



Making an Emergency Plan with Transition Age Youth in Foster Care in Pennsylvania

A Checklist for Dependency Attorneys, Caseworkers, and Advocates

The COVID-19 pandemic has unexpectedly altered our lives and especially the lives of youth in foster care who need support and advocacy now more than ever. The coming months will present a critical opportunity to collaborate with young people and their full network of supports to ensure that they feel safe, stable, and cared for and are not rendered more vulnerable as a result of the pandemic.

This guide details how to create an emergency plan for young adults in foster care and provides resources for meeting emergent needs. It aims to provide a starting point for dependency attorneys and other advocates working to assess client needs as this crisis unfolds and provide supports. **Transition age youth--young people who may be in college, living on their own for the first time, starting new jobs, and developing and testing their independent living skills--may be particularly vulnerable and require specific attention in the upcoming weeks.** There are a number of emergency services and resources available for this population, but they are not always easy to access. Advocates can help bridge the gap by reaching out to each of the young people they work with and asking targeted questions to assess their current situation. Once advocates have an understanding of a young person's current situation as well as their needs over the next few weeks or months, they can assist by offering to connect youth to emergency resources and advocacy support.

We encourage caseworkers, dependency attorneys and advocates to use the questions below to create a plan that meets the youth's needs during this emergency period and continues to plan for their transition to independent living ensuring their safety and well-being. This guide should be used in conjunction with the Emergency Planning for Youth Worksheet and be informed directly by the youth's individual situation, supports and preferences.

CURRENT HEALTH

- **Is the youth aware of and have an adequate understanding of the current health crisis?**
 - Review the main points of the current emergency and basic guidance on protecting oneself and preventing the spread of the virus.
 - Ensure that youth understand which health conditions place them at higher risk for severe illness and that they have a plan to stay healthy and seek medical assistance if necessary. For example, youth with asthma, compromised immune systems, or other medical conditions are at higher risk. Guidance is available here:
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/specific-groups/high-risk-complications.html>
 - Make sure the youth has access to a smart phone or computer/laptop and internet service so that they can get information and reach out for help if needed.
 - Share the recommendations and information from the PA Department of Health, which are available and being updated here:
<https://www.health.pa.gov/topics/disease/coronavirus/Pages/Coronavirus.aspx> . Make sure that the youth is aware of the specific precautions and orders in place in their county including the requirement to stay at home and not gather in groups.
- **How is the young person feeling physically?**
 - Review the COVID-19 symptoms (cough, fever, respiratory distress) that youth need to be aware of for self-assessment.
 - Make sure they have a current number for their healthcare provider.
 - **Give them the number for any local/county-based Helpline.**
 - Help them develop a plan of action if they become ill or a member of their family becomes ill. Advise youth to call their healthcare provider before going to the emergency room and help them locate the best number to call.
 - If youth live alone, make sure that they have a plan for reaching out to a medical professional and understand what symptoms should trigger a call to a medical professional or reaching out to their support networks (e.g., difficulty breathing)
- **How is the youth feeling emotionally? Are they feeling isolated, depressed, and/or anxious, and expressing or demonstrating a need for behavioral health services?**
 - Reassure the youth that increased anxiety and feeling isolated during this crisis is normal. Brainstorm ideas for social contacts, coping mechanisms, and develop a stress management plan with clear actions and important contacts for every youth. Example here: <https://parentandteen.com/teen-stress-management-plan/> .

- If the youth has mental health concerns that were previously being addressed by a counselor or therapist, suggest that they reach out to their providers for assistance.
- If the youth is experiencing a mental health crisis, help them identify and access local resources. This [link](#) lists some crisis lines by county.
- **The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) also operates a mental health hotline at (800) 950-6264 (or text 741741).** NAMI has tips related to COVID-19 issues that can be found here: <https://www.nami.org/About-NAMI/NAMI-News/2020/NAMI-Updates-on-the-Coronavirus>
- Discuss with the youth any concerns or worries they may have about being at home or spending time with partners or loved-ones that makes them feel unsafe. Let them know that you can help them find resources if they are experiencing any domestic or partner violence or abuse. Go to this [website](#) with the youth to find local domestic violence resources and helplines. Remind them that they are still able to seek protection from abuse orders and contact the police even if their county has issued a stay at home directive.

MEETING ONGOING HEALTH NEEDS

- **Does the youth have active health insurance and know how to use it?**
 - Remind youth that the COVID-19 test is free regardless of type of (or lack of) insurance.
 - Make sure the youth has a copy of their health insurance card.
 - Youth can check the status of their health insurance by calling their caseworker. Youth can also call the **Pennsylvania Health Access Network helpline at 877-570-3642** if they have questions about their insurance.
 - Youth may have health insurance through their college and should check how benefits work if a youth is off-campus. It may make more sense for the youth to leave the college's health insurance plan and enroll in Medicaid (Medical Assistance) depending on where they are residing and what coverage their university health insurance offers for off campus providers.
- **What is the youth's plan to maintain their ongoing health and behavioral health needs?**
 - Is the youth currently taking any prescription medication?
 - Make sure the youth has enough prescription medication and refills to last at least the next month, coordinating with the youth's medical provider and caseworker and obtaining court orders as needed.
 - Are there mental health treatment needs?
 - Work with youth to develop a plan for continued access - see below tips to make sure youth have the technology available to set this up.

- If the youth already had services in place before the crisis, ask if they have the number for their therapist or counselor to see if remote sessions are available. The youth may need to check with their counselor to determine whether remote sessions would be covered by their insurance. Work with them to reach out to identify if remote access is available or to assist in setting it up.
- Does the youth have any current or ongoing medical issues that will require attention during the crisis?
 - Make sure the youth knows where to go for treatment during the next month and where to go if there is a medical emergency.
 - Many regular medical services and appointments are being postponed or handled differently, and youth will need a plan to access necessary treatment. Assist the youth in reaching out to their medical providers for information about upcoming appointments.
 - Make sure the youth has access to a smart phone or computer/laptop that will allow telemedicine health access whenever possible.

HOUSING/PLACEMENT

- **Is the youth in a stable and secure placement where his or her needs can be met?**
 - Are they in a placement that they can remain in during the crisis? This means that they need to be able to stay there for at least the next two months.
 - Is this a placement where their health needs can be met, including those related to reducing chances of contracting the virus?
 - Is there any risk that the youth will need to leave their placement during the crisis?
 - If the youth expresses that they may have to leave their placement for any reason, including that they are turning 21, immediately contact the program and the youth's caseworker and DHS to advocate for the youth to stay in the program for the duration of the crisis. Even if they are turning 21 in the next two months, you should request continuation of the board extension so that they can remain in a safe home.
 - If the youth expresses that they want to leave care or their placement please advise them of the serious health risks of leaving a stable placement at this time. Contact the child welfare agency, the youth's attorney, and AIC coach and IL workers and seek their assistance in counseling the youth.
 - If the youth currently rents an apartment and cannot pay rent for the month due to effects from the crisis, seek assistance from the child welfare or provider agency to prevent homelessness.

- You can help the youth reach out to the local legal aid office to determine whether there are any moratoriums on eviction and to refer the youth to a housing attorney. **Find out your local legal aid office [here](#).**
- **Is the youth concerned about payment of utilities?**
 - If the youth does not have working electricity, gas or water, help them reach out immediately to the utility company.
 - Help the youth determine whether there are any special policies or programs in place in the county related to not shutting off utilities during the COVID-19 crisis.
- **Is the youth a college student who has been advised to move out of their dormitory?**
 - Contact youth in college immediately to assist them in making arrangements for housing if they are no longer permitted to remain on campus.
 - Determine whether they can make requests to stay on campus if they would like to do so and help them create an argument for why it is in their best interests to remain in on campus housing.
 - Notify the child welfare agency immediately of a need for placement if they cannot or do not want to remain on campus and are in extended foster care.
 - If the youth is not in extended foster care and is not able to remain in the dorms, help them call their IL program and ask about the availability of Chafee room and board assistance and help them contact Together We Rise at info@togetherwerise.org to see if they can provide any assistance.
 - For students who find alternate housing but need temporary storage, U-Haul is offering 30 days of free self-storage for college students moving out of dorms: <https://www.uhaul.com/Articles/About/20625/College-Students-U-Haul-Offers-30Days-Free-Self-Storage-amid-Coronavirus-Outbreak/>.
- **Does the youth have a backup housing plan in case of an emergency?**
 - Work with youth to identify family members or other important, safe adults who could provide or be a backup housing option in case of an emergency.
 - Offer to help youth find and make contact with those adults if they are concerned or hesitant about reaching out.

TECHNOLOGY, DEVICES, AND INTERNET ACCESS

- Does the youth have sufficient access to phone and internet to meet their needs for the next several weeks?
- Does the youth have a working cell phone and sufficient minutes that can be used throughout the crisis?
 - Ensure that the youth has a working cell phone that can be used throughout the crisis. Advocate for emergency funds from the child welfare agency or a private provider if this is not the case. It is critical that the youth have a consistent and reliable means of contacting the caseworker and their attorney.
- Make sure that you have a backup number for the youth in case they lose service.
- Make sure that the youth has the numbers for all of their important contacts including your phone and email, the caseworker and their supervisor. (Use the form below.)
- Does the youth have internet service?
 - Comcast is offering free broadband internet to low-income households. Youth apply for this free service by using this link: <https://variety.com/2020/digital/news/comcast-free-broadband-low-income-households-coronavirus-1203532765/> To prove that they are low income they can tell Comcast that they receive Medicaid.
 - Spectrum is also offering free internet for students in K-12. Contact them at: <https://www.wect.com/2020/03/15/spectrum-offer-free-internet-students-during-coronavirus-outbreak/>

FOOD AND BASIC NEEDS

- Does the youth have enough food (or money for food) to get through the next few weeks?
 - If they are in a SIL program or housing ensure that they have access to their stipend funds and request additional funds if the youth used wages from work to purchase food and other daily living needs and that income is not available. If they were normally picking up their stipend at the agency, determine with the youth how they will get the funds if the agency is closed.
 - Help youth apply for Foodstamps (SNAP) if they are eligible but know that that will not meet immediate needs. If the youth's food stamps were turned off, inform the agency caseworker that there will be additional needs for food and essentials.

- Share information with the youth about food delivery and food banks, and brainstorm strategies for the youth to get to their nearest food bank or food distribution site.
 - Many school districts are providing free breakfasts and lunches to youth under the age of 18. Help the youth identify the location of any food distribution through the schools.
 - You can search for foodbanks in your county here:
<https://www.feedingamerica.org/find-your-local-foodbank>
- **Does the youth have enough money to meet his or her basic and daily needs related to clothing, hygiene items, and incidentals?**
 - Help the youth access emergency assistance from the provider agency or DHS.
 - Get a list of the essential items that the youth will need in the interim and a proposed budget for those items and expenses.

TRANSPORTATION

- Talk with the youth about any transportation needs.
- Talk with youth about plans for transportation in case of shelter in place orders and/or reductions in public transportation options.
- Make sure the youth understands what precautions to take if using public transportation to protect his or her health.
- Make sure the youth has sufficient money to pay for transportation if they need to use transportation to get around.

PARENTING

- **Is the youth parenting and in need of immediate funds to meet basic needs?**
 - Help the youth identify the unmet needs and make requests for emergency funds from the provider agency and county child welfare agency.
 - County Assistance Offices are currently closed, so all actions related to benefits like TANF can only be conducted online at
<https://www.compass.state.pa.us/compass.web/Public/CMPHome>.
- **Is the youth parenting and in immediate need of food or formula?**
 - Help youth apply for WIC if they are not already receiving WIC. You can start the application here: <https://www.pawic.com/OnlineApplication.aspx>. The youth may still have to come into the WIC office to complete the application but it is critical to start the application as soon as possible.

- Advise youth that the federal government has given states flexibility in their WIC eligibility determinations, such as certifying eligibility remotely and issuing benefits up to three months in advance.
- **Does the youth have other immediate needs for themselves and their children?**
 - Ensure that youth are able to access resources that are difficult to find, such as diapers, wipes, or formula. Assist youth with locating a nearby store with the necessary supplies and make a plan for the youth to get to a store. If funds to purchase these items are an issue, assist youth in identifying a local charitable group who can provide basic supplies or request emergency funds from the child welfare agency or a private provider.
 - Ensure that the youth has the resources they need to provide activities and care for the child if the child's daycare and other activities are now canceled.
 - Ensure that the youth has a plan for meeting any health and other needs of the child, including that they have reached out to the child's pediatrician if there are upcoming visits or if they have ongoing medical concerns.
- **Does the youth have a child in foster care?**
 - Help the youth ensure continued contact and visitation:
 - Determine whether the visits are supervised or unsupervised. If they are unsupervised, help the youth figure out a safe location for visiting or whether it is possible to visit with the child at the foster home.
 - If they are supervised visits, help the young person figure out whether the foster parent or a family member can supervise the visits in a safe location or in the foster home.
 - If they have a child in care with a relative, this should be something that the agency is able to determine quickly to resume or continue regular visitation. Even if in person visitation is not an option during this time, ensure a plan is in place for virtual visitation and ongoing contact.
 - The youth should call their attorney if they have questions about their rights as a parent. **They can also call Community Legal Services Family Advocacy Hotline at 215-981-3765.**

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

- **Has the youth's coursework and instruction moved to an online learning?**
 - Ensure that they have the equipment and internet access they need to succeed in online learning, including support on how to use any new devices or programs. Reach out to their school if the youth has questions about remote learning.
 - Confirm that the youth is accessing the curriculum and other information for the school, college or vocational training program.

- **If the youth is still in high school and was receiving special education services,** contact the school to make sure the youth has a transition plan and ask for a planning meeting if they do not. If the youth will be entering college or a training program next year, make sure ideas for a 504 Plan are developed before the school year ends and work with the youth to make a request at the office of disability services at the college or program the youth will enter and ask for a 504 Plan.
- **Important Considerations for Remote Learning:**
 - Youth should proactively reach out to professors teaching their classes to communicate that they may have issues completing coursework on time or attending class via video due to disruption in living arrangements; professors may assume that students moving off campus are returning to a fully-stocked home with computer and internet, which is not the case for some youth in foster care. If a professor is unwilling to be flexible, contact the Dean of Academic Affairs and/or the campus foster youth program.
 - If youth's coursework has moved to online learning, ask if they know how to access their school email address. Students (especially high school students) may never have logged in to it before or may not know their password. Many school districts operating remotely are only communicating via email.
 - If the youth was receiving supplemental tutoring or support, assist the youth in contacting the tutor or service to arrange for online/virtual one on one tutoring sessions or telephonic tutoring sessions.
 - Ask the school or college if there are other remote/web-based programs that provide remedial education or help with credit recovery if needed.
 - See below for resources for internet access from Comcast and Spectrum.
- **Resources for laptops if the youth is in college: email One Simple Wish at info@onesimplewish.org**
- **Have college students received an update on any changes to their financial aid?**
 - Sometimes colleges will reduce a student's financial aid if the youth unexpectedly leaves campus, on the assumption that the youth has returned to a parent's care. Advise any youth for whom this is not the case to reach out to their financial aid office to confirm that they are listed as an "independent student" and the cost of attendance has not changed.
 - Students who are independent and living off campus may be eligible for more aid, depending on how the college calculates off-campus cost of attendance. Colleges are often able to adjust cost of attendance to take into account students' specific circumstances. Youth should also communicate with financial aid about money for internet access if they find that the free internet speeds

offered by providers are insufficient to allow them to use video calling or other digital resources for remote learning.

EMPLOYMENT

- **Is the youth's work being affected during the crisis?**
 - Advise youth that they may be eligible for unemployment benefits if they meet certain criteria. See this [information](#) provided by Philadelphia Legal Assistance that explains the application process and who may be eligible. Due to recent federal legislation, many more people are eligible for unemployment than before the crisis so encourage youth to apply if their loss of work or reduction of hours is in any way related to COVID-19.
 - For college students who had work-study jobs, help them check with their schools to see if they can continue to receive work-study payments and/or do work-study jobs remotely.
[Federal guidance](#) has authorized schools to pay students who are losing work hours due to the COVID-19 crisis.
 - If the youth was working and is now not permitted to come to work, check whether they are entitled to any paid time off or sick leave through their employer.
 - If the youth is looking for work, you can help connect them with the following resources:
 - Help the youth contact their IL worker for help on finding employment.
 - Help youth use the PA Careerlink Job Search tool:
<https://www.pacareerlink.pa.gov/jponline/JobSeeker/SearchJobs>
 - You can help the youth identify your local Workforce Investment Board [here](#) and go online to find out local job and training opportunities.

STAYING CONNECTED TO ACTIVITIES AND PEOPLE

- **Is the young person staying in contact with important people in their life?**
 - Assist youth in compiling a list of important contacts to keep with them during the crisis (see template emergency contact list below). You can even fill out the form with them and then email it to them so that they have the list on their phones.
 - Make sure that they know how to reach you specifically (i.e., is your office open? Are you checking voicemails? Email? What is the best way to contact you?).
- **Do they have the ability and/or a plan for staying in touch with friends, family and social supports during the isolation period? Do they have someone to talk with regularly?**

- Have they considered how to visit with friends by video or join group chats to catch up? Social isolation and loneliness are not trivial. Youth should make concerted efforts to stay in touch with their social networks. Video chats and phone calls can help fill some of the gap, and they are better at providing interactive opportunities than email or text.
- **What are they planning to do to stay busy?**
 - Discuss the importance of maintaining a good routine to combat the negative effects of social isolation. Consider topics such as waking up at the same time as usual, an exercise routine, light exposure, work or hobbies to fill the day.

EXTENDED FOSTER CARE AND TRANSITION PLANNING REQUIREMENTS

- **Policy on Extended Care:** Determine whether your county has issued any policies related to extended care. For example, have the participation requirements (work, school, etc) been suspended? Will discharges be delayed?
- Help the youth identify and document whether they will have difficulty meeting the eligibility requirements due to work or school closures or disruptions.
- If youth were enrolled in school, college, or a training program that has been disrupted, help them document that they were enrolled. Document if the youth is participating in remote learning programs or if they are unable to participate because of a lack of technology or wireless access.
- Help youth identify whether they can shift their eligibility criteria to “participating in a program actively designed to promote or reduce barriers to employment” if their work or school has been disrupted and help the youth develop a plan for activities that will meet this criteria. [State guidance from OCYF](#) provides that involvement in the county IL program meets this requirement.
- Identify if the youth is particularly vulnerable during this crisis because of their medical situation and document their inability to continue working or attending programs.
- Identify if the youth is scheduled to discharge/transition from foster care in the next 3 to 6 months. **If the current crisis will significantly impact the youth’s transition plan and make it impossible for them discharge safely, contact the child welfare agency and the youth’s case planning team to develop alternative plans, including, requesting a later discharge date and additional resources to assist with planning. Notify the youth’s team if you think a scheduled discharge will**

risks the youth's health and safety due to the COVID-19 crisis so action can be taken immediately.

- Note that aging out of care is generally challenging for young people. Discharging a youth from care during a public health crisis is likely to be highly upsetting and traumatizing for the youth. Additionally, there will be extremely limited resources available for the youth to find shelter or employment during the crisis. Identify these cases, document the risks to youth and take action as soon as you can to avoid making a difficult time even more dangerous for the youth.

CONTACT LIST

Important Contact	Phone and Email	Notes
Family members		
Other supportive adults		
Case worker		
Case worker's supervisor		
IL Worker		
Provider social worker or other service provider		
Attorney		
Social Worker for Attorney		
CASA		

Doctor's office for youth		
Pediatrician for the child if the youth has a child		
Therapist/clinician		
School contacts		
Childcare provider (if applicable)		
Local food bank		
Local pharmacy		
Emergency contact numbers		

Special thanks to the Youth Law Center for developing the original tool Juvenile Law Center adapted to provide information to young people in Pennsylvania. We also thank Kara Finck at the Child Advocacy Clinic at the University of Pennsylvania Law School for her significant contributions.