



North Carolina Child Welfare John H. Chafee Foster Care Program 2020 – 2024 Plan



NC DEPARTMENT OF
**HEALTH AND
HUMAN SERVICES**
Division of Social Services

Agency Administering Chafee

North Carolina Division of Social Services, a state-supervised, county-administered system, is the agency responsible for oversight of the Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood, and the Education and Training Voucher Program (ETV), referred to as NC LINKS. LINKS is not an acronym; it is a word that captures the purpose of the Chafee Act to implement a robust, youth-guided program with a network of supports and outcome-based services for youth and communities.

The LINKS program is managed by a state-level coordinator whose role is to provide support, training, consultation, technical assistance to county departments of social services and engage key stakeholders in the development and implementation of individual and group services to eligible youth.

Description of Program Design and Delivery

Program Design

The NC LINKS program helps youth and young adults transitioning from the foster care system in achieving the following eight (8) outcomes, in alignment with the purposes of the Chafee program:

1. All youth leaving the foster care system shall have sufficient economic resources to meet their daily needs.
2. All youth leaving the foster care system shall have a safe and stable place to live.
3. All youth leaving the foster care system shall attain academic or vocational/educational goals that are in keeping with their abilities and interests.
4. All youth leaving the foster care system shall have a sense of connectedness to persons and community. This means that every youth, upon exiting foster care, should have a personal support network of at least 5 responsible adults who will remain supportive of the youth over time.
5. All youth leaving the foster care system shall avoid illegal/high risk behaviors.
6. All youth leaving the foster care system shall postpone parenthood until financially established and emotionally mature.
7. All youth leaving the foster care system shall have access to physical and mental health services, as well as means to pay for those services.
8. All youth age 13 or older who are likely to remain in foster care until age 18 have ongoing access to engage in age and developmentally-appropriate activities.

The key components of the North Carolina LINKS model are as follows:

Independent Living Services – These services are provided directly to youth by county departments of social services and contractors. These services include, but are not limited to, individual live skills assessments designed to inform the development of a youth’s Transitional Living Plan, and group classes and activities to teach youth life skills like cooking and budgeting, and the purchasing of goods, such as clothing for work, or household items, that a youth may need to help fulfill a specific program purpose.

Education and Training Vouchers – The North Carolina Education and Training Voucher Program is available to youth who are otherwise eligible for LINKS services and have attained 14 years of age and after attaining 16 years of age, exit foster care to adoption, guardianship, or remain in care after their

17th birthday.

NC Reach – The NC Reach is a state-funded scholarship program for former foster youth who are legal residents of North Carolina, were adopted from the state’s foster care system after the age of 12 or aged out of the state’s foster care system at age 18. This program is specific to young people who are attending public colleges or universities in North Carolina.

Chafee funds support county LINKS programs through allocations, LINKS Special Funds, and contracts with agencies providing direct services and supports to eligible youth. County allocations are used for resources needed to offer programming, incentives for program participation, goods and services for and program operations which may include funding a position to provide services. LINKS special funds are used to support the cost associated with transitional housing and for services or supports needed to meet program outcomes. Amounts for are up to \$1500 for housing and \$3000 for program outcome supports. These funds are in addition to county allocations and are available to youth annually. North Carolina also contracts with the Children’s Home Society’s Strong Able Youth Speaking Out (SaySo) program to provide comprehensive and professional training, leadership, and life skills activities to transition-age youth and young adults across the state.

In addition to Chafee funds, North Carolina was awarded funding for the general assembly to provide youth with access to transportation. This funding can be used for costs related to driving to include the purchase of a car or insurance. *Transportation Really Is Possible (TRIP)* helps remove financial barriers to youth in foster care obtaining their driver’s license and having access to transportation.

Youth and Stakeholder Involvement in Program Design and Service Delivery

This plan was developed through ongoing consultation with current and former foster youth, caregivers, contract service providers, state agency staff, and county departments of social services. North Carolina Division of Social Services collects feedback on an ongoing basis from stakeholders in many ways. For example, the state LINKS Program Coordinator attends the annual SaySo Youth Board Orientation and many of the organizations events throughout the year. SaySo has attended and actively participated in Joint Planning with NC DSS for several years. In 2018, county LINKS Coordinators and youth also attended and participated in the Joint Planning process.

Child Welfare Family Advisory Council members are regularly engaged for their input on policies, forms, and other important processes concerning the child welfare system. Members of the Child Welfare Family Advisory Council also attend and participate in Joint Planning with NC DSS, as well as Child Welfare Section Meetings within NC DSS. The State LINKS Coordinator engages county LINKS staff through monthly telephone calls and participation in regional LINKS meetings organized by county staff. The State LINKS Coordinator also engages contract providers that serve the youth population by regular phone and in-person contact. These providers include SaySo, Youth Villages, and Foster Care to Success. The collaboration of the youth and family participation has resulted in a strengthening of key partnerships, policy and training development considerations and a refined perspective to enhance the LINKS model through consistent continuous quality improvement.

During Federal Fiscal Years 2020-2024, NC DSS will work to continue these efforts and develop concrete, meaningful ways to promote and improve engagement in the future. Such plans will include, but will not be limited to, annual agenda setting and formal feedback mechanisms between NC DSS and SaySo’s

Youth Board, Division-sponsored regional events, and/or training opportunities for local LINKS and Foster Care 18 to 21 staff, and Division-organized forums for providers to provide input on and participate in future Annual Progress and Services Reporting and Child and Family Services Planning processes.

Positive Youth Development

The design of the LINKS program is grounded in Positive Youth Development principles. The LINKS approach intentionally creates or allows opportunities for youth to experience growth-enhancing interactions with their environment. Permanency Planning, LINKS, and Foster Care 18 to 21 program policies support the principles of Positive Youth Development by requiring the involvement of the young person in their case plans. For youth who are age 14 and older and in foster care, agencies must provide the opportunity for them to identify up to two members of their team, who are not their foster parent or caseworker. For the Foster Care 18 to 21 program, the young adult's Transition Support Team Meetings are primarily led by the young adult themselves and they have the power to invite participants they choose.

Additionally, the foundational LINKS training curriculum for child welfare workers, called "LINKS 101", incorporates the principles of Positive Youth Development by teaching workers who deliver LINKS services in a flexible manner that respects the individual youth's strengths and needs, and provides young people with a safe environment to practice new skills.

National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD)

County department of social services staff contribute NYTD data (served population) bi-annually through the state's Service Information System (SIS). County staff also engage survey-eligible young people to complete the survey and submit completed surveys to the State.

The state-level LINKS Coordinator works directly with county department of social services staff to ensure NYTD information is accurately collected and reported. The state LINKS Coordinator works directly with local child welfare staff to communicate information about survey-eligible youth, outreach strategies, reporting deadlines, and any other information necessary to ensure accurate and thorough data collection. The state LINKS Coordinator also works closely and continuously with the NC DSS Performance Management Section to refine processes for accurately identifying, tracking, and reporting NYTD outcome data to prevent and address record errors prior to file transmission.

During Federal Fiscal Years 2020-2024, NC DSS will use the following strategies to engage families, children, youth, tribes, courts, county child welfare workers and leaders, service providers, the public, and other stakeholders in the process of NYTD data collection and data sharing:

- Develop the capacity of youth leaders to share information about NYTD;
- Explore and develop opportunities to use both print and digital media to reach out to stakeholders; and,
- Regularly disseminate the analyses of NYTD data to stakeholders through multiple outlets.

The improvement of NYTD data collection, analysis, and reporting will be a focus of North Carolina's data plan as described in the target of our continuous quality improvement commitment. North Carolina

is currently using NCFAS systems infrastructure to collect data. LINKS will be included in this advanced approach. However, pending legislation will influence the trajectory of the use of this technology.

Serving Youth Across the State

North Carolina Division of Social Services has and will continue to ensure that all political subdivisions in the state are served by the program, though not necessarily in a uniform manner, by ensuring adherence to state policy and procedures through continuous quality improvement activities of county programs and contracted agencies.

Tracking the data of youth served by LINKS is one key component of ensuring service delivery across the state. The state is currently able to query LINKS data to see the number of youth, by county, and across the state who are receiving one or more of the following services:

- Services to Current/Former Foster Youth Age 13-15
- Services to Current/Former Foster Youth Age 16-21
- Independent Living Needs Assessment
- Academic Support, Secondary School
- Academic Support, Postsecondary School
- Career Preparation
- Employment Programs or Vocational Training
- Budget and Financial Management
- Housing Education and Home Management
- Health Education and Risk Prevention
- Family Support and Health Marriage Education
- Mentoring / Personal Support
- Supervised Independent Living
- Room and Board Financial Assistance
- Other Financial Assistance

During State Fiscal Year 2017-2018, the NC LINKS program served 3,813 youth and young adults ages 13-21 across the state. The data in the chart below illustrates the youth served statewide in NC through the LINKS program.

SFY	Youth Served by LINKS age 13-15	Youth Served by LINKS age 16-21	LINKS Housing Funds Expended	LINKS Transitional Funds Expended	LINKS County Allocations Expended
2014-2015	926	2,990	\$102,692	\$863,016	\$2,020,725
2015-2016	944	3,052	\$81,166	\$762,150	\$1,999,935.80
2016-2017	948	3,202	\$64,537	\$611,098	\$2,020,725
2017-2018	832	2,981	\$103,936	\$856,126	\$2,020,725

To strengthen the broad delivery of services NC DSS will assist in the planning and development as needed in the growth of local SaySo chapters, which will be designed to support the development and delivery of a statewide local LINKS program. In collaboration with key partners, including our counties and contracted providers, NC DSS will review policy and training, as necessary, to identify methods to strengthen the delivery of LINKS programming statewide.

Serving Youth of Various Ages and Stages of Achieving Independence

During Federal Fiscal Years 2020-2024, NC DSS will ensure the following activities and services, at a minimum, are offered and delivered to LINKS-eligible youth based on their needs, age, and stage of achieving independence:

- Ongoing opportunities to engage in age or developmentally-appropriate activities and the use of LINKS funds to support youth to participate in such activities;
- Individualized Life Skills Assessments;
- Development and regular review of a written Transitional Living Plan;
- Life skills training based on assessment of need;
- Agency or contracted services that are provided to help youth overcome barriers that are interfering with achievement of educational or vocational goals, self-sufficiency, relationships with family and others, etc.;
- Specific activities to develop and strengthen the youth's personal support network;
- Opportunities to learn about resources in the community, such as public transportation, health resources, resources for educational/vocational training, military service options, recreational organizations, participation in school activities, and volunteer opportunities;
- Volunteer or work opportunities to help the youth explore vocational interests, to build a resume, and give back to the community;
- Participation in local, state, and/or national trainings and conferences relevant to LINKS services;
- Diligent, persistent, and ongoing efforts to locate and contact aged-out young adults whose locations are unknown to determine their status, offer needed resources, or engage their participation in the National Youth in Transition Database Survey or other surveys;
- Assessment of the young adult's current situation, barriers they are experiencing, efforts they have made to overcome those barriers, and plans or strategies for agency assistance, if requested;
- Engagement of young adults in planning, determination of responsibilities between the agency and the young adult, and choice of services offered by the agency that will supplement the young adult's own efforts;
- Informing the young adult of the availability of Educational Training Vouchers and NC Reach for vocational and/or educational training to enhance employment opportunities;
- Use of LINKS funds for assistance with completion of high school or GED, job training, housing, utilities, furniture, uniforms, equipment, or other items or services that are needed to facilitate self-sufficiency;
- Access to county LINKS program services; and,

- Offer Foster Care 18 to 21 services to young adults who have aged out of foster care at 18 and are not yet 21 years of age.

Extended Foster Care - Foster Care 18 to 21

North Carolina Session Law 2015-214 required NC DSS to develop a plan to extend foster care services to youth aging out of foster care at age 18. These young adults can choose to continue receiving services, including monthly foster care maintenance payments to support placement, until they reach age 21. The federal law guiding this program is the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Public Law 110-351) which provides states with the option to continue providing Title IV-E reimbursable foster care assistance payments to youth up to age 21.

County departments of social services are responsible for providing eligible young adults who enter into agreement for Foster Care 18 to 21 services with ongoing efforts to help prepare and ensure the young adult’s successful transition to adulthood.

Participation in the Foster Care 18 to 21 Program has grown every year since its initial implementation in January 2017. The table below displays the number of young adults served in each fiscal year since the program began.

State Fiscal Year	**Young Adults Served in Foster Care 18 to 21
2016-2017	407
2017-2018	968
2018-2019	1029

*Foster Care 18 to 21 was implemented on January 1, 2017
 *SFY 2018-2019 includes young adults served between July 1, 2018 and March 31, 2019

This growth corresponds with an increased use of LINKS Housing funds by eligible young adults. The table below shows the amount of housing funds expended in each State Fiscal Year since the inception of the NC Foster Care 18 to 21 Program.

State Fiscal Year	Total LINKS Housing Funds Expended
2016-2017	\$64,537
2017-2018	\$103,936
2018-2019	\$106,952

*Foster Care 18 to 21 was implemented on January 1, 2017
 *SFY 2018-2019 includes housing expenditures for eligible young-adults between July 2018 and April 2019

The growing participation in the Foster Care 18 to 21 Program, and LINKS by extension, demonstrates the need for the state continue to strengthen efforts to comprehensively monitor county extended foster care and LINKS programs, which is an important component of a strong, consistent Continuous Quality Improvement process.

Opportunities for Program Improvement

Strategies to strengthen program services are detailed in the Strategic Plan of the CFSP and the Health Oversight and Care Plan. These include:

1. Increasing utilization of foster care 18-21 for youth who emancipate from foster care
2. Strengthen transition age youth health programming

Expansion of Chafee Services to Age 23

North Carolina Division of Social Services continues to review and analyze current LINKS funding, programming, and policy to determine needed policy and program updates in response to the Chafee provisions of the Families First Prevention Services Act. Expansion of Chafee eligibility to age 23 remains under consideration. The social services reform process, including the implementation of regional offices will inform this process.

Independent Living Assessment

Program policy requires that youth are involved in the services planning process at all levels: from the identification of the issues that need to be addressed through the definition and identification of goals, activities, and personal and systemic resources. Life skills assessments for youth must involve both the youth and a person who knows the youth's skills and abilities first-hand, such as a family member or caregiver.

North Carolina Division of Social Services does not mandate the use of a specific independent living assessment but does provide information and guidance on available tools that can serve the purpose of this requirement. For example, the Casey Life Skills Assessment from Casey Family Programs, the Strengths and Needs Inventory created by Independent Living Resources, Inc. and provided to county LINKS Coordinators during LINKS training, and the Transition Readiness Scale from Independent Living Resources, Inc., which was developed for young adults, by young adults.

Each of these tools is designed to assess areas critical to transition, such as daily living skills like preparing meals, developing and sustaining healthy relationships, and basic employment and time management skills. The results of an independent living assessment are used by the young person and the foster care and/or independent living worker to develop the goals and activities on the young person's Transitional Living Plan.

[Collaboration with Other Private and Public Agencies](#)

North Carolina has partnered with several agencies and initiatives involving the public and private sectors over the last five years to assist youth to successfully transition to adulthood. These partnerships have been fruitful both for the state and for current and former foster youth. For example, young people who have had experience in North Carolina's foster care system have participated in the development of the state's driver's license pilot program, called Transportation Really Is Possible (TRIP).

During Federal Fiscal Years 2020-2024 the state will continue to engage a variety of stakeholders to ensure that young people in foster care are supported and able to make the successful transition to

adulthood. The following table lists the partnerships that NC DSS will continue to pursue during the 2020-2024 period.

Type	Organization / Entity
Youth Engagement	Children’s Home Society of North Carolina for Strong Able Youth Speaking Out (SaySo) Program
Family Engagement	North Carolina Child Welfare Family Advisory Council
Health	NC Division of Public Health – Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiatives: Fostering Health NC Sexual Health Initiatives for Teens (SHIFT) NC
Education	Foster Care to Success Johnson C. Smith University – Phasing Up to New Possibilities Program Wake Technical Community College – Fostering Bring Futures Program Western Carolina University – Resilient Independent Student Association (RISA) and Home Base
Employment	North Carolina Department of Commerce – Division of Workforce Solutions WIOA Programs
Housing	Local Housing Authorities throughout the State Federally-Funded Homeless Youth Agencies
Transition Support	Youth Villages for YVLifeSet Program
Services Continuum and Improving Systems	Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative

Determine Eligibility for Benefits and Services

In North Carolina, all youth who are now 14 and are not yet 21 and who are or were in foster care after the age of 14 are eligible for LINKS services, with two exceptions. Youth are not eligible for LINKS funds if:

1. They have personal reserves more than \$10,000; or
2. They are undocumented residents.

Eligibility for LINKS services and funds requires that the youth be an active participant in his or her planning, including sharing in the responsibility of designing and implementing their Transitional Living Plan. Youth involvement in case planning must be documented in the case record and reflected on the case plan.

Eligibility for LINKS funds continues regardless of residence and access is coordinated between the county/state of residence with the North Carolina county who has or had legal custody of the young person. The State LINKS Coordinator is a part of the state’s Interstate Compact (ICPC) team. This unique

team design facilitates the provision of LINKS and Foster Care 18 to 21 services when youth and young adults are placed across state lines.

Cooperation in National Evaluations

In Federal Fiscal Years 2020-2024, the North Carolina Division of Social Services will cooperate in any national evaluations of the effects of the programs in achieving the purposes of the Chafee Program.

Chafee Training

Over the past five years North Carolina Division of Social Services contracted with Independent Living Resources, Inc. (ILR) for the delivery of Chafee-related training, including the following courses:

As of SFY 2018-2019, the Division no longer contracts with ILR for the delivery of these trainings. LINKS 101 is now delivered by NC DSS training staff twice a year. NC DSS also hosts the website, www.FosteringNC.org, which provides on-demand courses, videos, webinars and publications for foster, adoptive and kinship caregivers. This website includes the short course, "On Their Way", which provides caregivers with information on how to help youth increase the skills needed to live independently. Another course, "Promoting Normalcy: Supporting the Social and Emotional Development of Young People in Foster Care", describe the reasonable and prudent parent standard and how foster parents can use it to help children and youth experience "normal" developmentally appropriate activities, including activities that support transitional living skills. During Federal Fiscal Years 2020-2024, NC DSS will work to strengthen its training and resources in alignment with the Division's training plan.

Education and Training Voucher (ETV) Program

The North Carolina Education and Training Voucher Program is available to youth who are otherwise eligible for LINKS services who have attained 14 years of age and, after attaining 16 years of age exit foster care to adoption or guardianship or remain in care after their 17th birthday. The maximum annual amount of the voucher (\$5,000) and its purpose to apply toward the cost of attendance at an institution of higher education remains unchanged. Students may receive both Pell Grant and ETV if the total of these two programs combined is equal to or less than the cost of attendance. In accordance with the Family First Prevention Services Act, young people who are eligible for ETV may receive ETV until age 26.

The North Carolina Division of Social Services contracts with the Orphan Foundation of America, DBA Foster Care to Success to administer the North Carolina Education and Training Voucher Program. The North Carolina Education and Training Voucher Program makes vouchers available to eligible youth to attend appropriately accredited postsecondary institutions of higher learning or access vocational training.

Under this contract, Foster Care to Success helps to manage the eligibility determination process, including ensuring that assistance provided to youth does not exceed the total cost of attendance. The State LINKS Coordinator and county LINKS Coordinators work in close partnership with Foster Care to Success to ensure youth who have applied for ETV meet the eligibility requirements and that any other assistance they receive is considered to avoid duplication. In addition, the State LINKS Coordinator works closely with Foster Care to Success to ensure that eligibility is correctly determined using contractor data and state-level data.

Every year as part of the state's Annual Progress and Services Report, the state provides an unduplicated count of ETV recipients. As part of the state's efforts to improve the collection and reporting of high-quality data, NC DSS will evaluate the current data collection methods of the contracted agency and implement any changes that may be necessary during Federal Fiscal Years 2020-2024. In addition, NC DSS will convene relevant stakeholders to discuss and develop ways to improve the state's ETV and NC Reach programs.

Consultation with Tribes

North Carolina has eight state-recognized tribes, one federally-recognized tribe, and several American Indian Associations. The federally-recognized tribe is the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI).

As of October 1, 2015, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indian now provides child welfare services to the population living on Tribal Land Trusts, except for Chafee services. LINKS benefits and services and the ETV program are available to Cherokee youth on the same basis as other youth in the state. These services are provided to the youth by county departments of social services that border the Qualla Boundary.

During Federal Fiscal Years 2020-2024 the North Carolina Division of Social Services will continue to coordinate and strengthen relationships with each Indian tribe in the state to ensure that benefits and services under the LINKS program are available to Indian youth in the state on the same basis as other youth in the state. This coordination and consultation will include, but will not be limited to:

Services provided to youth members of EBCI

- Providing technical assistance to county departments of social services bordering the Qualla Boundary to ensure LINKS services are provided to children who are members of the tribe without regard to their residence;
- Connecting and building relationships between the State LINKS program and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians to identify joint opportunities for services and support; This will occur during quarterly meetings between NC DSS and EBCI leadership.

Services provided to members of state recognized tribes

- Planning and coordination LINKS services to with state recognized tribes through participation on the Indian Child Welfare Committee.