On the Threshold of Change

Forces that could transform future conditions for youth in Extended Foster Care (EFC)

A foresight report by Institute for the Future

iFTF youth law center **CYC**

About Institute for the Future (IFTF)

Institute for the Future (IFTF) is the world's leading futures organization. For over 50 years, businesses, governments, and social impact organizations have depended upon IFTF global forecasts, custom research, and foresight training to navigate complex change and develop future-ready strategies. IFTF methodologies and toolsets yield coherent views of transformative possibilities across all sectors that together support a more sustainable future. Institute for the Future is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Palo Alto, California. **iftf.org**

About Youth Law Center (YLC)
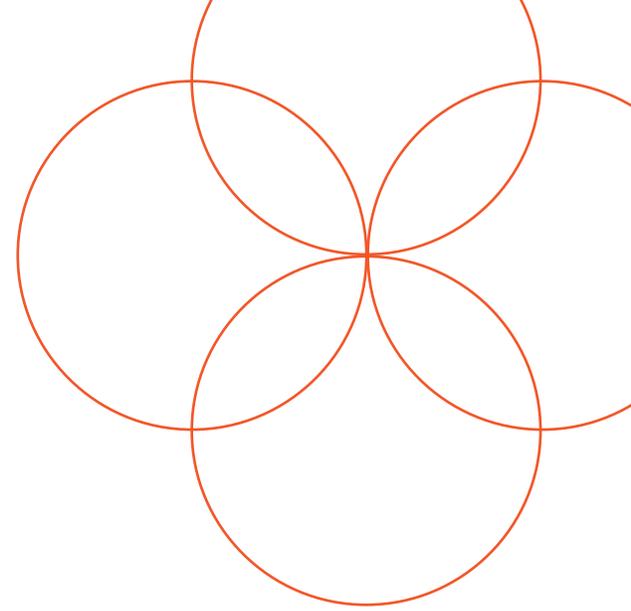
The Youth Law Center (YLC) advocates to transform foster care and juvenile justice systems across the nation so every child and youth can thrive. YLC's work aims to ensure that children are not only protected from harm and dangerous conditions, but also receive the support, opportunities, and love they need to grow up healthy and happy. For decades, YLC has led the field to transform systems to be truly child-focused and research-informed through litigation, policy reform, media advocacy, collaborative system change projects, training and advice, and public education. **ylc.org**

About California Youth Connection (CYC)

The mission of California Youth Connection (CYC), a youth-led organization, is to develop leaders who empower each other and their communities to transform the foster care system through legislative, policy, and practice change. CYC's vision is that all foster youth will be equal partners in contributing to all policies and decisions made in their lives. All youth in foster care will have their needs met and the support to grow into healthy and vibrant adults. **calyouthconn.org**

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Letter from
Youth Law Center

Ten years ago, the Youth Law Center and other partners advocated successfully for passage of the federal Fostering Connections to Success Act and California's Assembly Bill 12, to extend foster care from age 18 to age 21.

As one of the first states in the nation to extend foster care after enactment of the federal law, California policymakers, advocates, and youth stakeholders committed to creating a transformative structure for extended foster care. Rather than provide three additional years of patchwork, ineffective services that merely delayed the consequences of a difficult transition to adulthood, our vision was to meet the needs of young adults in a radically different way. Our goals included ensuring that youth in foster care were connected to family and community, empowered to lead decision-making and case planning in preparation for adult life, and provided with reliable access to supports and services once they left the system.

Now, during a historically challenging and bleak moment for youth, it is time to reevaluate California's extended foster care policy and implementation. With 10 years of quantitative and qualitative data at our disposal, it is clear that while some youth have experienced improved outcomes, as a whole, extended foster care has not been transformative. Many youth who experienced extended foster care are still struggling to survive, experiencing homelessness, incarceration, mental and physical health challenges, loneliness, and isolation. The California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (Cal Youth) found that many of these 21-year-olds are still "faring poorly compared to peers their age," and that "more work can and should be done to better support them during the transition to adulthood." In fact, research shows that we are failing in one of our core goals: the establishment of the conditions that foster the loving, supportive, and enduring relationships that are the key to improving youth wellness and success. Despite participation in extended foster care, nearly half of California youth report that they lack people they can rely on to provide emotional support or help them navigate daily life.

This failure has grave consequences for youth and the families they may create. The system's failures were highlighted during the pandemic and subsequent economic depression, as well as during recent natural disasters: in addition to their lack of

supportive connections to family and community, young people are not being prepared for changing economic realities or protected from mental health risks associated with increasingly volatile social, political, and physical environments. Extended foster care has not reliably met the basic needs of some young people, let alone helped them thrive. At a moment of unprecedented challenges to the safety net for all Californians, a deep analysis of how extended foster care is working and how it is failing is an urgent need.

In 2019, when the grant-making nonprofit Tipping Point Community offered Youth Law Center the opportunity to reimagine extended foster care, we quickly realized preparing youth to thrive in the future will require policy recommendations informed by future forces shaping employment, health — both mental and physical — postsecondary education, housing, the economy, the climate, social institutions, and family. To get a clear understanding of these future forces, Youth Law Center members collaborated with the Institute for the Future (IFTF), whose approach aligns with Youth Law Center's core values of ensuring that advocacy is research-informed and designed and directed by those most affected. In addition to IFTF, Youth Law Center collaborated with the California Youth Connection, which brings the leadership and deep expertise of directly affected youth, to conduct an in-depth inquiry on the following questions:

1 | **How do we build the ecosystem of support**, services, and opportunities that will allow young adults exiting foster care to thrive in adulthood?

2 | **How do we amplify the voices and capabilities** of directly affected youth so that they can create and lead the vision and policy agenda for this ecosystem?

3 | **What are the key future forces** that will shape the experiences of system-involved youth and their communities?

4 | **What are the risks and vulnerabilities for youth** transitioning out of foster care?

This report summarizes our findings. While it is important for the field to understand the future forces that will affect youth exiting foster care, we believe it is most crucial to take action in response. Now is the time to reenvision how extended foster care can ensure that young adults exiting the system face a future in which they can flourish.

—Youth Law Center

Letter from
California Youth Connection

Ten years ago, California Youth Connection joined the Youth Law Center and other community partners to advocate for the extension of foster care services to the age of 21.

Current and former foster youth throughout the State of California rallied at the steps of the Capitol, spoke on statewide panels, met with policymakers and stakeholders, and demanded that foster youth who were aging out of the system at 18 get additional support and resources to successfully transition into adulthood. The extended foster care system that people with lived experience were fighting for was supposed to be a safety net for youth aging out of the foster care system. It was intended to support those who needed it most, with minimal criteria to receive the support. The goal was to create an entitlement program that no one would be turned away from. It was with high hopes that young people across the state advocated for a guarantee that homelessness would no longer exist among youth aging out of foster care.

Unfortunately, extended foster care has become a system that foster youth must prove their worthiness to participate in. The dream of a low-barrier program turned into a laundry list of requirements that young people needed to meet. Failure to meet these requirements would result in the denial of benefits or the involuntary exit of the individual. The dream of any foster youth with limited (or no) support system being able to enter turned into a requirement to have an open foster care placement order on your 18th birthday to be able to participate. Extended foster care has become a system where young people have to fight to stay and also further perpetuates the trauma and harm caused by the foster care system that they just transitioned from.

Ten years after the enactment of extended foster care in California, and following the stresses of the pandemic, our concerns about how young people are faring in extended foster care are significant. In 2020-21, 36% of young people placed in transitional housing programs in extended foster care — THP-NMD — were exited involuntarily. This has created sincere urgency among our membership to address these issues. CYC members know it takes a community to transform the system, and Youth Law Center has always been a trusted partner committed to moving forward law and policy that comes authentically from the youth and young adults most affected. The opportunity to partner with Youth Law Center to reimagine extended foster care was a commitment that our

membership wholeheartedly accepted. It is extremely important that this project was prioritized and led by people with lived experience to ensure that we were moving toward a system that would allow participants to thrive.

We believe that as we look to the future of extended foster care, we need to be creating a system that participants feel safe enough to heal in. CYC has entered this project through the lens of our Feel the Heal campaign, which outlines the importance of creating opportunities for healing in health and wellness, education, a place to call home, and lifelong connection. It is through these four pillars that we can begin to think about how foster youth can successfully transition to adulthood. The future of extended foster care needs to be an environment where young people can discover who they are, have room to make mistakes, and know that their stability is guaranteed. This environmental shift will provide a space for youth to thrive rather than be forced to live in fight-or-flight mode.

Being a part of this project, alongside Youth Law Center and Institute for the Future (IFTF), has been transformative. IFTF has challenged us to truly embrace the meaning of foresight thinking by letting go of the present to plan for the future. Throughout this process, we have hit new milestones in our advocacy and have broken down the walls of societal constraints to envision a system that protects the wellness of each participant. We have been honored to have been led by over 50-plus advocates with lived experience who have shared their stories bravely and authentically with the goal of creating a better future for the foster youth who will come after them.

It is with great urgency that we need to view extended foster care as a preventative program. If this system is reshaped to be truly centered around the young person, we will be preventing participants from experiencing homelessness, incarceration, unemployment, and mental isolation. By preventing further trauma to an individual, we allow them to step into their healing journey, on their own terms. The consequences of not making these necessary changes will be catastrophic for the foster youth community.

We believe that the future forces provided in this report are essential for envisioning the new future of extended foster care through the eyes of those with lived experience. As we move into taking action, it is vital that people with lived experience remain at the center of this movement. We would like to thank Youth Law Center, Institute for the Future, our CYC Community, and you as the reader for your impactful dedication to bettering the lives of foster youth. It is only through partnership and collaboration that we will have a chance to create an extended foster care system that participants feel safe enough to heal in.

—California Youth Connection

Introduction

Prior to 2010, youth in foster care "aged out" of the system at the age of 18, which left them to navigate adulthood on their own. Many had been deeply traumatized by their experiences before foster care, the loss of their families of origin, and their experiences in foster care. Lacking relationships, post-secondary educational opportunities, money, and job training, many struggled as they reached the shores of adulthood.

In recognition of this, the Youth Law Center, California Youth Connection, and other organizations advocated successfully for the passage of the federal Fostering Connections to Success Act and California's Assembly Bill 12.[1]

As one of the first states in the nation to extend foster care to age 21 after enactment of the federal law, California committed to meeting the needs of young adults in a radically different way by prioritizing their relationships, decision-making power, and access to community support.

A decade later, it is time to reevaluate the effects of the 2010 changes to the extended foster care (EFC) system and acknowledge that while some youth have experienced improved outcomes, as a whole, EFC* has not been transformative. In fact, research shows that the EFC system is failing in one of its core goals: the establishment of the conditions that foster the loving, supportive, and enduring relationships that are key to improving youth wellness and success.[2] Many youth who experienced EFC are still struggling to survive — they are experiencing homelessness, incarceration, mental and physical health challenges, loneliness, and isolation.

This report explores a future that attempts to rectify these problems. It starts by recognizing the challenging conditions youth exiting foster care face today and then introduces four transformational future forces that could shape the conditions they need in order to thrive as adults. It concludes with key insights for youth-serving systems and organizations to consider as they do the hard but crucial work of building a more equitable future.

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* Throughout this report we use "EFC" when describing the present program and "extended foster care" when describing the future.

The Harsh Realities of Today

Today's foster care system has been shaped by centuries of mass incarceration, structural and systemic racism, colonialism, environmental and economic exploitation, misogyny, sexual violence, family separation, and violence towards LGBTQ+ individuals. These forces, combined with poverty, intergenerational trauma, and inadequate substance abuse and mental health services, have pushed human beings into systems where root causes are rarely acknowledged or addressed.

Social and economic security depends on membership in a stable family. The pandemic— and its cascading consequences—has reinforced this need, revealing widespread frailties in our social, economic, environmental, and political systems and the pre-existing conditions of inequality that shape our society. The young people participating in the EFC program today are disproportionately affected by these systemic failures and frailties that constrain their ability to thrive as adults. A reimagined extended foster care, one that strengthens familial and social connections and ensures financial stability, must support healing from abuse, neglect, loss, and centuries of injustice and should be equipped to address the harsh realities of today, including:

FAMILY INEQUITY	RACIAL INJUSTICE	ECONOMIC INEQUALITY	CLIMATE CRISIS	DIGITAL DIVIDE	SOCIAL VOLATILITY

Harsh Realities
Family Inequity

Most transition-aged youth in the general population rely on a strong family safety net for financial, housing, social, and emotional support as they enter adulthood. Transition-aged youth in foster care cannot rely on this intergenerational privilege.

EFC often weakens, rather than strengthens, family relationships.

EFC was established to provide foster care systems three additional years to focus on reconnecting youth with family and building a network of support for 18-year-olds who previously would have "aged out" of the system. But current system structures at best deprioritize, and at worst damage, crucial relationships and social ties of the youth they are serving. For example, the rules and qualifications for transitional housing programs and other foster care placements prevent many youth in EFC from living with younger siblings who may have experienced years of separation after continuous uprooting and relocating. Similarly, youth who are parents are often not permitted to live with their co-parent or other family members who can help share the important work of forming and supporting a family and parenting.

EFC undermines youth development research, emphasizing the importance of independence, rather than interdependence, for transition-aged youth.

EFC currently employs a model of striving for self-sufficiency and independent living. Policies and programming are awash in language about independence, and emphasize financial independence and independent living as essential elements to strive for in the transitioning years. Experts, however, stress the importance of youth building and fortifying connections to family and friends and meaningfully engaging in their communities so that they can navigate the transition to adulthood with support.

Exiting foster care without permanent family relationships

While the overall number of young people in foster care has declined, teenagers and young adults ages 16 to 21 were less likely to leave foster care with permanent families in 2021 than they were in 2016. Fewer than half leave foster care to live with adoptive families or guardians or return to their birth families.[3]

Extended Foster Care Future Design

Prioritize both family and community relationships.

Youth-serving systems must ensure that all young people have secure connections that can be divided into at least two categories. The first includes relationships that are as close to family connections as possible, are enduring over a young adult's lifetime, and provide unconditional support and love as well as a sense of identity and belonging. The second category includes caring adults and peers that surround young people and create a community that provides belonging. These two categories of relationships provide critical moral and financial support, social connections, identity, and belonging.

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YOUTH VOICES: WHY STABILITY IS CRUCIAL

The lack of stability causes relationships to become very rocky, and … can be extremely detrimental to one's mental and even physical health."

—Amaris, CYC member

Harsh Realities
Racial Injustice

The impact of systemic racism on the development of the foster care system and ongoing racial disproportionality in EFC is well-documented.[4, 5, 6] Youth in EFC continue to experience harm and inequities due to systemic racism both in and out of foster care that change their life trajectories and limit opportunities.

Youth of color in EFC experience differential treatment.

Youth of color are overrepresented in institutional care, the most restrictive setting, which produces poor outcomes, causes developmental harms, results in the lowest rates of exit to family, and provides particularly poor preparation for adulthood.

Youth of color in EFC experience higher rates of homelessness, despite being equally eligible for benefits. And many young people report experiencing distress when their racial and cultural identities are, at best, not supported in EFC, and at worst, actively disrespected.

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YOUTH VOICES: RACISM CONTRIBUTES TO POOR MENTAL HEALTH

I experienced racism within extended foster care when I first came to a mostly white town for transitional housing. Youth and the program mentors would constantly make little comments to me, like, 'Why can't you Black people clean up your hair after you shower?' My program mentor was the same way, so I always felt confined to my bedroom to the point it made my mental health get really bad."

—Olivia, CYC member

Precarious housing for youth of color

In a longitudinal study of EFC in California conducted by Chapin Hall (CalYOUTH), mixed-race youth (41.9%) and African American youth (32.2%) are significantly more likely than white youth (18.8%) and Hispanic youth (19.8%) to report having been homeless since their last CalYOUTH interview.[7]

Extended Foster Care Future Design

Address systemic racial injustices and strengthen the factors that will help youth weather the racial and social inequities they will face as adults.

Youth-serving systems must deploy tailored and targeted responses to address trauma and adverse experiences young people of color face prior to and during their time in foster care. Rates of depression, anxiety, trauma, loneliness, and suicidality have never been higher in the United States, and "the inequities that result from structural racism [contribute] to disproportionate impacts on children from communities of color," according to the nation's leading health experts.[8]

VOICES OF LIVED EXPERTISE: RACIAL DISPROPORTIONALITY IN OUT-OF-HOME CARE SHAPES IDENTITY

I very rarely saw a face that wasn't the same color as my own. I began believing that group homes, considered markedly more restrictive than foster homes and for 'harder to place' children, were designated for Black children. And with constant messages about our 'behavioral issues,' and the stark difference in experiences for those in foster homes, considered somewhat more positive, my adolescent mind concluded that group homes were for bad kids."

—Sade Daniels, author, "Black in Foster Care"[9]

Harsh Realities
Economic Inequality

The economic inequality faced by youth leaving foster care is significant, especially for those who lack a family support network. Among their economic challenges is a lack of savings and assets.

Current policy does not promote economic stability for youth in EFC.

While there have been some limited policy changes in this area, young people are often stuck in and between systems that penalize them for saving money by removing eligibility for some benefits and services. Restricting the amount that can be devoted to interest-earning savings strips young people in EFC of the opportunity to build wealth. This effectively ties them to poverty by depriving them of an economically stable foundation.

COVID-19 had exacerbated the impact of economic instability, particularly for the most vulnerable youth in EFC.

Economic hardships have proven even more extreme during the pandemic. In one national study involving 24,695 young people who were or had experience in foster care between the ages of 14 and 27, 73.8% of respondents reported experiencing high financial insecurity, with Black, biracial, or multiracial respondents experiencing the highest overall levels.[10] A California study yielded similar results: 22% of current and former foster youth respondents experienced homelessness after the pandemic began, and 68% reported a negative effect on employment, including being laid off or experiencing reduced hours or an inability to find work.[11] The study revealed even harsher conditions for Black youth and parenting youth: 35% of Black youth respondents reported episodes of homelessness, compared to 20% of non-Black youth.[12] Twenty-seven percent of parenting youth respondents reported episodes of homelessness, compared to 21% for non-parenting youth.[13]

Extended Foster Care Future Design

Ensure youth have the economic resources to both weather crises and achieve stability.

Youth-serving systems must shift programs and supports away from reactive approaches designed to intervene after economic crisis hits and toward anticipatory responses that focus on economic stability and growth for the most vulnerable youth in extended foster care. Any reforms or improvements must anticipate and assume economic volatility over the next decade.

Current and former youth in foster care experience high financial insecurity

In a 2021 national study by Think of Us, close to 75% of respondents reported experiencing high financial insecurity.[14]

Harsh Realities
Climate Crisis

Recent climate emergencies have resulted in radical shifts in regional ecosystems, measurable increases in sea level, and significant disruption of temperature and weather patterns. These shifts have grave implications for youth in EFC.

The consequences of the climate crisis are unequally distributed toward the most vulnerable in EFC.

Over the next decade, the effects of sustained heat, wildfires, and floods will be experienced most acutely by those without strong relational ties and/or economic security, and by populations who have endured decades of discriminatory housing practices.

Both material and emotional needs connected to climate crises must be addressed. Climate change will likely result in routine school and child care facility closures, disrupting the rhythm and routine of learning and affecting access to services, including food, housing, and health care. Such disruptions may result in dire consequences for the material and emotional well-being of those in EFC who have already experienced so much instability as a result of their familial circumstances.

Extended Foster Care Future Design
Anticipate climate-related risks and respond immediately to climate-related events.

Youth-serving systems must intentionally design climate-crisis programming and policy to respond to the unique needs of youth in extended foster care. Youth in foster care will experience the effects of climate change, and as climate crises increase, they stand to face the gravest risks.

Impact of heat on mental health differs by income and gender

According to research conducted by Dr. Obradovich and Dr. Paulus in 2018, individuals with lower incomes and women were more adversely affected by heat in terms of their mental health compared to those with higher incomes and men. The study revealed that the impact of heat on mental health was twice as severe for low-income women as it was for high-income men.[15]

Harsh Realities
Digital Divide

With 95 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds using YouTube and 75 percent using Instagram in 2021, it is hard to envision a future in which social media sites and digital tools — existing and new ones — do not continue to play a prominent role in young people's daily lives as a crucial source of information, connection, and support.[16] However, many youth enter EFC lacking digital literacy, leaving them ill-prepared for many jobs and vulnerable to misinformation and exploitation.

Youth in EFC often enter with limited experience with technology.

Many young people in foster care live in home settings in which their access to technology is restricted, impeding their digital literacy. In a systematic literature review of articles published between 2010 and 2020, researchers found that "foster parents, group home staff, and child welfare administrators see foster youth at high risk of harm related to the use of these technologies, and therefore restrict their use."[17]

Lack of digital literacy limits support, education, and employment opportunities for youth.

Limiting access to technologies not only restricts youth access to helpful information and emotional support, it also hinders their ability to gain familiarity with the technologies that are commonly used in schools and

workplaces. Additionally, for transition-aged youth who experience isolation and rejection because of their foster care living situation, or as a consequence of their racial or ethnic identity, sexual orientation, or gender identity, the communities they find through social media can be life-saving resources. Many parenting youth also depend on social media for counsel and support with raising children.

Transition-aged youth in EFC are likely to have experienced the impact of automation and algorithms in and outside of child welfare. Some transition-aged youth have been negatively affected by racist and discriminatory algorithms. For example, youth may have lost an employment or social opportunity based on their social media postings or online activity or been punished when the results of an online search triggered an automatic alert to school or home.

YOUTH VOICES: SEARCHING FOR INFORMATION ABOUT EFC

I literally Googled 'services for foster youth 21 and older.'"

—IFTF interview participant

Extended Foster Care Future Design

Equip youth with the ability to identify and understand digital tools and communicate and connect using them.

Youth-serving systems must provide youth access to new forms of computational know-how. Digital sensemaking, including the ability to assess social media information and understand how algorithms work, and particularly how they affect decisions, is a critical form of literacy over the next decade.

Youth in foster care have limited access to reliable technology

In early 2020, an organization in California, Pivotal, surveyed 332 youth in foster care in their postsecondary and high school programs and asked them about their access to technology. They found that only 38% had access to a reliable laptop, 20% of the students didn't have access to reliable internet, and 12% didn't have access to a reliable phone.[18]

Harsh Realities
Social Volatility

Reproductive health rights, critical race theory, immigration, affirmative action, sexual and gender identity, and family formations are among the hot-button topics that have polarized society and led to a confrontational political climate in the United States, including California. Youth in EFC are in the crosshairs of many of those issues.

Political divisions and social volatility impact youth safety and well-being.

Nationally, one third of teens in foster care identify as LGBTQ+ and report discrimination and threats to their safety in their living environments, workplaces, and schools.[19] So far, in 2023 alone, over 450 anti-LGBTQ+ bills have been introduced in state legislatures across the country.[20, 21] Some of these bills will not become laws, but, as the ACLU aptly notes, "They all cause harms for LGBTQ+ people." Without transformative change, the potential for negative effects on LGBTQ+ youth mental health, well-being, and sense of security is high.

National social division and volatility impacts California youth.

Youth in California are not insulated from the challenges facing marginalized youth across the country. While California has made efforts to promote a climate that seeks to ensure those of all backgrounds do not face discrimination, harassment, or violence, youth in EFC still disproportionately face these challenges. Youth across the United States are subjected constantly to the wider national social volatility and division on social media. Additionally, factors such as the escalating costs of living in California, climate disasters, and declining access to postsecondary education are forcing youth from California to move to other states, prompting a need to navigate different political norms.

Extended Foster Care Future Design
Explicitly protect the most vulnerable youth.

Youth-serving systems must actively take steps to ensure the most vulnerable youth in foster care are protected in a country that is increasingly openly hostile to youth who are LGBTQ+, female, immigrants, or people of color. The next decade will most likely involve intensifying social volatility and unrest.

FORESIGHT
The Transformational Forces of Tomorrow

This section of our report is not a prediction of what is to come. It is, rather, an attempt to bring discipline and creativity to how we envision and plan for the long-term future of extended foster care. Alvin Toffler, a giant in the field of futures work, called thinking about the future an act of "social imagination," an act he considered vital, because the future is not static or predetermined — we shape it by the actions we take today.[22]
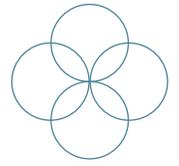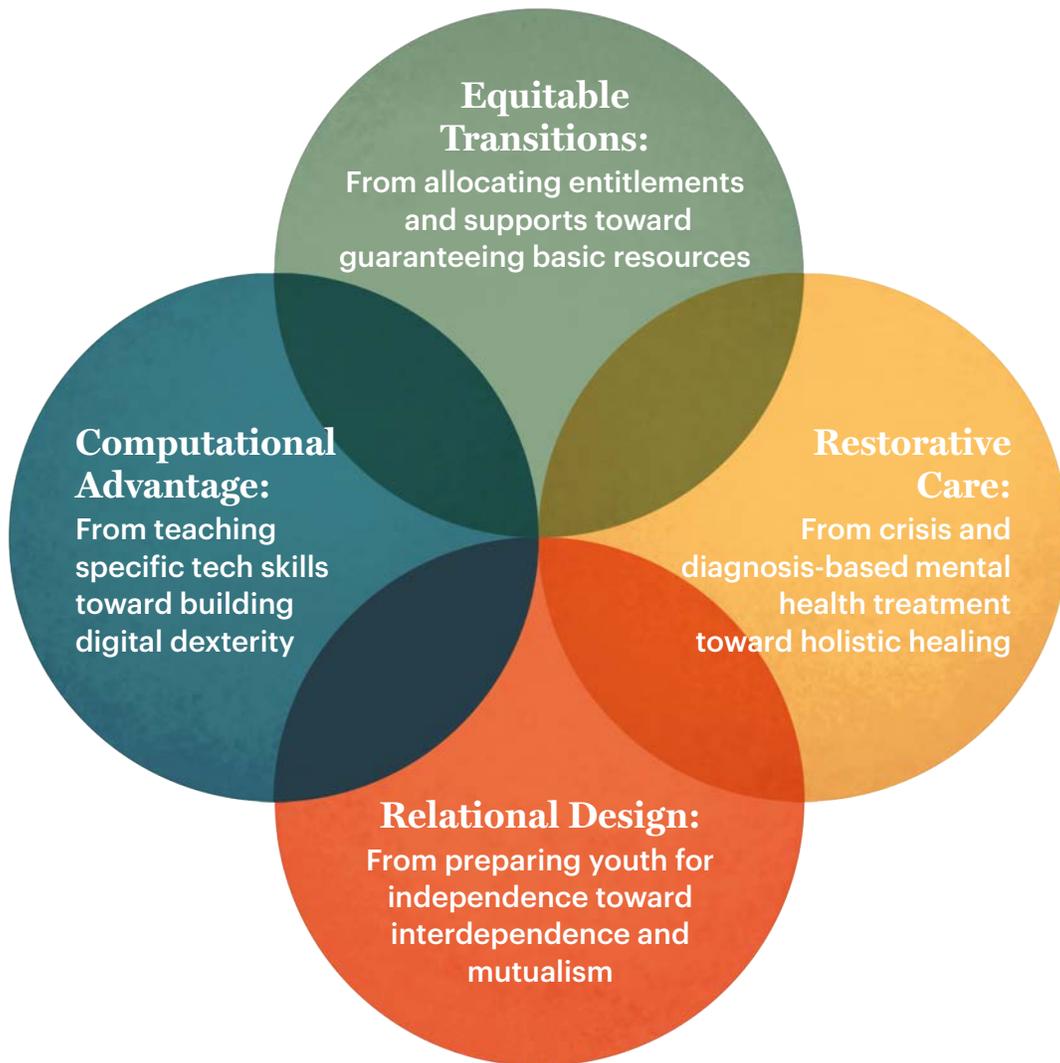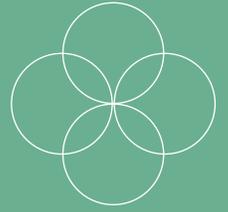
The following transformational future forces expand our concepts of what is possible and help unleash our social imagination. They compel us to go beyond fixing our current systems and structures to create radically new ones. They are supported by drivers and signals (indications of burgeoning trends), and in the case of this set, are deepened by the ideas and insights of young people with experience in EFC.

The four forces described below are likely to be slow-moving and perhaps a step removed from the more immediate pressures and constraints that shape the present and inform our understanding of the future.

Advocates and policymakers have the opportunity to ride and even shape the waves of change that will usher in these four transformational future forces.

Equitable Transitions:
From allocating entitlements and supports toward guaranteeing basic resources

Restorative Care:
From crisis and diagnosis-based mental health treatment toward holistic healing

Computational Advantage:
From teaching specific tech skills toward building digital dexterity

Relational Design:
From preparing youth for independence toward interdependence and mutualism

Equitable Transitions

From allocating entitlements and supports toward guaranteeing basic resources
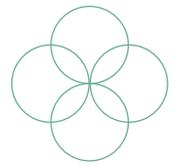
Youth-serving systems will shift away from limited and conditional benefits and supports and toward guaranteed basic resources, including stable housing, financial security, and broad access to the tools, skills, social connections, and know-how needed to flourish in adulthood.

FORECAST: In 2035, youth-serving systems provide a supportive bridge that ensures that youth in extended foster care are unconditionally guaranteed a basic set of resources intended to provide a fair level of economic protection. This includes education, financial security, employment, short-term and long-term housing, and health care and wellness resources, especially in the area of behavioral health. Youth-serving systems have converted limited benefits — the money or other resources previously provided to young people during a dedicated timeframe and only if they met eligibility requirements — into guaranteed resources that ensure that all transition-aged youth have financial and social building blocks that accumulate value over time and provide basic economic and social well-being over the long term. This transformation to guaranteed resources in extended foster care has required a fundamental culture shift: rather than holding youth accountable for navigating extremely complex systems in order to meet their own needs, agencies are held accountable for ensuring that the youth in extended foster care have all the resources to which they are entitled.

Removing age limits is just the beginning.

In the field of developmental neuroscience, consensus is growing that there is not a universal biological age that equates with brain maturation. Scientists now understand brain development as dynamic and highly subjective and based on the individual's lived experience. And, as research scientist Dr. Martha Denckla notes, the "social brain" — the effect of emotions on our cognitive control — may mature for most in our early 30s.[23]

Lifting policy-imposed age limits on a young adult's access to entitlements and supports and eliminating rules and requirements at odds with adolescent and young-adult development was a critical first step in building a system that enhances youths' ability to thrive as adults. However, a truly youth-serving system guarantees that transition-aged youth with experience in foster care have access to a basic set of resources ranging from housing and health care to education and financial security as they enter adulthood.[24] These resources are extended into adulthood and include savings
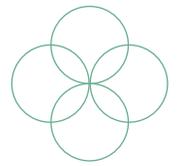
accounts and some form of homeownership, which are foundational for short- and long-term financial security.

Other mainstream public benefit programs have been reformed to ensure that funds used to pay for extended foster care services support the capacity of transition-aged youth to build wealth and further their goals. This is especially beneficial for parenting youth, who now have access to financial assets that can build generational wealth.

Tailored, comprehensive supports are customized to each youth's unique circumstances.

By 2035, extended foster care policies are designed explicitly to ensure that youth in need of specialized supports — those

involved in the juvenile justice system, who are parenting children, who have complex health or mental health needs, or who face societal barriers because they are LGBTQ+, Black, Indigenous, or Latinx — are not left behind. Tailored programming and resources are easily accessible. For example, parenting youth in extended foster care in 2035 are provided with child care and sufficient financial resources and are connected with a network of caring adults and peers who support the development of their parenting skills, as well as their goals in education and employment. These comprehensive supports are designed to break intergenerational child welfare system involvement, respect the rights of young parents, and provide both them and their children with the foundation they need to thrive.

YOUTH VOICES: WHY EFC NEEDS TAILORED PROGRAMMING

Many who come into this line of work with foster youth come with preconceived ideas of the people they are serving, and those ideas don't match up with them. For example, if a worker comes in with the idea that the youth needs a job and only acquires resources to that end, but the youth needs help finding housing, that's a problem."

—Juan, CYC member

YOUTH VOICES: WHY SELF-ADVOCACY IS IMPORTANT BUT SHOULD NOT PREVENT SOMEONE FROM RECEIVING SUPPORTS

"Self-advocacy is a big reason why some foster youth get help and not others."

—IFTF interview participant
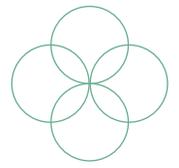
Housing becomes a guaranteed support.

By 2035, guaranteed housing is recognized as an investment that contributes to youths' economic and housing security long after they have left extended foster care. Young adults can count on access to stable and affordable housing in a variety of forms. Tiny homes, rental subsidies truly in line with market rents, and homeownership are among the menu of options.

To make homeownership viable, especially in expensive regions, transition-aged youth have opportunities to invest in housing cooperatives similar to Freedom West Homes in San Francisco. Founded in 1973, Freedom West has provided affordable housing for approximately 1,000 racially diverse, low- and moderate-income San Francisco residents.[25] In an extremely expensive city, its residents have enjoyed stable housing and financial gain from owning property. In 2020, the homeowners/shareholders approved a $2 billion plan to expand beyond permanent housing to include affordable rental units, a health and fitness center, a childcare center, a community innovation center, and retail and entertainment spaces.[26]

In 2035, youth-serving systems are piloting similar cooperative ownership models to provide opportunities for transition-aged youth. Instead of distributing housing funds in monthly allotments over the course of years, for example, the total amount is disbursed in such a manner that a youth, with guidance and support, can invest in property. With housing fundamentally guaranteed, the option of removing transition-aged youth from safe, secure housing as a punitive consequence for poor adherence to program rules has been terminated.

Investments are made in both the skills and relationships needed to build meaningful careers.

In addition to converting housing from a benefit to a guaranteed resource, sustained financial security is achieved by guaranteeing employment. Youth in extended foster care have work opportunities that will lead to quality, meaningful careers. Because providing gainful employment requires a longer-term commitment on the part of youth-serving systems, they have invested in structured access to mentors and networks

> ❝ **YOUTH VOICES: WHY HOUSING MUST BE A GUARANTEED SUPPORT**
>
> The vital thing, I think, is housing. There just has to be more housing, period. And housing where you're not denied. Because there's the kids who go on the system who do good and they get [housing]. But what about us who didn't?"
>
> —IFTF interview participant
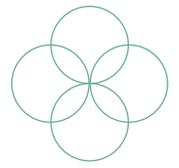
of professionals whose function is to help transition-aged youth realize their professional dreams. Youth-serving systems also have created the conditions that allow youth to develop the skills and the relationships necessary to thrive in a changing economy.

Youth-serving systems rely on tools such as My Opportunity Hub (MyOH) to help transition-aged youth identify people they know who could help with their career development.[27] Such tools help youth map their personal connections — former teachers, mentors, coworkers, coaches, etc. They supplement their organic network with "gateway" connections — professionals who understand the value of social networks and are committed to providing economic opportunities to all.

Youth-serving systems actively cultivate relationships with trust-based, culturally unique organizations that focus on people who have historically faced workplace discrimination. Trust-based organizations such as Black Worker Centers, for example, focus on mutual accountability and redistribution of power. Black Worker Centers help build emerging adults' professional networks and increase their access to tools and resources that cultivate sustainable economic pathways. They are critical support networks for Black youth who face barriers due to systemic oppression and "anti-Blackness in the workplace."[28] In addition to teaching youth relevant job skills, they help them navigate the racial injustices they face in hiring, promotion, and pay.

By 2035, a diverse range of community-based worker and innovation centers have forged durable partnerships with youth-serving organizations. They are invaluable resources for ensuring economic security, particularly for transition-aged youth who are involved in the juvenile justice system, are raising children, have complex health or mental health needs, or face societal barriers because they are LGBTQ+, Black, Indigenous, or Latinx. This community-led approach to economic stability provides guaranteed employment to individual transition-aged youth and is a powerful social intervention to fight discrimination and improve working conditions for everyone.

> ❝ **YOUTH VOICES: WHY EFC NEEDS FLEXIBLE SUPPORTS**
>
> I feel like if there was a program in which they said, 'You're going to pay for your rent and we want to see how you manage your money,' they would give me the opportunity to save my own money how I feel like I should."
>
> —IFTF interview participant, edited for clarity
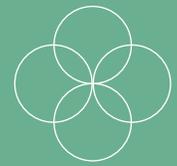
INSPIRATIONS FOR TOMORROW

Diverse Community Expansion

The nonprofit equity housing cooperative Freedom West Homes has been an affordable housing ownership option for approximately 1,000 racially diverse, low- and moderate-income residents in San Francisco since 1973. Recently, the homeowners (aka the shareholders) agreed to Freedom West 2.0, a $2 billion plan to expand beyond permanent housing to include affordable rental units, a health and fitness center, a childcare center, a "Community Innovation Center," and retail and entertainment spaces.

Source: https://sfyimby.com/2021/11/new-renderings-revealed-for-2387-home-freedom-west-proposal-fillmore-district-san-francisco.html

Empowering Youth Connections

In February 2022, the social enterprise Social Capital Builders launched My Opportunity Hub, an app that helps lower- and middle-income youth build connections with people who can provide career mentorship and guidance, which can lead to a job.

Source: https://www.myoh.app/features
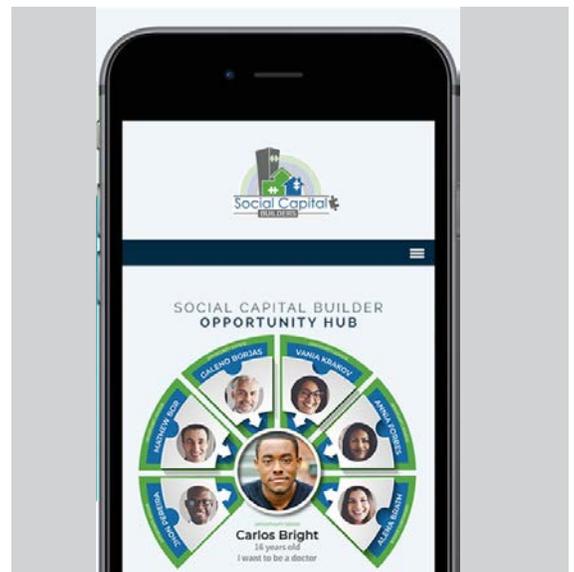
Innovative Job Solutions

The Southern California Black Worker Hub for Regional Organizing aims to address the "Black job crisis" through community partnerships and technical training, and is emerging as a core resource for cultivating quality work.

Source: https://socalblackworkersunited.org
Image source: https://unsplash.com/photos/woman-and-man-sitting-in-front-of-monitor-IgUR1iX0mqM
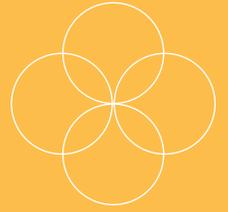
Restorative Care

From crisis and diagnosis-based mental health treatment toward holistic healing
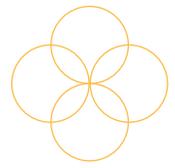
Youth-serving systems will shift away from crisis- or diagnosis-based behavioral health treatment and toward supporting holistic healing.

FORECAST: In 2035, emotional trauma resulting from pandemics, climate-related disasters, and social breakdowns such as mass shootings has accelerated the transition away from focusing only on reactive treatments driven by crises. Our collective understanding of well-being is not simply the absence of a mental health condition or episode; it incorporates a broader set of conditions that support lifelong well-being through restorative care. Mental health disorders are a more common cause of impairment in children and teens than physical conditions, and youth-serving systems have invested in restorative care to support holistic healing. Interventions available for youth in extended foster care who have been separated from their family, community, and culture include healing traditions from various cultures to confront historical trauma and build wellness. These practices prioritize relationships and serve to maintain and reconnect youth with family (including birth, resource, and chosen), a key part of the restorative care team for every youth.

Mental health is understood as a spectrum, from thriving, to managing, to struggling, to experiencing distress.

Adolescence and the transition to adulthood are inherently times of change and disruption. Interventions that support wellness through the ups and downs of this life stage are critical to maintaining mental health and well-being. Restorative care focuses on the conditions that produce and fortify mental health, such as ensuring that youth feel loved and nurtured and that their relationships are strong. It includes not just immediate treatment during a mental health crisis, but on-demand preventative treatment and connections to coping resources and enrichment activities that help youth thrive. It reflects the shift toward viewing mental health as a spectrum and as essential to general wellness.
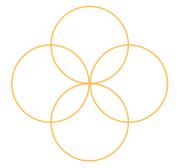
Restorative care responds to the psychological impacts of climate change.

By 2035, youth-serving systems employ a robust, comprehensive set of supports and services to prevent, treat, and manage the effects of climate change on transition-aged youths' psychological well-being. They have forged strong partnerships with large cities' chief heat officers and community leaders managing FEMA's public assistance funding after a climate-related disaster.[29] In advance of a heat wave or potential evacuation due to wildfires, or during the rebuilding and recovery process, decision makers place the needs and preferences of transition-aged youth in extended foster care front and center. This includes ensuring that they have access to care that addresses the emotional toll associated with environmental disasters.

Play and imagination are unlocked as part of healing and care.

Play, time spent with peers, and enrichment activities are proven ways that children experiment and learn. However, many in foster care were deprived of this prior to placement in the system. By 2035, restorative care encourages age-appropriate play for emerging adults, including play in nature, exploration of talents, hobbies, and interests, creative endeavors, and connections in one's community.

Restorative care also includes efforts to instill a sense of optimism in young people — what one expert defines as "the ability to see goodness and opportunity."[30] This focus on rational optimism despite adverse circumstances provides coping mechanisms

YOUTH VOICES: WHY EFC NEEDS TO PRIORITIZE HEALING

I needed healing before I could know anything about who I am…. I didn't know who I was until the last two years of my life, you know, so having a curriculum or some type of, I don't know what to call it, but where there's a healing process for whatever the situation is."

—IFTF interview participant
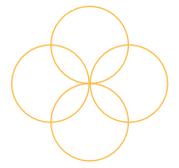
that counter toxic stress and emphasizes that ground that seems rocky at the moment may be germinating seeds of opportunity for the future. The system is designed to help young people anticipate a future without limits, bolstered by the support of many caring adults, and to see the goodness and strength in themselves and the world around them. Youth-serving systems provide guidance and opportunities for young people to share power, make decisions, and interact positively with the people around them.

Holistic healing includes addressing upstream causes, protection from harm, and imprinting self-care.

Restorative care explicitly helps the emerging adults in extended foster care understand the larger causes of the challenging circumstances in which they may find themselves. It is designed to acknowledge that the harms they sustained prior to and while involved in foster care were systems-level problems, and not the fault of the young person.

By 2035, youth-serving systems apply adolescent development research emphasizing the need to protect young people from hardship and pain, and youth-serving systems do not glorify resilience or grit as a way to justify the harsh circumstances that too many young people in extended foster care were forced to endure. Restorative care provides young people with the time and opportunity to develop problem-solving skills through experiences that are paired with guidance and support.

Finally, a more comprehensive definition of emotional well-being requires that youth also have access to the tools, resources, and scaffolding needed to convert the support that is offered into something for which they can see the benefit. Resources such as counseling or therapeutic interventions may reduce some negative impacts of mental health challenges, but teaching youth to recognize the value and take full advantage of the broad range of resources offered to cultivate healing and fortify well-being is how they will thrive.
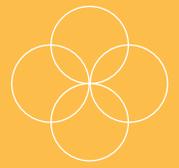
INSPIRATIONS FOR TOMORROW

A Spectrum Approach to Mental Health

The Youth Mental Health Forum held at the White House in May 2022 was the first convening to address mental health as a spectrum, from thriving, to managing, to struggling, to experiencing distress. It is helping to reframe mental or behavioral health as a continuum that encompasses prevention, regulation, and treatment.
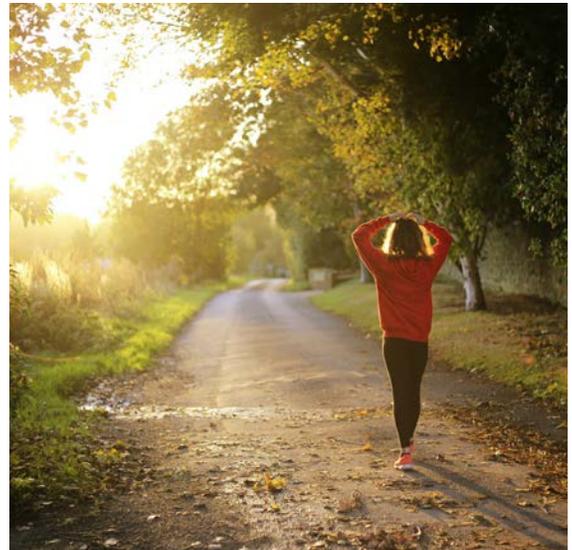
Source: https://www.mentalhealthishealth.us/mental-health-101/
Image source: https://unsplash.com/photos/three-men-in-jacket-laughing-at-each-other-pumko2FFxY0

Nature as Health Pillar

Science has shown that regular access to nature and opportunities for play can rewire the brain. British Columbia's PaRx program allows doctors and other health providers in nine provinces to prescribe play in nature as part of a treatment approach for mental and/or physical health conditions, issuing subsidized passes to over 80 national parks. The project, which launched in 2020, aims to make it easier for Canadians to access nature and make time outdoors "the fourth pillar of health," along with diet, exercise, and sleep.

Source: https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/nature-prescriptions-cometo-The-maritimes-1.6427777
Image source: https://unsplash.com/photos/woman-walking-on-pathway-during-daytime-mNGaaLeWEp0
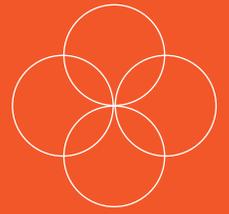
Relational Design

From preparing youth for independence toward interdependence and mutualism
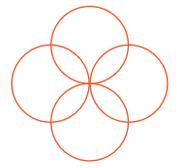
Youth-serving systems will shift away from preparing youth for independence and toward interdependence and mutualism.

FORECAST: By 2035, youth-serving systems have benefited from significant resources toward efforts to prevent child welfare system involvement in the first place, which frees up resources to serve the smaller number of youth who must be in foster care more effectively and creatively through a relationship-based approach that minimizes additional psychological harm and trauma. Systems that serve transition-aged youth recognize that family and community connections are foundational and that thriving adults are woven into webs of interdependencies in which the accomplishments of one individual are affected by the actions of others.[31]

Just as systems have created the conditions for emerging adults to access quality work and housing stability (see Equitable Transition), these same systems are also responsible for creating the conditions that keep youth connected to family and community. By the age of 25, young people in extended foster care are embedded in networks of families, friends, and communities that provide guidance and support when they face the social, emotional, financial, or environmental crises that are inevitably part of the transition to adulthood. By 2035, extended foster care policies and supports are informed by adolescent development research and experts like Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg, who explained that "safe, secure and sustained relationships are the most important for healthy development, resilience, recovery, and healing for youth."[32]

Relational permanency is central to extended foster care.

To accomplish interconnectedness, systems embrace the principles of relational design, which prioritize relational permanency measured by quality, durability, and quantity of connections. Youth-serving systems evaluate success by the quality of the youth's connection to family and social networks, as well as their involvement in and contribution to the larger community, and the community's involvement in and contribution to theirs. Secure connection to family and/or family-like connection and embeddedness in a community are not considered aspirational or optional; their facilitation is a guaranteed entitlement.
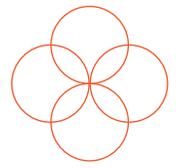
Maintaining quality, sustaining relationships requires skills and time.

By 2035, youth in extended foster care have support in building the skills and capacities needed to cultivate and maintain meaningful relationships, and youth-serving systems encourage ample opportunities for creating and sustaining lasting, healthy, emotional connections. Such a commitment requires an investment of time and openness to youth-led approaches to forming and strengthening family and social ties.[33]

Relational design is youth-led.

Youth have the option of living with biological or foster siblings, biological or resource parents, or, in the case of parenting youth, with their co-parents, extended family, or a resource family. This fights "relational poverty" by first identifying those to whom a youth feels connected, and then actively pursuing reunification by supporting such connections.[34]

Barriers preventing the deepening of relationships are lifted.

Implementing relational design has demanded a reexamination of blanket policies and practices that formerly limited the amount of time or extent that trusted adults in the foster care system could remain in a young person's life. Youths' relationships with advocates, case workers, teachers, and other supportive professionals they trust are now seen as protective assets that must be augmented by the development of secure, ongoing relationships with those outside the system. Encouraging and maintaining this range of connections throughout youths' transition into adulthood is deemed paramount.

> **YOUTH VOICES: WHY EFC NEEDS TO SUPPORT MUTUALITY**
>
> Everything that I've been through is for a purpose. Everything bad will be used for good now…. I can now reach the people, where I didn't even know I had a voice, who are self-harming or who are on drugs or who went through the same things that I'm going through. 'Hey, I've been there. I've been there, and I'm on the other side, and you can do that too.'"
>
> —IFTF interview participant
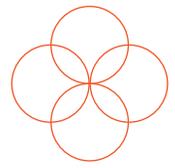
Finding and nurturing familial ties become priorities.

Designing for relational health has produced youth-serving systems that demonstrate commitment to family by expanding family finding and family engagement interventions. These strategies, pioneered by Kevin Campbell, are guided by young people and their communities and utilize technology to ensure that multiple family connections are identified, reestablished, and strengthened.[35] Learning from the pioneering work of the nonprofit Miracle Messages, which helps reunite unhoused individuals with their loved ones, resources are invested to identify and engage family members, and services and financial resources are embedded in the community so that youth and families can easily access any support they need to sustain their relationships over time.[36]

Social infrastructures that are sustaining, authentic, and individualized are built.

The system also incorporates concepts developed in programs that help young people build their social capital and community of support, including Baltimore's nonprofit Thread, Boston's Wily Network, and Guardian Scholars-type programs offered at many California public universities, colleges, and community colleges. Thread makes a 10-year commitment to ninth-graders in the Thread Family, and the Wily Network provides academic, emotional, and financial support to students in four-year college environments by building "a community that [the scholars]

can carry with them throughout their lives."[37,38] Programs like Guardian Scholars provide basic-needs support, career development, academic coaching and planning, educational support resources, and community connections for young people with experience in foster care. Such programs modeled how to cultivate social infrastructures that are sustaining, authentic, and individualized, and by 2035, youth-serving systems have expanded the reach of such intentional relationality by including youth who are not enrolled in school.

## Arts are a medium for community-building and belonging.

An intentional investment in relational design has advanced equity and a greater sense of belonging and has been a boon to Gen Z and Gen Alpha, who grew up in extreme and divisive environments that made community involvement and collective well-being an especially important goal. Exposure to arts by 2035 serves as a community-building enrichment opportunity for youth, as well as an appropriate way for them to grapple with issues such as power inequities and racism. Youth in extended foster care are connected to artists, science fiction writers, and others with expertise in relationality to help youth "unlearn" what they may have absorbed in foster care about isolation, individualism, destruction of relationships, and independence and instead learn how to build strong relationships and commit to collective well-being and mutual aid.
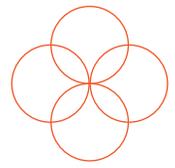
Through paid arts and culture internships and apprenticeships, transition-aged youth are able to participate in what one arts group calls "community cultural development."[39] By 2035, extended foster care has strong partnerships with organizations such as the Community Futures School at the Museum of Children's Art in Oakland, which teaches visual arts skills to high school-aged youth in order "to re-imagine a more inclusive and antiracist world."[40] It blends Afrofuturism and leadership skills to help participants find their voice through restorative healing. By 2035, community cultural development also includes Queer Futurism and Indigenous Futurism to form diverse, inclusive, and optimistic visions for the future.[41]

Embracing interdependencies within families and communities is vital.

The shift toward interdependency and mutuality has shifted the thinking in child welfare systems, replacing practices and norms associated with charity with those connected to solidarity. This shift reflects a primary concept of relational design: that mutuality is key to creating social connection. Both people in a partnership are open to helping and to being helped. Adults understand that their relationship to youth is as important to them as it is to the young people, and systems embrace their role in helping to create the conditions for connecting youth to family and community. Collective well-being has become the ultimate goal.
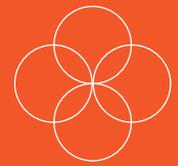
INSPIRATIONS FOR TOMORROW

Tackling Relational Poverty

The nonprofit Miracle Messages identifies "relational poverty" as "a deadly, often overlooked form of poverty." It provides family reunification services and other social connections and financial services for people experiencing homelessness.

Source: https://www.miraclemessages.org/stories

Long-Term Youth Support Network

Baltimore-based nonprofit Thread makes a 10-year commitment to the ninth-graders who join the Thread Family. Its mission is to create a "social fabric" that stays with the youth through high school and at least six years afterward.

Source: https://www.thread.org/how-we-work/
Image Source: https://www.pexels.com/photo/happy-young-teenage-boys-hugging-each-other-10536994/

Developing Future Leaders

While Community Futures School artist Alysse Brown was engaged in a creative exercise to imagine Oakland in 2045, she was also learning leadership, critical thinking, and community-building skills.

Source: Artwork by Alysse Brown, https://www.mocha.org/communtiesfuturesschool
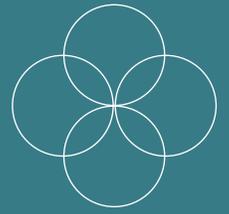
Computational Advantage

From teaching specific tech skills toward building digital dexterity
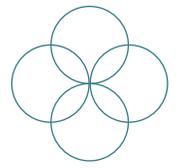
Youth-serving systems will shift away from teaching specific tech skills toward building digital dexterity.

FORECAST: By 2035, youth-serving systems have modernized the technological systems they employ. Youth, who are often first to embrace new technologies, are seen as power users by child welfare and juvenile justice systems, and through creative partnerships and forward-looking initiatives, more systems and organizations have leveraged existing and advancing technologies to serve transition-aged youth.

Embedding tech can streamline extended foster care services.

Youth-serving systems are using commercially available, "off-the-shelf" tech products to connect youth to family members and other important individuals from previous placements, and they are experimenting with tech-enabled solutions that allow transition-aged youth in extended foster care to provide real-time feedback about their treatment, conditions, and care in placements. In turn, the systems and organizations are equipped to respond to the continuous stream of feedback to solve problems and improve the "user" experience. They also use technology proactively to digitally match transition-aged youth with appropriate resources, lifting the burden to search, find, and apply for programs and services. By 2035, intelligent systems powered by sophisticated AI curate and tailor an optimal set of supports based on each young person's circumstances, interests, and plans for the future. Such AI-supported digital assistants are invaluable for many parenting youth, who use readily accessible information and resources to plan for the future.

> ## YOUTH VOICES: WHY EFC NEEDS TECH-ENABLED USER FEEDBACK
>
> So what seems to be the most notable problem in the foster care system is the lack of accountability. When someone in a position of authority does something harmful to those under their control, it is very difficult to have them held to account."
>
> —Juan, CYC member
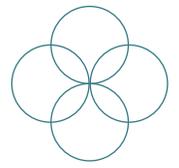
AI powers digital assistants for youth in extended foster care.

Because Natural Language Processing technology and artificial intelligence (AI) have progressed to the point that makes it possible for people to have seamless conversations with a "listening" technology, by 2035, the digital services offered in extended foster care will need to be integrated into the digital ecosystems of young people. Emerging adults in the 2030s will rely on AI tools to help develop resumes, write college and scholarship essays, and navigate the world more broadly. Many will have therapy bots that they access for years.

E-mobility revolution impacts extended foster care's transportation supports.

Extended foster care also integrates autonomous ride services into the transportation options available to transition-aged youth. California's ban on new gasoline-powered vehicles produced a more equitable geographic distribution of charging stations and jump-started innovative transportation solutions statewide.[42] Companies that received autonomous vehicle permits to offer rides to passengers were early movers on autonomous ride services.[43] By 2035, autonomous vehicles, electric scooters, and other advances in transportation have helped solve the mobility challenges faced by transition-aged youth moving from home to school to work. These innovations eliminate the barriers to reliable and affordable transportation that youth in and from foster care once faced in both urban and rural areas of the state.

## Strong governance undergirds extended foster care's digital practices.

In the early 2020s, algorithms were employed as screening tools to determine whether children needed protection from harmful home environments or to aid researchers in studying the effects of adverse childhood events on children's responses to various programs and policies. Advocates worried that such automation could be used to decide on expulsions from extended foster care or housing, especially as the child welfare system faced labor shortages.[44, 45]

> **YOUTH VOICES: WHY EFC NEEDS A DIGITAL OVERHAUL**
>
> Maybe creating a web page that shows you where to get all these foster care resources in your county and then links to apply. Because ... sometimes you are sent to apply through a probation officer or you have to apply through a county program. It's not very easy to find program applications online, even for someone that is a self-advocate. I think it could be really useful to have at least a website where you can access this information and applications ... like a Google drive with like everything on it ..."
>
> —IFTF interview participant
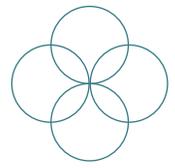
Recognizing these concerns, by 2035, extended foster care became well-equipped to enforce robust privacy rules and oversight on the collection, storage, sharing, and monetization of personal data for system-involved youth. Now, extended foster care embraces an open and fully transparent approach to algorithmic usage, subjecting it to regular evaluations by independent tech ethicists to detect any biases or discriminatory practices. By establishing effective collaborations with privacy advocacy groups and enhancing its internal capacity to comprehend emerging technologies, extended foster care takes a proactive stance in ensuring that intelligent computing systems benefit — rather than harm — the transition-aged youth they serve.

As a result, the child welfare system operates with a high level of accountability and transparency, maintaining trust between extended foster care programs, the youth they serve, and the wider community. This approach not only addresses the challenges of automation but creates a supportive environment where vulnerable youth can thrive as they transition to independent adulthood.

Algorithmic management replaces human bosses.

Computational advantage also has helped youth in extended foster care actively participate in the fast-moving digital economy. By 2035, many young people's first job is that of an app-based gig worker. Whether delivering food or supplies or driving for a ride-share company, workers who first enter the workforce through a digital platform have never had a human boss or a human network of co-workers. Decisions that in the past were made by human supervisors, such as scheduling and pay increases, are now made by software code protocols, commonly referred to as algorithms. In this era of algorithmic management, workers now shoulder the responsibility for their present and future health and economic well-being, as more of the roles and benefits historically provided by an employer — upskilling and mentoring, as well as health and retirement benefits — are offloaded to individual workers. In response, systems aimed at transition-aged youth are preparing youth to navigate these work conditions. Young people in foster care and extended foster care have access to technology and are supported in its use as a tool to connect to the community, build skills, access information, and channel their creativity. Extended foster care programming includes a focus on computational advantage to help youth gain digital dexterity, which benefits them in both their personal and work lives.

Digital media sense-making is a critical life skill.

In 2035, youth-serving systems emphasize training in digital media sense-making so that youth can engage meaningfully and safely online. Youth are taught how to build their online presence and "brand" and understand how that identity contributes to their plans for the future, including their career and relationships. They are taught how to distinguish quality information from disinformation, and how to evaluate sexually explicit media, violent material, or fake news objectively.
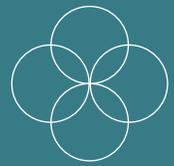
INSPIRATIONS FOR TOMORROW

AI Mental Health Companion

Woebot is an AI-powered mental health therapy chatbot that draws from Cognitive Behavior Therapy. The app learns from and stores all the interactions, increasing its ability to tailor the content to the user's needs over time.
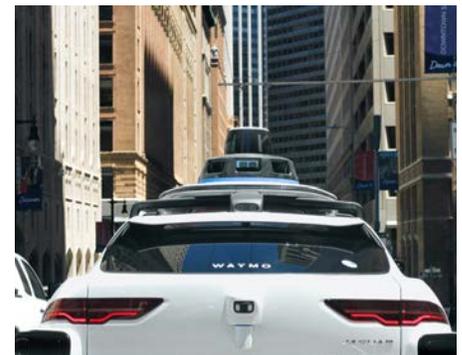
Source: https://woebothealth.com/what-powers-woebot/
Image source: https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.woebot&hl=en_US&gl=US
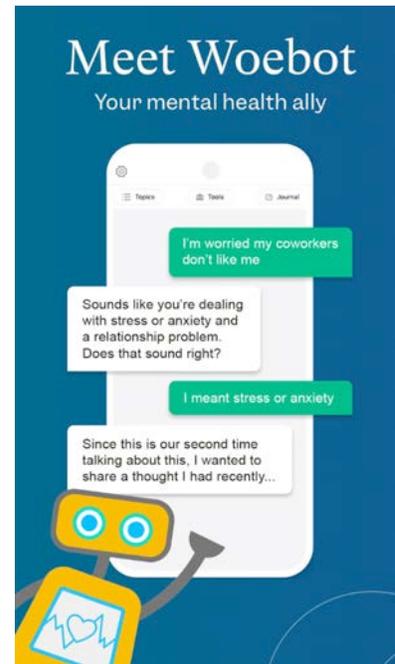
Autonomous Ride-Hailing Pilot

Alphabet's self-driving car division Waymo has begun a small pilot in San Francisco to test its autonomous ride-hailing service.

Source: https://arstechnica.com/gadgets/2021/08/waymo-expands-to-san-francisco-with-public-self-driving-test/
Image Source: Photo by gibblesmash asdf on Unsplash https://unsplash.com/s/photos/waymo

Promoting Information Literacy

Boston-based Start Strong employs a peer leadership model to prevent teen violence and promote healthy relationships. To help youth distinguish quality information from the overabundance of noise and disinformation, Start Strong developed visual media literacy tools, including curriculum to help youth interpret and make sense of the sexually explicit content they may be exposed to on the internet.

Source: https://www.thehallsboston.com/
Image Source: Mark Frauenfelder using Midjourney

INSIGHT
Building a Future-Ready Youth-Serving System

The four transformational forces described above offer a vision of a reimagined extended foster care in which helping transition-aged youth become thriving adults is the goal. In this section, we extend our vision, which is informed by the concept of a youth-serving system that has benefited from investment of significant resources toward efforts to prevent child welfare system involvement in the first place. This section explores programs and policies that center on three core outcomes:

1 / Building relationship wealth by cultivating and nurturing quality familial and social relationships

2 / Solidifying financial stability by cultivating a sense of life purpose — and one's ability to work toward that purpose

3 / Instilling optimism by helping youth see goodness and opportunity in the future as they enter adulthood.
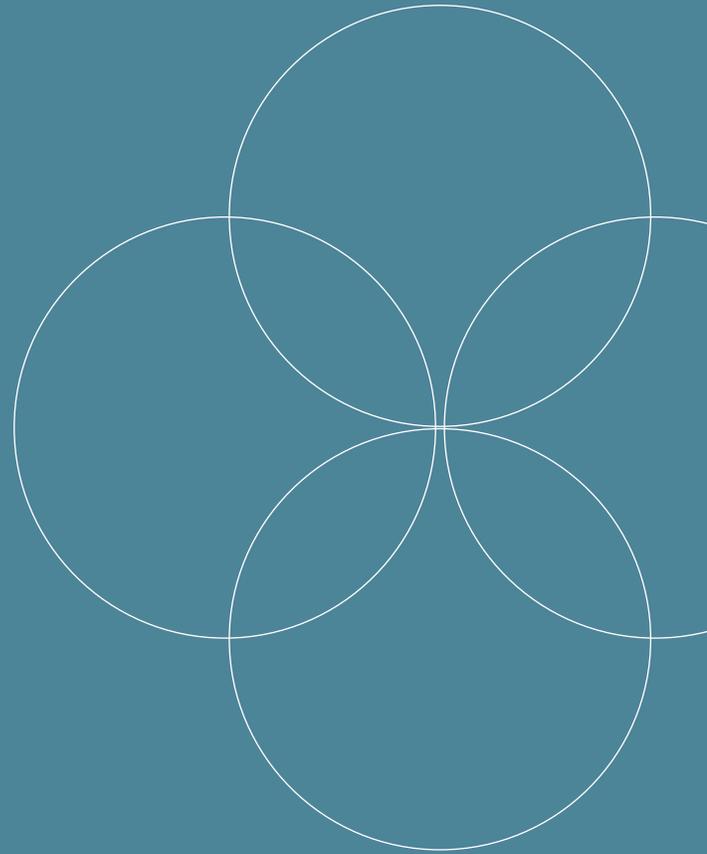
> " Remember to imagine and craft the world you cannot live without, just as you dismantle the worlds you cannot live within."[46]
>
> —Professor, author, and entrepreneur Ruha Benjamin

1 / BUILD RELATIONSHIP WEALTH

Cultivate and nurture quality familial and social relationships.

Research shows that family and social connections are among the most critical assets to support young adults' transition to adulthood. The most protective force in young adults' lives is the connection they have with family. For Black, Latinx, and Indigenous youth who face racism, oppression, and hostility in our current society, these protective relationships are even more vital, for well-being but also for physical safety, an economic safety net, and emotional support.

An investment of time and resources to develop strong, sustaining human relationships is fundamental to any system dedicated to helping youth transition into thriving adults. Nurturing family (including biological, foster, and chosen) and friend relationships must become the primary goal of the foster care system, and financial resources and other supports must be made available to keep families together. But not every youth will be able to depend on a biological family. Extended foster care must be flexible and adaptive to family units chosen by young people that may form and reform over subsequent decades.

While the focus of this report is on extended foster care, young people will experience the greatest long-term benefit when deliberate action is taken to prevent relational poverty as early in a child's experience in the child welfare system as possible.
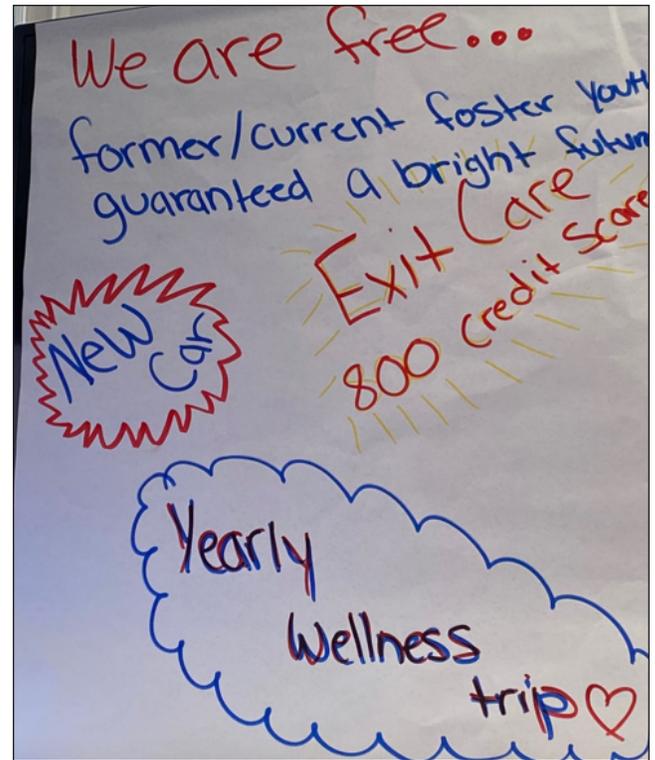
Source: "Flyer" created at CYC Insight Session, August 27, 2022

TAKE-AWAY

Extended foster care must be intentionally structured to assist transition-aged youth in strengthening their critical relationships and providing young people the material and non-material resources that families otherwise provide as a matter of course during the transition to adulthood. The field should be driven by adolescent development and developmental neuroscience research, and each practice and policy should be measured by whether it promotes or interferes with healthy development for young adults.
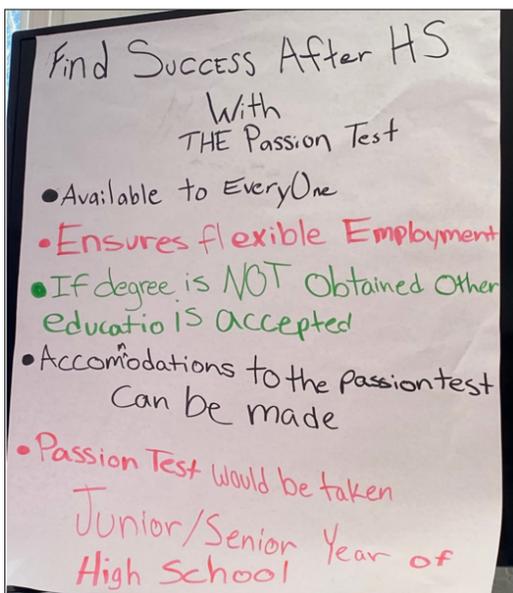
2 / BUILD STABILITY

Solidify financial stability by cultivating a sense of life purpose — and one's ability to achieve that purpose.

Financial stability depends on guaranteed income, steady employment, stable housing, and the optimization of advancing technology. The challenges associated with finding safe, affordable, and geographically relevant housing are highly destabilizing for youth in and as they leave EFC. As initiatives and new programming take shape to implement guaranteed housing resources, the ideas of transition-aged youth and emerging adults who have experienced housing insecurity must be at the forefront of all discussions. This will foster their sense of self-determinism, promote choice-making, and encourage experimentation in various living arrangements.

Direct access to work opportunities must also be integrated into extended foster care programming and supports. Extended foster care should guarantee both income and employment for all transition-aged youth in the program and include specialized training and

coaching. Systems should cultivate a network of employers who are open to participating in and implementing trauma-informed practices in the workplace, and who provide financial incentives if necessary.

At present, many in foster care face barriers because systems view technology as a danger or threat, rather than as an important life-navigation and career tool. As a result of limited access, many youth have not been taught online safety skills that are critical to developing their reputation and identity as successful adults in the world of work, putting them at a disadvantage compared to their peers, who use the internet for benefit and advancement and have protection from harms such as identity theft and reputational damage. A more informed and thoughtful approach to the use and role of technology in extended foster care is critical, because many of the skills that transition-aged youth will need to achieve their preferred future are related to quickly advancing technologies such as AI.

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Source: "Flyer" created at CYC Insight Session, August 27, 2022

TAKE-AWAY

Extended foster care should partner with trust-based, community-based organizations to work with emerging adults to co-design and implement the set of guaranteed supports and services needed to allow transition-aged youth to use their time in extended foster care to achieve stability and explore multiple life courses. This guarantee shifts the burden from the youth to the systems, which must be held accountable through swift means of redress when these guaranteed resources are not provided to transition-aged youth.

3 / INSTILL OPTIMISM

Help youth see goodness and opportunity in the future as they enter adulthood.

Youth in foster care have experienced significant trauma before and while in the foster care system due to abuse, poor treatment, and failures to provide needed treatment and care. The layers of trauma caused by the system itself must be eliminated; efforts at healing must be a key driver of foster care and extended care.

Extended foster care must integrate community-led interventions informed by intergenerational wisdom and historical cultural practices into its systems of care. Ideas about who is a healer and what are considered healing practices must expand.

Presently, while youth in foster care are categorically Medicaid-eligible and should therefore have access to all medically necessary care, their real-life experience often includes barriers to accessing treatment and services to which they are entitled. A robust offering of care services must include the most effective clinical interventions, as well as community-based healing practices.

Cognitive psychologists explain that we perceive our life course through a mostly unconsciously learned script imposed during our childhoods. Most of us inherit these scripts from our families, as well as through media and peer influence.[47] Many young people with experience in EFC report being handed life scripts dominated by mitigating future risks — not getting pregnant, not dropping out

> " Before a young person has the opportunity to dream about who they want to be, they are told about the barriers and what their future will look like."
>
> – YLC and CYC panel participant
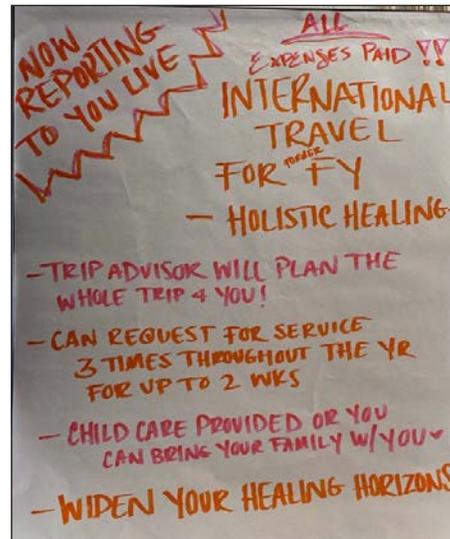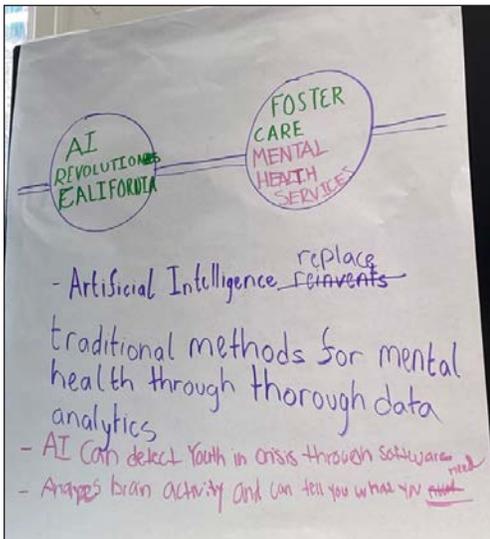
Source: Flyers created during CYC Insight Session, August 27, 2022

of school, not being homeless. They are not given opportunities to engage meaningfully in a positive, generative, and expansive exploration of life paths for them. The system views stability as the avoidance of negative outcomes such as homelessness, reliance on public benefits, and involvement with the adult criminal legal system.

Most parents of young adults would reject these goals as depressing and inadequate. Most parents want their children to experience stability so that they have the freedom to realize their life purposes and experience joy, happiness, and a sense of contribution to the world. This is the same goal that systems responsible for extended foster care should have for the youth in their charge. Realizing this goal requires opportunities for enrichment, recreation, and explorations of interests and passions.

The lives of emerging adults in EFC are often overwhelming. Many find it difficult to manage the stressors and complexities they face. Examining their internal narrative is an important developmental practice in a healthy transition from adolescence to adulthood. Done successfully — and combined with the tools and skills needed — this exercise can empower young adults to take ownership of their own story and build their preferred future. Foster care systems should look to the arts and enrichment activities such as recreation, cultural practices, and hobbies to help transition-aged youth understand their past, navigate their present, and imagine their future filled with possibilities and hope.

Unprecedented external forces may make it difficult for transition-aged youth to envision a hopeful future over the next decade. Environmental crises, growing disparities, volatile culture wars, and social and political instability promise to chip away at our collective ability to stay optimistic. It is vital that youth-serving systems connect emerging adults with the innovators and activists who are shaping the future of climate adaptation, disaster recovery, and reconstruction work, as well as those who are reframing poverty as a structural, systemic problem as opposed to simply the result of an individual person's bad choices. Participating in environmental and social movements will increase youths' sense of agency in shaping a more hopeful future.

TAKE-AWAY

From healing to thriving, extended foster care must provide seamless access to community-based activities and supports that are meaningful to transition-aged youth. This groundwork must be built into the foster care system so that children and youth of all ages have early access to a system of care focused on healing and hope. Countering the external pressures of the future will require extended foster care to collaborate with entirely new partners — innovators, artists, creatives, cultural healers, activists, and others — to provide youth access to the approaches, tools, and opportunities needed to instill hope and optimism. Success for child welfare will no longer be understood as an avoidance of negative outcomes, but rather as young people transitioning into adulthood with joy and optimism about their future.

Conclusion
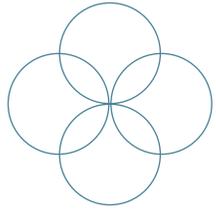
Now is the time to actively shape and build a future where young adults exiting foster care can thrive. To do that, we must take an honest look at California's existing extended foster care policy and implementation.

The current extended foster care system was meant to be a safety net for youth aging out of the foster care system. It was intended to support those who needed it most with minimal criteria to receive the support. Unfortunately, it has become a system in which youth have to prove they are "worthy" to participate in it. It is a system that perpetuates the trauma caused by the foster care system from which youth have just transitioned. It is impossible for young people to focus on a successful transition to adulthood if they are forced to live under the continuous threat of being cut off from services and proving their "worthiness" for support that most young people in families receive as a matter of course.

It is vital that we create a system in which participants feel empowered to heal, grow, and thrive. We must envision extended foster care as a transformative program that actively supports participants in achieving stable housing, meaningful employment, strong community connections, and positive mental well-being. Embracing these positive changes will yield tremendous benefits for the community of youth in foster care. Throughout the process of preparing this report, when youth expert participants contemplated the future of our policies and practices in 2035, their collective take-away was, "If we stay on the current course in extended foster care, we will be failing youth."

But failing our youth is not inevitable. We have an opportunity to redesign extended foster care to ensure youth are future-ready. Policymakers and care providers can work with young people who have experience with the foster care and juvenile justice systems to shape the course corrections necessary to take advantage of the transformational forces of the next decade that we describe in this report. We have the information, experience, and vision to collectively design a future in which all youth can thrive. But to achieve that, we must act now.
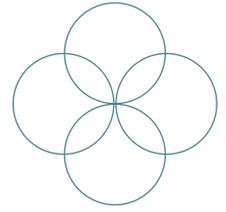
How This Project Was Designed

In 2021, with support from Tipping Point Community, the Youth Law Center (YLC) engaged the California Youth Connection (CYC) and the Institute for the Future (IFTF) in a process to identify the key future forces likely to shape the experiences of young adults in extended foster care in the next decade. Together we explored possibilities for a better ecosystem of support, services, and opportunities that will help young adults exiting foster care thrive in adulthood.

We designed our research process to learn from young adults with foster care experience and to empower them with futures skills. These youth are the experts on how the systems and the resources in place are not serving them, and they have the most thoughtful and innovative ideas on how to reimagine the extended foster care system. The research process was divided into four phases.

In Phase 1 of the research, IFTF, YLC, and CYC established the key research questions and principles for working together. Additionally, IFTF hosted two panel sessions with two young adult representatives from CYC and two YLC staff. The panels helped IFTF staff gain insight into how YLC and CYC view the present and future of extended foster care.

In Phase 2 of the research, IFTF led a foresight training with 34 CYC members and YLC staff. The training was co-designed with the CYC curriculum and training managing director to optimize youth engagement and participation. The training provided an overview and introduction to foresight and explained IFTF's foresight-to-insight-to-action cycle. Four main areas were explored: education and employment, housing, health and wellness, and lifelong connections. The goal was to both train youth in basic futurist skills and to engage youth in exploring areas for change. After the training, CYC hosted two debriefing sessions where members refined their foresight skills by creating flyers of programs they envision existing in the future.

In Phase 3 of the research, IFTF held two three-hour virtual Expert Futures Workshops with national experts to generate insights on what is changing with regard to how we understand the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Each workshop was divided into two parts: the first 90 minutes were designed for an open exchange of ideas, and the second 90 minutes were designed for deliberate futures work, encouraging participants to share their points of view about the 10-year landscape.

IFTF recruited 18 experts from a variety of fields and professional backgrounds. It was important to cultivate a group of thinkers with diverse perspectives and expertise that shared open-mindedness and curiosity about the future. In addition to their professional qualifications, some participants brought
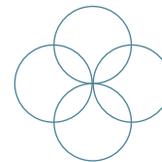
lived experiences that were deeply relevant to the conditions and realities of youth who have experiences in foster care. Perspectives represented in the expert workshops included:

Workshop 1: Social design; education attainment/economic opportunity public policy; adolescent health and social technologies; play/joy/delight and optimism; social work futures; social work and EFC; displacement and immigrant/refugees; maternal justice and social equity.

Workshop 2: Education innovation; housing innovation; reproductive health and family demography; space design; support systems; neurobiology and resilience; human well-being; lifelong well-being; co-creation of meaningful rituals; climate change and mental health.

In Phase 4 of the research, IFTF conducted nine individual 90-minute virtual interviews with youth who are either currently enrolled or have recently exited (within the past three years) the EFC program in California. We also interviewed one participant who exited EFC in 2018 to get the perspective and hear the experiences of someone further removed from the system. Interviewees were selected based on their lived experience, with special attention in selection given to those with unique needs that EFC was primarily designed to address: youth involved in the justice system, youth who became pregnant or were parenting in EFC, youth who were placed with a family of a different culture/background, or youth who had a special physical, mental, behavioral, or other health need. Two researchers conducted each interview, with one exception due to scheduling challenges. The interview guide was organized into three major sections: EFC Experience, Social Connections, and Outlook on the Future. The guide was designed to surface insights on the ecosystem of support, services, and opportunities that will lead to improved outcomes for youth engaging with the extended foster care system in the future.

Acknowledgments
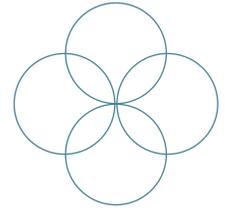
IFTF, YLC, and CYC would like to thank the individuals with lived experience in foster care, thought leaders, activists, changemakers, and academic researchers who generously shared their insights with us. This report was made possible by the generous support of Tipping Point Community.

CYC Participants
CYC Policy and Legislative Committee Members

2021-2022	2021-2023	2022-2023
Alex Furtado	Anjru Jaezon de Leon	Jazmine Rodriguez
Angel Gilbert	Clarissa Peña	Ayshah Brown
Annyanna McDuff	Florencia Valenzuela	Juan De Los Santos
Arine Kim	Galilea Carrasco	Heaven Brandon
Brenda Fowler	Kristina Tanner	Tashianna Brown
Elaina Albers	Mialissa Flores	Erik McLaren
Elizabeth Villa		Martha Pattison
Ethan Benabides		Victor Carmonavargas
Monica English		Amaris Gilbert
Sabina Beerawi		Erial Pierr
Sabrina Abong		Katelyn Wurtz
Toby Herrera		Lania Whiteside
Katrina Quiroz		Olivia Whitfield

CYC Staff

Makayla James | Former Statewide Policy Manager, CYC

Parker Terese | Communications Project Manager, CYC

Makaelah Perkins | 2022 Policy Liaison Assistant, CYC

Christopher Hernandez | Statewide Legislative Coordinator, CYC

Jordan Sosa | Statewide Legislative Manager, CYC

Janay Eustace | Executive Director, CYC

Sade Daniels | Former Curriculum Training Managing Director, CYC

YLC Staff

Jennifer Rodriguez | Executive Director, YLC

Jennifer Pokempner | Senior Policy Director, YLC

Lauren Brady | Managing Director, YLC

Marisa Lopez-Scott | Senior Attorney, YLC

Brian Blalock | Senior Directing Attorney, YLC

Will Radler | Operations Director, YLC

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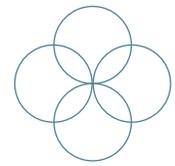
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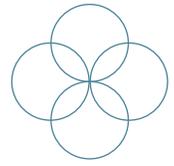
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