



Fostering Youth Success Alliance
Prepared for Submission to the Joint Legislative Public Hearing
On the FY 2024 Executive Budget Proposal
February 27, 2023

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 2023- 24 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 vulnerable youth. There are currently close to 1000 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. In the FY2023-24 we anticipate over 1,100 youth with a foster care background will access FYCSI funding.

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 \$43.361 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 continue to persist in their education throughout the continued challenges of our new normal.

FYCSI funds have and continue to allow students to cover expenses such as tuition, housing, transportation, medical and personal expenses. Tanajah, a current MSW candidate at SUNY Binghamton and BSW graduate of SUNY Brockport, stated that “The support I received through FYCSI was a game-changer for me, allowing me to succeed academically and feel more secure while in undergrad. I had access to all the resources and support I needed.”

Youth in Foster Care in New York State

In New York State there are over 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, and 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 fact, this support empowers students to even consider education as a viable path. Edwin, a current senior at SUNY Purchase, stated that, “When I learned that I could get funding to pay for college, it gave me the motivation to expand my horizons. I decided to pursue a degree in psychology at SUNY Purchase. With resources such as FYCSI, I can be one of the people to diversify the field of psychology.” As previously mentioned, young people are able to use FYCSI funding to cover basic needs, such as housing, books, transportation, food and personal care. 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. 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.

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

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

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

As we move beyond the peak stage of the pandemic and into a post-pandemic world, we can all take valuable lessons with us of what our communities need to thrive. Many of the difficulties young people with a foster care background experienced during the pandemic were not new, but rather 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. In 2020 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. For some, college acts as temporary housing, but this option was not always been accessible during the pandemic. Stable housing should not be tied to school calendars or the uncertainty of public health crises. For some young people accessing FYCSI, they have used funds to make sure they have secure housing year-round. One FYSA Advocate, Nittaya, stated last year that, "FYCSI allowed me to pay my rent so I wouldn't have to drop out. I can now say that I am in my graduating semester at SUNY Schenectady." Nittaya has now graduated with her Associate's degree and is pursuing her Bachelor's degree at Siena College. Without FYCSI support it is likely that she would've had to choose between a stable place to live and her degree – this is not a choice we should expect of any young adult.

In general, 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. This was true during the pandemic as well: 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, the supports such as advisement, tutoring, and community are also crucial to student success. FYSA will continue to work with young people, colleges, and state partners to ensure students access FYCSI have comprehensive supports in place to support them through their college experiences.

Making College Success a Reality

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>

For the past eight years, the state has devoted a total of \$42.361 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 important 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. In the 2023-23 academic year, the first year of this change's full implementation, 26% of students found eligible for FYCSI support were new 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 that support them.

Conclusion

At a time when we are all faced with increased levels of uncertainty, 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 FY24. A \$10 million dollar 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, are able 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 over 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.