



Fostering Youth Success Alliance
Prepared for Submission to the Joint Legislative Public Hearing
On the FY 2025 Executive Budget Proposal
February 8, 2024

This testimony is being submitted on behalf of the statewide Fostering Youth Success Alliance (FYSA). We would like to thank Chair Toby Ann Stavisky of the New York State Senate, Chair Patricia Fahy of the New York State Assembly, and the honorable members of the Committees on Higher Education, Senate Finance, and Assembly Ways & Means for the opportunity to provide feedback about the 2024- 25 executive budget proposal. This testimony seeks to address funding for the Foster Youth College Success Initiative (FYCSI). First established in the 2015-16 budget, FYCSI aims to bridge the gap from foster care to college success, for the state’s most marginalized youth. There are currently over 1,100 students, who are on the path to college success, participating in FYCSI across more than 100 public and private colleges and universities throughout New York State. Since its inception in 2015, the program has served over 2,000 individual students. We anticipate over 1,200 youth with a foster care background will access FYCSI funding in FY 2024-25.

FYSA is a statewide advocacy group that promotes responsive policy and programs to improve the socioeconomic, physical and mental health, housing, and educational outcomes for youth in and aging out of foster care. The alliance is comprised of concerned foster care providers, activists, and youth who are committed to securing stabilizing supports that empower youth across New York to overcome barriers and excel in life. FYSA is housed at and managed by Children’s Aid, a multi-service human services organization located in New York City.

To date, the state has invested \$50.522 million towards the college initiative to support the educational goals of young people with a foster care background. We appreciate that Governor Hochul’s Executive Budget proposal included \$7.92 million in funding for FYCSI and yet there is still more to be done. We ask the legislature to support an additional \$2.08 million in funding for a total of \$10 million in funding for the Foster Youth College Success Initiative. As more students with a foster care background become aware of and utilize FYCSI, it is essential that we ensure the support they need to make it to and through college is available to them. This funding has had tremendous impact for young people with a foster care background as they pursue their higher education goals. Recent data from SUNY has shown that FYCSI support is

associated with both higher retention rates and graduation rates for youth with a foster care background.

FYCSI funds have and continue to allow students to cover expenses such as tuition, housing, transportation, medical and personal expenses. As students with a foster care background balance multiple demands of transitioning out of the foster care system, this support can allow education to remain both a possibility and a priority. FYSA Youth Advocate, Darzell, a current student at LaGuardia Community College, stated, “Tackling college courses while aging out of foster care and finding an apartment at the same time is a lot to juggle by myself. However, having the Foster Youth College Success Initiative to support me through these challenges is a literal life changer.”

Youth in Foster Care in New York State

In New York State, there are approximately 14,000 children and youth in foster care¹, many of whom will eventually age out of the foster care system. However, many youth with a foster care background leave care without the support of a caring adult or family. When barriers or emergencies arise, many don’t have savings, relatives, or friends to rely on.

For any youth seeking to go to college, the process can be daunting from before even reaching the classroom. The application and financial aid processes alone can be overwhelming hurdles for young people with a foster care background who lack support networks to help them make sense of these confusing processes. When faced with the cost of a college education, this well-recognized pathway out of poverty can seem inaccessible to many students with a foster care background.

Since the FYCSI program was established by the state in 2015, this funding has helped young people to account for the gaps that other financial aid resources do not always accommodate. It opens the door to college that may otherwise seem impossible to accomplish. In discussing FYCSI, FYSA Advocate, Solai, a recent graduate of Five Towns College, noted that investing in children's education allows them to choose their own version of success.” By providing for basic needs, such as housing, books, transportation, food, personal and medical care, and emergency expenses, FYCSI allows students an opportunity to make choices with intentionality rather than focus solely on survival. Additionally, colleges are able to provide increased support services (coaching, mental health, etc.) to young people who may not otherwise have a support system to persist through college.

For youth in care with limited resources, work experience, and skills, obtaining a college degree is a sure way to help gain employment with a livable wage and to achieve self-sufficiency.

¹ <https://scaany.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/SONYC-2023-Data-Book.pdf>

According to the 2015 Bridging the Gap report, by graduating just one cohort of 375 students, the state can save approximately \$19 million, representing increased tax payments and a decrease in public expenditures in health care, food stamps benefits, and shelters².

Moving Forward: A Post-Pandemic Blueprint for New York's Foster Youth

As we continue to move into the post-pandemic world, it is essential that we hold on to the lessons of the pandemic. Many of the difficulties young people with a foster care background experienced during the pandemic were not new but instead exacerbated by the pandemic. Long familiar with instability and uncertainty, young people with a foster care background have been able to be resilient throughout these past few years through the unique challenges they faced. When FYSA [surveyed](#) over 200 young people with a foster care background in New York state, ages 8-26, on their experiences throughout the pandemic, it was found that nearly 1 in 4 of surveyed youth were concerned about the fear of or reality of housing instability. Even prior to the pandemic, nationally, 1 in 5 youth with a foster care background were found to experience housing insecurity. The support FYCSI can provide with housing is one support to provide stable housing for youth while they pursue higher education.

Beyond helping provide housing, we know that supportive funding programs increase the odds of young people with a foster care background accomplishing their degrees. In Texas, it was found that the 60% of eligible foster youth who accessed the state's fee waiver were 3.5 times more likely to receive a bachelor's degree than the students who did not, controlling for waiver eligibility, demographic characteristics, and academic performance³. The pandemic served as an example of just how vital support programs are for student persistence: support programs such as FYCSI, were and continue to be vital in helping students to navigate the obstacles they faced - 83% of the students who reported continuing on in college through the pandemic, stated that they were actively participating in college support programs such as FYCSI. Additionally, a survey conducted by John Burton Advocates for Youth (JBAY) found that students with a foster care background who accessed basic needs centers on their college campuses were more likely to persist in college than their peers who did not.⁴ It is essential to note that while these programs provide financial resources, supports such as advisement, tutoring, and community are also crucial to student success. With this understanding, FYSA will continue to work with young people, colleges, and state partners to ensure students accessing FYCSI have comprehensive support in place to support them through their college experiences.

² https://www.fysany.org/sites/default/files/document/bridging_the_gap.pdf

³ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0190740920309506?via%3Dihub>

⁴ <https://jbay.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/JBAY-COVID-19-Impact.pdf>

Making College Success a Reality

For the past nine years, the state has devoted a total of \$50.522 million in resources to support youth with a foster care background in obtaining their college degree. It is essential that New York State upholds this commitment as we all search for a way to move forward from the pandemic. The Governor's inclusion of \$7.92 million to the Foster Youth College Success Initiative is a start at supporting youth with a foster care background, but does not account for the full level of support that youth with a foster care background require to persist through their higher education goals. Funding the initiative at \$10 million will allow the state to fulfill its obligation to support all foster youth's successful transition to independence. As the acting parent for foster youth, New York State is responsible for ensuring that all young people have the resources necessary to pursue a college degree. In addition to the investment of funds, it is also crucial that FYCSI funds be easily accessible for youth to access.

Through the Making College Success working group that includes partners from the Higher Education Services Corporation, State Education Department, Office of Children and Family Services, Administration for Children's Services, SUNY, and CUNY that FYSA convenes monthly, changes were secured to the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) application that ensure young people can more easily disclose their foster care background at the time of applying for financial aid. The year-end count of students, 1,183, served in the 2022-23 academic year, the first year of this change's full implementation, including 37% of all students found eligible for FYCSI support who were new students. Additionally, new students were identified throughout the course of the year, with the year-end total eligible students served being 29% higher than the pool of students identified at the start of the year. In the current 2023-24 academic year, this reach has been maintained, with the initial count of eligible students identified for FYCSI landing at 1,148 students. FYSA anticipates that this will expand further as we work alongside both our Youth Advocates and state partners to raise awareness of the initiative with both young people and those who support them. Building awareness around available benefits for youth with a foster care background, such as FYCSI, can be aided through required signage and materials being visible in educational institutions.

Promising Results at the State University of New York⁵

While FYCSI students attend colleges and universities across New York State, the most considerable portion of students benefitting from FYCSI attend institutions that are part of the State University of New York (SUNY) system. As such, [data from SUNY](#) is a telling marker of the impact of FYCSI on student success. Through analyzing information in its SUNY Data Warehouse, SUNY was able to provide insights into the impact of FYCSI for SUNY students. To begin with demographics, SUNY FYCSI awardees are 66.5% female. Racially, 66.8% identify as Black,

⁵ <https://rockinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/2024-01-30a-Fostering-Success-at-SUNY.pdf>

Hispanic, or multi-racial - this approximate two-thirds of students represents a higher percentage of Black, Hispanic, or multiracial students than the SUNY population overall. In considering outcomes for FYCSI awardees, SUNY's data analysis found the following positive outcomes:

- ***FYCSI recipients have higher retention rates than their peers.*** Students receiving the benefits of FYCSI are more likely to reenroll from their first to second year in college at rates higher than Pell Grant recipients, underrepresented minority groups, and even SUNY students overall.
- ***FYCSI awardees at SUNY consistently posted higher two-year, three-year, and four-year associate degree graduation rates than their peers*** with a foster care background who may have yet to access FYCSI. They also post higher associate's degree graduation rates than their Pell Grant peers. It is of note that two earlier cohorts of FYCSI students posted higher graduation rates than SUNY students overall.
- ***FYCSI awardees post higher graduation rates than their peers for bachelor's degree completion rates*** when adjusted for six-year degree completion. This is an area for further study as there have been fewer cohorts of young people to follow due to the length of the program.

While these data highlight only one sector of FYCSI awardees, these promising results paint a picture of the importance of state support for young people with a foster care background as they navigate college. Additionally, this investment represents a commitment to more equitable access to education, as FYCSI plays a role in closing gaps in graduation rates across racial groups.

Conclusion

Youth with a foster care background face uncertainty throughout many aspects of their lives; having consistent support to access higher education should not be one of those uncertainties. It is necessary that we strengthen the resources that help us work towards stability. For young people with a foster care background, having continuous financial, mental health, and other supports allows them to persist in their college education even in the face of unforeseen circumstances. New York State must continue to honor its obligation to support its most vulnerable community members on their path to independence. We must work collaboratively to ensure that all students are able to access a college education. While Governor Hochul's current \$7.92 allocation for the Foster Youth College Success Initiative is a start, there is still a need for more support for New York's youth with a foster care background. We ask that the legislature support an additional \$2.08 million, for a total of \$10 million, for the Foster Youth College Success Initiative in the final enacted FY25. A \$10 million investment in FYCSI ensures that young people with a foster care background have access to the resources -tuition & fees, housing, personal expenses, and more - they need to make their college dreams a reality. By championing FYCSI, the state is ensuring that all foster youth who come into the care of the

state and want to attend college, have the opportunity to further their education and become independent, and make their unique impact on society.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of the approximately 14,000 children and youth in foster care in New York State. If you have any questions regarding this testimony, please contact Deidra Nesbeth, Director of the Fostering Youth Success Alliance at dnesbeth@childrensaidnyc.org or (646) 477-4322.