

ARKANSAS READY FOR LIFE TASK FORCE

Ready for Life

Task Force Report and Recommendations

How might Arkansas become the best state in the nation to be a teen in foster care or age out?



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Executive Summary

We know what happens to teens who age out of foster care without support. Nearly half experience homelessness by 21. Most young men are convicted of a crime by 26. Many never earn a living wage. These outcomes are well documented, highly predictable, and too often accepted. They don't have to be. But continuing the current approach will only produce the same results. By reimagining the system for older youth, Arkansas has an opportunity to make success, not failure, the predictable outcome. Young people who leave care with a caring adult, a stable home, and a path to work are far more likely to thrive. **Arkansas can become the best state in the nation to be a teen in foster care.**

Nearly one in three young people in Arkansas foster care is between 14 and 21, a share 38% higher than the national average. These youth are standing at the edge of adulthood, and many will face the responsibility of adulthood without the relationships, stability, and skills most young people take for granted.

Government was not designed to help youth launch into adulthood. Arkansas's Transitional Youth Services (TYS) model was built to meet legal and procedural requirements, and it does. It was never designed to help a young person build a foundation for their life. The data shows the gap:

- Youth ages 14–17 move to a new placement every **138 days** on average: a new home, school, and caseworker every 4–5 months.
- The high school graduation rate is **24% lower** for foster youth than for their non-system peers.

Youth told us what they need. In a survey of 350 young people in care, they asked for lasting relationships with kin, mentors, and employers, and for real opportunities to work.

- **55%** of 14–16-year-olds and **40%** of 17–21-year-olds do not meet regularly with their TYS Coordinator.
- Among 17–21-year-olds, **21%** lack a diploma or GED, **66%** have no driver's license, and **34%** report not being enrolled in Medicaid.
- Youth rate employment as the support they value most and can reach least.

One young man, Sam, lived in 13 foster homes before age six. At 18, a community organization gave him a stable home, a coach, a trauma therapist, and a path to culinary school. His life changed.

We recommend a reimagining of the system, not an add-on. The Task Force recommends replacing Transitional Youth Services with **Ready for Life**, a privatized, community-provider model for youth ages 14–21 in foster care, adopted, or reunified with family. Each young person is paired with a **BASE Coach** who helps build four foundations: Well-Being, At Least One Caring Adult, Safe & Stable Placement, and Earning Potential. The model also provides homes recruited and trained for older youth, a real path to work starting at 16, and trauma-informed behavioral health care that continues after a young person leaves care. Equipping and training the providers will be critical to ensure continuity and success of the program. Success is measured on a shared statewide scoreboard: diploma, ID, job, stable home, and a caring adult.

The timing is right, and the stakes are real. DCFS and thirteen statewide partners, including providers, advocates, and current and former foster youth, spent the past year building this model together and are committed to making it work. Without change, the projected lifetime public cost for young people who have aged out in the last five years aging approaches \$278 million.

Start with a phased pilot. Begin by placing BASE Coaches with youth in pilot counties chosen by need with backbone assistance provided to agencies, then build specialized homes in those same counties once early outcome data is in.

13 Community Partners + A Big Question

Launched in December 2025, the Task Force unites the Arkansas Department of Human Services Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS) with thirteen statewide partner agencies in a coordinated, data-informed effort to ensure every young person ages 14–21 in or aging out of foster care has the relationships, resources, and opportunities to enter adulthood resilient and ready for life.

The Ready for Life Task Force gathered to ask and answer one transformational question: **How might Arkansas become the best state in the nation to be a teen in foster care or age out?**

Partners: AFMC, Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families, Arkansas DCFS, CASA of NWA and River Valley, Children’s Safety Center, COMPACT Family Services, current and former foster youth, EverHope, Immerse Arkansas, LifeLine Children Services, Restore Hope, The CALL NWA, Timothy Hill, and Youth Villages.

SAM'S STORY

Sam’s earliest memory is of walking alone down a highway at four years old, until police found him.

He was removed from his home that day. Over the next two years he lived in 13 different foster homes. He was eventually adopted, but by 14 that placement had broken down, and he spent time in juvenile detention.

Sam’s story could have ended the way the statistics in this report predict. It didn’t, because at 18 a community organization gave him what the system had not: a stable home, a coach and champion, a trauma therapist, connected adults and a support system, and a path toward the career he wanted.

This report asks how Arkansas can make Sam’s experience the standard, not the exception.

Watch Sam’s story here



The Problem

Youth raised in the foster care system who enter adulthood with unaddressed trauma, no support structures, and no constructive relationships face a significantly heightened risk of incarceration, homelessness, and mortality.

How We Did the Work

The Task Force met monthly as a full body to review progress, share findings, and align on direction. Between meetings, four subcommittees carried the detailed work forward, each guided by youth voice:

- **Outcomes Committee:** Built the shared measurement tool and scoreboard.
- **Asset Grid Committee:** Mapped and researched key supports across the state.
- **Rural Team Committee:** Addressed the realities facing youth in rural Arkansas and identified programming best practices.
- **Youth Voice Committee:** Provided insight and reality-tested every recommendation.

What the Task Force Set Out to Deliver

- A statewide landscape analysis of needs, assets, and opportunities for transition-aged youth.
- A shared measurement framework to track outcomes for transition-aged youth across the state.
- Three to five transformational recommendations spanning policy, foster care system practice, and transitional programming.
- A three-year implementation plan to move Arkansas toward effective collective impact.

Three Phases

1. **Learn and Assess.** The Task Force completed a statewide landscape analysis, including a literature review, a statewide scan of needs and existing supports, and a deep dive into available foster care data. Input from youth, families, and providers across the state added qualitative data. A survey of youth currently in the system (ages 14–21) yielded 350 responses.

2. **Build a Shared Vision.** Members identified the gaps, barriers, and opportunities that mattered most, and developed a vision for how Arkansas might better prepare youth in care for adulthood.
3. **Recommend and Plan.** The Task Force developed transformational recommendations and a three-year implementation plan grounded in what it had learned.

The full Landscape Analysis is included as Appendix A, and the full TYS Youth Survey Report as Appendix B.

What We Found

Federal Momentum

Federal attention on transition-aged youth is at a high point. The Fostering the Future Executive Order, six corresponding congressional bills awaiting Senate approval, and HUD's Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) voucher program make this the right time to reimagine how Arkansas serves older youth in foster care. Arkansas DCFS and providers want innovative collaboration and believe a better future is possible.

The Current System Design Does Not Prepare Young People for Adulthood

The child welfare system is not designed to raise teenagers and does not prepare young people for adulthood. It often does the opposite: deterring growth, adding trauma, and isolating young people from the community. The impact shows in these statistics:

Nationally

1 in 3

experience homelessness by age 21¹

8%

earn a college degree by their mid-20s,
vs. ~46% of all young adults²

¹National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD), Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.; Child Trends. Two Thirds of Foster Youth Remain Stably Housed Through Age 21 (2026). <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/foster-youth-stably-housed-through-age-21>

²AERA Open (2025). <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/23328584251331454>

60%

of young men are convicted of a crime by age 26³

3x loss

earned monthly than peers (~\$575 vs. \$1,535)⁴

In Arkansas⁵

925

Arkansas youth aged out of foster care in the last five years

1,706

youth ages 14–21 were in the Arkansas foster care system last year

~33%

of Arkansas's foster care population is teens and young adults, 38% higher than the national average

138 days

average time between placement moves for teens 14–17: a new home, school, and caseworker every 4–5 months

24%

lower graduation rate than non-foster peers

75

youth in care ages 14–21 are currently pregnant or parenting

Employment and relationships were the top two requests of youth ages 18–21 in extended foster care, yet unnecessary barriers stand in the way of both.

SAM'S STORY

For Sam, the moves came even faster: 13 foster homes between the ages of four and six, each one a new bed, new rules, and new adults to trust.

³Coming of Age: Employment Outcomes for Youth Who Age Out of Foster Care, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (California, Minnesota, and North Carolina).

⁴Coming of Age: Employment Outcomes for Youth Who Age Out of Foster Care, ASPE, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (California, Minnesota, and North Carolina).

⁵All Arkansas figures provided by the State of Arkansas, Department of Human Services, Division of Children and Family Services (DHS DCFS), and the Arkansas Department of Education.

Government Systems Are Not Created to Build Connections and Community

Under DCFS policy (9 CAR § 40901, Transitional Youth Services), the department is responsible for preparing youth in custody for adulthood beginning at age 14. This includes assigning a Transitional Services Coordinator, developing a transitional plan with the youth's transitional team, conducting Chafee-funded life skills assessments and ongoing life skills classes, and coordinating required supports. The youth's primary Social Service Specialist coordinates the transitional team and the transitional plan as reflected in the court report.

This structure is designed to satisfy a checklist of legal and procedural requirements. It was not designed to build sustained, trust-based relationships, and the Task Force's findings show the result: youth are not being reached regularly, and key milestones (a diploma, an ID, stable housing, a job) are being missed at high rates. That leads to lifelong struggles with poverty, mental health challenges, and dependence on government support, and often to multigenerational foster care involvement.

Youth Told Us What They Need

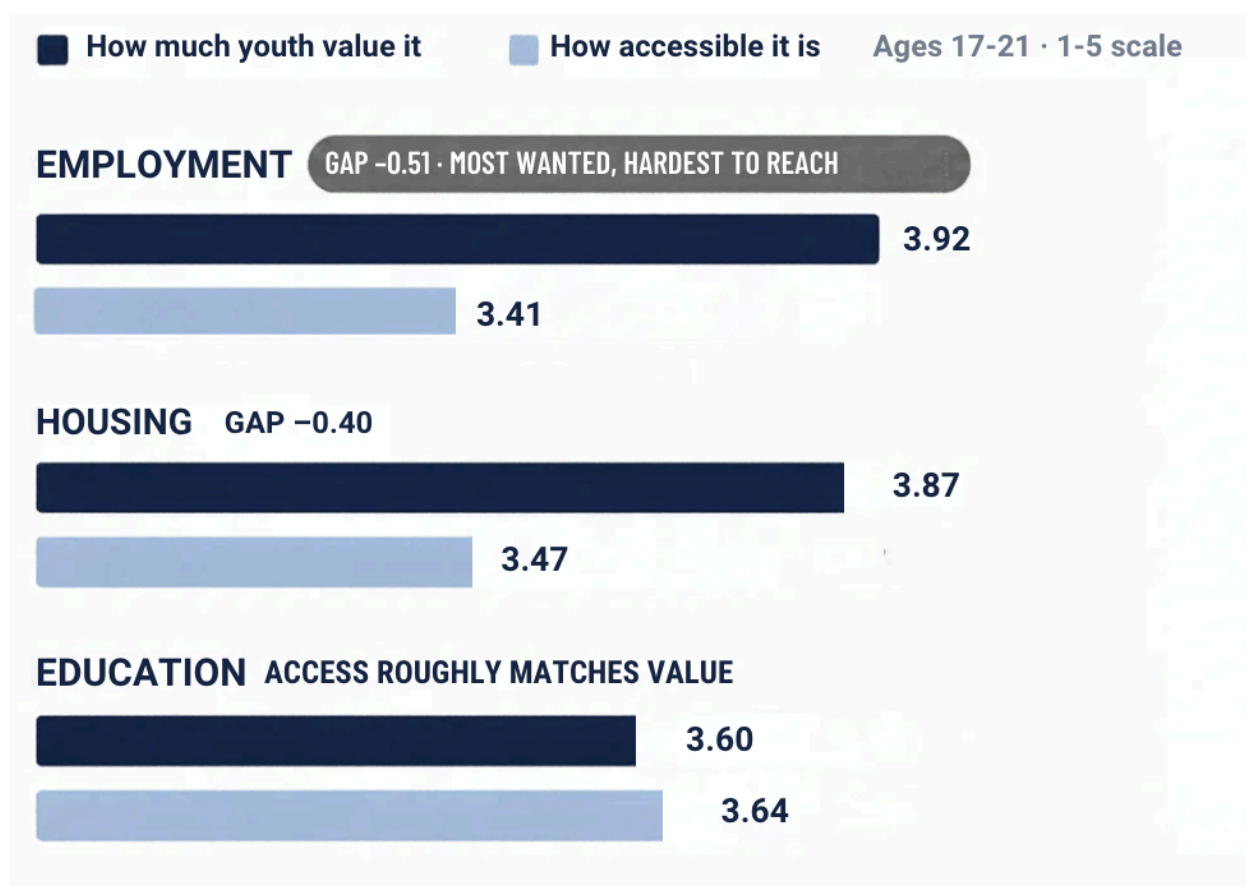
Early in the Task Force process, the team consistently heard from youth that:

- **Youth want lasting relationships.** They want connection with kin, fictive kin, and mentors.
- **Resources are unevenly distributed across the state.** Youth are too often displaced from their home communities to access support.
- **Federal resources are underused.** The state is still learning how to fully tap programs like Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) housing vouchers.
- **Providers lack shared data.** Outcomes are not tracked consistently across agencies, making it hard to know what truly creates lasting impact in a youth's life.

The Youth Survey: Valued, But Out of Reach

The Task Force Youth Survey (350 responses) measured how much youth value key supports and how accessible they find them, on a scale of 1 to 5.⁶ The full results appear in Appendix B.

⁶Ready for Life Task Force, Transitional Youth Services (TYS) Youth Survey, 350 respondents ages 14–21. Full results in Appendix B.



Source: Ready for Life Task Force Youth Survey, 350 responses. Bars start at 3.

Across most domains, young people rate supports as important but report lower familiarity and access. Employment showed the largest gap for young adults ages 17–21.

“More caseworkers and less cases so the kids that need help can actually be focused on leading up to turning 18.” — Youth survey respondent

When asked about meeting with a Transitional Youth Services (TYS) Coordinator through DCFS, 55% of 14–16-year-olds and 40% of 17–21-year-olds reported not meeting regularly.

Missed Milestones, Ages 17–21

21%

do not have a diploma or GED

66%

do not possess a driver's license

34%

report not being enrolled in Medicaid,
despite eligibility until age 26

These outcomes show the need for coaches and support figures actively engaged in each youth's transition to adulthood. Many youth feel supports disappear overnight after turning 18 or aging out.

"This stuff is hard and neither school nor DHS taught us anything we need to know." —

Youth survey respondent

"An 18-year-old I sponsor consistently cries during their TYS calls, expressing anxiety and fear about future stability in adulthood." — Arkansas foster parent and sponsor

Asked whether they would recommend that younger youth remain in foster care at 18, 40% of 17–21-year-olds said yes, citing stipends, education funds, and continued relational support.

Across ages 14–21, youth value supportive relationships: kin and fictive kin, mentors, foster parents, and, especially among 17–21-year-olds, employers.

Youth Want to Thrive. The System Gets in Their Way.

Red tape, multiple placements, and the tyranny of the urgent often prevent youth from achieving key milestones before adulthood. Arkansas young people in foster care made this clearest, naming employment as their most desired but least accessible opportunity. Rather than creating or permitting barriers, we must build on the drive, talent, and motivation young people bring, and specialize the support around their drive to become ready for life.

Becoming ready for life does not happen naturally within the current child welfare system. To change that, we must specialize the support, guidance, and care provided to teens and young adults. Our research shows youth are most likely to succeed when guided by a coach and living in a home committed to launching the young person into adulthood.

Doing Nothing Costs \$278 Million

Each young person who ages out of foster care costs Arkansas an estimated \$300,000 in lifetime public assistance. With 925 youth aging out over the past five years (SFYs 2021-25), the projected lifetime public cost approaches \$278 million. Without relationship-based, individualized interventions, these costs extend beyond public assistance and ripple across society through higher rates of chronic homelessness, incarceration, and multigenerational involvement in foster care.

Reimagining: A New Model for Older Youth in Care

We recommend replacing the current Transitional Youth Services model with a reimagined, privatized, community-connected model for youth ages 14–21, whether in foster care, adopted, or reunified with family, along with an implementation plan to move Arkansas toward an effective collective impact approach. This is not an added layer on the current system. It is a different way of delivering support, built around relationships and outcomes rather than procedure.

The model has four components: a coach who builds connections and drives the plan, homes that provide safety and stability, targeted support that builds earning potential, and specialized behavioral health supports designed for this population.

1. Connection: A BASE Coach for Every Teen

Case managers help a young person navigate the red tape and complexity of the child welfare system. BASE Coaches partner with a young person to achieve their full potential and build a life as they enter adulthood.

Managing a Case vs. Building a Life

Case Manager	BASE Coach
Manages the case.	Develops the young person.
Primary question: How do I stay in compliance?	Primary question: What does this young person need and want for their life? How do I walk with them to get there?

Case Manager	BASE Coach
Coordinates services, requirements, placements, and permanency	Helps youth set goals, build skills, and move toward adulthood
Accountable to the government system	Accountable to the young person's future
Responds to needs and case-plan goals	Builds on strengths, aspirations, and opportunities
Connects youth to resources	Is the resource. Is the intervention. Walks alongside the youth as they pursue their goals.

The Four BASE Coaching Pillars

The BASE Coach partners with the young person to build a BASE, the secure footing they need to enter adulthood resilient, healing, and ready for life:

- **WellBeing:** Building mental and physical wellbeing, connecting to trauma therapy when appropriate, achieving key life milestones, and developing the skills and habits needed to thrive.
- **At Least One Caring Adult:** Building a strong circle of healthy adults committed to walking alongside them into adulthood, including mentors, family, and kin when appropriate.
- **Safe & Stable Placement:** Strengthening and maintaining foster or adoptive placements for the wellbeing and attachment of the youth and the family, while helping youth aging out secure stable housing and community.
- **Earning Potential:** Building the education, skills, work experience, and opportunities that increase a young person's ability to support themselves, including a diploma or GED, higher education, a trade, and entering the workforce.

Milestones and Predictors of Success

Beginning at age 14, the BASE Coach helps the young person co-create and maintain an active life plan focused on key milestones:

- Present youth in foster care with the opportunity to work at age 16.

- Assist youth in obtaining a driver's license by age 16½.
- Ensure youth obtain a diploma or GED by age 19.

The coach collaborates with key entities to prioritize predictors of success:

- A placement close to home
- Activation or reactivation of family and kin relationships
- Prioritization of education, employment, and life skills
- Age-appropriate, skilled therapy
- Promotion of normalcy, independence, freedom, and adventure

SAM'S STORY: WHAT A BASE COACH LOOKS LIKE

When Sam turned 18, he enrolled in the culinary program at UA Pulaski Technical College, a passion he discovered while in juvenile detention. What he lacked was a foundation. Through Immerse Arkansas, he received one:

WellBeing A dedicated trauma therapist helped him work through PTSD and severe anxiety rooted in his early childhood.

At Least One Caring Adult Consistent staff and mentors who stayed with him.

Safe & Stable Placement Transitional housing gave him a stable place to live while in school.

Earning Potential Support to pursue culinary training and a career.

He also took up rock climbing and trained for a 5K. In his words:

"I'm not the scared 4-year-old that's walking down the highway. I'm a 19-year-old who's gotten further in life than anyone would have imagined."

2. Homes Identified for Youth

Youth in this age range need homes recruited, trained, and supported specifically for the realities of adolescence and the launch into adulthood. Private providers would recruit, train, and support foster and kinship families for this population, provide ongoing case management for those families, and identify and secure safe, stable housing for youth aging out of care.

3. Earning Potential: A Real Path to Work

Providers would ensure youth have real access to the education, skill building, and workforce opportunities that lead to a diploma or GED, higher education, trade training, and employment, closing the gap the Task Force identified between how highly youth value employment and how accessible they report it to be. Youth pursuing higher education would also be granted free state college tuition.

4. WellBeing: Care That Improves Outcomes

Older youth in care need behavioral health services built for the realities of adolescence in foster care, trauma, and the transition to adulthood. In partnership with Arkansas Medicaid and the state's behavioral health system, the state should establish targeted, trauma-informed, age-appropriate clinical services specifically for older youth in care. These services would be integrated with the BASE Coach and provider model, so clinical care works alongside the relationships and supports already surrounding each youth, and would continue through the transition to adulthood so youth do not lose access to care or trusted providers as they age out.

Equipping Providers

Agencies will receive training and technical assistance through a backbone organization that guides the overall vision and galvanizes statewide collective impact. Provider training and technical assistance will be core functions as no single provider or system can achieve lasting change for youth on its own. Progress in these efforts is dependent upon partners working toward a mutual goal and coordinating their efforts through aligned activities and shared practices. In this proposal, the backbone would serve as the strategic hub of the initiative, while guiding and equipping providers to deliver best practices for youth: a specialized, relationship-driven approach across all four BASE pillars, not just housing and case management. Equipping providers will include:

- **Guiding vision and strategy through a common practice framework:** Recommend developing one shared guide that defines high-quality service across all four pillars, giving partners a unified strategic direction and a common definition of success.
- **Supporting aligned activities through training and credentialing:** Propose standard onboarding and ongoing training for all BASE Coaches, paired with a statewide credential, so that each provider's work reinforces the collective strategy rather than operating in isolation.

- **Ongoing coaching and peer learning:** Recommend hands-on technical assistance support and regional learning communities where partners could share what works, refine strategies together, and spread quick wins across the network.
- **Using shared tools and warm handoffs:** Propose adopting common assessments and plans so a youth's progress would follow them across placements and providers.
- **Establishing shared measurement and quality assurance:** Recommend shared outcome measures and fidelity reviews that would allow partners to collect, track, and report progress, learn and improve together, and use data to guide strategy and where support should go next.

Community Support and Shared Metrics

Building community connections is essential to sustaining this model locally. This includes partnering with 10:33 to build community-based support networks around youth, and using Restore Hope's HopeHub technology system to track outcomes and connect youth to community resources. As part of its efforts, the Task Force developed a set of shared metrics to track youth outcomes across Arkansas.

What Changes, What Stays

This model replaces the current Transitional Services Coordinator function and the case-driven approach to life skills and transition planning. DCFS retains the legal functions it must hold by law: custody, court reporting, and permanency determinations. The day-to-day work of preparing a youth for adulthood shifts from a system built around compliance to one built around relationships and life readiness.

The new Ready for Life model replaces a system that coordinates services with a committed community organization that delivers them: coaching, a supported family, and enhanced behavioral health, working as one team around each young person ages 14–21.

	Today: Transitional Youth Services	Ready for Life: Community Provider Model
Built to answer	How do we meet legal and procedural requirements?	What does this young person need and want for their life, and how do we get there together?
Who delivers	DCFS coordinates; services come from separate providers, each with its own referral, staff, and records	One committed community organization that coaches the youth, supports the family, and provides enhanced behavioral health
How it fits together	The youth and a frequently changing caseworker stitch the pieces together	One team around one young person, working from one plan and one set of shared outcome measures
Youth served	Youth in foster care custody	Youth 14–21 in foster care, adopted, or reunified with family
Connection	A caseworker and transition coordinator	A BASE Coach from 14 to 21 who builds a circle of caring adults: family, kin, mentors, employers
Home	Whatever placement is open; youth move on average every 138 days	Families recruited, trained, and supported for youth, with ongoing support for the family and help securing stable housing when aging out
WellBeing	Behavioral health referred out and coordinated by the system; care can change with each move or end at aging out	Trauma-informed, age-appropriate care built for older youth, integrated with the coach and the family, and continuing through the transition to adulthood
Earning potential	Life-skills classes; employment is what youth want most and can reach least	A real path to a diploma or GED, a trade, college, and a job, starting with a chance to work at 16

	Today: Transitional Youth Services	Ready for Life: Community Provider Model
Success means	Requirements completed and documented	Outcomes on a shared statewide scoreboard: diploma, ID, job, stable home, a caring adult
Accountable to	The child welfare system	The young person's future

SAM'S STORY: WHY ADOPTED YOUTH BELONG IN THE MODEL

Sam was adopted and no longer in state custody when his placement collapsed at 14. Under today's structure, a young person like Sam falls outside Transitional Youth Services entirely. Ready for Life would serve him.

Adoption and reunification are milestones, not guarantees. The need for a coach does not end when custody does.

What Success Looks Like

- Foster youth high school graduation rate moves from 68% to on par with non-system peers
- Employment rate for youth ages 16–18 in care moves to 39%, on par with non-system peers
- 75% of youth are in a home or placement for at least one year
- 90% of youth have a connection with a family or community support person
- 42% of former foster youth enter trades and higher education, on par with non-system peers
- Zero unwanted homelessness among former foster youth ages 26 and younger
- Less than 5% incarceration of former foster youth under 26, on par with non-system peers
- No children of former foster youth entering foster care before the parent is 25
- 90% of former foster youth earning a livable wage

Start with Coaches, Then Find Homes

We recommend a phased pilot, with counties selected based on need and population rather than named in advance.

- **Phase One:** Place BASE Coaches with all youth in foster homes, adoptive homes, and reunified families in the selected pilot counties. Providers will receive technical assistance from a backbone agency to ensure best practice delivery and strides toward statewide collective impact.
- **Later phases:** Open, license, and support specialized homes for youth in those same counties.

This sequencing lets the coaching model take root and generate early relationship and outcome data before the more resource-intensive work of standing up specialized placements begins.

Ready for Life

Today, youth aging out of foster care face significantly higher risks of homelessness, poverty, and incarceration. Too often, they enter adulthood without the relationships, stability, skills, and support needed to navigate it successfully.

The Ready for Life Task Force gathered to ask and answer one transformational question: **How might Arkansas become the best state in the nation to be a teen in foster care or age out?**

The answer is not found in a single program or a single agency. It is found in what happens when we decide that every young person deserves more than a path out of foster care. They deserve a chance at being ready for life.

Arkansas has an opportunity to build a new model for young people ages 14–21, centered on relationships, individualized support, and measurable outcomes. At its center is a dedicated BASE Coach who walks alongside each young person to build four essential foundations: WellBeing, At Least One Caring Adult, Safe & Stable Placement, and Earning Potential.

If we invest in a model that successfully launches youth into adulthood, we can change not only their future, but the future of Arkansas.

Appendices

Appendix A: [State of Foster Care for Transition-Aged Youth in Arkansas: Landscape Analysis](#)

Appendix B: [Transitional Youth Services \(TYS\) Youth Survey Report](#)