth in care now and in the future.



Background

The transition to adulthood for youth in foster care

The most recent data from the Children's Bureau (2025) shows that in the United States over 331,000 children were in foster care. Over 15,000 young people exited foster care to emancipation in federal fiscal year 2025, meaning that they did not have legal permanency or a formalized familial relationship (Children's Bureau, 2025). Studies have shown that youth who age out of care (also known as emancipation) often experience fewer connections and supports and are more likely to experience challenges such as housing instability, joblessness, academic difficulties, early parenthood, incarceration, and substance use (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2025; Courtney et al., 2011).

Aging out of foster care comes at a critical period of development for emerging adults (or those aged approximately 18-25) (Arnett, 2000). This developmental period can be vastly different depending on a young person's earlier experiences, however, commonly involves starting to better understand one's identity, gaining independence, and the potential to experience multiple transitions in where and with whom one lives, builds relationships with, and explores work and educational opportunities (Arnett, 2000). Youth who have experienced foster care and layers of adversity may have fewer resources available to them during this critical time, including family support of monetary resources, housing, and navigating any emergent challenges (Rosenberg, 2026).

Access to and participation in positive youth development programming and mentoring activities have been shown to have positive impacts on young people as they transition to adulthood, as these types of activities reinforce developmental assets and have long-term positive implications for education, employment, and mental health and wellbeing outcomes (Bowers et al., 2015; DuBois et al., 2011; Munson & McMillen, 2008). Mentoring will be discussed in the following section as a specific strategy for youth who have experienced foster care and are transitioning into adulthood.

For youth who experience the foster care system specifically, layering numerous interventions can contribute to improved outcomes. Evidence shows that extended foster care after the age of 18 can have positive outcomes for young people (Rosenberg & Abbott, 2019; Rosenberg, 2026). "As of July 2025, 36 states, the District of Columbia,

Puerto Rico, and nine Tribes offer extended foster care,” with other states offering additional services and supports through state funding (Rosenberg, 2026).

EXPERIENCES OF YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE IN MAINE

In Maine, the number of children in care has decreased over the past three years and as of April 2026, just under 2,000 children were in state custody compared to over 2,500 in 2023 (Maine Office of Child and Family Services, 2026). Most recent Maine data, as reported by the Children’s Bureau (2025), shows that 45% of children in care had a permanency goal of reunification, and 37% had a plan for adoption. However, these plans show variation when looking at age. The percentage of children who have reunification as a goal differs greatly between children aged one to five (52%) compared to youth aged 11 to 16 (40%), while adoption as a goal slightly increases (41% for children aged one to five compared to 43% youth aged 11 to 16).

As noted in the research about supports after age 18, extended care can have a positive impact on outcomes for young people. Maine has made great strides in what is available for young people as they transition into adulthood, with many YLAT members supporting and participating in advocacy efforts to increase resources after 18. Beginning in 2023, young people, up until their 23rd birthday, can opt into a Voluntary Extended Support (V9) agreement to receive extended placement and other supports (this is an extension from the previous policy which offered supports until a young person turned 21) (Maine Office of Child and Family Services, 2023).

Support and connections

Opportunity Passport® is a financial education and matched savings program designed to help young people achieve success as they move from foster care to adulthood. “Launched in 2003, it was developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative® to address a need expressed by young people: a lack of opportunities to learn about finances and practice financial decision making while in foster care” (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2026).

Maine is one of 16 sites that implements this program using a public-private partnership model between the University of Southern Maine, JMG, and the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) to work with over 100 young people aged 14-26 each year. As participants in this program, young people are asked to take a survey twice per year to



share more about their experiences regarding such topics as foster care, education, employment, support, and housing. This is one of the most robust and up-to-date sources of data that informs how young people who have experienced foster care in Maine are faring. Despite the richness of this data, because program participants also complete financial education training and connect regularly with program staff to implement financial matches, this data cannot be generalized to the overall population of those who have experienced foster care in Maine.

From Opportunity Passport® survey data collected from 102 young people aged 14-27 in the fall of 2024, the majority (78%) reported that they had a family member they could turn to for support, while 68% responded that they had a nonfamily adult they could always turn to for support. When asked to specify their relationship to the nonfamilial adult, the majority of young people indicated people in the child welfare system as supports (45%), as well as other (35%), which included friends, significant others, colleagues, and extended family. Notably, almost half of those identified as supports are people in professional or specific to foster care roles.

Of the respondents who stated that they had a nonfamily adult they could turn to, over 80% reported that of those adults in their life who support them in some way, they could count on them to talk with them about their problems (85%) and to celebrate special events (83%). Slightly fewer respondents reported that they could count on the adults in their life to celebrate successes with them or to help them feel good about themselves (75%). Only 69% of young people reported that they could count on an adult in their life to support them to help them find a job and even fewer reported that they could count on an adult in their life to help them to get into college, community college, or vocational school (51%). Over half of youth respondents (65%) reported that they could count on an adult in their life to be trusted with their most private information or help them when they are sick. *See following table.*

Table 1. Types of support that young people can count on from adults in their life (Opportunity Passport® fall 2024 survey data)

Please think about adults in your life who support you in some way. If you need it, what can you count on these people to do?	%
Talk with me about my problems	85%
Celebrate special events with me, such as my birthday, holidays, etc.	83%
Help me feel good about myself	75%
Celebrate my successes with me, such as school graduation, getting a new job, etc.	75%
Help me find a job	69%
Be trusted with my most private information	65%
Help me if I am sick	65%
Provide me with a place to live	64%
Help me get into college, community college or vocational school	51%
Help me care for my children	47%
Help me pay for some or all of my education	30%

This data suggests that while a large majority feel someone would celebrate with them or help them feel good about themselves, far fewer have connections with adults who have access to tangible resources or material support or provide support and assurance with illness or caring for children.

Data from sites across the country (including Maine) and more than 22,000 youth show that participants who purchase a vehicle asset through the Opportunity Passport® matched savings program have 1.6 times higher odds of reporting employment and those

who purchase an education asset have 2.8 times higher odds of reporting being in school (Annie E. Casey, n.d.). This data demonstrates that youth who are connected to programming such as Opportunity Passport®, which provides both educational and material support, show positive outcomes in the specific areas that often pose the largest challenges for youth in foster care.

Education outcomes for Maine youth in foster care

In reviewing data on experiences of youth in foster care, education is one area where youth experience disparities. Data from the Maine Department of Education (2025) statewide high school graduation rates report shows that graduation rates for youth in foster care are higher when given the opportunity to graduate in 5 or 6 years compared to 4 years (see table below for most recent data).

Table 2. Statewide Graduation Rates

	4-Year Cohort for 2023	5-Year Cohort for 2022	6-Year Cohort for 2021
Foster care	56.12%	62.65%	69.33%
All students	87.30%	88.45%	89.06%

Opportunity Passport® survey data from fall 2024 indicates that of the young people age 18 and older, 87% had a high school diploma or equivalency (this increases to 89% of survey participants age 21 and older), mirroring the graduation rates for students overall in Maine. This data suggests that additional supports and resources may act as protective factors for young people to complete their high school degree.

Importance of connections

As stated previously, the developmental periods of adolescence and emerging adulthood are defined by rapid growth for all youth. A Positive Youth Development framework states that “all young people have strengths and that the contexts around these young people can provide resources to them” also known as assets (Bowers et al., 2015, p. 97). Research shows that when young people have the key assets or external supports and



internal strengths, they are more likely to thrive, less likely to engage in high-risk behaviors, and more likely to be resilient when facing challenges (Search Institute, 2024b).

Numerous developmental assets focus on connectedness, including **support**, meaning a young person is surrounded by people who love, care for, appreciate, and accept them; **empowerment**, meaning they feel valued and valuable, safe and respected; and have **constructive use of time**, meaning that a young person has opportunities outside of school where they can learn and develop new skills with others, including other youth and adults (Search Institute, 2024a).

Mentoring is one form of support or connectedness that may contribute to developmental assets and have potential benefits for youth. This section will further discuss the benefits and challenges of mentoring more specifically.

DEFINING MENTORING

Mentoring has been defined by the National Mentoring Resource Center (2026) as taking “place between young persons (i.e., mentees) and older or more experienced persons (i.e., mentors) who are acting in a non-professional helping capacity to provide support that benefits one or more areas of the mentee’s development.”

Informal or natural mentors are described as “adults in a young person’s social network who become actively invested in that young person’s growth and development” (Aschenbrener, Spencer & Stelter, n.d., p. 3). These relationships may “develop naturally, without any formal oversight or support” and involve people such as “extended family members, family members, coaches, after-school program leaders, neighbors, or adults in faith communities” (Aschenbrener et al., p. 3). Comparatively, **formal mentors** are defined as “adults connected with young people through mentoring programs” where an organization supervises the match between a young person and adult, may oversee or formalize the purpose, how long the relationship lasts, and where mentoring happens (Aschenbrener et al., p. 3).

Studies have shown that mentoring relationships can benefit youth on multiple levels. This includes social-emotional development, for example facilitating positive communication styles with adults, support coping with challenges, and further developing relationship skills to interact with others more effectively (DuBois et al., 2011). Mentoring relationships may also promote learning and building new skills and some studies have shown improvement in academic skills and outcomes for youth, including youth in foster



care (DuBois et al., 2011; Mallet, 2012). Notable, are findings that longer-term relationships can lead to positive outcomes, however relationships that end after only several months can contribute to decreased self-esteem, especially if this is outside of the expectation of the program time frame (DuBois et al., 2011).

MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS FOR YOUTH WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED FOSTER CARE

Numerous studies have examined the potential benefits of mentoring for youth in foster care. One such study showed that “youth in a long-term natural mentoring relationship reported less stress and were less likely to have been arrested at age 19” (Munson & McMillen, 2009, p. 104). In another study youth were provided with job readiness, mentoring, and enhanced outreach and found that those who received “enhanced services had significantly fewer arrests, lower delinquency, and increased hours of employment compared to those who did not receive supports” (Leathers et al, 2023, p. 1).

Benefits noted for youth in care by Taussig and Weiler (2017) include: that the relationship is not specific to child welfare system and therefore does not need to stop even if child changes locations; a mentoring relationship can provide activities that are not able to be offered by child welfare agency; can provide individualized support and connection; and can focus on the child in positive ways. These opportunities and experiences are often missed for young people in foster care who have experienced adversity, including moves and severed or stressed connections.

Natural forming mentorship relationships tend to form more gradually with less pressure and the opportunity to develop trust over time (Greeson, 2013). Additionally, “because these relationships form naturally over time, there is less likelihood that they will terminate abruptly and a greater likelihood that they will last for many years, helping bridge important transitions for foster youth” (Taussig and Weiler, 2017).

Taussig and Weiler (2017) also highlight **caution** when considering mentoring relationships with youth in care. These include: the experience of mentor abandonment may be felt more strongly with youth who have experienced disruptions in their lives; young people may have significant psychosocial needs and therefore this may complicate emotional connections between mentor and mentee; and those who have experienced loss may sever the relationship or show disinterest because of past experiences, wanting to end the relationship. As Spencer et al (2010) state, “Protecting foster youths from further rejection or disappointment must take precedence; this priority dictates, at

minimum, diligent adherence to the best practices gleaned from the research more generally” (p. 232). These unique needs and experiences are critical to take into consideration when designing any mentoring program. Spencer et al (2010) urge caution that mentoring cannot serve as a substitute for concrete supports such as housing, employment, education, and health care, and without these supports there may be less success for youth in mentoring programs as they transition into adulthood.

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Mentoring should not be seen by social services as a substitute for parental support, especially as young people emancipate from care, nor should mentors be expected to independently navigate key instrumental supports such as housing, education, or health care for their mentees.

—HEATHER TAUSSIG & LINDSEY WEILER

Mentoring for Youth in Foster Care (2017), p. 17



Methods

This project involved gathering data and information from numerous sources. Methods were reviewed and approved by the University of Southern Maine's Institutional Review Board under the determination of human subjects research process.

Mentoring program models: Maine review and informational interviews

A review of existing mentoring programs in Maine and information about mentoring models from around the country that are focused on working with young people who have experienced foster care was conducted. In addition, informational interviews with four mentoring programs were completed. The combination of this information brings together more detail about program approach, training components, staffing and capacity needs, implementation costs, and reported outcomes from existing programs.

PROGRAMS INTERVIEWED

Silver Lining Mentoring Program is a Massachusetts-based nonprofit that empowers youth in foster care (ages 7 to 22) through committed, long-term, 1-to-1 mentoring and life-skills training. Founded in 2001, it is one of the only organizations in the nation exclusively dedicated to this vulnerable population, providing trauma-informed support to help them build resilience and independence. Silver Lining Programs include:

- ▶ **Community-Based Mentoring:** Pairs youth (ages 7+) with a volunteer mentor for shared activities, friendship, and long-term, stable support.
- ▶ **e-Mentoring:** A digital platform where mentors and mentees can connect via video calls, voice chats, and text while working on personal goals.
- ▶ **Learn & Earn:** A 12-week life skills, employment, and financial literacy program that includes matched savings.
- ▶ **Young Adult Services:** Provides individualized clinical support, housing assistance, and resource brokering for youth aging out of foster care

[Silver Lining Mentoring Institute](#)¹ is the capacity-building arm of Silver Lining Mentoring (SLM), focused on empowering youth in foster care through evidence-based mentoring. Launched in 2019, the Institute expands access to high-quality mentoring nationwide by partnering with service providers, training organizations, and influencing policy. The Institute provides:

- ▶ **Training & Consulting:** The Institute teaches best practices to youth-serving organizations, utilizing the Elements of Effective Practice to enhance mentoring programs.
- ▶ **Capacity Building:** Through technical assistance partnerships—including work with the National Mentoring Resource Center (NMRC)—they help organizations improve services for youth in foster care.

[Family and Youth Initiative \(FYI\)](#) is an organization that has been around since 2010 is a caring supportive community of adults and teens and the only DC area organization focused exclusively on helping teens in foster care make lifelong connections with caring adults.

[Friends of Children](#) offers innovative programs that serve children in, and aging out of, foster care in Massachusetts. Friends of Children supports basic needs while also looking holistically at the needs of every young person. From court advocacy for children, to mentoring young adults, they provide programs including CASA, relational mentoring, and focused goal-oriented mentoring around employment, housing or financial literacy.

A supplemental component of the [Friends of Children](#) community mentoring framework, Open Table supports mentees who want to focus on targeted goals related to housing, employment, and financial literacy. This participant-driven model allows youth to select a specialized panel of mentors aligned with their specific milestones. The primary mentor maintains a foundational, supportive role, while Open Table mentors are introduced to provide specialized technical expertise. Due to the streamlined time commitment required by this structure, mentors are permitted to participate across multiple tables.

[Aging UP](#) uniquely serves Sacramento Region youth who have current or former foster care experience. The primary focus is to match youth with screened and trained volunteer

¹ One of the authors of this report is a consultant for Silver Lining Mentoring Institute and has provided technical assistance around training and expansion for mentoring programs.



mentors. This provides a one-to-one relationship with a committed and supportive adult who offers care and consistency during turbulent adolescent years.

Input from young people who have experienced foster care

YLAT AMBASSADOR WORKGROUP

Four young people with lived experience in foster care participated in a workgroup that supported gathering information for this report, creating feedback session questions, and determining final recommendations. These lived expert workgroup members also act as YLAT Ambassadors – a distinct role through YLAT that engages alumni of care who are leaders in the YLAT community. Ambassadors are between the ages of 18 and 24 and receive a monthly stipend for their contributions to ongoing YLAT activities.

FEEDBACK SESSIONS

Young people who are currently involved in the Youth Leadership Advisory Team (YLAT) were asked to participate in a 60-minute feedback session with YLAT staff and Ambassadors over Zoom in February of 2026. Young people received a \$40 stipend for their participation. One session was open to all YLAT participants, and one session was held specifically for Ambassadors; nine youth and four Ambassadors shared their feedback.

YLAT SURVEY

Young people who attended the annual YLAT Teen Conference in June of 2026 were invited to respond to a four-question survey. Participants received sticky dots to place on posters to respond to multiple choice questions and sticky notes to respond to an open-ended question. Those who participated in the survey at the Teen Conference received a raffle ticket for a conference prize. Approximately 20 youth participated in the survey (or about a third of youth who attended the conference).



Input from current Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) and YLAT staff

OCFS staff (Youth Transition Specialists and Extended Care Workers) who work with older youth who have Extended Care and Support Agreements were invited to participate in a feedback session to learn more about their thoughts, ideas, and experiences with mentoring and what types of programming youth who have an Extended Care and Support Agreement might benefit from. This in-person session was facilitated by two YLAT staff members with seven OCFS staff members, and three YLAT staff members present.

A survey for staff who were unable to attend the feedback session was also emailed; however, no responses were collected.

Findings

YLAT Youth

Data was gathered through two voluntary feedback sessions and an interactive activity at the Teen Conference, where young people provided input on key elements to include in a youth-in-care mentoring program. The primary themes identified from their feedback are detailed below.

YLAT FEEDBACK SESSIONS

When responding to questions about what they might need from a mentoring program and how it should be designed, young people shared themes related to who the person is, how they are connected, what the relationship might look like, and what mentors should know about the experiences of youth in foster care.

A connection outside of foster care

Young people strongly emphasized that a mentor should feel entirely separate from the formal foster care system and the caseworkers they interact with daily. As youth put it, mentors might serve as an **escape from the “craziness” of navigating foster care**. Additionally, youth shared that mentors should be **easy to talk to and offer a safe space** to vent without judgment.

Valuable mentoring might look like a formal match, but it might also mimic informal relationships with trusted teachers, friends, or older peers.

Another important factor for young people was that the mentoring relationship is **youth-led or driven**. Young people emphasized the need for **choice** in the relationship and that they should get to choose what they share about their personal lives. Youth felt that mentors should not have access to the same case details that caseworkers do.

Focused and individualized, but not alone

When considering how a mentoring program might be structured, young people gravitated toward a 1:1 relationship so that they might be able to form deep, personal connections. While individual mentoring was preferred, young people also offered that it

should be paired with group activities. Group settings allow mentees and mentors to build a broader sense of community and facilitate natural peer-to-peer mentoring. This feedback suggests a hybrid model rather than an "either/or" approach.

Youth also shared that from their perspective, to get young people ages 18–23 excited and willing to participate, the program would need to demonstrate clear, immediate personal value. Youth stated that it would be important to know exactly what they will personally get out of the mentoring experience, specifically, dedicated time with someone focused on them.

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Mentors need to be non-judgmental and able to be with young people in good and hard spaces. The mentor can help give a young person a break from hard stuff and they should be more connected to the young person than the Foster Care system.

— YLAT LEADER

Practical support

Young people highlighted a distinct gap between the urgent issues caseworkers handle and the day-to-day life skills they still need assistance with during their transition to adulthood. To them, this meant **addressing lower-urgency needs**. For example, a mentor might step in to help with important tasks that might not meet a caseworker's urgency threshold. Setting up a bank account is an important life skill but not necessarily a skill that a caseworker needs to facilitate or something that would rise to urgent and immediate

need. Additionally, young people stated that support specific **to life skills** would be helpful, which included support to do things like find a new doctor, register for dance or art classes, learn how to cook, and how to navigate financial responsibilities like budgeting and filing taxes.

Youth also noted that if a mentoring program were to exist, **peers in the program might serve as resources** because they may also be experiencing similar challenges or have already learned ways to successfully navigate similar circumstances and therefore able to share lived expertise.

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Mentors can help support young people with the transition from care and unexpected items that arise and to have a mentor to do these items with — budgeting, cooking etc.

— YLAT LEADER

Mentor training and program capacity

To ensure the program is both safe and effective, participants emphasized the need for clear program standards and structural readiness. **Confidentiality was named as important to youth.** Young people want to feel that they can have a person to talk with and vent to without worrying that information will be fed back to their entire legal/foster care team. In addition, youth shared that **role clarity and safety** were important to them. This would include establishing **clear boundaries** regarding what mentors can and cannot do, **thorough background checks and safety precautions** as mandatory components to ensure youth are not put at risk by another adult.

Youth also shared that a common experience is that youth in care already experience extensive delays for service, and it is frustrating to wait. It was recommended that any mentoring program would recruit enough mentors to **prevent long waitlists**.

YLAT TEEN CONFERENCE

Approximately 20 youth participated in a dot survey during the YLAT Teen Conference in Bangor in June 2026 (out of 63 youth and alumni attendees). Feedback aligned strongly with what was shared in the Zoom sessions with youth, including interest in 1:1 mentorship, doing activities together, and learning new skills from a mentor. Young people also expressed an interest in friendship and having someone to talk with.

About half of the youth surveyed responded that they would be interested in having a mentor (11), while seven responded that they were not sure. Only one young person responded that they would not be interested in having a mentor. Most youth would prefer to have an individual mentor (12), compared to a group mentoring experience (5). Three youth responded either, and two responded that they were not sure. The top experiences that youth would like **most** out of a mentoring relationship (they were asked to choose only one option) are **time to do fun activities together** (10) and **someone to learn new skills from** (9). Two youth responded that they would like to have someone they can trust who isn't part of foster care, and one person responded that they would like a mentor to participate in their Family Team Meetings. When asked what they would like most out of a mentoring relationship, no youth responded that they would like a mentor to participate in their school events.

These concepts were reinforced in written comments provided by young people that focused on the positive relationship experience of mentoring. Friendship and someone to talk about feelings and life experiences with emerged as themes from the eight written responses received. As one person shared, "I believe having mentoring as an option would be beneficial so youth can talk to others with life experience," while another person shared "**Having someone to talk to about my feeling and just to have someone.**" Young people also commented on the idea of opportunity and to see "what's the next step" and that "to see it gets better." One respondent also shared that they would like "Someone to establish a relationship with have fun and have a genuine friend as an adult."

OCFS and YLAT Staff

Staff perspective was captured through a focus group featuring OCFS Youth Transition Staff (serving ages 14–23) and YLAT youth engagement staff (serving ages 14–26). This session aimed to delineate the foundational requirements for a successful youth mentoring model. Their primary recommendations included:

Current Landscape of Mentoring and Resource Gaps

Participants identified several existing programs, but noted significant limitations regarding age eligibility, infrastructure, and continuity.

- ▶ **Targeted vs. General Programs:** Existing formal networks like *Big Brothers/Big Sisters* and *Boys & Girls Clubs* are recognized but viewed as geared toward younger youth rather than the 18–23 transition age group. Programs like the one at *Long Creek* offer valuable support, but a major gap exists because mentoring often ends abruptly upon a youth's release, unless connected to specific transition mentors (e.g. *Credible Messenger* program).
- ▶ **Mentorship Needs:** There is an active interest in highly specific mentorship, such as financial literacy, buying a car, completing taxes, often in a moment of need.

Core Elements of Value and Low-Barrier Access

For a mentoring program to be successful and engaging for older youth, it must be flexible, practical, and highly relational.

- ▶ **Flexibility & Autonomy:** The program must be "low-barrier" and voluntary.
- ▶ **Tangible Incentives & Funding:** Youth respond to incentives to engage, and mentors need dedicated funding to support shared experiences (e.g., going to the gym, YMCA, or playing disc golf) and exploring the youth's personal interests.
- ▶ **Strategic Matching:** Pairings should be intentionally built around shared goals, interests, and lived experience.

The Power of Peer and Near-Peer Support

A distinct preference emerged for incorporating older youth who have shared lived experiences within the child welfare/foster care system into programming efforts.

- ▶ **Relatability and Proof of Concept:** Having an older youth who has "been through it" speaks to the value of having a mentor helps overcome trust barriers.
- ▶ **Hybrid Structure (1:1 vs. Group):** A hybrid model is preferred. 1:1 settings are crucial for building deep personal connections, confidentiality, and safety. Meanwhile, group settings are ideal for peer-to-peer connection and delivering structured life-skills training (e.g., financial literacy, job readiness).

Opportunities and Risks of 1:1 Mentoring

While one-on-one relationships offer deep community integration, they also come with increased vulnerability.

- ▶ **Pros (Social Capital & Community Navigation):** Mentors can give individualized support, allow youth to be their true selves, and connect with their local community (e.g., connecting them to trusted local resources like mechanics or plumbers).
- ▶ **Cons (Boundaries & Alignment):** Clear risks include blurring boundaries and the need for very clear roles.

Structural Barriers to Participation

Participants highlighted several practical and emotional hurdles that prevent youth from consistently engaging:

- ▶ **Logistical Hurdles:** Time constraints due to school and work schedules, combined with major transportation gaps and geographic isolation in rural locations.
- ▶ **Interpersonal:** The emotional heavy lifting of developing a new mutual relationship is significant, especially when young people have experienced high levels of loss and may have difficulty trusting adults.

Program Anchoring and Systemic Oversight

Participants felt that the program should not be an entirely informal network but rather anchored in trusted community organizations with systemic oversight.

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- ▶ **Potential Community Anchors:** Organizations like *JMG*, *YMCA*, *YLAT*, *Tree Street (Lewiston)*, *Midcoast Youth Center*, *Public Libraries*, and residential partners (*Beckett*, *NFI*) were flagged as ideal environments to host or anchor the program.
 - ▶ **The Need for Program Staff:** The program will require dedicated staff and infrastructure. Program staff are needed to support mentors, manage regular check-ins with OCFS workers, and bridge communication between the Department and the mentoring program.

Established mentoring programs

To identify best practices and sustainable strategies for supporting youth in care, this study examined four established mentoring organizations: [Silver Lining Mentoring](#), the [Family and Youth Initiative \(FYI\)](#), [Friends of Children](#), and [Aging UP](#). Each of these programs was intentionally selected because they possess at least five years of operational experience and specialize exclusively in serving youth with current or former foster care experience. Interviews were conducted with leadership and staff from each organization to gather longitudinal insights into program design, operational elements, and effective engagement strategies.

PROGRAM ELEMENTS AND COST ANALYSIS

Mentoring presents an opportunity to build mutual relationships that can support young people in care as they navigate life transitions and define their future goals. However, it is important to recognize that the successful programs that show sustainability are either built on existing mentoring programs that create an affinity program specifically for youth in foster care or where mentoring is added as an additional strategy to a program that is already working directly with youth in foster care.

Costs are generally about double what a typical mentoring program requires. It is more expensive because mentors and mentees need a much higher level of ongoing case management and emotional support. Collaborating with system partners takes more time than one guardian and significant staff time must be dedicated to coordinating and collaborating with the child welfare system, caseworkers, and community partner. Finally, a key recommendation shared by established programs is that the program must have the capacity to raise funds and source physical resources to respond directly to the immediate, tangible needs of the youth.

Program structure has a significant impact on budget

- **Integrated Model (More Cost-Effective):** Building an "affinity program" within an existing mentoring organization or adding mentoring to an agency already working with foster youth. This leverages existing leadership and financial infrastructure.

- **Stand-Alone Model (More Expensive):** Operating as an independent program. This requires building a completely fresh infrastructure for leadership, financial management, and oversight, leading to higher overhead.

The benefits of being housed at a state or private agency is the direct link to referral sources and access to case managers, therapists, and other support services. Mentoring programs have similar needs to any other program such as training space, office space; office equipment for clerical functions; and administrative support for daily operations.

Viable funding options include expansion of an existing mentoring program and/or establishing the mentoring program as part of a community agency with a commitment to youth, particularly youth in transition from foster care. Such an agency would need to have other support services for youth in transition such as assistance with housing, employment, and education. In a community with several large social service agencies that have a range of programs for youth including foster care, residential care, emergency shelter, mediation and case management, any one of them could be a potential fit with a mentoring program.

CORE STAFFING PHILOSOPHY & CAPABILITIES

A mentoring program designed for youth in foster care requires personnel who possess deep expertise in the child welfare system. Staff members must maintain a comprehensive understanding of both the unique vulnerabilities and the inherent strengths of youth in care.

While program staff often serve as the most accessible and trusted adults for a young person, their role extends beyond direct mentorship. When a youth faces a complex dilemma, staff must have the systemic expertise and clinical navigation skills to actively engage the rest of the youth's professional team (caseworkers, therapists, and resource parents) to collaboratively resolve the issue.

KEY STAFFING ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES

Program staff named four key roles for a mentoring program to be successful.

Program Management: Oversees strategic development, daily operational management, and strict safety compliance. This role focuses heavily on building a sustainable funding infrastructure, hiring and supporting staff, and maintaining consistent, trauma-informed matching practices.

Mentor Training: A critical upfront and ongoing investment. Training is designed to help mentors build skilled, caring relationships, gain confidence, and thoroughly understand the nuances of the foster care system—ultimately sustaining volunteer enthusiasm and safety.

Mentor Recruitment & Support: Driven by staff with strong interpersonal and public speaking skills. Recruitment focuses on evaluating volunteer attitudes toward the child welfare system and tapping into both existing networks (teachers, coaches, relatives) and broader community organizations. Support is maintained via regular mentor community meet-ups.

Youth Recruitment & Support: Focuses on building strategic partnerships with referral sources (social workers, caseworkers, resource parents). Staff utilize structured recruitment packets and coordinate periodic meetings with child welfare agency personnel to streamline appropriate youth referrals.

PROGRAM COST BREAKDOWN

The following tables outline the estimated operational and personnel costs required to sustain the program's infrastructure based on conversations with mentoring program staff and internet research on salary ranges for related programming. It is important to note that the costs listed below are estimates and that most mentoring programs are housed within organizations that deliver many types of programs, meaning that costs are often interwoven into organizational or more general program expenses and budget lines. Therefore, it was challenging for staff interviewed to provide specific and direct cost estimates for a mentoring only program.

Table 3. Personnel & administration

Expense Item	Description / Details	Estimated Cost / Range
Program Director	Full-time strategic leadership and fund development	\$70,000 – \$90,000
Program Manager	Full-time operational oversight and match compliance	\$50,000 – \$66,000

Expense Item	Description / Details	Estimated Cost / Range
Website & Administrative Support	Part-time infrastructure management (20 hours/week)	\$30,000
Website & Technology Infrastructure	Setup, accessibility, and platform development	\$8,200

Table 4. Operations & outreach

Expense Item	Description / Details	Estimated Cost / Range
Marketing Materials & Office Supplies	Printed outreach collateral and recruitment videos	\$5,700
Staff Cell Phones	Required for continuous field work and case management	\$4,800
Food & Program Activities	Covers 3 volunteer trainings (\$600) and 3 large program events (\$2,500)	\$3,100
Youth Stipends	Funds to compensate youth co-designing/facilitating trainings	\$3,000
Mileage & Travel Reimbursement	Critical for staff to transport youth and eliminate transit barriers	Varies (Statewide vs. Local)
Indirect Costs	Includes facility space, health insurance, and liability insurance	\$4,000 – \$6,500



Maine youth mentor programming

A review of Maine organizations with youth mentoring reveals that mentoring is frequently offered as part of a suite of services rather than as a primary organizational focus. Where mentoring does serve as a central model, programs often employ structured activities, such as outdoor education, as a vehicle for relationship-building. Programming predominantly targets middle and high school-aged youth, indicating a relative gap in services available to younger children between the ages of 4 and 10 and ages 18 and up. Most organizations appear to structure their programming around the needs of specific local communities rather than providing statewide services. In the programmatic review, prevention emerged as a recurring priority. Very few of the programs, aside from Big Brothers Big Sisters, provide clearly articulated pathways or expectations for prospective mentors seeking to become involved. However, only one program appears to offer a more comprehensive model, providing overlapping mentoring and mentee opportunities for individuals aged 4 to 24 alongside practical life-skills support, including driving instruction and employment and education assistance. Notably, one organization's website stated they serve foster care youth and it appears that their mechanisms of support have been significant in fundraising for the needs of youth in care but less around direct mentoring.

See [appendix](#) for list of programs reviewed.

Mentoring model recommendations

Mentoring is a structured and trusting relationship bringing successes and challenges under any circumstances. This section of the report outlines recommendations based on research and hearing directly from youth and professionals in Maine. Creating a mentoring program for young people in foster care, especially emerging adults who are transitioning out of foster care means adapting a model of mentoring that recognizes the unique opportunities and challenges that young people with this experience face.

Program Setup & Resources

Based on the information gathered in this report, the most feasible approach is a **community-based mentoring model** that leverages an existing relationship with the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) and youth currently in care. To maximize impact, this program should be housed within a youth engagement entity or an organization that already provides direct support like housing, employment, or the *Opportunity Passport®* program. Expanding an established program ensures that staff already possess a deep understanding of the unique needs of youth in care, requiring only specialized training to support the nuances of a mentoring relationship.

While this legislative recommendation specifically targets young adults on the Extended Care Agreement (ages 18–23), research and practitioner expertise strongly advocate for establishing mentor relationships in early adolescence—well before the tumultuous transition of turning 18. Consequently, this model encourages a broader matching criterion that spans **ages 14–23**.

Other key program setup and resource considerations include:

- ▶ **Bring in Clinical Experts:** Have therapists, social workers, and young people help design the match activities and training. This ensures the program truly supports youth dealing with deep trauma.
- ▶ **Avoid Waitlists:** Recruitment is a priority. Young people in care already deal with enough instability, and it's important to quickly respond to their willingness to engage in a mentoring program.
- ▶ **Encourage Caseworker Engagement:** The program should collaborate with the foster care system and caseworkers should be actively encouraged to



promote the program and ensure the youth are a part of the mentoring initiative.

- ▶ **Foster Existing Connections:** If a young person already has a mentor (like through Big Brothers Big Sisters) and then enters foster care, make sure the program allows that relationship to transition along with them.
- ▶ **Focus on Strengths and The Future:** The informational and screening process for young people and mentors should focus on their individual strengths and goals for the future. Focusing on strengths and opportunities will provide the foundation needed for a mutual relationship.
- ▶ **Program Evaluation:** A program monitoring and evaluation process that looks at the degree to which the program is demonstrating outcomes and providing data upon which to base decisions is very important for program improvement and sustainability. Two helpful pre-existing tools are Youth Strength of Relationship (YSoR) and Mentor Strength of Relationship (MSoR) which provide a youth or mentor's perceptions of, and experiences in, the mentoring relationship and Developmental Assets Profile by the Search Institute. However, there are many designs that can be found at the National Mentoring Resource Center that can meet the program's needs. Evaluation should be set up before the program launches to articulate program goals and to ensure the ability to continuously understand and adjust efforts as needed.

Finding & Vetting Mentors

- ▶ **Recruit Judgment-Free Adults:** Recruit people who can stick around through both the good times and the messy times. Mentors should be supportive and nonjudgemental adults who plan to be in the community for a number of years.
- ▶ **Thorough Background Checks:** Safety is non-negotiable. Keep vetting protocols rigorous for all 1:1 mentors. Background checks may look different for group mentoring or event volunteers where they are not alone with the young person.
- ▶ **Time Commitment:** Ensure that there are clear processes for onboarding and offboarding mentors/mentees. Consider a specific time commitment and

outline of what the role will look like so that both youth and adults have clarity in expectations.

Matching & Mentoring Styles

- ▶ **Utilize 1:1 Mentoring and Groups:** Combine 1:1 mentoring in the community (for deep bonding) with group events so the youth and mentors can expand their network of support.
- ▶ **Peer Mentors:** Connect with older youth who have already been through the Extended Care Agreement to offer real, lived-experience advice and credibility.
 - Feedback from young people strongly emphasized the value of **peer mentoring**. A program already embedded in the foster care community can naturally support alumni to serve as peer mentors, creating dedicated spaces where younger youth can learn from older peers who have successfully navigated similar transitions. Young people spoke to the desire of having a hybrid or 1:1 mentor and groups as a layered approach to mentoring. To ensure success, these alumni mentors must receive comprehensive training on their roles, maintain access to regular guidance from program staff, and be financially compensated for their time. Furthermore, an established organization will already have the administrative infrastructure, background check mechanisms, and liability insurance pathways required to meet the stringent standards of working with this population.
- ▶ **Identify Goals:** If a young person wants to learn how to manage money, match them with someone who is great with budgeting. Let their practical goals drive the match while fostering the relationship. Utilize an application process that identifies a new skill that both the mentor and mentee want to develop.
- ▶ **Events to Promote Matches:** Host regular events for volunteers and youth to allow youth the chance to identify volunteers who they might want to be matched with. Give youth more agency and choice in the relationship.
- ▶ **Focus on Real Connections:** Require regular connections for mentors and youth so that they can bond naturally over everyday things like playing basketball or hanging out at a park.

Boundaries & Privacy

- ▶ **Set Clear Ground Rules:** Give mentors thorough training so they know exactly where their role starts and stops.
- ▶ **Keep it Confidential and Let the Youth Decide What to Share:** Mentees need to a safe space to vent. They shouldn't be reporting everyday conversations back to the case management team unless it's a safety emergency. The young person gets to choose what they share; mentors should not automatically get a copy of the youth's official caseworker files or history. If something major comes up, it should be shared with the program manager, caseworker, or another trusted adult. These processes should be clear to mentors and mentees so that trust is not damaged.

Life Skills & Getting Youth on Board

- ▶ **Focus on Everyday Opportunities:** Caseworkers are usually busy handling crises. Mentors should focus on the day-to-day adult milestones, like:
 - **The Basics:** Budgeting, cooking, and tackling taxes.
 - **Personal Growth:** Finding local art or dance classes or picking a new doctor.
 - **Big Shifts:** Moving out of care and rolling with unexpected curveballs.
- ▶ **Pitch it Right to the Youth:** When promoting the program, make sure the marketing highlights what's in it for *them*. Frame it as a dedicated person who is there strictly for their interests, fun, and mutual learning.

Training & Support

To successfully operationalize this model, the organization must intentionally build its capacity to recruit, train, and support volunteer mentors. Drawing from historical impact studies—such as *Child Trends*, *Youth Who Age Out of Foster Care* (Wertheimer, 2002) and the *Big Brothers Big Sisters Impact Study* (1995)—as well as local program expertise, the pre-match training curriculum must move beyond basic relationship-building to address the specific realities of the child welfare system. A comprehensive initial training should be provided to mentors so that they can confidently build caring relationships, understand their role, and learn about the unique experiences that youth in foster care face.

Systemic Awareness & Collaboration

Training must clarify how the mentor fits into the youth's broader collaborative care team (including caseworkers, resource parents, biological parents, and therapists). A strong emphasis should be placed on navigating these system boundaries, helping mentors manage the natural urge to "rescue" the youth, and grounding them in the reality that they may be the only unpaid adult in the young person's life.

Trauma-Informed

Because youth in care have experienced profound layers of separation and loss, mentors need intensive preparation to understand the behavioral impacts of trauma. Specialized training ensures volunteers are equipped for the unique challenges of building trust and maintaining consistency with youth who may initially struggle to form secure attachments.

Key training elements should include:

- ▶ An explanation of the unique needs of youth in care, highlighting how mentoring can become a vital part of a youth's support network.
- ▶ A review of the role of a mentor, including what the role of a mentor is not
- ▶ A discussion of the mentor role in relation to the caseworker, resource parents, biological parents, and therapists, including the fact that a mentor may be the only unpaid adult in the young person's life.
- ▶ Provide information on the many systems supporting young people in care and how mentors are part of a larger collaborative care team. Proper training helps manage the urge to "rescue" the youth and keeps the focus on being a supportive team resource.
- ▶ A brief description of the child welfare system and how the program works within the social service network.
- ▶ Information about the separation and loss youth in care have experienced in their lives and the resulting difficulty youth in care may have in forming trusting relationships with adults.

Additional training and support components might include **hosting Peer-to-Peer Networks**. These would be organized dedicated training and social events for mentors to



build relationships, share encouragement, and act as thought partners and support for one another.

Building Partnerships and Funding for Sustainability

This program should build partnerships with established mentor programs such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, Trekkers and other programs in Maine to help re-ignite momentum around the mentoring movement. Expanding current mentoring models to provide specialized outreach to youth in care or embedding a program within a community organization may prove supportive.

There are community mentoring programs in Maine that are working to build student aspirations, and this could be a great place to learn about what is working. Currently most programs are not serving youth in care specifically and require attendance in certain schools or living in certain geographic areas. However, there are many programs that have demonstrated positive outcomes for youth who participate in their programming and therefore there are opportunities to build and learn from these established programs.

In the 1990's, the Maine Mentoring Partnership provided statewide backbone support for programs and served as an advocacy arm at the legislative level. Massachusetts and other states have active Mentoring Partnerships that could also be a support to a new mentoring program serving youth in care.

Additional and more targeted attention should be paid to staffing roles:

- ▶ **Secure Qualified Staff:** Hire competent, professional staff to manage core operational roles, including recruitment, match coordination, training, evaluation, and administrative support. This is a relational program that will thrive on consistent staff and minimal turnover.
- ▶ **Prioritize Staff Supervision:** Provide consistent supervision for program staff to minimize turnover, improve match quality, and increase the overall longevity of youth-mentor relationships.



Conclusion

Mentoring provides many opportunities for both mentors and mentees to build relationships, learn from one another, and experience positive outcomes. However, as cautioned by researchers and practitioners alike, it is critical to recognize the greater context of the experiences, including trauma that young people in foster care have experienced and the challenges they face as they transition into adulthood.

Ultimately, a mentoring program needs operational infrastructure to reach its full potential, advocate for resources, and sustain momentum. As stated previously, to support young people in reaching their full potential they need access to and the experience of their basic needs being met. Adolescence and emerging adulthood are exciting years of growth and development and if Maine is to continue to explore the design of a mentoring program for youth with extended care and support agreements with OCFS it is critical to approach program design with great care and attention to the specific needs and hopes of youth in care.

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Appendix

MAINE PROGRAMS WITH MENTORING COMPONENTS

Programs with mentoring components for youth across Maine were reviewed for this project to better understand what is currently available and opportunities for the future. A list of programs reviewed is below.

Apex

Big Brothers Big Sisters - Bath Brunswick

Big Brothers Big Sisters - Southern Maine

Credible Messengers

Maine Seacoast Mission

Midcoast Youth Center

Ready By 21 Mentoring

Rivers & Roads

Tree Street Youth

Trekkers

University of Maine 4-H Camp at Bryant Pond

University of Maine 4-H Camp at Tanglewood & Blueberry Cove

Yuls Foundation