



Testimony of Melissa Hackett

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In support of LD 1091, An Act to Improve the Long-Term Outcomes for Youth Transitioning from State Care by Raising the Upper Age Limit for Voluntary Support Eligibility

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Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer and esteemed members of the Health and Human Services Committee:

My name is Melissa Hackett, and I am offering testimony in support of LD 1091 on behalf of the Maine Children's Alliance. Our organization is a public policy, nonprofit improving the lives of Maine children, youth and families through research, collaboration, and advocacy. For over 25 years, MCA has promoted sound policies and best practices to make sure all Maine children have the resources and opportunity to reach their full potential from birth to adulthood.

The transition from adolescence into adulthood is difficult for most young people, as they begin to take on unfamiliar roles and responsibilities in this new phase of their lives. For many, this transitional period includes employment or educational opportunities. During this time, it is critical that youth have strong relationships with parents or other adults who can provide ongoing support or guidance to young people navigating this transition.

For youth who have experienced the foster care system, the needs are just what all young people need to be successful, yet the significance of having those supports is much greater. For children who exit the state's custody upon reaching the age of 18 or at the end of an extended agreement at age 21, there may not be that permanent connection to another adult who can provide a consistent, supportive role in their lives. For many young people, biological parents play this lifelong role – helping complete a FAFSA, finding safe and affordable housing, filling out a resume or preparing for an interview, navigating a difficult breakup or conflict with a teacher or boss.

For youth who have experienced foster care and may not have permanent family relationships, it is vital that there are not only financial resources available to support them, but also opportunities to develop permanent adult relationships. To ensure young people can successfully connect to work, training, or education, programs and services must recognize and incorporate the kind of human support that can help keep young people connect and stay connected to opportunities to achieve their goals and find both personal and financial success.

In the [National Foster Care Youth and Alumni Policy Council's Youth and Alumni Priorities on Older Youth Successful Transitions to Adulthood](#),¹ current priorities were identified, including:

Aging Out: Youth should have access to resources and a realistic transition plan to ensure they are on track to succeed when they exit foster care and especially if they age out of foster care.

¹ The National Foster Care Youth and Alumni Policy Council, <http://nationalpolycouncil.org/>

Normalcy: Promoting normalcy is essential for the youth's well-being. In an ideal world, we want a young person to have access to a healthy support system that encourages them to realize their dreams through education, apprenticeship, and support from family and friends.

These priorities should be at the heart of the discussion around what young people need to thrive as they enter adulthood, and should inform our efforts to ensure youth with foster care experience receive the support they need to achieve their goals.

[The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program](#)² provides federal funding to states to help foster youth transition successfully into adulthood and self-sufficiency. Activities and programs include help with education, employment, financial management, housing, emotional support, and assured connections to caring adults for older youth in foster care.

[The Chafee Foster Care Independence Program](#)³ through Maine's Office of Child and Family Services, provides support for older foster youth who enter into Voluntary Extended Care Agreements (V9s) up to age 21. The terms of these agreements center in youth being engaged in education, training, or work activities, and are also available for youth with behavioral or specialized medical health needs. With the federal Chafee program and associated funding amended in 2018 with an increased emphasis on successful transitions to adulthood, states can now also provide services to youth who have aged out of foster care up to the age of 23.

[When youth remain in care beyond 18 through extended care agreements](#),⁴ these are some of the positive results:

- Doubled the odds that they would be working or in high school at 19.
- Were twice as likely to have completed at least one year of college by age 21.
- Doubled the percentage of youth remaining in care until 21 who earned a college degree.
- Reduced by 38 percent the incidence of pregnancy among young women in care before age 20.

Resulting in cost savings of:

- \$72,000 estimated increase in per-person lifetime earnings by extending foster care.
- \$481,000 more in projected earnings over their work-life for former foster youth with a college degree compared to those with only a high school diploma.
- \$2.40 return on each dollar spent on extended foster care with the attainment of a bachelor's degree, according to a cost-benefit analysis conducted in California.

While Maine currently offers these extended care agreements and associated supports to youth up to age 21, the state has the opportunity now to extend these services to youth up to age 23.

Data provided by the Department of Health and Human Services in May 2020 showed that 68 young people in Maine were in Extended Care Agreements (V9s). Between 2015 and 2019, the number of youth who aged out of foster care ranged between a low of 63 and a high of 80 youth. Given the relatively small number of young people who could utilize these critical supportive services, it would be

² Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/grant-funding/john-h-chafee-foster-care-independence-program>

³ Office of Child and Family Services, Child Welfare, Youth Transition Services, <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/ocfs/cw/chafee.htm>

⁴ National Conference of State Legislators, Older Youth Housing, Financial Literacy and Other Supports, <https://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/supports-older-youth.aspx>

a significant missed opportunity for our state to not wrap around these young people and ensure they have what they need to be successful.

We all benefit when every young person in Maine is prepared for success. As they enter adulthood, young people become Maine's workforce, future leaders, and parents. We should make our best effort, then, to ensure young people have access to people and programs to support them, so they can make this transition with the greatest opportunity to find happiness, success, and a sense of belonging in the many communities across our state.

Thank you.