

Governor Jay Inslee  
Office of the Governor  
PO Box 40002  
Olympia, WA 98504-0002

Cc: Secretary Ross Hunter  
Department of Children, Youth, and Families  
1500 Jefferson St SE  
Olympia, WA 98501

April 7, 2020

Dear Governor Inslee,

We recognize the challenges COVID-19 has placed on you and your administration and deeply appreciate your swift action and leadership in this time of crisis. It has already saved lives, and we are grateful for this. We write to ask that you take action to meet the health and safety needs of older youth in the foster care system and youth who are aging out.

Youth leaving the care of the child welfare system in Washington are among the most vulnerable in our state and that vulnerability has increased during the current public health crisis. At 18 or 21, dependent youth face uncertainty and an abrupt end to state support. About 350 foster youth turn 18 in care each year; currently there are about 200 young adults age 20 in Extended Foster Care who will age out when they turn 21. With your leadership, Washington has made great progress in supporting the social, emotional, housing, and education needs of older youth in foster care. Without continued leadership and action now, youth who are aging out of care face homelessness, economic instability, and vulnerability.

We urge your administration and the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) to ensure the stability, health, safety, and well-being of youth in foster care during the COVID-19 crisis. Our main priority at this time should be to keep young people safe, housed, and connected to services and caring adults so that they can make a successful transition to adulthood. This approach affirms the state's commitment to prevent youth from exiting systems of care into homelessness. We believe the following steps are necessary to accomplish these goals:

**1) Maintain safe and stable housing for foster youth at all costs:**

- **Waive requirements for Extended Foster Care (EFC) related to participation in school, higher education and training, program participation, and treatment, and expedite the Voluntary Placement Agreement process for youth entering EFC.**

Extended Foster Care is a lifeline for young people at this time. For many young people, work, school, and programs which are tied to their eligibility for EFC have been closed indefinitely or

eliminated. DCYF should waive these eligibility requirements for youth currently in EFC and for youth who are between the ages of 18 and 21 who wish to enroll in EFC. This may require a statutory waiver. The state of Oregon has already taken this step and should be looked to as a model. DCYF should also expedite the Voluntary Placement Agreement (VPA) process for youth entering EFC and ensure that their stipend is likewise expedited so that youth have access to funds to obtain or maintain housing.

- **Place a moratorium on discharging any youth from EFC during this crisis and for 12 months after the end of the crisis and ensure DCYF has adequate funding to maintain housing and caseworkers for young people.**

Cutting young people off from their main source of support and stability during a health crisis will result in harm to youth. Safe and stable housing is the cornerstone of this support. DCYF should not discharge youth from care during this crisis; this includes youth who would otherwise age out on their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday if they do not have stable housing to exit to. This would require a statutory waiver to continue serving youth beyond age 21. It may also include rental assistance, additional funding for foster parents, help with security deposits and fees, negotiating with landlords, and support to apply for housing vouchers. Youth who lost housing due to closure of college housing options must be assisted to immediately find and maintain safe and stable housing.

- **Require DCYF to provide expedited processes for youth to re-enter care that allows their immediate needs to be met.**

Re-entry into care is a crucial safety net available to youth who aged out of care and are under age 21, but who are not currently in EFC. Re-entry is an important mechanism for responding to the immediate needs of youth in crisis. Closure of most courts and local DCYF offices make re-entry very challenging for young people in need of the supports that EFC offers. DCYF must provide a way to respond to these cases and provide immediate placement and services—including expedited stipends—to youth so that their time in unsafe situations can be reduced. As noted above, DCYF should waive requirements for EFC re-entry eligibility during the COVID-19 crisis. If DCYF still declines to enter into a Voluntary Placement Agreement with a youth, DCYF should assist the youth with filing a notice of intent to file a dependency petition under RCW 13.34.268.

## **2) Support and maintain connection to education and community:**

- **Ensure youth and families have access to cell phones, data plans, laptops, and internet in order to remain connected to school, family, and friends.**

During the school closure, OSPI has directed school districts to ensure that students are maintaining educational progress through distance learning. This often requires reliable access to internet and a computer, which youth in foster care may or may not have access to.

Washington state colleges plan to conduct spring quarter entirely online. In-person visitation with family, including siblings, has largely been suspended. Case workers should ensure that every youth in care, including those in EFC, has adequate access to technology to remain connected to educational opportunities and to their family and other support system during this crisis. DCYF staff should also ensure that parents and caregivers also have access to adequate and appropriate technology in order to facilitate ongoing family connection during this difficult and isolating time.

- **Expand availability of transition planning and behavioral health services for older youth in care, including youth in EFC.**

This is a destabilizing time, and youth in EFC who live alone may be particularly isolated. Case workers should increase the frequency of contact and proactively ensure their case load has adequate support. Youth should be proactively connected with counseling and other behavioral health supports through Coordinated Care or contracted providers. And case workers should revisit transition plans with youth as circumstances are likely to have changed dramatically.

### **3) Meet financial needs of foster youth and caregivers:**

- **Increase Chafee Aftercare funds available to support youth who have aged out to meet their immediate and basic needs during the crisis.**

Like many citizens in our state, young adults who have left foster care are now struggling to maintain employment and make ends meet. The Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) expands Chafee eligibility to age 23, but the federal government did not provide any additional funding to states to serve this older population. Youth in EFC and who have aged out need financial assistance during this crisis to meet basic needs including food, clothing, and utilities including phone service and internet. Staff at Independent Living programs can also help youth navigate unemployment benefits, signing up for food stamps, connecting with employment opportunities, and other crucial connections. DCYF must increase contracted Independent Living providers' ability to serve youth by augmenting Chafee funds with state dollars to adequately respond to the needs of youth up to age 23.

- **Increase the family based setting and appropriate living arrangements that can be provided for older youth.**

Now, more than ever, child welfare agencies must be supported in connecting older youth with family and kin so that they have support and connection to weather crises. They should also identify potential foster family homes that can serve older foster youth. This includes providing financial support and concrete goods to caregivers, and access to telehealth counseling options.

The federal government has made several additional revenue streams available that may help fund a number of these recommendations. These include:

- \$45 million in new Title IV-B-1 funds with no state match requirements
- A temporary 6.2% increase in FMAP for Title IV-E Foster Care, Adoption Assistance, and Guardianship Assistance
- \$30 million for Washington state in Title I education funds
- Increases to the Child Care Development Block Grant, SNAP, Community Service Block Grant and other crucial public supports and benefits

We urge you to do all in your power to access these funds to prevent homelessness and instability for youth in care. Additionally, our resilient provider community and generous philanthropic community are already working hard to address urgent needs as they arise and stand to partner with you and your administration to ensure safety and stability for young people.

Thank you again for your leadership in this time of crisis, and for investing in the health, safety, and wellbeing of our most vulnerable young people and the caregivers who support them.

Sincerely,

*(in alphabetical order)*

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