

# Youth Transitioning to Adulthood

Support for Those Who Have Aged  
Out of Foster Care

Mindy Calderon-Pitchford, *Director of Community Services*  
and Christine Woods, *Independent Living Supervisor*

Wellpoint Care Network  
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# A Gap in Support

While there's no denying that being in the foster care system and separated from your birth family would be difficult at any age, younger children have a system built to ensure they are getting support and resources from foster parents. **But what happens when that child turns 18?** Where do they go?

When the court order that mandates foster parent support suddenly ends, the child is no longer eligible within the system they once relied on.

While foster youth represent one of the **highest risk youth populations**, there are very few programs specifically designed to meet their various needs once they age out of foster care.

Consider the amount of family support, financial resources and educational preparation required to get even the most advantaged 18-year-old ready for life on their own.

Now imagine an 18-year-old with a significant history of childhood trauma and without a stable income, adult guidance or a reliable family support system.

There's a **significant gap** in support and resources for these young adults that needs to be addressed.

Here's how the *Indiana Adoption Program* illustrated this reality:

**“YTA helped me to understand that my *past trauma* doesn't define my *present* or hinder my *future*. They keep me grounded so I can move forward with my life.”**

— A CURRENT YTA PARTICIPANT

## Picture this...

Your 18th birthday is fast approaching. You have butterflies in your stomach thinking about the freedom adulthood will finally bring. You're excited to spread your wings, head to college, pick a major. Your parents have supported you and cheered you on, and they're not too far away if you need them.



## Now picture this...

Your 18th birthday is fast approaching. You've spent the majority of your life in foster care. 18 feels as though the floor is dropping out from under you and you have no idea where you will land. It's your dream to go to college, but you have no clue how to make that happen. You're terrified, anxious and feel a lot older than 18.



# The Statistics are Staggering

Nearly **55% of 17- to 20-year-olds in foster care** age out of the system without a family they can depend on. That lack of support and connection can negatively impact a young adult's life, leading to things like homelessness, unemployment, crime and more.

According to the *National Foster Youth Institute*:

- More than **23,000 children** will age out of the U.S. foster care system every year.
- **20% of the children** who were in foster care will become instantly homeless after reaching age 18.
- Only **1 out of every 2 foster kids** who age out of the system will have some form of gainful employment by the age of 24.
- There is **less than a 3% chance** for children who have aged out of foster care to earn a college degree at any point in their life.
- **7 out of 10 girls** who age out of foster care will become pregnant before the age of 21.
- **25% of children** who age out of the foster care system suffer from the direct effects of PTSD.

**“YTA opened my eyes to new opportunities and helped me grow into my chosen profession. With their help, I was able to receive my CNA certificate, and continue to work in the field.”**

— A CURRENT YTA PARTICIPANT

Additionally, many foster care youth aging out of the system are people of color. In Milwaukee, youth of color live with some of the nation's greatest racial disparities in education, health, incarceration, employment and income.

Researchers have now identified **Race-Based Traumatic Stress (RBTS)** as a serious issue related to mental and emotional injury caused by encounters with racial bias and discrimination.

On top of this extraordinary baseline of complex trauma, foster youth of color have experienced the acute personal trauma of abuse, neglect and family separation due to foster care placement.

## Think About This...

- *When you just want someone to talk to, staying in a violent relationship may feel like the only option.*
- *When you have nowhere to live, you may have to choose an unsafe environment to sleep in at night.*
- *When you don't have access to educational resources, finding a job can be even more difficult.*

This is what these young adults face each day without a solid support system.

# Early Intervention

There is one common denominator among all children in the foster care system: **trauma**. Whether from childhood neglect or abuse, poverty or other adversities; historical trauma or racial injustices that still occur today, trauma creates powerful barriers to thriving in day-to-day life.

Since trauma is at the core of so many hurdles for so many people, we believe **Trauma Informed Care** must be central to the work of all child welfare systems.

Preparing youth for the realities of aging out of the system sets them up for success from an early age. And when Trauma Informed Care is prioritized throughout their time in foster care, they are better prepared to leave the system once they turn 18.

## Help From the State

Aging out of the foster care system is a huge milestone. Support is clearly needed for this critical age group.

State-funded programs are in place to help bridge the gap to adulthood for former foster care youth and help them through emotional, educational and economic challenges.

According to the **Wisconsin Department of Children and Families**, the services available to youth focus on education, career planning, money management, understanding medical coverage, making healthy decisions, having healthy relationships, creating goals for the future and much more.

These programs are instrumental in changing the direction of a young person's life.

**“Without YTA, I don’t know *where* I’d be. They gave me the comfort of knowing that I wasn’t alone. I had a *community* of people behind me.”**

— A CURRENT YTA PARTICIPANT



# The Wellpoint Care Network Difference

# About Wellpoint Care Network's YTA Program

Each county in Wisconsin has a designated **Transition Resource Agency** for youth aging out of the foster care system. Wellpoint Care Network is that agency for Milwaukee County and has been since 2017.

We chose to name the program **Youth Transitioning to Adulthood** (YTA) because we felt it accurately depicted the journey we were supporting in these young people's lives.

The YTA program serves some of Milwaukee's most at-risk youth. These young people have experienced abuse, neglect, poverty and the distinct trauma of family separation due to foster care placement.

YTA provides the guidance, support and resources that foster youth need to build emotional resilience, develop life skills and access the education, employment, healthcare and housing opportunities that will lead to a healthy independent adulthood.

Any given year, there are roughly 175 to 225 active youth in Wellpoint Care Network's YTA program. The program is completely voluntary and available to youth who have aged out of foster care through the age of 23.

## Trauma Informed Care

According to Harvard's Center on the Developing Child, **Adverse Childhood Experiences** (ACES) — abuse, neglect, economic hardship, racism and social disconnection — can adversely impact learning, decision-making, health and other personal outcomes over a lifetime.

Yet, neuroscience indicates that trauma can be mitigated when human service programs are infused with Trauma Informed Care.

Trauma Informed Care applies scientific research about human brain development, function and healing to help people overcome trauma.

The model prioritizes empathy and relationships and shifts the central therapeutic question from *What's wrong with you?* to *What has happened to you, and how can I support you?*

## PROVEN STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

A recent study in the Children and Youth Services Review showed that providing foster youth with broad independent living services along with access to tangible resources, like housing and post-secondary education, significantly reduced negative life outcomes.

YTA combines these research-based approaches to positively impact foster youth in Milwaukee.

First, YTA leverages Wellpoint Care's Trauma Informed Care practices to provide meaningful one-on-one support through case management and peer mentor relationships that are based in trust, empathy and respect for the experiences of each individual.

Second, YTA develops partnerships with employers, educational institutions, health care providers and others to offer youth access to tangible housing, education, employment health and other resources.



YTA is funded in part by the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families

# Planning for Stability

When first entering the program, youth are assigned a case worker who works with them to create a Plan for Success. This plan is guided by the **Five Pillars of Stability**, a framework used by Wellpoint Care Network to address the social determinants of health and help individuals reach their fullest potential.

## Housing

YTA helps participants establish and maintain safe and affordable housing, with an emphasis on helping them access specially-designated federal funds for former foster youth. We also provide “Home Starter Kits” that include a bed, bedding, towels, kitchen supplies, cleaning supplies and other home essentials to give young people a sense of dignity as they move into a new phase of life.

## Education

Recognizing that education is one of the most powerful ways to escape poverty, YTA guides each participant toward meaningful post-secondary education that aligns with their strengths and interests — whether that means a four-year university, technical college, vocational school or apprenticeship. Case managers and peer mentors arrange college tours, assist with applications, help youth secure financial aid and support them throughout the process.

## Employment

Through dynamic partnerships with Transform Milwaukee Jobs, Department of Workforce Development, Quad, Job Corps, MATC, UWM and others, YTA helps participants gain direct access to a variety of sustainable career pathways.

## Health

Knowing that mental health care IS health care, Wellpoint Care Network works to eliminate the stigma around seeking help. All YTA participants have access to therapists in our Clinic. Whether it’s for traditional talk therapy, art therapy or occupational therapy, we help our youth begin their healing journey whenever they are ready.

## Caring Connections

Everyone needs people they can talk to about their struggles and successes. While our case workers often become mentors to YTA participants, we also work to identify trusted individuals in their community and recommend additional resources for post-program success.

## THE FIVE PILLARS OF STABILITY

These five pillars have been shown to support individual and family stability and prevent or reduce the need for deep-end interventions. When we are strong in these areas, we are able to work on restoring connections to our families, friends and the broader community.



# Additional Resources

In addition to the standard program offerings, Wellpoint Care Network offers Youth Transitioning to Adulthood participants additional resources to help them navigate the responsibilities of adulthood on their own.

## Monthly Meet-ups

Monthly social “meet-ups” and workshops are open to all youth in foster care and those who have recently left the system. Past topics have included educational opportunities, college preparation and financial aid, employment, health and wellness, healthy relationships, cooking, budgeting and smart shopping.

## GRiD MKE

Wellpoint Care Network designed and maintains this **smartphone app** specifically with local foster youth in mind. It provides information about key local resources and services (such as food, shelter and mental health resources) so former foster youth can stay connected to local support 24 hours a day.

## Wisconsin Youth Advisory Council

The **Youth Advisory Council (YAC)** began in 2005 and consists of former and current foster youth who provide a voice for all foster youth in Wisconsin. Participants begin serving on regional councils and are able to become members of the Statewide Council.

YAC’s mission is to work with governmental systems to inspire change through education, advocacy, training and awareness. They also work to improve the image of foster youth by addressing foster care issues. Members of YTA are encouraged to participate in YAC.

**“YTA has the resources to help you learn the things *most* children would learn from their parents. YTA *stepped up* and filled that role.”**

— A CURRENT YTA PARTICIPANT





# Future Goals

Even though Wellpoint Care's YTA program has been in place for many years, we are always looking at ways to improve. And the number one question is always, **How can we reach more youth?**

We believe the answer is by focusing on mental health and wellness.

While we can't force a person to go to therapy or address mental health concerns, we **can** introduce them to mental health concepts and the role childhood trauma can play in adulthood. Learning about concepts like regulation, avoiding triggers and other simple strategies can have a big impact on their daily lives.

Having easy access to appointments at our Outpatient Clinic and a built-in relationship with the agency might mean the difference between them "just surviving" and "truly thriving."

## Funding Needed

In any given year, an average of **80 youth** age out of foster care in Milwaukee County alone. Though the YTA program does receive some funding through the State of Wisconsin, it is not enough.

Current State funding is only available until age 21. Our YTA program is open to former foster youth **through the age of 23**, because those additional years of support are *crucial* to helping each participant truly thrive in adulthood.

Donor funds ensure we can offer monthly workshops, college tours and access to Home Starter Kits and personal supplies. They also fund the Employment and Education Assistance Fund, which helps with basic expenses like college application fees, bus passes, driver's license fees and special tools or clothing needed for a particular job — **small expenses that add up** to create huge barriers for low-income foster youth without family support.

If a young person has a goal but no way to reach it, that goal just becomes a dream. **Without support and guidance**, that dream will fade away. Please consider donating today to keep this program going strong for years to come.

**"YTA opened my eyes to new opportunities and helped me grow professionally."**

— A CURRENT YTA PARTICIPANT



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