

Access Granted:
Texas Foster Care Handbook for Youth

Texas Department of Family and Protective Services
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DFPS Mission

The mission of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) is to protect children, the elderly and people with disabilities from abuse, neglect, and exploitation by involving clients, families, and communities.

DFPS Vision

The Department of Family and Protective Services

- ❖ Is recognized for innovative, effective services
- ❖ Builds strong, effective partnerships with clients, communities and state leaders
- ❖ Provides effective leadership that is accountable for its actions and communicates openly with clients and stakeholders, and
- ❖ Supports staff who are highly motivated, diverse, ethical, well trained, and professional

DFPS Values

- ❖ We protect the unprotected
- ❖ We involve clients, families and communities in decision making
- ❖ We provide quality services
- ❖ We are innovative and strive for excellence
- ❖ We are ethical and accountable
- ❖ We promote diversity
- ❖ We value our staff

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What Does It Mean To Be Placed In Foster Care?

A judge of the local district court or county court-at-law can place you in foster care under the custody of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services if you cannot be safe and/or protected at home. It means the judge will provide you an attorney that is there for you (and who you can talk with). It means you must move to live in a safe place away from your family or home due to abuse or neglect. This new home is called a foster home or a placement. You may have questions about new routines and rules in your placement. Be sure to talk to your foster parents, caregiver or caseworker about these to help you adjust.

Separation and Loss, the Right to Feel Sad

Now that you have been removed from your home, we understand that there are different feelings you may have: scared, nervous, sad, alone, mad, and maybe hopeful. Although it may feel as though no one can understand what you're feeling or going through, we encourage you to be honest with yourself about what you are feeling, and talk to someone you trust about these feelings. This could be your caseworker, parents, a relative or close family friend, foster parents and/or caregiver, a teacher, your attorney, your counselor, or CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates). Your emotional health is important to us, and we can only help you if we know what you are feeling and thinking.

Remember the Following:

- ***You have the right to grieve for your family.*** This means its okay to be sad. No matter what has happened to you, we understand that you will miss your family. Talk to your caseworker about your scheduled visitation with your parents. If you are not allowed to see your parents, you have the right to know why. If you are not living with your brother(s)/ sister(s), you have the right to see them at least once a month. If there are no safety reasons why you are not living with your brother(s)/ sister(s), it is your caseworker's job to try to work hard to find a home for you to live with them.
- ***You have the right to be angry or upset.*** It is okay to cry because you miss your family, or because you are angry that you cannot see them every day, but we want you to use your words, and say how you feel rather than doing something that could hurt yourself or someone else. If you feel like hurting yourself, you must tell an adult immediately. We are here to keep you safe.
- ***You have a right to have your family respected at all times.*** During your time in foster care, there will be times you want to talk about you and your family. It is important that no one speak negatively about your family. Although it may be hard to talk about the things that have happened, your caseworker may need to discuss what those things are in order to find ways to help your parents learn how to make good changes and how to make your home safe so you can go home.

- ***While you are in foster care, we encourage you to know at all times what your emotions or feelings are and learn healthy ways to deal with them.***
You will have happy days, and some days that will not be so good. If you feel that you cannot talk to someone, we want you to try to write down your feelings in a diary or journal, draw out your feelings in art work, write poems, listen to music you can relate to, play sports or find positive ways to express and learn to deal with your feelings. Remember, the only way the adults who care about you can help you is if you tell us what is wrong.

Youth Perspectives About Foster Care

These statements are from youth for youth who are entering the foster care system

"When we first came into foster care we came in with our clothes on our back, but when we leave we leave with a future."

--Shawn H

"When I came into care at age 12 I thought my life was over, but now I am 17 and now I think about how my life has just begun."

--Tiffany R

"Foster care is like life. It gets hard, but it also gets better."

--Ardetra L

"I've learned that you always come into care with a handful of nothing, but leave care guaranteed a handful of something!"

--Rey R

"Good times and bad times come and go, so go make the best out of the good times you have in care. I mean, it's not that bad, they save us a step to begin beating the real world like...**free college!** So hang in there for the ride, it may just be the one that make you a better person."

--Clemis W

"Transitioning out of foster care leaves room for growth, perseverance, opportunities, and most of all independence. This is your time to show others and prove to yourself that you're capable and that you will succeed."

--Krizia R

CPS Rights of Children & Youth in Foster Care

As a child or youth in foster care you have the rights listed below and these rights should be shared with you by your caseworker and caregiver

Rights of Children and Youth in Foster Care

As a child or youth in foster care, I have the right:

1. To good care and treatment that meets my needs in the least restrictive setting available. This means I have the right to live in a safe, healthy, and comfortable place where I am protected from harm, treated with respect, and have some privacy for personal needs.
2. To know:
 - Why am I in foster care?
 - What will happen to me?
 - What is happening to my family (including brothers and sisters) and how Child Protective Services (CPS) is planning for my future?
3. To speak and be spoken to in my own language when possible. This includes Braille if I am blind or sign language if I am deaf. If my foster parents do not know my language, CPS will give me a plan to meet my needs to communicate.
4. To be free from abuse, neglect and exploitation.
5. To fair treatment, whatever my gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, religion, national origin, disability, medical problems, or sexual orientation.
6. To not receive any harsh, cruel, unusual, unnecessary, demeaning, or humiliating punishment. This includes not being shaken, hit, spanked, or threatened, forced to do unproductive work, be denied food, sleep, access to a bathroom, mail, or family visits as punishment. I will not receive remarks that make fun of me or my family or any threats of losing my placement or shelter.
7. To be disciplined in a manner that is appropriate to how mature I am, my developmental level, and my medical condition. I must be told why I was disciplined. Discipline does not include the use of restraint, seclusion, corporal punishment or threat of corporal punishment.
8. To attend my choice of community, school, and religious services and activities to the extent that it is right for me, as planned for and discussed by my caregiver and caseworker, and based on my caregiver's ability.
9. To go to school and receive an education that fits my age and individual needs.
10. To be trained in personal care, hygiene, and grooming.
11. To comfortable clothing similar to clothing worn by other children in my community.
12. To clothing that does a good job of protecting me against natural elements such as rain, snow, wind, cold, sun, and insects.
13. To have personal possessions at my home and to get additional things within reasonable limits, as planned for and discussed by my caregiver and caseworker, and based on caregiver's ability.
14. To personal space in my bedroom to store my clothes and belongings.
15. To healthy foods in healthy portions proper for my age and activity level.
16. To good quality medical, dental, and vision care, developmental and mental health services that are at least adequate enough for my needs.

17. To be free from unnecessary or too much medication.
18. To visit and have regular contact with my family, including my brothers and sisters (unless a court order or case plan doesn't allow it) and to have my worker explain any restrictions to me and write them in my record.
19. To contact my caseworker, attorneys, ad litem, probation officer, CASA, and Advocacy, Inc. at any time. I can communicate with my caseworker, CASA, Advocacy, Inc. or my attorney ad litem without limits.
20. To see my caseworker at least monthly and in private if necessary.
21. To actively participate in creating my plan for my services and permanent living arrangement, and in meetings where my medical services are reviewed, as appropriate. To be given a copy or summary of my plan and to review. I have the right to ask someone to act on my behalf or to support me in my participation.
22. To go to my court hearing and speak to the judge.
23. To speak to the judge at a court hearing that affects where I have been placed including status hearings, permanency hearings, or placement review hearings.
24. To expect that my records and personal information will be kept private and will be discussed only when it is about my care.
25. To have visitors, to keep a personal journal, to send and receive unopened mail, and to make and receive private phone calls unless appropriate professionals or a court says that restrictions are necessary for my best interests.
26. To get paid for any work done, except for routine chores or work assigned as fair and/or reasonable discipline.
27. To give my permission in writing before taking part in any publicity or fund raising activity for where I am placed or the agency, including the use of my photograph.
28. To not be forced to make public statements showing my gratitude to the foster home or agency.
29. To receive, refuse, or request treatment for physical, emotional, mental health, or chemical dependency needs separately from adults (other than young adults) who are receiving services.
30. To call the Texas Abuse/Neglect Hotline at 1-800-252-5400 to report abuse, neglect, exploitation, or violation of personal rights without fear of punishment, interference, coercion, or retaliation.
31. To complain to the DFPS Consumer Affairs Office at **1-800-720-7777** and/or Advocacy, Inc. at 1-800-252-9108 if I feel any of my rights have been violated or ignored. To be free from threats of punishment for making complaints and have the right to make an anonymous complaint if I choose.
32. To be told in writing of the name, address, phone number and purpose of the Texas Protection and Advocacy System for disability assistance.
33. To not get pressured to get an abortion, give up my child for adoption, or to parent my child, if applicable.
34. To hire independent mental health professionals, medical professionals, and attorneys at my own expense.
35. To understand and have a copy of the rights of children and youth in foster care.

Youth 16 and older

When I am age 16 and older in foster care, I also have the right:

1. To attend Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) classes and activities as appropriate to my case plan.
2. To a comprehensive transition plan that includes planning for my career and help to enroll in an educational or vocational job training program.
3. To be told about educational opportunities when I leave care.
4. To get help in obtaining an independent residence when aging out.
5. To one or more Circle of Support Conferences or Transition Planning Meetings.
6. To take part in youth leadership development opportunities.
7. To consent to all or some of my medical care as authorized by the court and based on my maturity level. For example, if the court authorizes, I may give consent:
 - to diagnose and treat an infectious, contagious, or communicable disease
 - to examine and treat drug addiction
 - for counseling related to preventing suicide, drug addiction, or sexual, physical, or emotional abuse
 - for hospital, medical, or surgical treatment (other than abortion) related to the pregnancy if I am unmarried and pregnant

If I consent to any medical care on my own, without the court or DFPS involved, then I am legally responsible for paying for my own medical care.
8. To request a hearing from a court to determine if I have the capacity to consent to medical care (Sec 266.010).
9. To help with getting my driver's license, social security number, birth certificate, and state ID card.
10. To seek proper employment, keep my own money, and have my own bank account in my own name, depending on my case plan and age or level of maturity.
11. To get necessary personal information within 30 days of leaving care, including my birth certificate, immunization records, and information contained in my education portfolio and health passport.

Family Service Plan

The Family Plan of Service is an agreement between CPS and your parents. Your parents and your caseworker will talk about why you are in care. Together, they will decide what changes need to be made by your parents (or sometimes with other relatives) for your safe return home and set up a plan for making these changes.

Child Service Plan

The Child Service Plan (sometimes called a permanent case plan or case plan) is a plan for making sure that you receive safe and good care while away from your parents. The plan outlines your needs while in foster care and the services you will be provided. This plan will include information about your health, education, recreation, religion, and other items that are important to you. It will also include a permanent plan for you to return home. This is our first goal for you and your family.

If you cannot go home, then another permanent plan will be included. If you are in care at the age of 16, your plan will include services to transition you into adulthood and prepare you to care for yourself. More information about Transitional Living Services can be found on page 12.

Medical Health Passport

The Health Passport is a secure and confidential electronic system for storing medical information of children and youth in the care or custody of the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS). The information is shared with medical providers who treat children and youth, the caregivers responsible for providing consent to their medical care, and DFPS staff. The information in the Health Passport also must be made available when a child or youth leaves the state's custody, such as when a youth transitions out of foster care or when a child is adopted. When you reach age 18, you will be given the information in your Health Passport to improve your transition to independent living and enable you to make informed decisions about your future medical care. You may ask your caseworker at any time about your Health Passport.

Education Portfolio or "Green Binder"

The Education Portfolio is a green binder that has many of your education records. Since you entered foster care and school, your caseworker and caregivers have been adding information to your Education Portfolio. It has copies of your report cards, school pictures, and important tests. It also has copies of your birth certificate, Social Security card, some medical history, and transcripts showing all the classes you completed in high school.

The Education Portfolio belongs to you. You can add special things to it. When you leave foster care, you take the Education Portfolio with you. It can be a good reflection of all the things you have accomplished in school.

Youth in Foster Care also have a responsibility to

- ❖ Work with CPS to develop a permanent case plan for you
- ❖ Work together with your caseworker and caregiver to make sure that your needs and case plan issues are addressed
- ❖ Work with your caseworker and caregiver about rules at your placement and follow the rules responsibly
- ❖ Take part fully and try your best to make good decisions
- ❖ Tell your caseworker when you do and when you don't want to have visits with your parents
- ❖ Communicate with your caseworker. If you do not feel safe in your home or have problems where you live, tell your caseworker immediately
- ❖ Do not runaway no matter how bad things may seem. If you runaway you may not be able to return to the same foster home or placement, you could spend the night in juvenile detention, and you could be seriously hurt or worse.

- ❖ Follow the CPS chain of command (your caseworker's boss and their bosses) and grievance procedures (see " Chain of Command: Where to Turn for Help," page 11) when you have a complaint about how you are treated.

Foster Parents and Kinship Caregivers have the responsibility to

- ❖ Keep you safe and provide your basic needs (food, clothing, shelter) for daily care
- ❖ Treat you with dignity and respect
- ❖ Keep information about you and your family confidential, unless it is in your best interest to give it to professionals
- ❖ Show understanding, give guidance and unconditional acceptance
- ❖ Participate in meetings regarding your case plan and other case-related meetings with staff
- ❖ Prepare you for your next move whether it is going home, to another placement, or independent living
- ❖ Help in your growth and development by encouraging your success in areas such as school and daily life skills
- ❖ Make sure you get medical and dental care
- ❖ Work with you and your caseworker to make sure your case plan is developed and implemented
- ❖ Help you, or get you help, to deal with your thoughts and feelings about being in foster care
- ❖ Get enough training to be able to provide care for youth who have been abused and/or neglected
- ❖ Make their home ready to welcome you
- ❖ Help you learn about your culture and heritage

Caseworkers have the responsibility to:

- ❖ See you regularly and talk to you alone at least once a month face to face, not by phone
- ❖ To return your calls as soon as possible
- ❖ Notify you of court hearings and major points in your case
- ❖ Keep your family updated on how you are doing
- ❖ Build a relationship with you and your caregiver to best represent you and your best interests
- ❖ Help you with your plan to transition to adulthood and ensure you receive at least one Circle of Support after turning 16, if you would like to have one
- ❖ Help you understand what services, supports, and benefits you are eligible for, including transitional Medicaid once you leave care

- ❖ Schedule visits between you and your family (parents, siblings and relatives), or anyone else you would like to contact that is not prohibited by the court
- ❖ Keep your attorney and child advocate updated on how you are doing and help you get in contact with your attorney and/or court advocate,
- ❖ Write court reports informing the Judge of the progress made by you and your parents during this time
- ❖ Make recommendations to the court on what they believe to be in your best interest
- ❖ Make sure that you feel safe in your home at all times
- ❖ Conduct background checks on a relative or kinship individual to have a home study conducted on them

Definitions of Different Kinds of Foster Placements

- ❖ **Family Foster Home:** A family who wants to care for you or other children who have been removed from their home.
- ❖ **Kinship Care:** A relative or someone not related who you consider to be like family or someone you have an important relationship with who will care for you in their home. This person could be an aunt or uncle, grandparent, God parent, teacher, coach, or pastor.
- ❖ **Foster Group Home:** This is a large foster home or licensed facility with caring 24-hour staff that provides care for 12 or fewer youth. This placement provides individualized treatment.
- ❖ **Residential Treatment Center (RTC):** Similar to the foster group home or licensed facility, except that the care is for 13 or more youth and has caring 24-hour staff who work at the placement.
- ❖ **Emergency Shelter:** A facility that provides care for youth in crisis on a short-term basis, typically as long as to four weeks. The shelter is licensed to provide care for 13 or more youth.

Ask your caseworker how a relative or a person you think of as being family (Kinship) can become your caretaker.

Relative and Kinship Care

If a relative or fictive kin caregiver (a close family friend) is interested in providing a safe placement for you while you are in CPS care, encourage the relative to contact your caseworker as soon as possible or provide to your caseworker the name and contact information of that person.

Relatives and close family friends will have to participate in a home assessment process and be approved to provide care for you. If you know of any relatives or close family friends who would like to provide a placement for you, let your caseworker know so that they can work with your relative on this process.

Where to Turn for Help: CPS Chain of Command:

- Caseworker (start here)
- Supervisor
- Program Director
- Program Administrator
- Regional Director

If you are placed in a kinship home, foster home, group home, or other facility and feel that you are not being treated fairly, there are people who you can turn to for help. If you have gone through the CPS chain of command, contact your attorney ad litem. If you do not feel that your problem is being resolved, you may call the DFPS Consumer Affairs at 1-800-720-7777. Physical discipline is not allowed while in foster care. If someone uses physical discipline on you or you feel you have been abused and/or neglected you can call and report it to the Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-252-5400 and it will be investigated. Your name as the reporter is confidential (by law).

Life Skills Activities for Youth 14-15 Years Old

If you are in foster care you will receive hands-on learning opportunities tailored to your skills and abilities. Activities and training will include grocery shopping, meal preparation and cooking, use of public transportation, performing basic household tasks, balancing a checkbook and managing personal finances.

Transitional Living Services for Youth 16-22 Years Old

Transition Planning / Circles of Support

Transition planning is a process that helps prepare you to leave foster care and enter adulthood. It is a part of each child's service plan and helps ensure all youth receive all necessary services. CPS uses a meeting called Circles of Support to help you plan for your transition to adulthood.

A Circle of Support is a meeting driven by you. It is based on another CPS process called Family Group Decision Making and it will be offered to you starting at age 16. You will get to call a meeting with people you identify as "caring adults" in your support system. These adults can be foster care providers, teachers, parents, siblings, relatives, church members, mentors, etc. You and your caring adults meet with a person (called a "facilitator") who will keep the meeting focused on you to develop and review your transition plan. Meeting topics include your, hopes and dreams, goals, strengths, concerns and needs for education, employment, health/mental health, housing, personal and community connections, and all PAL life skills training components.

If needed, the transition plan will address special needs for youth with disabilities. Each caring adult identifies a way they can personally help support your

transition plan and attain short-and long-term goals toward self-sufficiency. Then, everyone signs the transition plan.

Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) Services/Benefits

The Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) program helps older foster youth prepare for leaving and transitioning from state care and support. The program provides supportive services and benefits to approved youth ages 16- 21 (in some cases to youth ages 14-15 if funding is available) to increase self-sufficiency and productivity.

The PAL Program consists of:

- Life skills assessment to find out your strengths and needs to get life skills
- Life skills training in the following core areas:
 - Health and Safety
 - Housing and Transportation
 - Job Readiness
 - Financial Management
 - Life Decisions/Responsibility, and
 - Personal/Social Relationships
- Educational/vocational services
- Supportive services (based on need and funding availability), that may include:
 - Vocational assessment and/or training
 - GED
 - Prep for college entrance
 - Driver's education
 - High school expenses
 - Counseling
 - Documents
 - Volunteer mentoring
- Transitional living allowance up to \$1,000 - distributed in portions up to \$500 per month, if you take part in PAL Life Skills training, to help you with initial start-up costs in adult living;
- Aftercare room and board assistance (based on emergency or need) up to \$500 per month for rent, utilities, utility deposits, food, etc. (not to exceed \$3,000 of added up payments per youth);
- Case management to help you plan to become self-sufficient and manage resources.

PAL Featured Events!

- ❖ **PEAKS Camp (Physical and Environmental Activities for Knowledge and Skills):** Two four-day experiential camps sessions can host 40 youth each. An adult, preferably the youth's caseworker, accompanies the youth. Activities include ropes course activities, canoeing, expressive arts,

swimming, nature hikes, and journal writing. The camps focus on increasing self-esteem, improving communication and problem solving skills, and building leadership skills.

- ❖ **Statewide Teen Conference:** The Statewide Teen Conference is held on a college campus. About 155 youth attend a three-day conference with motivational speakers and workshops related to preparing for adulthood.
- ❖ **PAL College Conference:** Texas A&M University at Commerce hosts a weekend college conference each year. About 80 youth take part in two days of workshops, campus tours and speakers related to attending college. Workshops include information on financial aid, what a college class is like, residence life and life skills. (Several other colleges offer one-day conferences.)
- ❖ **Statewide Youth Leadership -Council (Youth Advisory Board):** The Statewide Youth Leadership Council consists of two current or former foster care youth from each region. The youth give input and a youth perspective for developing policy and programs. They make recommendations to improve services for children and youth.
- ❖ **Regional Activities:** Regions offer Teen Conferences and events to help prepare youth for adult living and provide leadership opportunities.

Note: Ask your caseworker for more details about these exciting events!!!!

Transition Centers

Transition centers are "one stop shops" that serve the diverse needs of young people ages 15½ to 25 who are aging out or have aged out of foster care. The centers are a central place to get DFPS services such as PAL services, employment readiness, job search classes and assistance, and mentoring. Other partners provide many other services like career counseling, job search assistance, substance abuse / mental health counseling, housing assistance, and leadership training. The centers are located throughout Texas.

A list of current Transition Centers with their locations and contact information is available through your caseworker or at www.texasyouthconnection.org

Receiving Your Personal Documents at Age 16 and 18

On or before turning **age 16**, youth will receive certified copies of these documents:

- your birth certificate;
- a Social Security card or replacement Social Security card, as appropriate; and
- a personal identification certificate issued the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS)

30 days before you turn **age 18** and leave care, you will receive copies of these documents:

- your birth certificate;
- a Social Security card or a replacement Social Security card;
- a personal identification certificate issued by DPS
- immunization records;
- information contained in your health passport; and
- proof of enrollment in Medicaid, if appropriate
- Information on a Medical Power of Attorney

Your caseworker or PAL staff will make sure you get these documents or notify you that they are in the process of being obtained. They can also assist you if any documents are lost.

Extended Care-Until September 30, 2010

If you want or need to extend your stay in placement after turning 18 to achieve your educational goals and as you transition into adulthood, this option is available to you as long as you are:

- regularly attending high school up to age 22; or
- regularly attending GED classes up to age 19; or,
- Completing a vocational or technical training program up to 21.

Note: You must voluntarily decide to enter the program and sign a special kind of document between you and DFPS called a "voluntary agreement."

Beginning October 1, 2010, if you are ages 18 to 21, you may stay in care through what is called "Extended Care" if you attend or participate in:

- ❖ An institution of higher education, post-secondary, vocational, or technical program full-time;
- ❖ A program or activity that promotes or removes barriers to employment;
- ❖ Are employed at least 80 hours a month; or
- ❖ Are incapable of performing all of the above activities due to a documented medical condition.

You may also regularly attend high school or a GED program from 18 up to 22 years of age while in extended care.

You may stay in care from 1 to 3 ½ months after graduation from high school or a GED program prior to attending college, or other higher education program. You must be enrolled in college or a higher education program at the time.

Talk to your caseworker or your PAL worker about the options available to you for extended care.

Return to Care

The Return to Care Program allows youth (18-22 year olds) who have aged out of foster care to return to CPS to live in a foster home, group home or another type of living arrangement to:

- ❖ Regularly attend high-school (up to age 22); or
- ❖ Regularly attend full-time GED courses (up to age 21); or
- ❖ Attend a full-time certified vocational or technical program (up to age 21) that allows for a youth to be hired into the workforce; and
- ❖ Return on a break from college or a technical or vocational program for at least one month, but no more than 4 months (up to age 21).

Along with meeting the requirements to return to care, you must voluntarily agree to enter the program and sign a voluntary agreement. You may contact a PAL staff to discuss this program.

Additional Resources Available to You

Education and Training Voucher (ETV) Program ([Back to cover page](#))

The Education and Training Voucher (ETV) is a federally-funded (Chafee) and state-administered education program. You may be approved for ETV if you are ages 16 to 23. ETV provides youth with up to \$5,000 of financial assistance per academic year to help reach your post-secondary educational or vocational/technical training goals.

Who is Eligible?

- Youth in DFPS foster care who are at least 16 and who are likely to remain in foster care until turning 18, or
- Youth who age out of DFPS foster care but have not yet turned 21, or
- Youth who are adopted from DFPS foster care after turning age 16 but not yet 21, or
- Youth who enter permanency care assistance after turning age 16 but who are not yet age 21; or
- Youth participating in the education/training voucher program prior to their 21st birthday can remain eligible until 23 as long as they are enrolled and making satisfactory progress toward completing their post-secondary education or vocational program, based on the institutions' enrollment policies.

Do I Qualify?

- Youth between 16 and 21 who have a high school diploma or equivalent and who are enrolled at least part-time (6 hours) in an accredited or pre-accredited public or non-profit program that provides a bachelor's degree or not less than a 2 year program that provides credit towards a degree or certification (your PAL worker or the ETV

staff will help you know if the program is accredited or pre-accredited), or

- Youth who are beyond the age of compulsory school attendance (age 18) and who are enrolled at least part-time (6 hours) in an accredited or pre-accredited program that provides training toward gainful employment
- Online/Correspondence/Distance Learning Students.

If you enroll in a dual credit course or other course in which you earn joint high school and college credits you may also receive assistance from the ETV program. You must be in foster care on the day you enroll.

For more information about enrolling in the ETV program, go to: <http://www.bcfs.net/etv> or call 1-877-268-4063 and talk to an ETV staff.

Tuition and Fee Waiver (provided by Texas Law) ([Back to cover page](#))

If you were in foster care or adopted in Texas from DFPS conservatorship, you may be approved under a Texas law that exempts paying tuition and fees at Texas state-supported institutions of higher education. This is part of Section's 54.211 and 54.211 of the Texas Education Code.

While U.S. citizenship or qualified alien status is not required, it is strongly encouraged as young adults without such status will have trouble getting any federal financial assistance for college.

To be exempt to paying tuition and fees ***you must have been in DFPS conservatorship***. Tuition and fees are waived for students if you were in DFPS conservatorship:

- On the day before your 18th birthday.
- On or after the day of the your 14th birthday, and you were eligible for adoption on or after that day.
- On the day you graduated from high school or received the equivalent of a high school diploma.
- If you were adopted from DFPS conservatorship on or after Sept. 1, 2009.
- Your permanent managing conservatorship was granted to a non-parent on or after Sept. 1, 2009.
- If you are enrolled in a dual credit course in which you may have earned joint high school and college credit.

Dual Credit Courses ([Back to cover page](#))

As of September 1, 2009, youth who enroll in a dual credit course or other course in which they may earn joint high school and college credit are eligible for the state tuition and fee waiver. Youth must be in foster care on the day they enroll.

You must enroll, **no later than your 25th birthday**, in an institute of higher education as an undergraduate student or be enrolled in a dual credit course or other course for which you earn joint high school and college credit. You may enroll in an associate's degree or vocational/certificate course at a local community college.

Other Help for College

To receive financial aid from the government such as a PELL Grant, you must apply for federal financial aid by completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) for each year that you attend college. To apply for federal financial aid, visit web site www.fafsa.ed.gov

To Search for Scholarships:

- www.finaid.org
- www.orphan.org
- www.fastweb.com
- www.collegeboard.org
- www.college.gov
- www.collegefortexans.com
- www.thecb.state.tx.us

Or look under Education at www.texasyouthconnection.org

College Partnerships ([Back to cover page](#))

- **The University of Texas at Arlington** provides a 50 percent discount on residential housing.
- **The University of Texas at Pan American** provides up to six residential housing scholarships per year.
- **Texas A&M University at College Station** provides a staff person to help Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) students at the university.
- **Austin Community College (ACC)** has an outstanding support system for former foster youth attending the college. Part of the success of this system is the participation of community stakeholders through an ongoing workgroup. Members include the Casey Family Programs, Life Works (a community program for homeless and at-risk youth), the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and representatives from DFPS/CPS. During Spring 2010 semester, 138 foster youth were registered at ACC.

- **Texas State University (TSU)-San Marcos** started an annual \$1,000 scholarship for former foster youth. In addition, TSU has a website to provide additional resources and other supports for Foster Care Alumni who are interested in attending TSU or who are enrolled at TSU.

Ask your caseworker or the PAL staff if there are other college partnerships in the area where you live.

Transitional Medicaid / STAR Health

Transitional Medicaid/Star Health

This program provides continuous medical coverage to youth age 18 to 21 that have aged out foster care / custody at age 18 or older and meet the following eligibility criteria:

- Must be a current Texas resident between ages 18 and 21
- Must be a U.S. citizen or qualified alien
- Must have aged out of foster care / DFPS custody at age 18 or
- Must have no other medical coverage (private insurance or other category of Medicaid)
- Must not have resources valued at more than \$10,000; and
- Must meet the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) income guidelines for this category of Medicaid.

You must call HHSC Centralized Benefits Section at 1-800-248-1078, ext. 8126 or 512-908-8131 or 8145 to report change of address.

For more information, go to www.texasyouthconnections.org or at www.fostercaretx.com.

Former Foster Care in Higher Education Program Health Benefits ([Back to cover page](#))

You may be approved for health care benefits if you are:

- a former foster care youth who is at least age 21 or older, but younger than age 23,
- eligible to receive assistance as a foster youth, and
- enrolled in an institution of higher education.

To request an application, call toll-free 1-800-248-1078 or 2-1-1 or talk to the PAL staff about whether you qualify for these health benefits.

Texas Youth Hotline

The Texas Youth Hotline is a resource for youth who are under age 21, including those who have aged out of the foster care system. You may contact the statewide hotline at 1-800-210-2278 for phone counseling and information and referrals. The hotline can help young adults locate local services.

Texas Youth Connection

The Texas Youth Connection website, designed with youth input, is a resource for youth in Texas foster care, alumni of foster care, or for youth seeking general tips and information. It offers information and resources in education, finances, records, diversity, health, contacts, job links, food, housing, books, stories, hotlines, and other hot stuff. Check this resource out at:

www.texasyouthconnection.org

Youth Specialists

Youth Specialists are CPS employees who are former foster care youth who aged out of care. Youth Specialists play a key role in the development and support of local youth leadership councils. They are located in all of the DFPS regions and provide a voice for youth in program development.

The National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD)

You Can Improve Foster Care

How Can You:

- ❖ Get Involved?
- ❖ Leave a Legacy for Your Brothers and Sisters in Foster Care?
- ❖ Improve Your Community?
- ❖ Use Your Experiences to Really Make a Difference?

It's as easy as answering questions in an online survey. Your responses will be used to improve the quality of life for Texas youth. You can make a difference for yourself and others!

What is NYTD?

The National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) is a data collection system created to track independent living services and learn how successful states are in preparing youth to move from state care into adulthood. Texas will survey youth who are in foster care when they are age 17 and then do follow-up surveys of some youth at age 19 and the same youth again at age 21.

How Can You Get Involved?

All youth that are or were in Texas foster care at age 16 or older are invited to register with the NYTD: Access Granted website. Make sure your contact information is kept upto-date!

If you are selected to be part of the NYTD survey, take the survey!! This is your chance to help improve services and outcomes for youth in Texas. Those chosen to take the survey will be notified by e-mail.

So, keep your contact information up to date if you want to have your say when you turn 17.

Where Do I Go Next?

Improve Foster Care: The NYTD: Access Granted Website

The NYTD: Access Granted website is where the NYTD Surveys will be posted. The website will also be a great source of information on what's happening in the Texas Youth community. Go to www.texasyouthconnection.org

Common Terms and Phrases

- ❖ **Attorney Ad Litem:** A lawyer assigned by the court to represent the youth's interest in a civil abuse and neglect case, which will determine who will have managing conservatorship over the youth. The Attorney Ad Litem must represent the youth's opinion even if the attorney does not agree.
- ❖ **DADS Guardianship:** If a youth with serious disabilities turns age 18 or older and needs someone to make decisions for him or her, Adult Protective Services (APS) may be appointed guardian for the youth. The youth must be severely incapacitated (not able to take care of himself or herself) before this would happen.
- ❖ **Biological/Birth Family:** The family you were born into, your birth mother and father, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.
- ❖ **CASA worker:** (Court Appointed Special Advocate) A volunteer who works with you, your caseworker, and the courts to advocate and help you while you are in foster care.
- ❖ **Caseworker:** A Child Protective Services staff person who works with you and your family while you are in foster care.
- ❖ **Kinship Care:** A placement approved by CPS provided by a relative or close family friend.
- ❖ **Managing Conservator/Guardian:** The adult or adults who the court/judge has decided has the right to make decisions about you and your life. Note: When you are younger than 18, the common term used by the Texas courts is "managing conservator." If you are 18 or older, the common term is "guardian."
- ❖ **Mentor:** A volunteer friend, consultant, and guide to help you prepare for adult living.
- ❖ **Permanency Plan:** A plan that is developed by Child Protective Services and the Judge to arrange for the most permanent living situation possible for you, while considering your best interests. The plan tells where and with whom a foster care child shall live, and the proposed legal relationship between the child and the permanent caregiver or caregivers.
- ❖ **Plan of Service (case plan):** A plan that is developed with your Child Protective Services caseworker and caregiver and sometimes other

- helpful adults. The plan includes your needs and goals. You should be actively involved in developing your plan of service.
- ❖ **Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) Program:** A program that helps youth develop skills and resources needed for adult life after foster care. Through Chafee Foster Care Independence Program funds, and state and community matching funds, approved youth can also receive financial help with housing, educational, and other needs for a limited time after leaving foster care.
 - ❖ **Service Levels:** This term replaces "Levels of Care" as of September 1, 2003. The service levels describe the needs of individual youth so that the Child Protective Services can provide the right services. The service levels are basic, moderate, specialized, and intense, depending on the type and amount of services needed.
 - ❖ **Sibling visits:** Visits with your brothers or sisters while you are in foster care.
 - ❖ **Substitute Care:** Care provided to youth when they are removed from their birth family and are placed in the state's care. (Examples: foster homes, emergency shelters, kinship homes, and group homes)
 - ❖ **Termination of Parental Rights:** In some cases, the agency may petition (request) that your biological/ birth parents no longer have any legal rights to you and only if it is in your best interests and therefore, their parental rights are ended. Child Protective Services works closely with parents before a step like this is taken. Termination of parental rights can happen if your parents did not make changes necessary to provide a safe home to take care of you and have serious problems that make it too difficult for them to take care of you. It usually happens when reuniting with your family has been ruled out and adoption is a possibility. If the court terminates parental rights, it means you are free for adoption. When parental rights are terminated, your parents no longer have access to information about you and do not work with your caseworker anymore. Your caseworker will work with your parents to identify and locate other family members or kinship willing to adopt you and if family cannot be located CPS will work to find an adoptive home for you.
 - ❖ **Voluntary Agreements (these agreements are for the Return to Care or Extended Care Programs):** These special documents signed by you and DFPS are a request that you be allowed to either have your foster care extended beyond your 18th birthday or to return to foster care after your 18th birthday as long as you meet certain requirements.

Frequently Asked Questions

QUESTION: Can I get my driver's license while I am in foster care?

ANSWER: Yes, you can. Talk with your caseworker to decide how to best proceed and if this is in your best interest. When a youth in state conservatorship applies for a Texas driver license, the youth's application must be:

- accompanied by a copy of the court order appointing the state as the youth's managing conservator; and
- signed by the supervisor of the youth's worker, or another staff member at a higher level than the supervisor.

DFPS does not provide automobile insurance for youth, although if you are enrolled in the ETV program these funds may be used to pay for automobile insurance if funds are available. Questions about getting automobile insurance may be referred to the Texas Department of Insurance or any insurance company that provides automobile insurance.

QUESTION: Can I have a car while I am in foster care?

ANSWER: Maybe. Foster youth having cars is handled on a case-by-case basis. Some group homes or foster homes do not allow youth to have a car while they are living there. However, depending on how mature you are, your transportation needs, and your individual situation, you can discuss this with your caseworker. Some youth who work can save money and purchase a car. You must get your caseworker's approval before buying a car as it may affect your eligibility for foster care assistance or federal benefits you receive. Paying for insurance is a challenge that also must be addressed by anyone who has a car. Issues about car insurance, and owning and maintaining a car are covered in the PAL life skills training. Foster parents or caregivers are not required to put you on their car insurance plan.

QUESTION: What is a transition plan?

ANSWER: When you are age 16 or older, agency staff will work with you to create a transition to help you prepare for life after foster care when you are an adult. This plan is coordinated with your plan of service (see "Common Terms and Phrases" page 21) Your caseworker and foster care provider (and probably the PAL staff) will discuss options, resources, and plans with you to address the following needs for adult living:

- Medical/dental services, including information about extended Medicaid coverage, if available;
- Housing;
- Food;
- Transportation;
- Financial;
- Social/emotional/religious/spiritual;
- Educational/job training;
- Cultural/heritage; and
- Community resources.

You should help develop and revise your transition plan. Discharge planning is similar to transition planning. You will discuss the same types of topics related to your transition from foster care to adult living.

QUESTION: Can I stay in foster care after I turn 18?

ANSWER: Yes, although you must sign a voluntary agreement (see "Common Terms and Phrases" page 22) to remain in care. In Texas you have the right to remain in foster care until you turn 22, to complete high school or until the end of the month of your 21st birthday if you are enrolled in a full-time GED program, or up to age 21 if enrolled full-time in a certified vocational or technical program.

Effective October 1, 2010 youth may stay in care from:

- 18 up to 22 years of age and regularly attend high school or a GED program; or
- 18 to 21 years of age and attending and participating in:
 - An institution of higher education, postsecondary vocational or technical program;
 - A program or activity that promotes or removes barriers to employment;
 - Employed at least 80 hours a month; or
 - If incapable of performing all of the above activities due to a documented medical condition.

Some agencies may not let you stay in their program if you are not in school or a vocational program. If you meet the criteria above, you will be asked to read and sign a voluntary foster care agreement that explains what is expected of you in order for you to remain in foster care, and DFPS's roles and responsibilities. DFPS realizes you should be given more freedoms as an adult, but it is important that you still abide by the caregivers rules.

The Youth Leadership Council advocated for a rule that affects youth who graduate from high school in May and don't start college or a vocational program until September. Youth may also remain in foster care for up to 3 1/2 months if they have completed high school or a GED and have been accepted at a college or educational/vocational program that does not begin immediately. You must work with your caseworker to plan for the future so that your caseworker can request extended foster care in a timely manner before your 18th birthday.

QUESTION: If I leave foster care and go away to college, will I have a place to stay during school holidays and vacations?

ANSWER: Some agencies or foster parents will help you arrange for a place to stay over the holidays (Christmas break, the summer, etc.) if you don't have somewhere to go and the dorms close. If you have a close relationship with your former foster parents or group home staff, they may help you during these times. DFPS can give you other options or a list of places you can go. It is important to talk with your PAL staff or your caseworker if you want specific information about planning for college. You should talk to your foster parents and caseworker to find out what your options are if you go away to college. Talk to your caseworker or a PAL staff to see if you qualify for the Return to Care program as this

program allows for youth to return to care while on college breaks if you are eligible.

QUESTION: What help can I get when I am ready to leave foster care to be an adult?

ANSWER: When you are ready to leave foster care for adulthood, you may receive help from your caseworker, the PAL program, and other community resources. While you are still in care, you can take the PAL life skills classes, which teach you how to find an apartment and give you hands-on help in actually looking for one, if that is part of your transition plan. Your foster parents, group home staff, caring adult, PAL life skills trainers, PAL after care case managers and others supporting your transition should take you to meet landlords or real estate agents, if appropriate for your transition plan. They will help you contact community organizations, Transition Centers, previous foster parents, or relatives who can help you. Your caseworker will work with PAL program staff to plan for your activities for life after foster care. Staff will discuss your options, resources, plans related to housing, important records, medical/dental services, finances, education, employment, emotional support, and other areas of adult living.

If you do not feel you are getting help, call your caseworker and ask for a meeting.

Let your caseworker know you want to help yourself, but that you also need help and information from them and DFPS. It is very important to begin saving money (if you are able to work) while you are in foster care, so you can move toward becoming self-sufficient once you are on your own. Depending on your situation, you may be able to get some start-up funds through the PAL program to help you move on to independent living.