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Supporting California Counties in Transitioning Foster Youth to Independence: How Electronic Record Systems Can Help Serve the Goals of AB 12

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Electronic record systems designed specifically for foster youth can be used as a case management, record keeping, and empowerment tool within the context of the youth's formal transition to self-sufficiency and adulthood. This document describes county requirements under AB 12 to equip transition age youth with their essential records and highlights opportunities for integrating electronic record systems into workflows related to formally transitioning foster youth into independence. Such a strategy holds the promise to streamline workloads for caseworkers and enhance the self-sufficiency and empowerment of youth as they move into adulthood.

INTRODUCTION

Children in foster care often experience frequent changes in homes, schools, and service providers—disruptions that lead to fragmented care and disorganized, incomplete, and outdated life records. This predicament follows foster youth into independence, despite laws intended to give them the support they need through that transition. However, an emerging set of digital tools offers a solution. This issue brief provides guidance on how counties—and youth themselves—can use digital tools to smooth the transition to independence and improve a youth's chances for success.

Policy Context

The federal Fostering Connections Act, signed into law in 2008, provides an option and funding stream for states to extend foster care services to age 21. The Act enables youth who turn 18 to live in more independent living arrangements while still remaining in formal foster care.¹ The impetus for this policy solution was mounting evidence that former foster youth fare poorly when they exit the system at age 18; studies have shown that on a number of outcome measures—including educational attainment, employment, housing stability, dependence on public assistance, and incarceration—former foster youth often struggle well into adulthood.²

In 2010, California seized the opportunity afforded by the Fostering Connections Act and passed Assembly Bill 12 (AB 12), legislation that extends welfare benefits and services to all foster youth in California up to the age of 21 if they choose to remain in the program past their 18th birthday.³ This law represents an important advancement in public policy as it relates to supporting the future success of former foster youth, who, prior to the passage of AB 12, were emancipated from the system with few institutional or social supports to aid them on their journey to self-sufficiency.

To help put youth on a glide path to independence, AB 12 requires foster youth to demonstrate progress towards education or employment goals in order to continue to receive benefits and services. Namely, they must show that they are engaged in one of the following four activities:

1. Completing high school or an equivalent program;
2. Enrolled in college, community college, or a vocational education program at least half time;
3. Working at least 80 hours a month or participating in activities that will lead to employment in the future; or
4. Unable to participate in any of the above due to a medical condition.⁴

Since its passage, AB 12, also known as “Extended Foster Care,” has proven to be popular with foster youth and higher than expected numbers have opted into the program—in Los Angeles County, for example, 80 percent of youth enrolled in foster care choose to extend it when they turn 18, whereas lawmakers estimated that only 50 percent (statewide) would.⁵ In 2015, there were approximately 9,000 youth, ages 18–20, in foster care, a 211 percent increase from 2010.⁶ The popularity of the program is good news for foster youth who are benefiting from a longer period of assistance and case management during a tumultuous period of transition. But it has also presented some challenges for county caseworkers who, in many instances, are already struggling to manage high caseloads (California's child welfare system is administered at the county level, and the state has the largest foster care population in the country).⁷

Test Site: Sacramento County

To test the best opportunities for and feasibility of integrating an electronic record into a county's Transition to Independent Living Plan process, The Children's Partnership (TCP), a nonprofit, partnered with Sacramento County on a "proof of concept" initiative in 2015. The partnership included AltruIT, a technology company that owns an electronic record designed specifically for foster youth.

For the proof of concept, Sacramento County's Child Protective Services Division staff, TCP, and AltruIT jointly explored how best to integrate an electronic record keeping tool into the formal emancipation from care process, which includes the development of a key planning document with the youth: a 90-Day Transition Plan (or Emancipation Plan). This plan outlines actions and steps needed to help the youth transition to independence and adulthood.

Through direct observation of an emancipation meeting and interviews with a county facilitator, two county caseworkers, and a supervisor within the Sacramento County Independent Living Program office, the team identified optimal scenarios for using an electronic record system to support the transaction and safekeeping of essential documents during county-led emancipation meetings. TCP also noted ways that the tool could be used by the youth to store, view, download, upload, and transmit information and documents after the meeting, thus alleviating caseworkers and state-level agencies of the task of tracking down and replacing lost or missing documents for youth. Lessons from this exercise informed TCP's implementation strategy recommendations for counties detailed in this document.

Critical Records in Transition

Per AB 12, one important task charged to caseworkers is ensuring that key personal records are given to foster youth to support their formal transition to Extended Foster Care and adulthood. This transfer of documents ensures that youth can take charge of their own affairs as they assume key life responsibilities, including getting a driver's license, finding housing, applying for benefits, seeking employment, and securing financing for higher education.

However, managing and maintaining these essential documents—which include health, welfare, education, and court records—is time-consuming for caseworkers, particularly when youth require regular assistance with tracking down and replacing lost documents that go missing as a result of frequent changes in living arrangements. Indeed, acquiring, updating, and accessing key records—such as birth certificates, social security cards, transcripts, and so on—can become a cumbersome task for caseworkers and youth alike. Counties would benefit from a mechanism for storing such documents in a format that allows transitioning youth to easily access and update them on their own and caseworkers to conveniently reference them for case management purposes.

COUNTY REQUIREMENTS UNDER CALIFORNIA CODE

According to California law, counties must ensure that transition age youth, those who are at or near their 18th birthday, are in possession of their essential life documents when they leave traditional foster care. Specifically,

Welfare and Institutions (W&I) Code Section 391 states that a court cannot terminate the State's jurisdiction over a non-minor dependent that turns 18 until the child welfare division

of the jurisdictional county's human services agency has submitted a report verifying that key information, documents, and services have been given to the youth. This official "hand-off" is designed to help the youth operate independently outside of the foster care system. Family and placement history, any personal or family photographs held by the county child welfare services program, and other critical pieces of identification are given to the youth at this time, including:⁸

- A certified birth certificate;
- A Social Security Card;
- An identification card and/or driver's license;
- A proof of citizenship or residency status;
- Death certificate(s) of parent or parents;
- A proof of county dependency status for education aid applications;
- School records;
- Immunization records;
- Medical records;
- A Health and Education Passport;
- A work permit;
- Credit report;
- Family history and placement history;
- The names, phone numbers, and addresses of siblings and other relatives; and
- Information regarding jurisdiction termination hearings.

At the official "Emancipation Conference" (also called a "Transition Conference") near the youth's 18th birthday, the county caseworker gives the youth paper copies of the referenced documents for his or her safekeeping. The department must also provide certain information related to the child's time in foster care, their health care and education history, and the youth's official plan for independent living outlined in a written 90-Day Transition Plan.

HOW ELECTRONIC RECORD SYSTEMS CAN HELP

Managing these valuable documents is a new, often unfamiliar task for transition age foster youth. And as these young adults move into Extended Foster Care, they may again experience frequent life disruptions and changes in living situations, which will compromise their ability to keep hard copy documents safely in their possession. For youth, the loss of these personal items, especially irreplaceable family photos, can be both upsetting and frustrating. Further, these young adults miss out on valuable opportunities like financial aid and employment when documents to support their applications are unavailable.

Fortunately, a host of consumer-oriented online record systems offer a workable solution for these problems commonly experienced by youth graduating out of traditional foster care and the busy county caseworkers assigned to assist them.⁹

Electronic record systems designed for vulnerable youth can provide a safe, secure, stable online repository for copies of these essential documents.

Implementation Strategies for Counties

Based on input from county-level staff, including Sacramento County (see the call-out box above), The Children's Partnership identified optimal opportunities for integrating an electronic record system into existing workflows and processes associated with the youth's transition to Extended Foster Care. Below we describe the practical steps needed to put such a strategy in place.

1. The Transition to Independent Living Planning Process

An ideal time to introduce an electronic record resource is the first Transition to Independent Living Planning (TILP) meeting with a youth, which may occur several years prior to emancipation or transition to Extended Foster Care (such planning typically starts at age 16 but could begin as young as age 14). At this meeting, the county caseworker collaborates with the youth to develop a TILP document and typically updates it every six months to reflect progress towards emancipation goals.¹⁰

Using the document as a guide, caseworkers assist youth with securing health coverage, finding housing, and obtaining employment—tasks which all require access to and management of these essential personal records.

A key first opportunity for integrating the electronic record tool into the TILP process would be at the very first TILP meeting. Once a youth sets up a record, he or she could then continue to use it throughout the rest of the transition process. For example, when the county caseworker gives the youth important documents during subsequent meetings, the youth would scan/photograph and upload the documents into their electronic record with guidance from the caseworker. Alternatively, the youth can opt to give access to the caseworker so that he or she can coordinate case management and release key documents into the online record as the youth gains independence, possibly using an automated process. Technical issues with uploading and accessing the account could be addressed at the regular check-in meetings with the caseworker, so that the youth builds the capacity to manage the record independently over time. During this process, the caseworker could support the youth in understanding how best to protect privacy and maintain the security of these documents. By the time the youth attends the 90-Day Transition Plan Meeting near his or her 18th birthday, the youth would already be familiar with the tool, understand its value and how to use it, and be skilled at keeping track of and utilizing key life documents stored in the system. Certain documents that can't be given to the youth prior to the 18th birthday, such as the 90-Day Transition Plan, would be uploaded at this final transition meeting.

2. The Transition Meeting and Emancipation Conference

A second opportunity to leverage the value of an electronic record tool arises when the youth prepares to leave traditional foster care and two key meetings are planned to facilitate the rite of passage:

- The 90-Day Transition Meeting, which occurs when a non-minor dependent is 90 days away from terminating his or her dependency; and
- The Emancipation Conference, which occurs before a minor turns 18 and transitions to Extended Foster Care.

Both meetings are attended by the youth, county caseworker, county facilitator, foster parents, service providers, and other supportive adults and are an opportunity to complete and review the youth's plan for self-sufficiency, exchange important documents, and apply for additional benefits (e.g., CalFresh, Medi-Cal). The goal is to ensure that dependent children who leave adult-supervised living arrangements have been given the necessary guidance and tools to become healthy, productive adults as they transition into a more independent living situation.¹¹ Held at the county offices, the meetings follow a structured

format in which the caseworker reviews multiple documents with the youth, specifically those outlined above and codified in statute.¹²

At the outset of the 90-Day Transition Plan Meeting or the Emancipation Conference, a caseworker trained in the use of an electronic record system could help the youth (with his or her consent) set up an electronic record. This could happen at the conclusion of the discussion of the required documents outlined above (per W&I Code Section 391), at which point the caseworker would introduce the tool, help the youth create an account and initiate the record (if the youth elects to sign up), and assist the youth with uploading important life documents using a smartphone or scanner during the same interaction. The meeting could also be used to train the youth in how to protect their privacy and maintain the security of these important documents. Importantly, the youth could also upload the 90-Day Transition Plan created at this same meeting so that it could be easily accessed and referenced moving forward. This caseworker would serve as the point of contact for future questions related to the youth's account, including troubleshooting, password resets, and helping with the process of uploading and downloading documents. This initial time investment would deliver dividends later on as the caseworker no longer performs tasks related to obtaining and managing such documents. Once the youth enters Extended Foster Care, the caseworker would reference and utilize the new electronic record for future case management activities, document storage, and management moving forward so that it becomes an expectation to use the online repository for that purpose.

With this expectation set for both caseworkers and youth, the case management functions of the electronic record can be used to support a broader range of activities as well, including communicating with the youth about job opportunities, following up on referrals, and coordinating with other members of the youth's support team. Electronic record systems typically have the capability to deliver notifications, educational materials, and links to community-based services—all of which could be employed once the system becomes part of the workflow and standard method of interaction between caseworker and client.

CONCLUSIONS

Through TCP's outreach to several human services agencies and an in-depth pilot with Sacramento County, we have identified clear opportunities for using an electronic record to support and enhance any county's process for transitioning foster youth to Extended Foster Care or smoothing the exit from the foster care system.

To accelerate the adoption of the strategies outlined in this document, we propose several state-level and county-level policy changes.

- As the State develops a new Child Welfare Services/Case Management System, it should build a "portal" function for foster youth so that information held by counties and the State can be auto-populated into an electronic record, ensuring a streamlined and accurate transition of information that does not rely upon limited county staff time.
- Counties should integrate electronic record systems into existing processes, considering the strategies outlined above, so that staff can be better utilized for the case management tasks for which they have been trained, as opposed to clerical tasks related to tracking down, obtaining, and maintaining documents on behalf of their clients.

Such changes and improvements would ensure that crucial life documents are safely stored and readily available to youth faced with addressing their own employment, housing, education, and medical needs as they embark on the journey to independence and self-sufficiency. For youth in foster care, when instability can be one of few constants, electronic record systems stand to benefit their lives disproportionately. This population of vulnerable kids deserves the best we have to offer so they have what they need to succeed in life.

Three Simple Steps Counties Can Take to Get Started

1. *Evaluate existing electronic record tools and consider those tailored to foster youth;*
2. *Meet with caseworkers to identify the best openings for integration into the current workflow using the above strategies; and*
3. *Test out the process in a few meetings with youth and refine the process based on experience and feedback.*

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ABOUT THE CHILDREN'S PARTNERSHIP

The Children's Partnership is a strategy and policy center working to ensure that all children, especially those at risk of being left behind, have the opportunities and resources they need to grow up healthy and lead productive lives. We develop bold ideas, create scalable programs, and drive meaningful action to help all children thrive. The Children's Partnership works in California and nationally, with staff in Santa Monica, CA; Sacramento, CA; and Washington, DC. For more information, please visit: www.childrenspartnership.org.

For the past decade, The Children's Partnership (TCP) has been working to ensure that the benefits of health Information Technology reach California's most vulnerable children. This has included working with a number of counties to develop and evaluate electronic processes for sharing critical information about children and youth in foster care among a care team, in order to improve care coordination and service delivery.

For more on how The Children's Partnership researches and promotes the use of technology to benefit children and youth in foster care, and other underserved children, please visit: <http://childrenspartnership.org/our-work/foster-care-coordination>.

¹ Children's Advocacy Institute, "California's Fostering Connections: Ensuring That the AB 12 Bridge Leads to Success for Transition Age Foster Youth," December 2013, accessed October 28, 2015, http://www.cachildlaw.org/Misc/AB12_Report_Final.pdf.

² Ibid.; Mark E. Courtney et al., *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Mark E. Courtney et al., *Midwest Evaluation for the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 21* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Mark E. Courtney and

Huerig D. Hughes, "The Transition to Adulthood for Youth 'Aging Out' of the Foster Care System" in *On Your Own without a Net: The Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations*, ed. D. W. Osgood, et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

³ For more information about AB 12, see: http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/cgi-bin/postquery?bill_number=ab_12&sess=1516&house=A.

⁴ Children's Advocacy Institute, "California's Fostering Connections: Ensuring That the AB 12 Bridge Leads to Success for Transition Age Foster Youth."

⁵ California Senate Appropriations Committee, *Fiscal Summary of AB 12*, August 12, 2010; Eric-Michael Wilson, "Majority of Calif. Foster Youth Opting for Extended Age Care," *The Chronicle of Social Change*, May 15, 2013, accessed October 28, 2015, <https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/news-2/majority-of-calif-foster-youth-opting-for-extended-age-care/2819>; Children's Advocacy Institute, "California's Fostering Connections: Ensuring That the AB 12 Bridge Leads to Success for Transition Age Foster Youth."

⁶ http://calswec.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/uploads/ab_12_q2_14.pptx.

⁷ Children's Advocacy Institute, "California's Fostering Connections: Ensuring That the AB 12 Bridge Leads to Success for Transition Age Foster Youth," December 2013, accessed October 28, 2015, http://www.cachildlaw.org/Misc/AB12_Report_Final.pdf.

⁸ Cal Wel. & Inst. Code, § 385-391, accessed October 28, 2015, <http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/cgi-bin/displaycode?section=wic&group=00001-01000&file=385-391>.

⁹ It is important to note that HealthShack is just one technology that can be utilized for this purpose; other options include iFoster, a foster youth specific resource hub that includes a "digital locker", and personal health record systems targeted to a more general audience, such as Microsoft HealthVault.

¹⁰ See an example of a TILP document here: <http://www.cdss.ca.gov/cdssweb/entres/forms/English/TILP1.pdf>; The California Department of Social Services (CDSS) Manual of Policies and Procedures (MPP) Division 31-25 requires social workers to co-develop a written TILP with each youth in placement who is 16 years old or older.

¹¹ See here for an example of a 90-Day Transition Plan:

<http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/lettersnotices/entres/getinfo/acl/2009/09-87.pdf>.

¹² Cal Wel. & Inst. Code, § 385-391, accessed October 28, 2015, <http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/cgi-bin/displaycode?section=wic&group=00001-01000&file=385-391>.