

# Promoting the Health and Well-Being of Current and Former Foster Youth



## Children and youth in foster care often have complex health needs because of trauma

Children and youth in foster care have experienced abuse, neglect, and other adverse childhood experiences that can negatively impact their health. In fact, half of all children and youth in foster care have endured four or more adverse childhood experiences.<sup>i</sup> As a result of this trauma, they often have complex physical, mental health, and developmental needs.<sup>ii</sup> Children and youth in foster care are up to six times more likely than their peers to experience mental health challenges<sup>iii</sup>, and between 35 and 60 percent of children and youth have at least one chronic or acute physical health condition that needs treatment at the time they enter foster care.<sup>iv</sup> Moreover, recent research found that children with any Child Protection System history had three times the odds of death by suicide compared to children with no history.<sup>v</sup> The health issues faced by children and youth in foster care often continue into adulthood.

## Children and youth in foster care face barriers accessing needed care

Children and youth in foster care have health coverage through Medi-Cal and those who age out stay covered until age 26. Despite this coverage, they continue to face barriers accessing needed services. Common barriers include:

- Care coordination can be challenging because of the multiple individuals and systems involved and frequent moves.
- Health history is often unavailable or incomplete at the time of foster care entry.
- There is a shortage of trauma-informed providers who understand the unique needs of children in foster care.
- Long waits for services.
- Difficulty navigating the complex health care system for caregivers and social workers.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends children in foster care receive more frequent monitoring given their special health care needs. However, many children in foster care in California do not receive timely preventive exams, required screenings, or follow-up services when a need is identified, especially to meet their emotional needs.

## Conclusion

In order to heal from their trauma and thrive, children and youth in foster care need loving and responsive caregivers and access to comprehensive health services tailored to their individual needs. Recent state reforms to the Medi-Cal system simplified access criteria to now allow children and youth in foster care to access specialty mental services based on their history of trauma. Moving forward, it will be important to ensure a broad continuum of behavioral health services, including non-traditional therapeutic supports, are universally available and that in practice children and youth in foster care can easily access all needed services on an ongoing basis without requiring a mental health diagnosis or deterioration in their emotional well-being. Additionally, it will be critical to continue to promote cross-system collaboration between child welfare and health and strengthen cross-system oversight and accountability. Access to comprehensive health services is imperative to helping children and youth in foster care heal and thrive, supporting efforts to stabilize youth in nurturing placements, meeting Continuum of Care Reform's (CCR) goal to reduce the state child welfare system's dependence on congregate care, and ensuring young adults aging out of foster care are able to successfully navigate the transition to adulthood.

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<sup>i</sup> Connecting Youth Placed Out of County to Trauma-Informed Care, Trauma Transformed, available at <http://traumatransformed.org/wp-content/uploads/BTC-TT1-care-coord-report.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> Health Care Issue for Children and Adolescents in Foster Care and Kinship Care, Pediatrics, October 2015, Volume 136, Issue 4, available at <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/136/4/e1131>

<sup>iii</sup> Connecting Youth Placed Out of County to Trauma-Informed Care, Trauma Transformed, available at <http://traumatransformed.org/wp-content/uploads/BTC-TT1-care-coord-report.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> Child Welfare: Health Care Needs of Children in Foster Care and Related Federal Issues, Congressional Research Service, Nov. 2014, available at <https://fas.org/spp/crs/misc/R42378.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> A Population-Based Examination of Suicide and Child Protection System Involvement, Journal of Adolescent Health, February 2021, available at <https://www.datanetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/A-Population-Based-Examination-of-Suicide-and-Child-Protection-System-Involvement.pdf>