

## Updating the PAL Independent Living Study Guides: Listening & Learning from Youth Transitioning into Adulthood

From 2020 through 2021, TNOYS partnered with the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) and the Supreme Court of Texas Children's Commission to update the Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) Independent Living Study Guides (ILSGs), a set of guides intended to provide older youth and young adults (YYA) in foster care with resources and tools to successfully transition into adulthood and independent living.

The transition to adulthood is an especially critical period for YYA in systems such as foster care. Systems-involved youth experience neglect, mental anguish, poor health outcomes, complex trauma exposure, and have an unmet need for meaningful supportive adult relationships, all of which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and impede YYAs ability to achieve healthy development. Unlike many other youth, those in the foster care system often do not have the same natural supports to rely on and have far fewer opportunities to help them build the skills necessary for adult life. Research shows that 20% of children who were in foster care will become instantly homeless upon turning 18, and only half of youth who age out of foster care will have some form of gainful employment by the age of 24.<sup>1</sup> With this project, TNOYS prioritized hearing directly from YYAs with lived foster care experience to inform updates to the ILSGs with contemporary, tangible resources and tools to meaningfully support youth in their transition and ultimately improve outcomes.

TNOYS held five focus groups with YYAs to understand their needs as they exited care and explore what resources, tools, and information would help them be most successful in their transition into adulthood. We applied a Youth Participatory Action Research model to this work, an innovative approach to positive youth and community development in which YYAs are trained to conduct systematic research to improve their lives, communities, and the systems intended to serve them.<sup>2</sup> We worked explicitly with our [Young Adult Leadership Council \(YALC\)](#), a group of 16 YYAs with experience in various systems, to assist in developing, facilitating, and analyzing focus groups with YYAs who have experience with foster care, aging out of care, the PAL program, or other involvement in the child welfare system. A total of 29 additional YYA (19 unduplicated youth) who were currently in foster care or had systems involvement participated in the five focus groups, each focused on a specific topic related to the transition into adulthood: Job Readiness (8 participants), Financial Responsibilities (6 participants), Housing and Transportation (5 participants), Personal and Social Relationships (7 participants), and Healthy Living (3 participants).

Many of the youth who participated in the focus groups were also involved in the participant check where we invited them back to provide additional insight on the findings and their preferred media for receiving information. Additionally, TNOYS met with, interviewed, and received feedback from key stakeholders on information related to the PAL program and incorporated their recommendations and resources where appropriate. TNOYS then worked with the YALC to analyze the data, pull out important themes, and identify additional resources addressing these content areas. Many of the resources found through this update are explicitly directed to youth learning or aim to be as engaging to youth as possible while also providing important information. Across all six guides, these updates include storytelling videos of youth sharing their experiences, links to resources with youth-friendly design and more accessible content, and a variety of formats to increase engagement with the materials.

A number of major themes emerged from the YYA focus groups about what supports were lacking during their transition into adulthood and what they needed to be successful:

**YYAs recognize the importance of mental health and desire the tools and resources to manage it across a variety of settings.**

Mental health was a topic of discussion within the Job Readiness, Health & Safety, and Personal/Social Relationships sessions. Participants sought practical tools that they could use like self-care techniques, therapy options, and strategies to navigate mental health in relationships. Disclosure of mental health related issues in the workforce was of particular concern. YYA felt that workplaces were generally unaccommodating to mental health issues — even if they were disclosed to employers — making it more difficult to enter the workforce and thrive.

**YYAs desire greater support in developing the basic skills that serve as the foundation for adult living.**

Youth expressed having fewer opportunities to develop basic skills such as time management, saving money, and setting goals. These skills were found to be crucial when entering other phases of adulthood like entering college or the workforce.

*Most people in the workplace they're non-supportive. My last job, I told them I was in CPS, they still gave me the same hours, the same attitude towards me as if I never told them 'yes I've been through trauma, yes I've been through stuff that nobody else has been through.'*

– YYA Participant

*One of the biggest things you miss out on, being in foster care, is that transitional stage before you graduate high school where you're being prepared to be a young adult by the people around you. Where you're given more responsibility slowly.*

– YYA Participant

**When discussing more personal subjects, YYAs much prefer hearing directly from peers with various experiences.**

Participants spoke about naturally looking to peer supports, especially with more sensitive subjects like self-care and individual, mental, and sexual health. Hearing stories or receiving important information directly from youth was more comfortable, easier understood, and more readily retained.

**Many specialized resources are understated or not discussed, causing many youth to misunderstand them or miss out on resources for which they may have been eligible.**

Participants expressed not knowing enough about resources specifically for youth in care until it was too late, including such things as housing options or vouchers and potential education funding. Many YYAs wished these resources and the requirements to access them were more clearly stated, repeated often, and easier to refer back to.

**Developing the social skills necessary for adult living is often completely ignored, yet YYAs recognize the impact social skills have on confidence and their ability to implement what they learn in the real world.**

Participants talked about the social skills necessary for vetting potential roommates, negotiating contracts or deals, building confidence to advocate for themselves, understanding personality styles, building trust, and setting reasonable expectations for specific relationships. Participants discussed how they do not feel adequately prepared to navigate these situations and see them as critical for adult living.

*I really felt that I really needed a lot more help regarding therapy and becoming integrated in a healthy way to the social environment of the university and adulthood in general.*

– YYA Participant

**YYAs want to know how to leverage their own internal resources/traits and personal networks for success.**

Participants expressed self-awareness about some of the skills and traits that they possess such as generosity, patience, and discipline, but desired more guidance to build on their strengths and any other existing resources they have at their disposal as they move into adulthood.

**YYAs understand that having a clear understanding of one's rights, responsibilities, and requirements is extremely important, and the consequences of not understanding are higher for them than for peers without**

**experience in care or other systems.**

Participants discussed wanting more practical resources for things like acquiring appropriate identification and documentation, knowing their rights and responsibilities as a renter and with other housing options, and navigating insurance (health, car, rental). They understand that they have fewer resources to fall back on if mistakes are made, therefore these resources need to be clear, direct, and easy for young people to understand and navigate.

**YYAs desire greater exposure to different possibilities and tools to make informed decisions based on their needs.**

Participants understood that their experience in care or multiple systems limited their exposure to different experiences and possibilities. They expressed wanting to have support in practicing normal activities and greater exposure to different hobbies, foods, environments, etc. so that they can gain independence in their adult life and ultimately make the best decisions for themselves.

*A big [uncertainty] for me would be not knowing what could happen [...] a pipe bursts or heat goes out, you suddenly find that there's termites or other pests living there. And it's like, I don't really know how to deal with it.*

– YYA Participant

TNOYS worked with the YALC and staff with lived experience to embed the ILSGs with tangible resources that reflect the themes that we heard directly from YYA themselves. Youth-serving providers should seek to embed these findings into their services, programs, and resources, particularly those geared toward transition-aged youth. After completing the project with DFPS, TNOYS revised the guides again to include additional resources, many specifically geared toward YYA experiencing homelessness. These guides serve as a unique resource that providers can utilize to improve outcomes for youth as they transition into adulthood whether they have experience in the foster care system, with homelessness, other systems experience, or no systems experience at all. [Check out the guides here](#), and consider using them with youth that you serve, both personally and professionally. Join us in supporting youth with youth-driven resources to foster success!

Sources

- 1: Alfian, S. (2021, May 27). Homelessness & Foster Youth: The National Foster Youth Institute National Foster Youth Institute. <https://nfyi.org/issues/homelessness/>
- 2: (2015). New Virtual Learning Curriculum! YPAR Hub. <http://yparhub.berkeley.edu/>