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What We Know Now About Meeting the Needs of Teens and Young Adults
(Second of two issues)

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Countdown to 21: Outcomes from a Transition Support Program for Older Youth Exiting Foster Care

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Despite the critical need for effective programs for older youth exiting from foster care, little is known about the outcomes of transition support programs or how they are perceived by youth. This study sought to understand youth outcomes and perceptions of an innovative, statewide program using a youth-driven team decision-making model in transition planning meetings. A pre-post design involved data collection from youth and caseworkers. At 3-month follow up, significant improvements occurred in the youth’s perceptions of support deficits, confidence they could access services,

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financial and housing security, employment, and legal issues. Qualitative findings from open-ended questions suggest that the transition meetings were helpful as they provided an opportunity to plan and set goals that went beyond planning that had already occurred. Providing all youth with a collaborative, supportive process with trained external facilitators may support greater access to services and improved perceptions of readiness for independent living after discharge.
For many of the over 20,000 youth who leave foster care at age 18 or older each year, the transition to independence is challenging. Youth formerly in foster care often struggle economically, with less than half reporting employment several years after leaving care (Courtney et al., 2010). An estimated 11% to 36% experience homelessness (Dworsky et al., 2015), and risk of victimization is significantly higher than for youth in the general population (Courtney et al., 2010). Early parenting is common, with twice the rates of pregnancy before age 21 among youth in foster care than in the general population (Courtney et al., 2007). In the first years after leaving care, over 40% of young men and 20% of young women report arrests (Courtney et al., 2010). These significant needs in early adulthood can contribute to reduced employment and earnings throughout adulthood, with youth formerly in foster care estimated to earn about half that of a national sample (Okpych & Courtney, 2014).

Recognizing the high needs of youth in foster care, nearly all states have implemented a range of programs to provide skills development and support to older youth in foster care. Despite the critical need for effective programs for this population, little is known about the outcomes of these programs or how they are perceived by youth. This study sought to understand youth outcomes and perceptions of an innovative program designed to engage youth in planning for their exit from care and gaining financial literacy. Using a youth-driven team decision-making model, the program seeks to support the development of realistic goals, increase access to services, strengthen supportive relationships, and increase financial stability.

Background

Services for Older Youth

To address the significant challenges of transitioning out of foster care, child welfare systems have developed services to target factors thought to contribute to difficulties in early adulthood, including the abrupt
termination of services at 18, the need for targeted educational and vocational planning for independence, and increased access to services. The majority of states now offer extended foster care or other supportive services until age 21, including independent living services and programs that seek to assist youth in planning and preparing for independence by learning independent living skills, accessing educational and employment opportunities, and building social supports (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). Programs and services vary widely in intensity, with some providing direct assistance and resources across multiple domains and others primarily consisting of time-limited life skills classes.

Despite the proliferation of programs, the effectiveness of most programs for older youth is largely unknown. Two reviews of empirical studies (Everson-Hock et al., 2011; Woodgate, Morakinyo, & Martin, 2017) focusing on the effectiveness of services found that youth who received transition planning services might have some benefits, such as in educational and employment outcomes, but both reviews conclude that the effectiveness of different services is largely unknown. Since these reviews, several randomized studies have provided stronger support for specific programs, including the Better Futures model (Geenen et al., 2015), the My Life model (Blakeslee & Keller, 2018), and the YVLifeSet model (Courtney, Valentine, & Skemer, 2019). The methodologically strongest study of a transition support program, YVLifeSet, found modest effects in critical areas including housing stability, earnings, and economic hardship. A similarity across these programs is their emphasis on establishing an ongoing, consistent relationship with youth over a period of a year or more to support attainment of goals to succeed in transitioning to independence (Courtney et al., 2019). While the role of the adult working with the youth is labeled differently in each program, similarities in the role tasks suggest that frequent in-person meetings, defining youth-directed goals, and program duration of a year or more might be key to improving outcomes for youth approaching an exit from foster care.
To support positive outcomes, existing research also points to the importance of active engagement of youth in planning for transitioning from care (Vis et al., 2011). While involving youth in planning for their transition from foster care is viewed as a critical component to transfer responsibility, build skills, and provide youth with a self-directed plan for independence (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), the process to engage the youth may or may not be specified, leading to low levels of participation in transition services. Some studies find that less than half of older youth enroll in available programs to support transitioning from care (Dixon & Stein, 2002). Models to increase youth engagement in planning are critically needed to support positive outcomes for youth exiting care.

Youth also have identified financial support accompanied by financial education as key to successful transition to independence (Edelstein & Lowenstein, 2014). While the effectiveness of financial education programs in the general population is still being evaluated, even less is known about the outcomes for financial education programs among current and former foster care youth. However, certain characteristics of financial education programs have been associated with positive outcomes in descriptive studies. These characteristics include targeting to a specific audience or activity, using a “just-in-time” or “teachable moments” approach, demonstrating content relevance, and incorporating strategies to increase motivation (Fernandes et al., 2014; Loke et al., 2015). Successful programs also provide opportunities to engage with real-world financial products and services, thus allowing participants to apply their knowledge and develop financial capability (Loke et al., 2015). A program for youth in foster care should incorporate these elements into a program tailored specifically for youth approaching the transition to independence, when development of these skills is most relevant.

This article describes the components of Countdown to 21, an innovative program to support the transition to independence statewide for youth age 19 and older in substitute care developed with John E.
Chafee funds. This statewide program supplements private agency services by facilitating youth engagement in transition planning and supporting completion of financial literacy training by all youth before leaving care at age 21. Youth and participant perspectives on the extent that the program matches its goals are reported as well as short term youth outcomes.

Countdown to 21: A Youth-Driven Transition Planning and Financial Literacy Training Program

Since 2014, the state of Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) has provided Countdown to 21. Developed using the tenets of positive youth development, it uses a youth-driven, team decision-making framework to support the development of realistic goals, increase access to services, strengthen supportive relationships, and increase financial stability. Consistent with a team decision-making framework, the program emphasizes collaborative in-person planning that includes the youth, caseworkers and staff, and the youths’ support system (Crea et al., 2009). While meeting the requirement of Fostering Connections to support development of a youth-driven transition plan 90 days prior to discharge, the statewide program provides more comprehensive support by initiating the planning process at age 19 and incorporating an external facilitator trained in a youth-driven team decision-making framework. The program begins with a two-hour planning meeting when youth are 19, with an additional meeting scheduled at age 20 and nine months. A third meeting is scheduled for pregnant and parenting youth identified as having high needs at age 20 and three months. These planning meetings supplement ongoing service planning coordinated by caseworkers and ensure that the planning process emphasizes the youth’s voice and incorporates their identified support system.

To prepare youth to be active participants in the transition planning meetings, six weeks prior to the meeting, the meeting facilitator contacts the youth’s caseworker to discuss transition planning and also
to confirm a date, time, and location for the meeting. The caseworker and facilitator share responsibility in preparing the youth in advance of the meeting about the active role the youth will take in the meeting and benefits to participation. The meeting begins with clarification of meeting ground rules and goals and includes sufficient time for discussion and planning. Follow-up meetings can be scheduled as needed to address needs. The program provides the opportunity for long-term planning to develop educational and vocational goals and focus on housing stability by identifying housing options and supporting placement of the youth in the setting where they will live prior to leaving care (DCFS, 2014). Building enduring connections with family and community supports is emphasized, with supportive family members and other supportive adults invited to participate in the meetings.

In the first meeting at age 19, all youth are referred to Get Real: Financial Decisions in the Real World, a financial literacy training program developed specifically for youth in care by the Economic Awareness Council (EAC). The Countdown to 21 program uses a train-the-trainer approach through which 622 certified financial literacy instructors have been trained by the EAC and DCFS to lead the financial education statewide since 2014. Ideally, youth complete the financial literacy training at age 19 to provide them with the opportunity to practice financial skills they have learned prior to their discharge, but youth are able to complete the Get Real training any time after referral until their exit from care. The training includes 8–12 hours of applied content across nine areas to support increased financial knowledge and build positive financial behaviors. Working individually with a certified trainer, the youth set financial goals and learn about topics such as savings strategies, management of their earnings, budgeting, college financing, and credit.

A one-time transition fund of $1,200 is provided to youth who complete all requirements of the Countdown to 21 program, including participation in the planning meetings, completion of a youth-driven transition plan, completion of the Get Real financial literacy training course, and development of a post-care budget. These funds serve as an
incentive to complete program requirements and provide some financial support as youth leave the child welfare system.

Methods
This study used a pre-post survey design involving data collection from youth and caseworkers. Online surveys assessed youth well-being and confidence in preparation for independence prior to the discharge meeting, and then again three months after the meeting. Measures were primarily quantitative, but several open-ended questions also provided qualitative data about perceptions of the meeting at follow-up. Changes in youths’ financial literacy and capabilities were assessed, with measures administered just before the Get Real training began and an average of two months later.

In addition, immediately after completing the discharge meeting, all meeting participants (youth, caseworkers, supervisors, caregivers, guardian ad litem (GALs), birth parents, and other supports to the youth) completed a brief satisfaction survey to assess the facilitator’s fidelity to a youth-driven, team decision-making model. This study focuses on perceptions of the meeting process immediately after the meeting and at follow-up. Additionally, changes in youth well-being and confidence in preparation for independence at follow-up are presented. While the study design does not isolate the effect of the program on youth outcomes, identification of changes in specific areas targeted by Countdown to 21 could support future program development and research using more rigorous designs.

Sample
Participants in all discharge meetings occurring at either age 19 or 20 over a two-month period were eligible for the study. A total of 593 people participated in 142 discharge meetings including 137 youth, 136 caseworkers, 117 supervisors, 76 GALs, and 127 people who served as another type of support.
Response rates for satisfaction surveys (completed immediately after the meeting) were 98% for youth, 93% for caseworkers, and 88% for caregivers. Pre-meeting well-being surveys were completed by 86% of youth ($n = 122$) and 94% of caseworkers ($n = 133$). Using the number who completed pre-meeting well-being surveys as a denominator, three-month follow-up response rates were 73% for youth ($n = 89$) and 92% for caseworkers ($n = 122$). The two financial literacy measures, which were administered by different staff, had a lower response rate (ranging from 61–66%) across the two time points. This lower rate was in part due to difficulties with entry of case identifiers when the program began.

For the qualitative data analysis, the sample includes all respondents for each time point regardless of whether pre and post data could be matched. Because some youth responded at follow up who did not participate in the pre-meeting survey, qualitative analysis at follow up includes 106 youth and 135 caseworkers.

**Data Collection Process**

Baseline well-being surveys were conducted using SurveyMonkey. Participants (youth, caseworkers, and caregivers) received an email link to the survey several weeks before the meeting. Paper versions of the survey were also available before the meeting for those who did not complete it online. The three-month follow up surveys were completed either online or by phone by youth, caregivers, and current caseworkers. A dedicated interviewer completed all follow up data collection and entry.

All participant surveys were confidential. Hardcopies of satisfaction surveys were completed with the facilitator out of the room, and then placed in a sealed envelope to be data entered by a data coordinator to maintain confidentiality. De-identified data were shared with the university partner that completed data analysis. Participants were not compensated for completing study surveys. The DCFS research board approved the data collection procedures and data sharing and handling procedures were approved by a university human subjects review board.
Measures

Measures included items from standardized scales or previously conducted research whenever possible. All measures had acceptable levels of internal consistency unless noted. Additional information on measures’ psychometric properties and scale items are available from the first author.

Model Fidelity and Satisfaction

Participants rated their experience of the meeting for 22 meeting qualities corresponding to positive team decision-making. The areas assessed included: (1) Youth participation level in the meeting; (2) plan focused on what youth thought was most important; (3) resources for youths’ transition out of care were identified; (4) group members level of agreement about the plan; and (5) perception that the meeting was a worthwhile process. Items across these areas were highly correlated, so all items were averaged together to create a single model fidelity score. Additionally, endorsement of a meeting quality was dichotomously coded if a respondent responded that the quality was mostly or very true.

Youth Support and Stress

Measures of social support included a nine-item scale completed by youth and a five-item scale completed by caseworkers. Based on results from a principal components factor analysis that indicated differences in how youth responded to positively and negatively worded questions, two subscales were created including positive support, e.g., When I am feeling stressed, I have someone I can talk to and support deficit, e.g., There is no one I know who I could stay with for at least three months if I lost my housing for some reason. To assess stress level, youth responded to a standardized question drawn from the Ohio Scales of Behavior and Functioning (Ogles et al., 1999).
Preparation for Independence

This construct included three measures completed by youth. Financial Confidence assessed overall financial and housing security with three averaged items (e.g., *I am confident that I can afford housing after my DCFS case closes*). Employment assessed consistency of employment and difficulties with finding or holding a job with six items (e.g., *I have a steady job; I am in danger of losing my job* (reverse coded)). Current legal issues included two items (e.g., *I currently have legal issues that could cause me problems in the future*).

Caseworkers’ assessment of preparation for exit included 10 averaged items (e.g., *I am optimistic that this youth will be prepared to transition out of DCFS care; the youth has the resources that s/he needs to successfully transition out of DCFS care*).

Services Adequacy and Access

Service adequacy included two caseworker items assessing the extent that employment and education services adequately met the youth’s needs, while service access was measured with four items (e.g., *I am aware of resources to help me to find a job; I do not know how to access medical care after my DCFS case closes*, reversed). The Cronbach’s alpha for the access measure was .52, indicating a low internal consistency of these items, possibly due to variation in youths’ perceptions of access based on their prior use.

Financial Literacy and Capability

To measure financial literacy and behavior, two measures were created. Youth rated 17 statements as true, false, or do not know, including items such as *It is normally less costly to borrow from payday lenders than from banks* and *Even if a bank goes out of business, money in an FDIC insured account is protected*. Items with correct response were summed to create a single measure of financial literacy. Financial capability included 17 items assessing positive financial behaviors such as using a budget.
or spending plan to track income and expenses each month and having an emergency fund. All positive behaviors reported by youth were summed to create a single financial capability measure.

**Qualitative Perceptions of the Meeting and Its Impact at Follow-Up**

Open ended questions at the end of the follow up survey provided participants with the opportunity to provide additional information about their perceptions of the discharge meeting. Questions included whether the meeting was worthwhile, why or why not, and the impact the meeting had made on the young person, if any.

**Analyses**

Following descriptive analyses, paired $t$-tests were used to identify statistically significant differences in perceptions of the discharge meeting and changes in support, stress, preparation for independence, access to services, and financial literacy and capability. Content analysis was used to code responses to the open-ended question asked of all respondents at follow-up. Coding involved dividing comments into positive, negative, and mixed responses and then identifying similar content within each area (e.g., “learned about services,” “helped me plan,” “youth directed”). Reliability of coding was not formally assessed, but all codes were reviewed by a second author to identify possible discrepancies in how responses could be interpreted. All codes were then compiled in tables to provide a summary of the most common themes from the qualitative data.

**Results**

**Sample Characteristics**

Demographic characteristics and placements of all youth with pre-meeting and/or post-meeting data are shown in Tables 1 and 2. Demographic data was not collected from participants other than
Table 1. Youth Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male gender</td>
<td></td>
<td>42.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>19 (2.44)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td></td>
<td>51.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
<td>34.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnant or parenting</td>
<td></td>
<td>38.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Education

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High school diploma</td>
<td></td>
<td>67.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GED</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational certificate</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None at this time</td>
<td></td>
<td>25.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Employment

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td></td>
<td>24.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td></td>
<td>26.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

youth. The average days until post-test completion was 89 days after the planning meeting ($SD = 27$). In the overall sample, 40.3% of young women and 35.8% of young men reported they were parenting, pregnant, or that their partner was expecting.

**Discharge Meeting Model Fidelity**

Mean scores for fidelity to the team decision-making model were high across all groups of participants. On a scale from 0–4, the average level of satisfaction ranged from 3.25 for GALs to 3.65 for participants identified as a support to the youth or a relative. Analysis of ratings for specific items across participant type provides an understanding of areas of strength and areas perceived less positively. The items with the highest ratings included “the group listened to youth,” “the plan focuses on what youth thought was important,” and “group members will try to make
Table 2. Youth’s Living Situation Before and After the Transition Meeting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>%</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Own apartment (ILO)</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>35.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current foster parent</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLP</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>18.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential care</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group home</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adoptive parent</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College dorm</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former foster parent</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse/partner</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth parent</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other family members</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends or roommates</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Move from house to house</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"the plan work." These items were endorsed by all participants more than 90% of the time, suggesting that the youth’s voice was central to the meeting and that group members felt they could support his or her plan. Having a better "understanding of the youth’s needs" also had high endorsement, with youth endorsing this item 87.4% of the time, and all other participants endorsing the item over 90% of the time.

Changes for Youth After the Meeting

Youth Well-Being

Youth reported improvement in their perceptions of support deficits after the meeting ($\rho = .05$), while stress levels and perceptions of positive support were unchanged (see Table 3). Caseworkers reported a higher
Table 3. Contrast of Time 1 with Time 2 for Youth Social Support, Stress, Preparation for Independence, Access to Services, and Financial Literacy and Capability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Time 1</th>
<th></th>
<th>Time 2</th>
<th></th>
<th>t(df)</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support (youth report)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall support</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>−.50 (88)</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support deficit</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>−1.96 (88)</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive social support</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>1.17 (88)</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support (CW report)</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>−1.76 (112)</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress level</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>1.62 (84)</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation for independence (youth report)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial/ housing confidence</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>−3.47 (85)</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>−2.44 (85)</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal issues (reversed)</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>−3.47 (86)</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation for independence (CW report)</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>−1.38 (114)</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services adequacy (CW report)</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>−2.39 (112)</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to services (youth report)</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>−3.15 (84)</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial literacy</td>
<td>11.64</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>14.88</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>−6.64 (78)</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial capability</td>
<td>12.35</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>14.53</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>−8.29 (75)</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: CW = caseworker. All variables are coded with positive outcomes corresponding to higher scores with the exception of stress level. All variables range from 1–5 with the exception of financial literacy and capability, which range from 0–17.
level of support at follow up, but this increase did not reach statistical significance ($p = .08$).

**Preparation for Independence**

Youths’ perceptions of how prepared they were for independence improved at follow-up, including financial and housing security, employment, and concerns about legal issues. In contrast to youths’ perceptions, caseworkers’ ratings of overall readiness for independence were unchanged, with very similar ratings at both time points.

**Services Adequacy and Access to Services**

Caseworkers’ perceptions of services adequacy and youths’ confidence that they could access services if needed were both significantly more positive at follow-up. Caseworkers reported that they thought employment and educational services more adequately met the youth’s needs, and youth reported more confidence in their abilities to access needed services after discharge ($ps < .05$).

**Financial Literacy and Capability (Youth Report)**

Youth also gained financial knowledge and reported improved financial behaviors after completing the financial literacy training ($ps < .01$).

**Qualitative Perceptions of the Meeting Process at Follow-Up**

**Youth Perceptions**

When asked for reasons why they did or did not feel the meeting was worthwhile in the three-month follow up survey, 96 youth responded. The majority (78%) identified reasons that the meeting was worthwhile. The most common reasons identified included opportunity to set goals and plan for the future (48%), received useful information about resources (19%), and gained new insights (9%). For example, one youth
stated, “The meeting was worthwhile because it allowed me to set and share goals with my current support group, as well as approaches to help me achieve my goals,” while another youth stated, “It made me realize how serious it is to be on your own, paying rent and bills.”

Only 13% of youth who responded identified reasons they did not feel the meeting was worthwhile. The most common reasons identified were did not receive needed help (5%), did not receive any new or helpful information (3%), the meeting was too long (2%), and did not feel heard (2%). Comments from youth included, “It motivated me some, but I have not heard from anybody and I think they forgot about me,” and “Not too worthwhile as I already had my goals set since I was 12 years old.”

When asked about the impact the meeting had on them, 88 youth responded (83%). The majority (69%) reported the meeting had a positive impact on them, while 24% reported the meeting had no impact on them. The most commonly cited reason for a positive impact among those who responded was that it gave them an opportunity to plan and set priorities for the future (28%). For example, one youth stated, “it made me strive harder to find a job and be prepared when I am on my own,” while another youth stated it helped “Prioritize things in my life—[it] helped me learn the difference between what I need vs. what I want.” An additional 27% of youth reported that the meeting had a positive impact on them without citing a specific reason, while 10% reported that it helped motivate them to take their future more seriously and 6% reported that it helped them to focus and think more clearly.

**Caseworker Perceptions**

Among caseworkers who responded to the question about whether the meeting was worthwhile (62%), the most frequent response was that the meeting provided an opportunity to set goals and plan for the future (30%) and useful information and resources (17%). Comments from caseworkers included “As the CWS working with this client for five years, I have personally witnessed [a] change in this client since she
attended ... she understand[s] what she needs in order to age out of the system successfully,” and “Provided [the youth] with more information coming from a different perspective from the team. It really engaged him in thinking on his own.”

All respondents were less likely to identify reasons why the meeting was not worthwhile. The most commonly cited reasons among case-workers for not feeling like the meeting was worthwhile were that the meeting was repetitive of work the agency was already doing (14%), the youth already had a plan in place prior to the meeting (9%), and the youth did not follow through (10%).

Discussion

The challenges many young adults face after leaving foster care point to the critical need for enhanced support as youth transition from care. Countdown to 21 is a statewide program that provides transition support including enhanced discharge planning meetings and financial literacy training to all youth expected to age out of foster care. Using a youth-driven team decision-making framework, the program supports collaborative discharge planning that includes youth, caseworkers and staff, and the youths’ support systems (Crea et al., 2009). Engaging youth in planning for their transition from care is cited as critical in efforts to assisting youth in building skills needed for independence (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), but the extent that this is achieved in actual services is unclear. Results from this study indicate that use of youth-driven service planning in Countdown to 21 supports youths’ engagement in planning and positive perceptions of readiness for independence.

Reports from participants after discharge planning meetings suggest a high level of fidelity to the goal to prioritize the youth’s voice in planning, with over 90% of participants endorsing meeting qualities including “the group listened to the youth” and “the plan focuses on what the youth thought was important.” The high level of youth direction reported by both youth and others involved in the discharge meetings is particularly
notable, as previous research has highlighted discrepancies in program goals to support youth participation in meetings and youth perceptions of their levels of involvement. One study found that less than 10% of youth reported that the level of their own and others’ involvement matched what they desired (Beal et al., 2019). The use of external, trained meeting facilitators and strong emphasis on creating a youth-driven process in Countdown to 21 appears to have created a planning process where youth felt empowered to share their needs and perspectives.

Perceptions of the meeting process were also positive in the qualitative data provided in the 90-day follow-up survey. The primary benefit noted by both youth and others was that the meeting provided them with an opportunity to plan for transitioning from care. Additionally, many respondents said that the process provided benefits beyond the establishment of goals and a plan, stating that they or the youth were more focused, better able to prioritize their goals, and had greater insight about what they need to do. Similarly, quantitative findings at follow-up indicate that caseworkers felt educational and employment services were more adequate, and youth reported more confidence in their ability to access needed services after discharge. This might be related to the practical approach of the transition meeting, which includes active identification of services and programs. When asked about new services they received as a result of the transition support meeting in an additional qualitative question, nearly half who responded said they had received at least some new services, most commonly educational (35%) and housing resources (26%) followed by financial (18%), employment (18%), and parenting and child care resources (12%).

Quantitative results also suggest that positive changes occurred in youths’ perceptions of their preparation for independence in the 90 days after the discharge meeting. Youth reported greater confidence in handling finances and housing, employment, and ability to access services. They also reported less concern that legal issues such as issues in a background check would affect them after leaving care and had greater financial knowledge and improved financial behaviors. These results are consistent with the longer-term results from randomized studies.
indicating that programs that involve assignment of a consistent adult to guide a youth-directed planning process have positive effects in outcomes including housing stability, earnings, and economic hardship (Geenen et al., 2015; Blakeslee & Keller, 2018; Courtney et al., 2019). Our study’s results suggest that use of trained external facilitators who supplement the transition support planning with caseworkers provides an enhanced planning process that could be an important first step in achieving these outcomes.

Improvements in perceptions of independence readiness and financial knowledge and behaviors could be related to key characteristics of the Countdown to 21 program, which is tailored to the specific needs of foster care youth during their transition to independence. Targeting to a specific audience and capitalizing on teachable moments when skills are most relevant are supported in the literature as characteristics of financial literacy programs leading to positive outcomes (Fernandes et al., 2014; Loke et al., 2015). Similarly, the transition support meetings focus on practical issues identified by youth themselves at a point when the information is highly relevant to their well-being. This approach is likely to increase youth engagement in the planning process and commitment to the discharge plan.

Youths’ perceptions of social support deficits (e.g., There is no one I know who I could stay with for at least three months if I lost my housing for some reason) were also improved at follow up, although this finding was just at the threshold for statistical significance. While it might seem improbable that a discharge planning meeting accompanied by financial literacy training could impact social support, the discharge planning meeting focuses on identifying supportive adults who might assist the youth when they are independent. Youth also are encouraged to invite supportive adults to attend the meeting. Identifying these supports might provide the youth with a stronger sense that they have connections that they could rely on if needed after leaving care. Additional research is needed to understand the extent that adult connections can be strengthened prior to discharge and the extent that these connections provide resources as needed to prevent negative outcomes after youth have left care.
Some contrasts were found in caseworkers' and youths’ perceptions of the limitations of the transition support meetings. While about one in seven caseworkers stated that the meeting was inefficient or repetitive of the services that the agency was already providing, youth were less likely to state this. In contrast, youth were more likely to report wanting more follow-up services after the meeting. Caseworkers also did not perceive a change in the youth’s overall preparation for independence at follow up. It may be that the changes that occurred for youth in the short follow up period were more internal rather than observable behaviors that could be identified by the caseworker.

**Study Limitations**

This study has design limitations that impact the extent that conclusions can be drawn from its findings. The pre-post, uncontrolled design limits the extent that the positive changes that occurred over the short follow up period can be attributed to the Countdown to 21 program. Youth approaching exiting from care might typically become more confident in their level of preparation; without a control or at least a comparison group to identify changes that occur naturally over time, it is not possible to be sure that the transition meeting supported these positive outcomes. The convergence of the qualitative and quantitative results at follow up does provide some support that the transition meeting was helpful for youth, as both sources of data indicate that the youth found the process worthwhile. However, randomized studies of the program are needed to understand the extent that components of the program resulted in the outcomes observed in this study.

The follow-up period of this study was also very short, and whether positive trends continued or shifted over time is not clear given this design limitation. In future studies, follow up periods should include data collection after the youth has left care to assess program impacts on life conditions. This study’s results suggest that some youth and caseworkers had concerns about follow through after the transition meeting, and the extent that services were ultimately received and were
effective in meeting the youth’s needs is not addressed by this study. Youth also varied in where they were in their transition toward independence, with about equal numbers of youth who were 19 and 20 at the time of the transition meeting. Ideally, a larger sample would be used to analyze age differences in perceptions and outcomes. While no differences by age group were found in this study, the sample size was too small to identify smaller differences that could suggest variation by age group. Similarly, perceptions and changes over time might vary for youth with different characteristics or life circumstances, such as those who are parenting. A larger study is needed to more fully explore the needs of different groups of youth. Despite these limitations, however, the results from this study provides initial support for a statewide program that appears to provide many youth with a meaningful opportunity to plan for their transition from care.

Conclusions

The Countdown to 21 discharge program achieves its goal of providing an opportunity for a youth-driven, collaborative transition planning process for the majority of youth across a large state. While the investment required to support a statewide transition support program that potentially duplicates private agencies’ work with older youth might be questioned, the results from this study indicate that the majority of youth and their caseworkers found the process worthwhile, with only a minority of caseworkers perceiving of the program as overlapping with the work the agency was already engaged in. Results from this study suggest that providing all youth with a collaborative, supportive process with trained external facilitators supports an increased focus on meeting goals prior to exiting care, greater access to services, greater financial literacy and capabilities, and improved perceptions of readiness for independent living after discharge. Future research of a youth-directed, team-decision making process using a randomized controlled design is supported by these findings to further refine this model and study its effects.
References

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