

Moratorium on Aging Out of the Foster Care 18-21 Program – Get the Word Out!

The last 14 months have encompassed a year like no other because of COVID-19. As a country, we have experienced unimaginable loss of life. In our own communities and lives, we have transitioned to a new normal – one that feels more like a sci fi movie plot than our actual reality. But, reality it has been. Thankfully, we appear to be slowly moving our way back to what was once familiar. As we live in this pandemic, laws responding to the impact of COVID 19 have been passed by Congress and our own state. At the end of December 2020, Congress passed a COVID relief bill – the Consolidated Appropriations Act. There are components of that Act that have been heavily reported on – the stimulus checks and unemployment benefits for example.

Did you know that same federal law imposed a moratorium on young adults aging out of extended foster care and modifies the eligibility terms for participation in that program? In North Carolina, that program is the Foster Care 18-21 Program. What does that mean for those young adults? Do you know a young adult who was terminated from the program this calendar year? They may opt back in.

The Foster Care 18-21 Program

North Carolina's extended foster care program, Foster Care 18-21, is a voluntary program for those young adults who were in foster care when they turned 18 or were adopted or placed into a legal guardianship when they were 16 or 17 years old. G.S. 108A-48(c); -49(e); 131D-10.2(B); 10A N.C.A.C. 70P.0104(6). At any time before the young adult's 21st birthday, they may opt in to this program, which is voluntary and does not involve a transfer of custody. Instead, extended foster care services offers additional services to a young adult to help with their transition to adulthood. The young adult and county department of social services (DSS) enter into a Voluntary Placement Agreement. Services are provided to the young adult by DSS and include ongoing case work, including a transitional living plan; a support team; placement in an approved home; foster care maintenance payments, with a maximum monthly rate of \$634 (G.S. 108A-49.1); Medicaid; credit checks; and educational vouchers and scholarships. There is also a right to a judicial review. G.S. 7B-910.1.

For more information about the Foster 18-21 Program, see the NC Child Welfare Manual "Permanency Planning" section, "Foster Care 18-21" subsection [here](#) and/or my earlier blog post [here](#).

The Moratorium on Aging Out

Although a young adult ages out of Foster Care 18-21 upon their 21st birthday, the federal law temporarily suspends this age-out provision through September 30, 2021. It also permits young

adults who did age out between January 27, 2020 and April 20, 2021 and were terminated from the program as a result of their age to opt back in, also through September 30, 2021.

Temporary Changes to Eligibility Requirements

The federal law protects a young adult from losing their extended foster care benefits as a result of not meeting the education, training, or work requirements. As with the moratorium on aging out, these changes are effective through September 30, 2021.

Why These Changes?

The purpose of extended foster care is to provide those youth who aged out of the system with necessary supports to help transition to adulthood. Like so many, these young adults have been negatively impacted by the pandemic. Congress recognized additional supports are needed for these young adults and made services and support available to them through September 30, 2021.

What Can You Do?

First, be aware of these temporary changes to the program to ensure that a young adult is not mistakenly terminated from the Foster Care 18-21 program. The North Carolina Department of Human Services [announced these changes](#) earlier this week. There is also a Dear County Director letter, [here](#).

Second, inform your DSS directors and social workers, guardians ad litem, judges, parents, foster parents, teachers, and community support systems of this federal law.

Third, help identify these young adults and encourage them to remain in or return to the Foster Care 18-21 program so they can access these benefits. Young adults can opt in by contacting the county department of social services where they reside or where they aged out of foster care. NC DHHS has identified two state contacts: LeAnn McKoy (the State Foster Care 18-21 Coordinator) and Erin Conner (the State LINKS Coordinator). Their contact information is [here](#) (last paragraph of the press release).