

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



Background

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.ⁱ As a result of this trauma, they often have complex physical, behavioral health, and developmental needs.ⁱⁱ Children and youth in foster care are up to six times more likely than their peers to experience mental health challenges,ⁱⁱⁱ and 35-60% of children and youth have at least one chronic or acute physical health condition that needs treatment at the time they enter foster care.^{iv} Without quality services and supports, the health challenges faced by children and youth in foster care often continue into adulthood.

Children and youth in foster care have health care insurance 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:

- Challenging care coordination because of the multiple individuals and systems involved and frequent moves.
- Unavailable or incomplete health history at the time of foster care entry.
- A shortage of providers who understand and are equipped to meet the 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 unique health care needs. However, many children in foster care in California do not receive timely preventive exams, required screenings, or follow-up services, especially to meet their behavioral health needs.

Next Steps

Access to comprehensive targeted health care services is imperative to helping children and youth in foster care heal and thrive, supporting stable placements in family homes, reducing the use of congregate care, and ensuring young adults aging out of foster care are able to successfully navigate the transition to adulthood. Moving forward, it will be important to ensure:

1. Effective collaboration and coordination among the new Enhanced Care Management benefit under California Advancing and Innovating Medi-Cal (CalAIM), the Health Care Program for Children in Foster Care (HCPCFC), the Child Welfare Liaison role within Managed Care Plans, and others involved in health care coordination for children and youth in foster care;
2. The effective formulation and implementation of various state health care reforms with the potential to improve service access and quality for children and youth in foster care, including efforts within CalAIM and the Behavioral Health Community-Based Organized Networks of Equitable Care and Treatment (BH-CONNECT) Initiative and the roll out of the Child Welfare Services-California Automated Response and Engagement System (CWS-CARES);
3. A broad continuum of behavioral health services, including non-traditional therapeutic supports, are universally available and easily accessible to children and youth in foster care on an ongoing basis;
4. Statewide solutions are identified and implemented for youth in foster care whose health care is disrupted by moves between and within counties; and
5. Cross-system collaboration between child welfare and health and strong cross-system oversight and accountability.

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

ⁱⁱ 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>

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

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