

INDEPENDENT LIVING SERVICES ADVISORY COUNCIL (ILSAC)

2024 ANNUAL REPORT TO THE SECRETARY



Shevaun L. Harris
Secretary

Ron DeSantis
Governor

Table of Contents

Introduction: ILSAC Purpose & Scope	3
2024 Executive Summary.....	4
This Year’s ILSAC Focus & Analysis	5
Education, Training, and Employment.....	6
Transportation.....	6
Health and Wellbeing.....	6
Successes.....	7
Barriers.....	7
Recommendations.....	8
Permanent Connections with Supportive Adults	9
Needs Assessment and Financial Support.....	10
Qualifying Activity.....	12
Housing.....	12
Looking Ahead.....	12
<i>Council Members</i>	133

Introduction: ILSAC Purpose & Scope

The Florida Legislature has established the Independent Living Services Advisory Council (“ILSAC” or “the Council”) for the purpose of reviewing and making recommendations concerning the implementation and operation of the Extended Foster Care (EFC) program (section 39.6251, Florida Statutes (F.S.)) and the Road-to-Independence (RTI) programs (section 409.1451, F.S.), which includes Postsecondary Education Services and Support (PESS), and Aftercare Services. These programs provide participants with the skills, education, and support necessary to become self-sufficient and leave foster care with a lifelong connection to a supportive adult.

The Council is required to assess the implementation and operation of EFC and the RTI Programs and advise the Department of Children and Families (Department) on actions that would improve the ability of these programs’ services to meet established goals. The Council’s recommendations and the Department’s response to those recommendations are included in an annual report that the Department submits to the Governor, the President of the Senate, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives pursuant to section 409.1451(7), F.S.

In 2021, the Florida Legislature strengthened and expanded the Department’s reporting requirements. Specifically, the Department’s report must include the most recent data regarding the status of and outcomes for young adults who turned 18 years of age while in foster care and an analysis of such data and outcomes in each of the following domains:

- Education
- Employment
- Housing
- Financial
- Transportation
- Health
- Well-being
- Connections

The Council collects additional data to help analyze the effective implementation of EFC and RTI programs. This activity involves editing the CBC Data Collection Form as needed and requesting that the Department require each Community Based Care Lead Agency (CBC) to provide additional information regarding such factors as staffing structure, service array, outcome data, and administration. It should be noted that the CBC reporting could also include information obtained from the Case Management Organization (CMO).

This report includes the Council’s recommendations to the Secretary regarding actions that would improve the ability of Independent Living programs and services to meet established goals, the status of the implementation of programs, efforts to publicize the availability of the programs, the success of the services; problems identified, and recommendations for Department or legislative action. Moreover, it allows stakeholders to understand the efficiency and effectiveness of programs related to the Council and points ahead to opportunities for continuous improvement in the areas of coordination of efforts, progress toward incremental goals, and the measuring and reporting of overall outcomes for the population served by the Council.

2024 Executive Summary

This year the Council tasked themselves with “deconstructing” the Extended Foster Care (EFC) Program. EFC is a program available to young adults between the ages of 18-21 (or 22 in certain situations). It is implied based on eligibility factors for youth turning 18 in licensed department custody and requirements to maintaining eligibility, that young adults should demonstrate progress towards achieving their stated goals, thus decreasing their dependency on the system programs and in turn increase their self-reliance and within certain timeframes. EFC offers opportunities for young adults to receive needed support and assistance to complete their educational, career, transportation, and housing goals. Young adults should be involved in ongoing developmental life skills opportunities and have the ability to exercise their right to make decisions for themselves and experience the results of those decisions whenever safely possible. It can be very challenging for some child welfare professionals to adjust from a protective posture to a more flexible, coaching posture, which is necessary when encouraging young adults to have decision-making responsibility. It will take time and much effort for both advocates and the system of care to be willing to fully make this shift.

The Department is taking a closer examination of other challenges that also require more focus, and to assess what is working, what it should continue adjusting, and make suggestions about what would an ideal system for older teens and young adults look like. EFC is a complex program that is necessary to prevent housing instability, ensure education continuity, and support employment opportunities for youth that are aging out of licensed foster care settings. The program is saturated with administrative process related to federal Title IV-E guidelines. However, it is not clear how the state is reclaiming these or other available resources that can supplement state funding that is also needed to support the growing eligible population of youth that have not achieved permanency and are not prepared to take on their full responsibilities when they turn 18. While incremental progress has been made, there are still improvements needed on new processes related to data quality for reporting on youth actively receiving services. Additionally, quality assurance service data could not be fully assessed in its entirety and therefore ongoing assessment and research will continue over the next year.

Areas of focus this year included measures of success, milestones, and outcomes, judicial oversight of case plan compliance measures and consequences, opt-outs & readmissions, ongoing training of IL services to young adults, programs data and outcomes, progress on reporting of permanent connections, housing challenges, needs assessment and allowance, qualifying activities, youth engagement and specialized independent living training curriculum.

This Year's ILSAC Focus & Analysis

Highlights discussed this year included: Utilization of the Youth Active Receiving Services Report for tracking and reporting of outcome measures pertaining to young adults participating in post-18 programs. At this time the Department is able to monitor compliance with My Pathways to Success (MPTS) Transition Plan staffings, Life Skills Assessment, and Permanent Connections. There is not yet one full year of data available to analyze, but the committee looks forward to reviewing further progress and data within the upcoming year.

Based on evaluative work conducted during Fiscal Year (FY) 2023-2024, the Council recognizes opportunities to assess the current state of overall performance management for the ILSAC program during FY 2024-2025. Using the existing [OCFW performance dashboard](#) as a guide, these efforts would first aim to (re)establish outcome measures that, when monitored comprehensively and consistently, reflect what success for the program looks like. The initial steps for this work should seek to capture the variety of outcome metrics currently in use across the network. This will provide a functional baseline for future evaluation and expansion of performance assessment, management, and improvement efforts.

Given that outcome measures tend to be “lagging” in nature, attention should also be devoted to identifying *upstream* activities and performance metrics related to these “leading” indicators that serve as *drivers* of desired outcomes (a brief conceptual overview of the relationships among these types of measures can be found [here](#)). With a menu of proposed outcome measures in hand, the group can then assess what leading activities and associated indicators make the most sense as functional drivers of desired outcomes.

Most regions are using social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) to engage with youth and promote their programs, while platforms such as YouTube and Twitter are less commonly used. Many organizations find social media effective in reaching youth, while others are still working on optimizing their engagement. Organizations track engagement metrics from social media by the number of likes, shares, and follower growth, which are often seen as agreed upon metrics for measuring engagement effectiveness. Some also rely on feedback from youth and internal reports. Youth Councils and Advisory groups are another method used for engaging youth and to aid in their inclusion for decision-making. Other strategies include social media campaigns and in-person events.

A common challenge is ensuring consistent participation and measuring engagement beyond social media and monthly transactional interactions. There is not much evidence that supports use of best practice models or other strategies that promote quality engagement between the professionals and young adults. Some examples that were mentioned did include Youth Thrive, Positive Youth Development, Social / Emotional Learning, Transition to Independent Process (TIP), and Trust Based Relational Intervention (TBRI) and other coaching models. It is stated that youth are “automatically” enrolled into the EFC program at 18. Some Lead Agencies including Family Partnerships of Central Florida, Northwest Florida Health Network, Heartland, and Citrus have well developed written practices and procedures, forms, and assessments to help engage, guide, and support program participants. These are additional steps taken above the required DCF forms. There is obvious inconsistency across the state by the manner and strategies used to engage with this unique population and truly assessing their basic and financial needs as well as the young adults’ capabilities. In addition to this inconsistency, how progress and success is defined for and by youth and young adults is not one size fits all.

For the most part, other than minimal expectations set by the Department and the EFC Program, most agencies also do not report imposing specific benchmarks or milestones that may work to promote a timelier transition into the PESS program and/or living independently.

The Department learned last year that staffing ratios are on average 25:1. The Council anticipates better understanding of the process for claiming Title IV-E reimbursement, so that resources can continue to be provided to help support the efforts being made to help youth have a smooth transition to adulthood.

Education, Training, and Employment

One of the primary resources available to Young Adults seeking post-secondary education and training on their road to independence is the tuition waiver made available through the Department, in partnership with the Department of Education. This resource waives the cost of tuition and fees associated with an eligible student qualifying educational programs at designated public educational institutions in Florida.

Beyond the state tuition waiver, ILSAC also notes an opportunity to explore additional resources made available through the Federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) managed by the local workforce development board in each area of the state: the name and counties served by each local workforce board can be found [here](#); a map of the career centers located within each local area, along with the addresses of their locations, can be found [here](#). Under WIOA Title I, resources potentially relevant to the Young Adults include the [WIOA in-school youth and out-of-school youth programs](#). Information on WIOA [eligibility](#) and enrollment can be obtained from the local workforce development board serving the county in which the youth resides, as noted above. Individual Training Accounts (ITAs), the primary mechanism for enrollment in education and training under WIOA, leverage designated programs listed on the [Eligible Training Provider List](#) (ETPL) for the state and/or local area.

In addition to the local workforce development boards, as described above, youth and young adults can also find employment resources at their one-stop career centers. Specific employment programs available in many areas include registered apprenticeships, pre-apprenticeships, and other employment programs aimed at helping participants secure training associated with in-demand occupations and self-sustaining wages on their path to independence. Achieving the greater degree of cross-partner coordination and collective awareness of each other's programs implied in this section will promote the overall goals of the [REACH Act \(2021\)](#) and [Senate Bill 240 \(2023\)](#) in a manner consistent with the "no wrong door" structure of the [FLWINS platform](#) currently under development.

Transportation

Keys to Independence provides youth in EFC and PESS with the chance to obtain their driver's licenses and helps with car insurance costs for six months. The program also collects data on license attainment, trends, and barriers. The Council reviewed data from the Lead Agencies on transportation. The data collection forms indicate that Lead Agencies address issues when they are a barrier to participation in IL programs for individuals over 18. This can strain already overburdened case managers or result in financial assistance being provided to remove barriers for youth to attend appointments and other qualifying activities and personal appointments.

Health and Wellbeing

The Sunshine Health Child Welfare Specialty Plan provides multiple expanded benefits available to young adults aging out of the child welfare system. These benefits include an Over The Counter benefit, providing \$25 each month per member for health, wellness, and hygiene items; the Transition Assistance Fund, providing up to \$500 one-time per adult member to support safe and stable housing; transportation for medical appointments, behavioral health appointments and social trips each month through a transportation vendor and the Care Grant, which provides up to \$150 per calendar year per child for services or supplies for educational use, social use or physical activities. The Department works in partnership with a Health Plan representative attending transition plan staffings in order to provide education directly to young adults on these benefits and encouraging young adults to fully utilize the

benefits available to them through their health plan. Ongoing efforts are needed to help young adults access and maximize these available resources.

Successes

There is evident progress with compliance reporting. The Council is making progress in collaboration with Independent Living professionals across the state and the Department to create a needs assessment tool and recommend potential changes needed to the FSFN payment guide. These efforts include determining incidental needs compared to discretionary wants, along with guidelines for defining language and operating policies regarding terms for providing training “allowances, stipends, and incentives. The council along with the Department, will be able to analyze annual roll up results from the Quality Assurance Reviews to better understand gaps in service, quality trends, and inconsistencies in services provision.

Barriers

There is little evidence to support that youth are gaining work experiences or other opportunities to practice skill building related to their personal goals prior to turning 18 and entering EFC or RTI programs. Youth are often unprepared to take on the responsibilities of managing their monthly expenses as a result. This lack of preparation perpetuates a systemic dependency of financial assistance and attachment to professionals instead of building lasting connections with supportive adults within their local communities. This lack of preparation coupled with failure to achieve permanency, and the challenges associated with managing high demand caseloads or turnover also significantly impact the effectiveness of programs under charge by this Council. As a result, this requires additional resources for the real practice opportunities that are postponed. Additionally, this lack of preparation also impacts the maintenance of collaborative relationships with housing and other partnerships statewide. Additional Housing Challenges include:

- **High Costs:** Many organizations report difficulties due to **high housing costs** and lack of suitable, affordable housing for youth.
- **Supportive Housing Gaps:** There's a consistent need for specialized **supportive housing options** that provide both accommodations and services including mental and behavioral health supports. Youth require more support and treatment to stabilize before being able to work on goals towards living independently.
- **Fair Market Rent** and negotiations with local housing providers are standard approaches for determining housing costs. Partnerships with community organizations are common to secure housing options.
- Most young adults **lack work experience** or do not have enough income to support themselves after turning 18. They do need an appropriate amount of time to adjust to their new expectations and responsibilities as an adult and to secure employment where they can earn livable wages and begin establishing a better quality of life balanced with work and meeting responsibilities.
- Young adults on average **remain in EFC for 2-3 years**. This can be related to multiple factors including low self-esteem, motivation, and messages told to them about their limitations or special needs during their dependency experience.
- Increased rate of eligible youth turning 18 accessing EFC because they are not prepared to enroll in PESS program or achieve Independence.

The program is saturated with specific administrative processes and required documentation related to federal Title IV-E eligibility guidelines. There is still work to be done to reflect accurate accounting of young adults actively receiving services and how they navigate and/or are guided through Independent Living Services within the state of Florida. While it is not yet clear how the state is reclaiming reimbursement as a result of all the compliance factors, some considerations should be made to balance the demand of Independent Living staff so they are able to have time to have meaningful and

effective engagement with EFC program participants and be able to engage in real social work activities
 - Change agent connector to the other available programs and resources.

Report Section	Recommendation
Outreach and Youth Engagement	Analyze results taken from the annual roll up of the Quality Reviews to determine the best practice trends that directly impact the levels of engagement, progress and successful outcomes for young adults participating.
EFC Process Definition.	Collaborate with Lead Agencies to help Identify activities and performance metrics and indicators that serve as <i>drivers</i> for desired outcomes for being on path for achieving self-sufficiency before the age of 21(22). Continue to roll out Independent Living Curricula and take steps to insure validity for FCB certification.
EFC Needs Assessments.	The Council recommends continuing to collaborate with the Department on finalizing the development of a new needs assessment tool to better identify and address the needs of young adults. The committee will continue collaborating with the Department to further research and review this effort. Allowance amounts should be standardized using this tool, with clear definitions established for 'incidental' and 'discretionary' expenses. During the 2024 IL Training, IL field staff showed openness to adopting a statewide tool. The recommendation is to ensure basic needs are met, with any additional expenses becoming the responsibility of the youth or young adult, encouraging early financial accountability.
Accountability	The Department developed training specific to Independent Living that will address quality home visits, documentation of qualifying activities and the termination process. In the next year, the Council should track data from the quality office to see if this training has any impact on the outcome of quality visits and verification of the qualifying activity. The council also recommends that data be collected regarding the specific reasons for termination to determine if the quality of visits is correlated to EFC termination.
Housing and Housing Partnerships	In response to these challenges, ILSAC is recommending that the Department create a statewide Housing Coordinator position who will help alleviate barriers to the access and understanding of the FYI vouchers; be responsible for the coordination of ongoing trainings, the development of new housing partnerships and opportunities, the creation of an ongoing statewide housing workgroup that will share information and resources with one another, the creation of a housing database, amongst other duties that lead to a statewide effort to address difficulties with housing. In addition, ILSAC recommends the sharing of data and information collected as part of the 3-year pilot where 3 Lead Agencies are receiving funding for a Housing Specialist. Understanding the impact of this pilot may lead to future recommendations that can lead to consistent and effective housing solutions statewide.
Preparation of Youth Transitioning to Adulthood	The Council recommends that the Department address the lack of preparation and the System of Care's failure to follow currently documented procedures established for youth transitioning from care and youth under 18 years of age, as required by the Department. The inconsistencies in the System of Care amongst children and youth's formal Independent Living skills, needs to be addressed with all providers, Lead Agencies, and Case Management Organizations so that formal services can be provided consistently to youth entering EFC or RTI for better outcomes. The charge of the committee needs to be clearly interpreted as it related to youth ages 13-17 as outlined in section 409.14515, F.S., and Rule 65C-28.009, Florida Administrative Code.
Connections	The Council recommends that this continue to be monitored through the use of the Young Adult Receiving Services (YARS) and National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) reports.

Recommendations

The below summary is an overview of the 2024 ILSAC data collection assessment synthesizing key points for the Department, Secretary, and Florida Legislature. The intent is to save the reader time and assisting with understanding the report's overall content.

Permanent Connections with Supportive Adults

Problem Statement:

According to the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) data as of 2024, out of a cohort of 337 young adults aged 21, 82% reported they have at least one supportive adult connection. However, only 61% of young adults ages 19-22 were reported to have at least one supportive adult connection according to Young Adult Receiving Services (YARS) data as of June 2024.

Research/Analysis:

The ILSAC'S subcommittee on Permanent Connections researched the number of youth and young adults aging out of foster care with at least one supportive, permanent adult connection. Utilizing the Department's newly created YARS report, the ILSAC was able to track statewide data in real time to help pinpoint the potential barriers facing both youth and young adults and frontline staff. The Permanent Connections Subcommittee also conducted several focus groups with youth and young adults and discovered that in addition to potentially outdated and unreported information, staff in some areas were not adequately engaging youth and young adults to collect this information effectively. Some youth that have been reported as not having a supportive adult were found to have these connections already but were not challenged or taught to view these connections in a supportive way, thus leading to further inaccuracies in reporting. Data Entry errors and update lag time was discovered by the department to potentially lead to high number of participants being counted and skewing report data.

The ILSAC collected the information below from the YARS report about the percentage of permanent connections statewide. Additionally, the table below shares a few testimonies as qualitative data received from the youth focus groups.

Percent of Permanent Connections Statewide (YARS)	
February 20, 2024	30%
April 30, 2024	51%
June 3, 2024	61%
August 22, 2024	54%

The Permanent Connections Subcommittee conducted several focus groups with youth and young adults to understand firsthand reasons behind the data results. Youth and young adults were asked about what permanent connections mean to them. The subcommittee asked the following questions:

- a. What does a mentoring relationship look like to you?
- b. What are some things mentors can do to better support young people transitioning out of care?
- c. What is the difference between a mentor and a supportive adult?

Summary of Youth Feedback:

Based on the youth feedback, some of the barriers identified were turnover in child welfare and not having a consistent case manager, Guardian Ad Litem, or placements. Youth during these focus groups have stressed the importance of having someone who will be their constant supportive adult. The youth shared that they need guidance as they age, especially as they are transitioning into adulthood. Many young adults mentioned they are entering into post-18 programs with the expectations that they know vital life skills, but often do not. Some feel behind the curve amongst their peers and unsure of who to ask for help at times.

Focus Group Results and Findings:

As a result of the focus groups, the subcommittee found:

- Supportive adult information was often outdated.
- Staff in some areas did not report information because they were not adequately engaging youth and young adults to collect this information effectively.
- Some youth that have been reported as not having a supportive adult were found to have these connections already but were not challenged or taught to view these connections in a supportive way, thus leading to further inaccuracies in reporting.
- It was also recently discovered by the Department that agencies were not closing out cases correctly, leading to potentially higher numbers of cases and skewing report data.
- The ILSAC plans to review past and future NYTD and other state youth survey results to determine the effectiveness of Florida's permanent connections practices.

Recommendation:

The Council recommends that this continue to be monitored through the use of the YARS and NYTD reports.

Needs Assessment and Financial Support

Problem statement:

Community Based Care lead agencies hold the responsibility to provide financial support for the needs of young adults in their programs. This responsibility is handled in various ways and is not standardized among agencies statewide. Furthermore, agencies do not have a standard definition to reference when assessing needs over wants, incidental vs. discretionary.

In efforts to fully prepare young adults for independent living, the Council recognizes the importance of a thoughtful approach needed in delivering this financial support by agencies. The Council recommends that a thoughtful approach is facilitated through a revised Needs Assessment Tool and corresponding guide collaboratively created with the Department in the Spring 2024. The tool captures daily living expenses in all areas of life and factors income and government assistance. The section below elaborates further on the elements of the tool and its expected benefits.

About the Tool:

The Needs Assessment Tool will capture the following subsections in relation to the needs identified from the My Pathways to Success Transition Plan. These categories will include Education, Housing, Hygiene essentials, transportation, childcare, basic needs and discretionary expenses. Along with the Needs Assessment Tool, there will be a Needs Assessment Guide to assist staff with explaining the process to determine if allowance is appropriate, and also so that the young adult understands the financial benefit and purpose of completing the Assessment Tool.

Research/Analysis:

Youth Feedback

Youth and young adults often miss out on the full range of services and benefits available to them due to gaps in education and engagement. As a result, resources like Sunshine Health's Child Welfare Specialty Plan expanded benefits are underutilized. By implementing a standardized assessment process, we can better equip agencies and youth to address their unique transitional needs and expectations, reducing the risk of crisis situations. This approach fosters meaningful dialogue, enabling support teams to more effectively understand and meet needs while helping youth achieve their goals.

Benefits to a Standardized Tool:

Should the Department adopt the Needs Assessment Tool as a required process for lead agencies and subcontracted Independent Living programs, the Council expects youth/young adults to receive improved service delivery and be better prepared for independent living. More youth/young adults would be able to take advantage of services like Sunshine Health's expanded benefits. Independent Living programs will no longer need to navigate ambiguity surrounding financial support for the youth/young adult's basic needs. In turn, lead agencies will be able to approach their Independent Living programs with increased fiscal responsibility.

Recommendation:

The Council recommends continued collaboration with the Department on finalizing the development of a new Needs Assessment Tool to better identify and address the needs of young adults. The committee will continue collaborating with the Department to further research and review this effort. Allowance amounts should be standardized using this tool, with clear definitions established for 'incidental' and 'discretionary' expenses. During the 2024 IL Training, IL field staff showed openness to adopting a statewide tool. The recommendation is to ensure basic needs are met, with any additional expenses becoming the responsibility of the youth or young adult, encouraging early financial accountability.

Qualifying Activity

Problem Statement:

The Council was tasked with “deconstructing” the Extended Foster Care (EFC) Program to get a better understanding of successes, barriers and areas that require the focus of the council. An area identified by the Council for review was the requirement for a qualifying activity to participate in the Extended Foster Care Program. Specifically, the Council's focus was to determine if agencies are monitoring the qualifying activity and assisting the young adults with barriers to participation in a qualifying activity.

Research/analysis:

In October 2023, the DCF Office of Quality and Innovation reviewed 63 EFC cases from across all regions. The findings revealed areas needing improvement: 21% of cases lacked a quality visit with the child, 8% had no review or verification of qualifying activities, and 17% did not address barriers to self-sufficiency. These gaps in documentation and discussion could affect the young adults' success in the EFC program.

In June 2024, the Office of Quality and Innovation conducted a follow-up review of 63 EFC cases, noting some changes since the previous October 2023 review. While there was a slight improvement in the quality of visits, the frequency of visits has significantly decreased. This indicates progress in visit quality but highlights a concern with visit frequency that could impact the effectiveness of the EFC program.

The Office of Quality and Innovation will continue to conduct focus reviews for Independent Living every six months.

Recommendation:

The Department developed training specific to Independent Living that will address quality home visits, documentation of qualifying activities and the termination process. In the next year, the Council should track data from the Office of Quality and Innovation to see if this training has any impact on the outcome of quality visits and verification of the qualifying activity. The council also recommends that data be collected regarding the specific reasons for termination to determine if the quality of visits is correlated to EFC termination.

Housing

Problem Statement

There are marked barriers to providing adequate support and options to young adults needing housing. The affordable housing crisis in Florida has only compounded this issue, making it difficult for lead agencies to navigate resources consistently. Ongoing challenges exist in the areas of recruitment of new landlords and the development of new housing relationships, ongoing training on new and existing housing supports/resources, successful management of new housing partners, the development of housing for specialized populations. The lack of options has led to lead agencies having to settle for higher rental rates and to the concern that young adults were being placed in housing that did not align with their needs, creating risks for young adults with higher needs (i.e. behavioral health, etc.). Many other challenges make it evident that housing is an ongoing topic ILSAC must address in the upcoming year. However, the analysis of existing information initiated immediate recommendations for the Department.

Research/Analysis

In ILSAC's analysis of housing across the state, it was evident that lead agencies with resources, either directly or indirectly (via hybrid model/partnerships), that have a Housing Specialist/Coordinator were more successful in developing and pairing youth with appropriate housing options that met their individualized needs. While some IL teams are less knowledgeable about how to expand their housing resources, other circuits have more robust housing offerings. The lack of information sharing and consistent training in this area is cause for concern.

Recommendation

In response to these challenges, ILSAC is recommending that the Department create a statewide Housing Coordinator position who will help alleviate barriers to the access and understanding of the FYI vouchers; be responsible for the coordination of ongoing trainings; the development of new housing partnerships and opportunities; the creation of an ongoing statewide housing workgroup that will share information and resources with one another; the creation of a housing database, amongst other duties that lead to a statewide effort to address difficulties with housing. In addition, ILSAC recommends the sharing of data and information collected as part of the 3-year pilot where 3 lead agencies are receiving funding for a Housing Specialist. Understanding the impact of this pilot may lead to future recommendations that can lead to consistent and effective housing solutions statewide.

Looking Ahead

In 2025, the Council will continue to utilize the CI Action Deck as a central repository of issues of concern to better prioritize and address topics in the planning stages of our working calendar. The Council will continue to use the CBC Data Collection form to gain more insight into programmatic services and their implementation.

The Council intends to continue focus on Extended Foster Care to complete critical and analytical review of this program. The focus on Extended Foster Care is based on reviewing past recommendations as well as the research conducted in the 2022, 2023, and 2024. The Council will be reviewing current data, needed measurement milestones, review best practices in-state as well as out-of-state best practices and incorporation of youth voice in the problem-solving process.

A methodical approach is needed for reviewing open issues and analyzing statewide gaps. The Council shall address the necessity for ongoing defined subcommittee workgroups. By implementing subcommittees, a more in-depth and thorough exploration can be achieved in the research of the EFC and RTI programs.

We are looking forward to presentations from Florida's Council on Independent Living, Updates from the HOPE Court and Housing Pilots currently in progress across the state. We are also requesting updates on Federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).

Finally, the Council determined a need to review Council Member term limits. Current term limits impact the efficiency of the Council operations in numerous ways, as recommendations made and accepted by the Department, take more than four years to fully implement. As such, incoming Council leaders; (including the Chair, Co-Chair, & Secretary) have limited to no knowledge for meaningful follow up through to closure. The Council is considering a legislative revision to § 409.1451(7.2.c), F.S. and an executive briefing for term limit changes has been prepared for consideration.

Council Members

The Council Roster as of the writing of this report.

Leadership:

Regina Watson: Camelot Community Care – Chair

Christine Frederick: FLITE CENTER – Co-Chair

Stephanie Lucas: Children's Network of SW FL Community Based Care Lead Agency (CBC)- Secretary

Council Members:

Adam Briggs: CareerSource Florida, Inc

Alison Fulford: Department of Juvenile Justice

Chelsea Strickland: Department of Education

Demarco Mott: Citrus FCN Youth Advisory Council

Dietra Barfield: Camelot Community Care

Eileen Geisler: ChildNet Community Based Care Lead Agency (CBC)

Heather DeFrancisco: DCF Regional - Office of Economic Self Sufficiency

John Watson: DCF Headquarters – Office of Child and Family Wellbeing

Lynda Thompson: Foster and Adoptive Parent Association

Margie Dotson: Communities Connected for Kids Community Based Care Lead Agency (CBC)

Maria Batista: Youth Advisory Board

Melissa Vergeson: Agency of Health Care Administration (AHCA)

Opal Ringo: Agency for Persons with Disabilities

Raul Catuy: Reconnecting the Dots

Sara Pham: Sunshine State Health Plan

Tony Delisle: Centers for Independent Living

Vacant Council Seat(s):

Department of Economic Opportunity

The Independent Living Services Advisory Council thanks the Department, the Secretary, and the Florida Legislature for your support and attention.

**Department of Children and Families
Response to the Independent Living Services
Advisory Council
2024 Annual Report**

December 31, 2024

Shevaun Harris
Secretary



Ron DeSantis
Governor

Introduction

Since the establishment of the Independent Living Services Advisory Council (the Council) in 2002, the Council has provided recommendations concerning the implementation and operation of independent living services as part of a comprehensive report to the Legislature. As required in s. 409.1451(7), F.S., the Department of Children and Families' (the Department) is submitting responses to the Council's recommendations as part of the Council's 2024 Annual Report.

Department Response to the Council's Recommendations

The Department extends sincere appreciation for the unwavering support and dedication of the Council and its members. With continued collaboration between the Department and the Council, Florida will continue to make substantial strides in improving the prospects and well-being of the youth and young adults in our care. The Council proposes the Department and stakeholder groups work toward the following recommendations:

1. PERMANENT CONNECTIONS WITH SUPPORTIVE ADULTS

The Department recognizes challenges in identifying and documenting supportive adult connections for young adults summarized by the Council. The Department appreciates the youth and young adult feedback provided on supportive adult connections versus mentors. The feedback is important as it highlights, along with conflicting data points, that perhaps the issue is not solely based on the young adults not having a supportive adult but more likely on lack of engagement with youth/young adults, lack of sufficient documentation and reporting, and not teaching the youth/young adults the appropriate ways to value and foster these relationships.

The department supports the council's recommendation that permanent connections continue to be monitored using the Young Adult Receiving Services (YARS) and National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) reports. The Department supports this recommendation as this will require a multi-faceted approach to increasing effectiveness. There have been several trainings already developed and presented to the Independent Living field that should correct some of the data entry and validity errors. The Department looks forward to future recommendations from the Council on how to improve effectiveness of the field in identifying supportive adult connections with the youth/young adults as well as how to ensure the youth/young adults are valuing and utilizing these relationships.

2. NEEDS ASSESSMENT AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT

The Council has recommended the creation and implementation of a standardized Needs Assessment tool to be used by the field to better identify and address the needs of the young adults specifically to determine allowance amount. At present, s. 39.6251(2) F.S. states "The young adult will live in an independent living environment that offers, at a minimum, life skills instruction, counseling, educational support, employment preparation and placement, and development of support networks. The determination of the type and duration of services shall be based on the young adult's assessed needs, interests, and input and must be consistent with the goals set in the young adult's case plan." While this allows for the CBC lead agencies to develop a process on assessing the young adult's needs, the Department agrees with the recommendation of a standardized tool and corresponding guide as this is not occurring consistently statewide. This tool has the potential to not only standardize the process statewide but also eliminates the ambiguity for determination of financial responsibility of the CBC lead agencies. The Department intends to develop a work group with partners from the field to create the tool and guide to ensure it is applicable to all areas. There will be additional discussion needed

as to if the tool is specific to Extended Foster Care or if it will be applicable also to the RTI Programs to ensure young adults are on a path to self-sufficiency.

3. QUALIFYING ACTIVITY

The Council intends to continue to track data over the next year from the targeted reviews completed by the Office of Quality and Innovation to determine if the implementation of the IL Specialty Track Curriculum has improved the quality of home visits and support of the young adult's qualifying activity success. The Council has also recommended the specific reasons for termination from EFC be analyzed to determine if there is any correlation with the quality of visits and support of the qualifying activity. The Department agrees with the request to have a better understanding of the reasons for termination for EFC. This will likely require manual tracking by the regional independent living points of contact through the department that approve termination or creation of a FSFN report; the Department will explore feasibility of implementing this request.

4. HOUSING

The Department agrees with the Council on the challenges of housing for this population in the access and understanding of the Fostering Youth to Independence (FYI) housing vouchers, lack of training and support for housing providers working with a unique population, need for development of new partnerships with housing providers, the lack of sharing resources across regions, and lack of a centralized housing database. The Council has recommended the Department create a statewide Housing Coordinator position to help with housing for young adults. While the Department understands the purpose of this request, at this time it would likely be best to continue to monitor the development of the pilot program in which the Department has supported Housing Specialist positions at three CBC lead agencies. The Department will make ongoing efforts to work with the Council and statewide service providers to begin addressing some of these barriers in the interim.

The Foster Youth to Independence initiative allows for young adults ages 18-24 who left foster care, or will leave foster care in 90 days, and are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless access to the Housing Choice Voucher assistance available through Public Housing Agencies (PHA) in partnership with Public Child Welfare Agencies. The young adult is eligible for housing assistance through the voucher for up to 36 months but may be extended for an additional 24 months if they are with supportive case management services through an agency. There are some regions throughout the state that have been able to establish a strong partnership with their local PHA to implement the voucher process; however, there are many areas that still do not have access to these vouchers for the young adults. Over the last year, the Department has held monthly meetings with several CBC lead agencies along with the executive director of the National Center for Housing and Child Welfare to help eliminate barriers to accessing the vouchers. At least one lead agency has been able to establish a partnership with the local PHA to begin issuing the vouchers. This effort has also led to Housing Specialist positions being offered by the Department to three lead agencies as a pilot program to increase the accessibility of the vouchers as well as eliminate other barriers to housing young adults in Independent Living programs.

Independent Living Program Overview

Consistent with the Department's commitment to continuous improvement through in-depth analysis and intentional actions, this section of the report provides updates on the Independent Living Programs for the fiscal year 2023-24.

Extended Foster Care (EFC) s. 39.6251 F.S.

Extended Foster Care is available to foster youth who turn 18 years of age in the Department's legal custody or in licensed foster care and allows the opportunity to continue residing in or return to a supervised living arrangement. Approved living arrangements can include licensed foster home or group home, host home, transitional living program, shared housing, or individual housing. Extended Foster Care provides continued case management services, court oversight, room and board, and other services needed to ensure success as an independent adult.

Young Adults in EFC must maintain eligibility through a qualifying activity which include:

- completing secondary education or a program leading to an equivalent credential; or
- enrolled in post-secondary or vocational education; or
- employed for at least 80 hours/month; or
- participating in a program or activity that promotes or eliminates barriers to employment (i.e., job skills program); or
- unable to participate in one of the above full time due to a documented disability.

Young adults are eligible to remain in Extended Foster Care until their 21st birthday, or until the age of 22 years old if they are actively participating in EFC and have a documented disability which might impact their ability to transition to independence requiring more time in care. EFC is a voluntary program and at any point the young adult may opt out or apply to return to care prior to their 21st birthday.

Postsecondary Education Support and Services (PESS) s. 409.1451(2) F.S.

PESS is available to former foster youth who turned 18 years of age while in department custody and spent a total of at least six months in licensed out-of-home care before turning 18; or are 18 years of age and adopted after the age of 16 from foster care or placed with a court-approved dependency guardian after spending at least 6 months in licensed care within the 12 months immediately preceding such placement or adoption. Starting July 2024, eligibility for this population shifted from 16 to 14 establishing eligibility for more young adults to take advantage of PESS. Young adults applying for PESS must have earned a standard high school diploma or equivalent, have been admitted in at least 9 credit hours at an eligible Bright Futures postsecondary educational institution (or equivalent at a technical school), and have submitted an error-free FAFSA for financial aid.

PESS stipends are legislatively established at \$1720 per month. This stipend is provided to assist the young adult with securing housing and utilities while pursuing post-secondary education. Prior to receiving the PESS stipend, the Department assesses for financial literacy, executive functioning, self-regulation, and similar skills to determine how the stipend should be paid. The assessment allows the Department the ability to pay housing expenses on behalf of the young adult out of the stipend amount to ensure housing stability. PESS provides continued transitional and financial planning that includes assistance in meeting young adults current and future needs.

Young adults must meet renewal criteria annually and demonstrate academic progress to continue receiving the stipend. PESS support is available for eligible young adults until the age of 23 years old.

Aftercare Services s. 409.1451(3), F.S.

Aftercare Services is designed to be a temporary program that assists young adults who aged out of care in department custody or licensed foster care to transition to self-sufficiency or to establish eligibility for Extended Foster Care or PESS. As of July 2024, legislation expanded eligibility to include young adults who were in out of home care for at least 6 months after the age of 14 who were not reunified. With the expansion, additional goals of Aftercare Services will now include eligibility for Extended Guardianship Assistance Program or Extended Maintenance Adoption Subsidy. Young adults are eligible from the ages of 18 to 23 and must submit an Aftercare Application. An Aftercare Services Plan is developed with the young adult to identify the goal of the plan and establish a path to achieving the plan through identified services and tasks. This plan must be updated and reviewed at minimum every 90 days.

Aftercare Services can include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Mentoring or tutoring
- Mental Health Services
- Substance abuse counseling
- Life skills classes
- Parenting classes
- Job and Career skills training
- Counselor consultations
- Temporary financial assistance
- Financial literacy skills training
- Emergency Financial Assistance

Table 1 illustrates the number of young adults served in each Independent Living program by lead agency during the past two State Fiscal Years (SFYs). Florida has experienced a 12.5% decrease in Extended Foster Care participation over the last SFY. However, there has been a 30.4% increase in Aftercare Services participation which is likely the difference. Overall, there was minimal difference in young adults served statewide amongst all programs between the past two SFY.

Lead Agency	2022-2023			2023-2024		
	Aftercare	EFC	PESS	Aftercare	EFC	PESS
Brevard Family Partnership (now known as Family Partnerships of Central Florida as of May 2024)	27	104	11	15	59	17
ChildNet, Inc	24	166	112	41	142	112
ChildNet Palm Beach	11	118	62	27	116	61
Children's Network of Hillsborough	57	146	60	79	99	49
Children's Network of SW Florida	8	65	34	17	32	61
Citrus Health Network	48	269	186	127	247	153
Community Partnership for Children	16	76	47	16	53	55
Communities Connected for Kids	11	28	26	13	29	23
Embrace Families (now known as Family Partnerships of Central Florida as of 5/11/2024)	38	145	57	N/A	N/A	N/A
Family Partnerships of Central Florida (combined for Embrace and Brevard Family Partnership)	N/A	N/A	N/A	45	165	81
Family Support Services	23	107	31	18	96	33
FSS Suncoast	49	105	55	54	100	54
Heartland for Children	37	91	29	36	82	41
Kids Central, Inc	54	54	39	51	65	39
Kids First of Florida, Inc	0	27	13	2	17	14
NWF Health Network-East	19	67	27	16	78	30
NWF Health Network-West	11	100	19	25	89	22
Partnership for Strong Families	6	16	5	8	22	7
Safe Children Coalition	29	37	16	19	38	19
St Johns County Commission (aka Family Integrity Program)	0	12	8		11	8
Statewide	467	1733	857	609	1540	879

Data and Outcomes

Secondary Education

For each lead agency, Table 2 displays the number of young adults who have achieved a High School Diploma, GED, or Special Diploma in the past three SFYs. The data continues to indicate academic success with an increase of 128 more young adults achieving a diploma or equivalent.

Table 2. Young Adults who have a High School Diploma, GED Certificate, or Certificate of Completion/Special Diploma

LEAD AGENCY	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
Brevard Family Partnership (now known as Family Partnerships of Central Florida as of 5/11/2024)	19	30	N/A
ChildNet-Broward	60	110	125
ChildNet-Palm Beach	30	54	84
Children's Network of SW Florida	36	21	71
Citrus Health Network	73	207	206
Communities Connected for Kids	17	4	3
Community Partnership for Children	24	18	15
Family Support Services- Suncoast	81	71	75
Children's Network of Hillsborough	39	83	81
Embrace Families (now known as Family Partnerships of Central Florida as of 5/11/2024)	66	99	N/A
Family Partnerships of Central Florida (combined for Embrace and Brevard Family Partnership)	N/A	N/A	141
NWF Health Network – West (Previously known as Families First Network)	24	53	56
St Johns County Commission (aka Family Integrity Program)	2	8	8
Family Support Services of North Florida	31	31	26
Heartland for Children	32	20	38
Kids Central, Inc.	19	33	38
Kids First of Florida, Inc.	4	9	5
Northwest Florida Health Network-East	27	58	54
Partnership for Strong Families	19	8	9
Safe Children Coalition	27	25	35
Statewide	630	942	1070

Postsecondary Education

Chart 1 below reflects the number of young adults enrolled in the PESS program who have successfully obtained a post-secondary or graduate degree in the past two SFYs. There has been a significant decline in the number of young adults obtaining a degree this SFY despite the statewide enrollment in the program remaining about the same. The Department believes this decline could partially be attributed to a data entry issue and will be looking further into the matter to correct it.

There continues to be a focus on ensuring the PESS program not only encourages young adults to obtain postsecondary education, but also that they achieve self-sufficiency. This has been an ongoing effort by increasing frequency of contact, quality of contact, and requiring completion of financial plans and My Pathways to Success Plans every 6 months for participants.

Chart 1: Number of Young Adults in PESS with a Postsecondary Degree

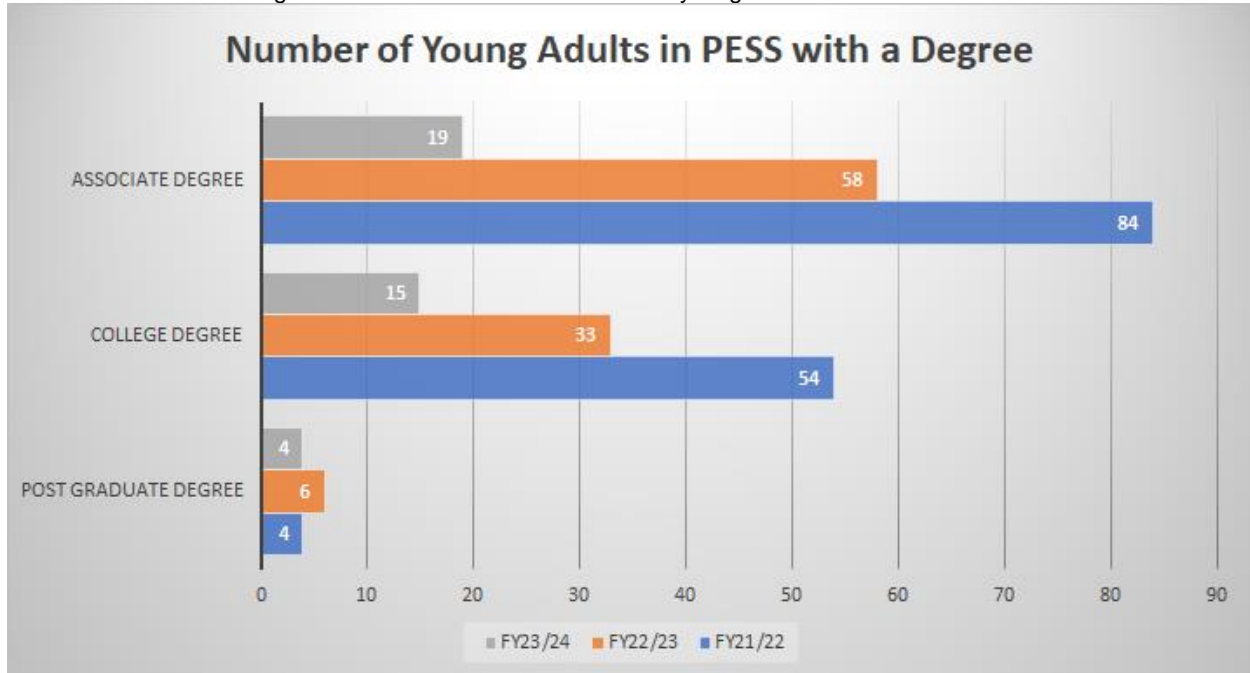
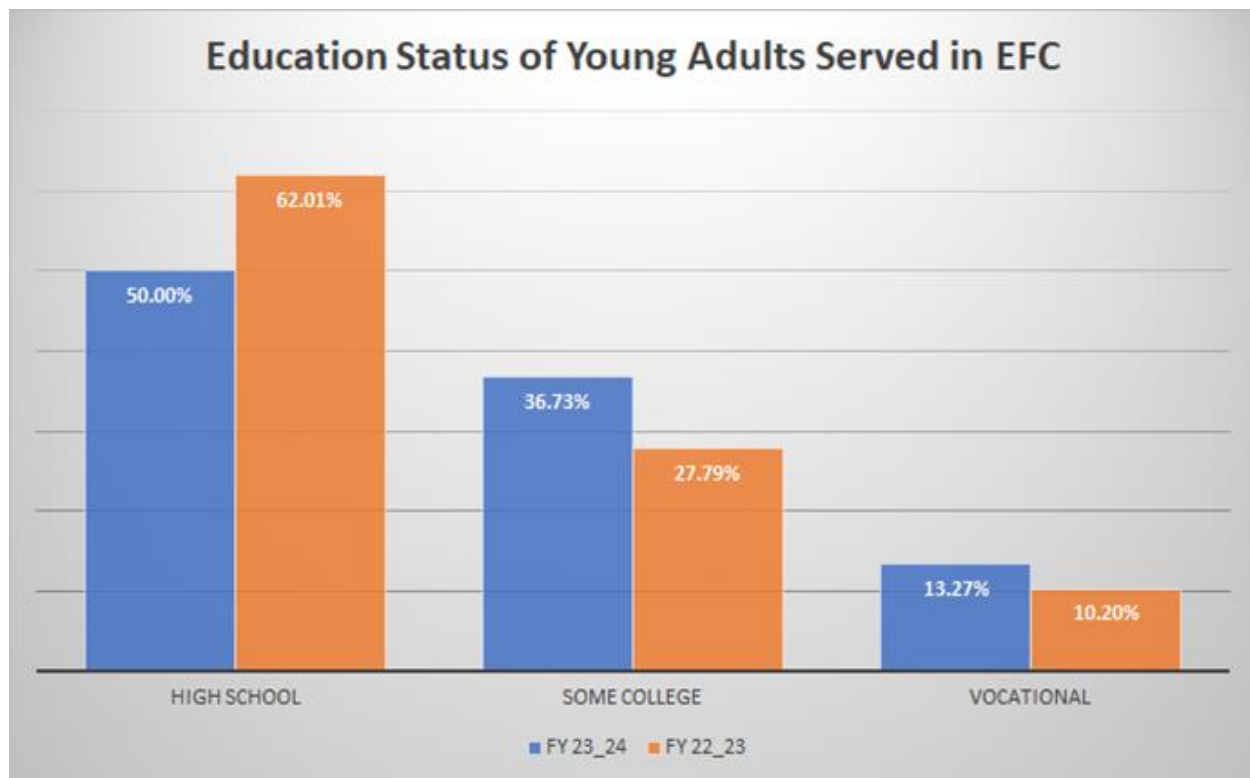


Chart 2 below shows the number of young adults in EFC that are enrolled in high school, college, or vocational school. It should be noted that this is reflective only of the young adults whose qualifying activity is education with an open education record.

Chart 2: Education Status of Young Adults Served in EFC SFY 2023-2024



Employment (EFC)

Table 3 represents lead agency data on the count of young adults involved in the EFC Program who have been employed in the past two SFYs. It is important to note that obtaining employment is not the sole requirement for eligibility in this program. Recent data suggests that more program participants are choosing to pursue secondary education as the activity that qualifies them for the program as represented in the increase in secondary degree obtainment. Consequently, there has been a slight decline in the number of young adults in the program who have reported employment compared to the previous SFY.

Table 3. Number of Young Adults in EFC with a Recorded Period of Employment

Lead Agency	2022-2023	2023-2024
Brevard Family Partnership (now known as Family Partnerships of Central Florida as of 5/11/2024)	18	N/A
ChildNet-Broward	26	29
ChildNet-Palm Beach	6	12
Children's Network of SW Florida	14	14
Citrus Health Network	75	59
Communities Connected for Kids	3	5
Community Partnership for Children	1	2
Family Support Services- Suncoast	24	16
Children's Network of Hillsborough	44	20

Embrace Families (now known as Family Partnerships of Central Florida as of 5/11/2024)	59	N/A
Family Partnerships of Central Florida (combined for Embrace and Brevard Family Partnership)	N/A	73
Northwest Florida Health Network-West (Formerly Families First Network)	51	48
St Johns County Commission (aka Family Integrity Program)	9	5
Family Support Services of North Florida	33	27
Heartland for Children	28	17
Kids Central, Inc.	3	11
Kids First of Florida, Inc.	8	8
Northwest Florida Health Network-East	18	21
Partnership for Strong Families	3	5
Safe Children Coalition	13	23
Statewide	436	395
Source: OCWDRU #1169, FSFN Data Repository		

Employment (Aftercare)

Table 4 provides the number of young adults who received Aftercare for the previous two SFY's and had a recorded period of employment. The number of young adults who have recorded employment in Aftercare has increased 19% from the previous SFY.

Although young adults are not required to seek employment or attend school as an ongoing condition for eligibility in Aftercare, they must make efforts to complete activities to become self-sufficient. These types of activities, as part of the recently updated Aftercare Services Plan, will assist with transitioning the young adult towards financial self-sufficiency.

Table 4. Number of Young Adults in Aftercare with a Recorded Period of Employment

Lead Agency	2022-2023	2023-2024
Brevard Family Partnership (now Family Partnerships of Central Florida)	9	10
ChildNet-Broward	5	5
ChildNet-Palm Beach	0	2
Children's Network of SW Florida	5	0
Citrus Health Network	22	41
Communities Connected for Kids	0	2
Community Partnership for Children	0	2
Family Support Services- Suncoast	2	10
Family Partnerships of Central Florida (combined Brevard Family Partnership and Embrace Families as of 5/11/24)	N/A	17
Children's Network of Hillsborough	5	25
Embrace Families (now Family Partnerships of Central Florida)	21	N/A
Northwest Florida Health Network-West (formerly Families First Network)	31	13
St Johns County Commission (aka Family Integrity Program)	2	0
Family Support Services of North Florida	5	6

Heartland for Children	11	10
Kids Central, Inc.	1	4
Kids First of Florida, Inc.	8	0
Northwest Florida Health Network-East	0	2
Partnership for Strong Families	0	0
Safe Children Coalition	4	7
Statewide	131	156
Source: OCWDRU #1169, FSN Data Repository		

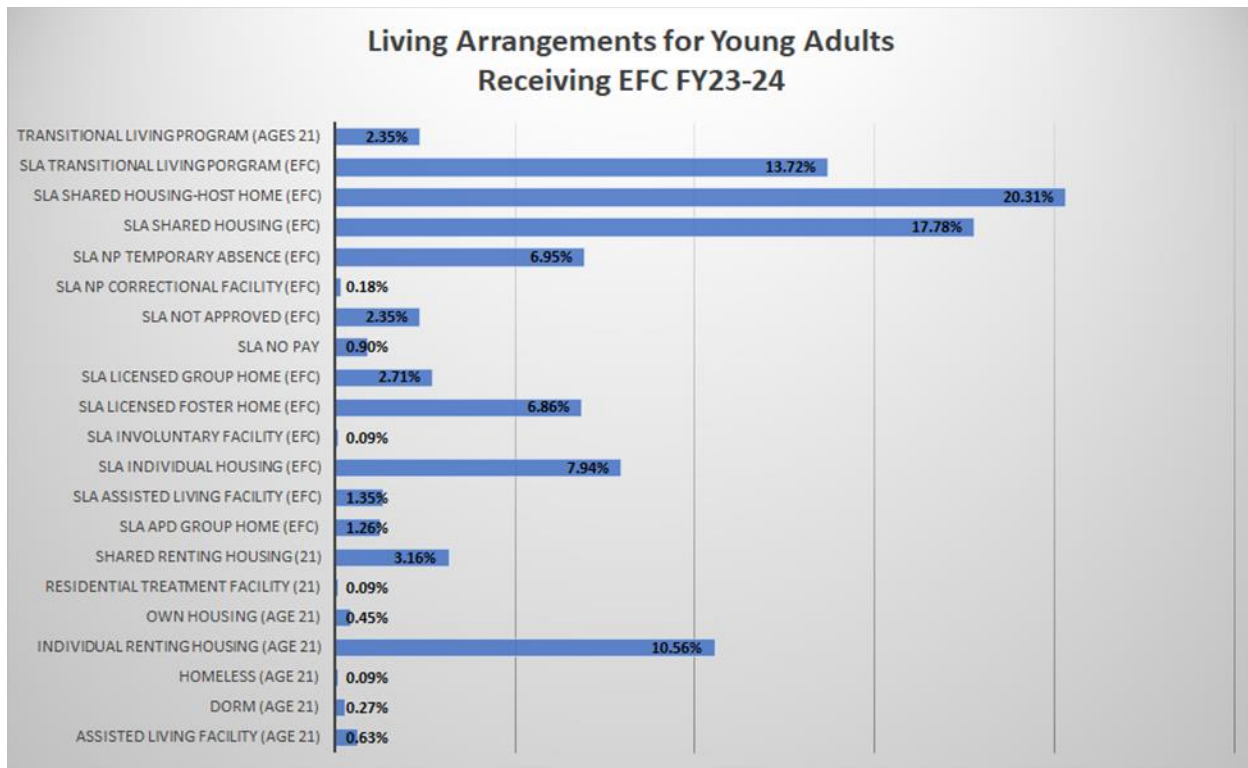
Housing

The Independent Living population presents unique challenges in housing young adults in each program due to different placement requirements, funding, housing availability, and the young adult's readiness for independent living. EFC requires the placement to be approved by the CBC lead agency and must meet the young adult's required level of supervision as determined by the Supervised Living Arrangement Assessment. Housing options for EFC include licensed foster home or group home, host home, transitional living program, shared housing, dormitories, assisted living facilities, residential treatment facilities such as a substance use treatment facility or CSEC safe house, placements licensed by the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, or individual housing. PESS and Aftercare do not require CBC lead agency approval of the living arrangement, so the challenges are more related to lack of affordable housing, sufficient income to live independently, appropriate supports for the young adults, and their readiness for maintaining independent living. Regardless of the program the young adult is currently in, the Department maintains an obligation to ensure young adults have a safe and stable home to fully transition to independence and become self-sufficient.

Throughout the state there has been an increase of transitional living programs (TLPs). TLPs offer a level of supervision for young adults while still allowing them to maintain their independence often without 24-hour staff. The programs typically provide housing but also oversight of qualifying activity, some transportation, life skill development services, and supportive adults. These are run by individual agencies with the room and board rates negotiated directly with the CBC lead agencies. The significant increase in these programs is valuable due to the requirement and burden for the lead agencies to identify placements for hard to place young adults; however, the programs are also increasing room and board rates likely above and beyond the identified needs of the young adults. There is currently no standard or licensing requirement for any type of EFC housing outside of level 2 licensed care or group homes.

Chart 3 displays the supervised living arrangements for young adults enrolled in EFC for the SFY 2023-2024. This chart is initial data to include all EFC placement types (out of home and living arrangements for those ages 21-22). The most common out of home placement type for young adults in EFC are our host home providers at 20.3%.

Chart 3: Approved Placement Type Types for EFC



Financial

There continues to be a focus on financial accountability for the lead agencies in managing and dispersing the Independent Living budget. The FSFN and eligibility work completed by the field directly impacts the payments, so it is imperative that each department understands the impact of the accuracy of their work. There has been a request by the Council to further understand the impact of Title IV-E reimbursement. The Department will develop guidance for the field in conjunction with the Department's Office of CBC and Managing Entity Financially Accountability to ensure the appropriate information is disseminated.

Table 5. FY 2023-2024 Independent Living Service Payments

SFY23-24 GAA	
Independent Living (Recurring Base)	\$ 38,195,652
SB 80/96 Requirements - Rec GR	\$ 1,683,938
IL Case Coordination / Pre-IL Life Skills & Normalcy - Rec GR	\$ 5,710,752
Increase in PESS Monthly Payment - Rec GR	\$ 8,352,000
SFY 23-24 Appropriation	\$ 53,942,342

During FY 2023-2024, the Legislature appropriated nearly \$54 million for Independent Living services which was the same as the previous SFY. The total appropriation includes the cost of case management associated with the delivery of services to young adults and the supplemental room and board payment to foster care parents for providing independent life skills and normalcy supports to youth ages 13 through 17. If a lead agency exceeds its Independent Living allocation, the excess comes out of its core funding.

Transportation and the Keys to Independence Program

In 2014, the Florida Keys to Independence Act was enacted into law. This program is specifically designed for youth and young adults ages 15 through 21 who are in out-of-home care, Extended Foster Care or PESS. The program seeks to aid its target population in obtaining a driver's license and car insurance. Keys to Independence is currently managed through a contract with the Department by FLITE Center who obtained the contract from Embrace Families in May 2024.

As of June 2024:

- 2,985 youth and young adults in the state of Florida have obtained a learner's permit.
- 1,705 have obtained a Florida driver's license.
- 9,733 youth and young adults have been enrolled in the Keys to Independence program statewide and 3,709 remained actively enrolled in the program as of the same date.
- Since the expansion to include eligible PESS clients in April 2022, there have been approximately 500 young adults in Florida enrolled in PESS who are currently receiving services through the Keys to Independence Program.
- 267 youth/young adults have received behind the wheel driving lessons.
- 165 insurance policies were paid for by Keys to Independence
- 80% of eligible youth/young adults are enrolled in the program.

In addition to providing support through the Keys to Independence program, young adults can also discuss obtaining or accessing reliable transportation and other resources like bus schedules, public transportation or ride sharing during completion of their My Pathways to Success Plan. Young adults who continue to receive Sunshine Child Welfare Specialty Plan through Medicaid are also eligible for transportation to all medical, dental, and behavioral health appointments as well as three social transports per month. Through the combined efforts of the Keys to Independence program and the standardized My Pathways to Success Plan, the Department has observed a rise in young adults' ability to acquire driver's licenses without incurring any expenses, thanks to the additional support, resources, and incentives that motivate them to actively participate.

Health and Well-Being

Young adults who age out in department's custody at 18 and were receiving Medicaid are eligible for it to continue until they turn 26. Sunshine Child Welfare Specialty Plan representatives take an active part in the young adult's healthcare by participating in Transition Plan staffings beginning at age 17, providing direct services and assistance to the young adult, and remaining accessible to the Independent Living field staff to assist with direct needs. Most young adults maintain enrollment with the Sunshine Child Welfare Specialty Plan until they turn 21 opening the following additional benefits to assist with improving well-being and transitioning to self-sufficiency:

- Specialized Care Management
- Targeted transition planning in coordination with the lead agencies to address healthcare needs and social determinants of health (housing, education, employment)
- Training/workshops for youth related to accessing healthcare as they transition.
- Partnerships and coordination with agencies/programs serving transitional independent living youth throughout the state.
- Care Grants-up to \$150 per year, per youth for services or supplies including social or physical activities, such as gym memberships, swimming lessons, sports equipment or supplies, art supplies, and application fees for post high school educational needs.
- Transition Assistance Funds-a one-time payment of up to \$500 per young adult transitioning out of foster care or Extended Foster Care between the ages of 18-21. These funds may be used toward services and items such as rental deposits, utility services, or household supplies (i.e., linens, appliances, furniture).

Youth and young adults who are eligible for Medicaid over the age of 18 years of age are eligible to transfer their Medicaid to Florida, and Florida young adults are eligible to transfer their Medicaid to other states. In Florida, if a young adult from another state wishes to apply for Medicaid, then they only need to self-attest that they are former foster youth to continue Medicaid enrollment status in Florida.

Historically there has been limited focus on well-being of young adults; however, the Department and the field have been utilizing the Young Adult Receiving Services Report (YARS) which provides data on most recent appointments and providers. This report allows the Independent Living field to have quick access to information regarding the young adult's health care that opens the opportunity for guidance and direction.

It will continue to be a focus of the Department to reduce high risk behaviors of young adults in the Independent Living program; therefore, increasing their overall well-being.

Connections

The Department understands the value of strong bonds between caring adults and young adults. These relationships prove even more critical for young adults with lived foster care experience due to lack of familial involvement, trauma prior to and during Department involvement as a minor, educational delays, and barriers to becoming independent. Research has shown that for those experiencing trauma, one supportive person can be the difference in overcoming that as an adult. Feedback from site visits and training with the Independent Living field has emphasized the long-lasting impact of these connections for young adults.

The Department continues to actively promote the creation of supportive adult connections, mentor relationships, and positive peer connections. CBC lead agencies and their providers have increased the hiring of young adults with personal foster care experience to form relationships with their peers, guiding them through the transition to adulthood. There continues to be an increase in the number of youth voice groups around the state that help lead initiatives to better foster care and Independent Living as well as guide new policies and legislation.

Moreover, the Department offers resources to CBC lead agencies to promote the development of supportive relationships. The enhanced My Pathways to Success Plan, along with statewide training initiatives, have placed a strong emphasis on the importance of adult support networks and mentors. To aid both staff and young adults in locating mentors and forging positive connections, facilitator guides were created and contain a specific section dedicated to the identification and cultivation of supportive adults. In cases where no supportive adults are identified, a documented plan must be formulated to outline the steps for finding a mentor or establishing a lasting positive connection that will extend into adulthood.

Recent expansion of the Hope Florida program also serves as a resource to identify caring and committed adults for Florida's youth. Hope Florida – A Pathway to Promise assists youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood by providing a long-term mentor and offering a strong start to their future. Utilizing both Guardian ad Litem volunteers and Department of Elder Affairs' Hope Heroes, youth aging out of foster care are paired with a trained mentor, who will provide guidance, motivation, emotional support, and help to develop skills and resources for their future.