

Advocating for Transition Age Foster Youth: Framing for the Journey to Success Campaign

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The FrameWorks Institute
Health+ Studio

**FRAME
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Introduction

All young people need to be plugged into supportive networks as they become adults. This is especially true for transition age foster youth—young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are transitioning out of the foster care system. They need a comprehensive set of supports to promote their healthy development and lifelong wellbeing as adults. But today, programs that support transition age foster youth are often unable to provide what they need to prepare them to become healthy, happy, thriving adults in their communities.

Together We Can Change That

We know that changing policy also means changing the narrative about important social issues so policymakers and the public understand what is at stake and how to make change happen. In this messaging guide we share an effective, evidence-based strategy for communicating about transition age foster youth (you can find the full report with the framing recommendations [here](#)). As a companion to the Journey to Success policy campaign, this guide provides proven strategies for talking about its policy framework with policymakers and the wider public.

What Is Framing?

“Framing” refers to the choices we make in what we say and how we say it. Framing matters because it affects how people hear us, what they understand, and how they act. Using the same frames consistently helps move the conversation further and can stimulate action faster.

The Purpose of This Document

What youth and young people who have experienced foster care say they need most to do well is **healing, family, and economic security**. It is these supports that form the central pillars of the Journey to Success campaign. This framing guide is designed to help transition age foster youth achieve these goals by giving advocates—including foster youth themselves—the tools to talk about the campaign’s policy goals in effective ways. This guidance isn’t prescriptive—you can and should customize these frames to your policy asks and specific situations. Instead this guide offers helpful examples of how to frame the **six overarching policy goals** of Journey to Success and tips on how to use this framing strategy to advocate at the state, local, and community level.

Like Journey to Success itself, the framing recommendations here and in our **online toolkit** were developed with extensive input from a diversity of individuals, including young people with lived experience of foster care.

Policy Goal #1: Prioritize Health, Healing, and Wellbeing.

We must help youth and young adults in foster care achieve the health and wellbeing, including healing from trauma, that is foundational to success in school, work, and family life.

Framing Guidance:

Keep policymakers' focus on *health* and *wellbeing* by talking about the importance of healthy adolescent development. This means discussing the various ways we can make sure foster youth thrive, including creating programs that support mental health needs and address past trauma. The *Steep Climb* explanatory metaphor will help you communicate to policymakers why this support is needed and how it addresses inequities.

Example Messages:

- When we support the healthy biological, psychological, and emotional development of transition age foster youth, we advance their wellbeing now and help them thrive in the future as they continue their journey into adulthood.
- Transition age foster youth face a rocky path to adulthood. We need programs that give them the supports and resources they need to heal from past trauma and build resilience and equip them with the tools they need to thrive as they become adults.

Making It relevant for Your Community:

- Frame mental health and other health data for youth in your community using the *Steep Climb* metaphor. In addition, describe programs that provide wraparound services, care navigators, mentorships, etc. so people can see the solutions.
- Include data on policy-related outcomes, such as graduation rates, enrollment in postsecondary education, and employment rates, to show the benefits of these types of support, but always link them to health and wellbeing, not just economic outcomes.

Making It Universal—but Targeted

Throughout your communications, make sure to connect the needs of transition age foster youth to the needs of all adolescents as they become adults. Then call out the specific supports and resources foster youth need more of and the policies that make them possible.

Policy Goal #2: Nurture Family Ties and Family Permanence.

We must nurture family connections for all youth and young adults in foster care, create better permanency outcomes, expand every youth's network of caring adults, and stop youth from aging out of foster care on their own.

Framing Guidance:

Increasing support for policies that privilege caring relationships means talking about them as foundational to transition age foster youths' wellbeing and as a shared imperative that benefits foster youth, their families, and our communities. The *Roots* metaphor is particularly useful for talking about how strong, ongoing relationships support wellbeing. Linking foster youths' connections to their communities to better outcomes for both makes this issue more salient for policymakers.

Example Messages:

- Every young person's wellbeing is rooted in strong, supportive relationships. But transition age foster youth often lack these connections at a critical time in their lives. We need to create programs that prioritize strong relationships and connections to family if we want transition age foster youth to thrive.
- When foster youth become parents themselves, it becomes harder for them to stay connected to critical supports. Ensuring that they have ongoing, caring relationships with their families, foster families, and other supportive adults helps them and their children continue to flourish.

Making It Relevant for Your Community:

- Draw on the *Roots* metaphor to communicate how local policies and community programs can support families when they come into contact with the foster care system. Talk about how family connections are maintained and what needs to happen for foster youth to thrive even if some roots are severed.
- Use examples of programs that build social connections and provide emotional support through relationships in your community. Include stories of transition age foster youth who become connected, engaged members of their communities and how this benefits them and their communities.

Policy Goal #3: Retool Foster Care to Better Serve Adolescents and Young Adults.

We should nurture the unique developmental needs of adolescents and young adults so they can experience key milestones in their development of life skills and healthy relationships that are foundational to their success in school, work, and family life.

Framing Guidance:

Use the *Plugged In* metaphor to explain how foster care can be redesigned by connecting transition age foster youth to the resources they need. In addition, use the *Opportunity for All* value to talk about how to address inequities and clearly identify programs and supports that could make these opportunities more accessible.

Example Messages:

- As part of creating a more just and equitable society, it is our collective responsibility to provide transition age foster youth access to the essential supports they need to thrive— supports that other adolescents already have through their families.
- All young people need opportunities to do well, regardless of their background. We can make sure these opportunities are accessible to transition age foster youth by redesigning the foster care system and creating stronger supports for them as they transition into adulthood.

Making It Relevant for Your Community:

- When using data to depict the disparities that exist in your local foster care system, always make sure to explain *why* these inequities among young people exist and persist.
- Include the voices of transition age foster youth by telling well-framed, contextualized stories about young people who have experienced foster care.

Policy Goal #4: Increase Accountability, Foster Fairness, and Focus on Results.

We must increase accountability on all levels to ensure that each young person's foster care experience is positive and results in the best possible outcomes.

Framing Guidance:

Draw on the language of the *Steep Climb* metaphor to talk about the origins of inequities like racism, poverty, and prejudice. Make addressing these inequities salient for your audience by connecting the supports transition age foster youth need to our fundamental belief that everyone should have the opportunities they need to thrive.

Example Messages:

- Everyone should have the opportunity to do well in life, regardless of their start in life. However, because racism, poverty, and prejudice shape our child welfare system, we need to sharpen our focus on the inequities transition age foster youth face and create programs that create more equitable outcomes.
- Transition age foster youth often experience prejudice before, during, and after their experiences in foster care. Racism, discrimination, and stigmatization make their journey to adulthood particularly difficult to navigate. We need to redesign the system to ensure transition age foster youth have the opportunities and guidance they need to find their footing as they reach adulthood.

Making It Relevant for Your Community:

- Use data to depict the disparities that exist in your local foster care system or more generally, in the United States. Always make sure to explain *why* these inequities among young people exist and persist.
- Highlight programs that address inequities through concrete examples, such as culturally specific interventions in your community.
- Amplify the voices of foster youth who want to talk about their experiences with racism and discrimination before, during, and after their time in foster care and draw on examples from their experiences to explain what supports can address these problems.

A Note on Talking about Equity

The words *equity*, *equitable*, and *inequity* are largely unknown to members of the American public and may not be easily understood by policymakers, either. Remember to define these terms early and often in your communications.

Policy Goal #5: Ensure Youth Are Plugged into Supportive Services, Including in Health, Education, and Housing.

We must prevent the high rate of young people leaving foster care to homelessness, poverty, and social isolation. Supportive services and resources should be available to help them transition successfully to young adulthood, including help with housing stability and other basic daily needs, ongoing emotional support, and opportunities to pursue school and work. These supports should extend to youth and young adults whose childhood and adolescent years were disrupted by foster care.

Framing Guidance:

Combine the *Plugged In* metaphor with the *Opportunity for All* and *Community Connections* values so policymakers understand why the policy recommendations are so important to transition age foster youths' wellbeing, and make it salient by linking their wellbeing to the wellbeing of the communities they live in.

Example Messages:

- As teenagers become adults, they need to be plugged into networks of support that power their growth and success. This includes financial support, but also caring relations and educational and employment opportunities that other young people get through their families.
- When transition age foster youth are plugged into their communities, we are also supporting their communities. Our communities are stronger when we make sure everyone, including transition age foster youth, are connected to each other.

Making It Relevant for Your Community:

- Explain how local policies and community programs make these supports more accessible—not just available—to foster youth using concrete examples.
- Share stories of transition age foster youth being disconnected from resources and the impact it had on their lives both from a material and emotional perspective, while ensuring this storytelling is affirming and non-traumatizing.

Policy Goal #6: Promote Economic Security.

We can and should put all children, youth, and young adults who are in foster care on a path toward economic security.

Framing Guidance:

Use the *Steep Climb* metaphor to talk about the supplies foster youth need to ensure they have financial security and stability as they transition into adulthood. Highlight the role of relationships by talking about supportive adults as guides on this journey to success.

Example Messages:

- We need to redesign the foster care system to clear the path to economic security to ensure that transition age foster youth have the financial resources and guidance they need to find their footing as they reach adulthood.
- Young people who are transitioning out of foster care face a more difficult journey to adulthood. Financial, educational and housing assistance are supplies they need to navigate this new terrain and achieve stability and success.

Making This Relevant for Your Community:

- Include local data on policy-related outcomes, such as graduation rates, postsecondary education enrollment, and employment rates, to show the benefits of increased supports, but always link them to healthy development and general wellbeing.
- Explain how policies and programs support foster youth's connection and engagement in their communities, which improves outcomes more broadly.

Conclusion

The shared narrative of the Journey to Success campaign is one of young people who are well supported, thriving, and connected. As a companion to the campaign’s transformational policy framework, this framing guide will help advocates—both adults and youth themselves—integrate this narrative into their communications for policymakers *and* the public.

To learn more, please see the following resources:

- FrameWorks strategic brief, *Advancing Wellbeing and Expanding Opportunities: Reframing Transition Age Foster Youth*
- Transition Age Foster Youth Communications Toolkit
- *Journey to Success Quick Messaging Guide*
- Journey to Success website
- *Journey to Success: Creating Healthy, Family, and Economic Security for Youth and Young Adults Who Experience Foster Care (White Paper)*

Feedback? We want to hear about your experience using this guide. Please drop us a line at sayhello@healthplusstudio.com or info@frameworksinstitute.org.

Appendix A: Full Policy Goals and Recommendations

- 1. Prioritize health, healing, and wellbeing.** We must help youth and young adults in foster care achieve the health and well-being, including healing from trauma, that is foundational to success in school, work, and family life. Federal policy can promote this by doing the following:
 - Expanding the types of mental health and wellness services available to better meet their needs, including nonclinical services that help build and strengthen family, peer, and community connections.
 - Incentivizing the provision of mental health services for youth and young adults in foster care and those transitioning to adulthood.
 - Strengthening the planning and coordination among child welfare, health, and mental health agencies to improve the availability of, quality of, and access to services.
 - Addressing the overuse of psychotropic medications.
- 2. Nurture family ties and family permanence.** We must nurture family connections for all youth and young adults in foster care, create better permanency outcomes, expand every youth's network of caring adults, and stop youth from aging out of foster care on their own. Federal policy can promote this by doing the following:
 - Making every effort to ensure youth live with family or in a family setting when in foster care and ensuring these families are well supported.
 - Providing tailored and intensive permanency services for youth and young adults.
 - Making youth engagement in permanency planning a practice norm.
 - Ensuring youth can maintain relationships that are important to them—including with brothers and sisters, parents, extended family, friends, neighbors, teachers, coaches, and others.
 - Supporting foster youth and young adults who are parenting, so they and their children can thrive.

3. **Retool foster care to better serve adolescents and young adults.** We should nurture the unique developmental needs of adolescents and young adults so they can experience key milestones in their development of life skills and healthy relationships that are foundational to their success in school, work, and family life. Federal policy can promote this by doing the following:
 - Making sure all youth have the option to remain in foster care through age 21 with continued permanency planning and case worker support.
 - Making ongoing youth and young adult involvement a regular part of planning and implementation of child welfare programs and supporting them in their own case planning.
 - Having case workers with specialized skills supporting adolescents and young adults.
 - Ensuring that each young person is well supported in their transition from adolescence to adulthood, and that agencies are appropriately resourced to provide this support.
 - Protecting and preserving young parents' rights so they are supported in their parenting and in their own healthy development.

4. **Increase accountability, foster fairness, and focus on results.** We must increase accountability on all levels to ensure that each young person's foster care experience is positive and results in the best possible outcomes. Federal policy can promote this by doing the following:
 - Addressing racism and gender-based discrimination directly, through antidiscrimination requirements, improved implementation of the Indian Child Welfare Act, and improved data collection and use.
 - Ensuring young people with lived expertise in foster care have mechanisms available to them to help hold systems accountable, such as having opportunities to provide consistent feedback and being part of decision-making at the individual and system levels.

5. **Ensure youth are plugged into supportive services, including in health, education, and housing.** We must prevent the high rate of young people leaving foster care to homelessness, poverty, and social isolation. Supportive services and resources should be available to help them transition successfully to young adulthood, including help with housing stability and other basic daily needs, ongoing emotional support, and opportunities to pursue school and work. These supports should extend to youth and young adults whose childhood and adolescent years were disrupted by foster care. Federal policy can promote this by doing the following:
 - Making targeted, ongoing support available to youth and young adults up to age 26 to help them heal from trauma, complete their education and training, secure safe and stable housing, become economically stable, and have a foundation to build their future.
 - Ensuring young people have access to services and supports in communities where they live and work.
 - Having client feedback inform the ongoing quality improvement of services and supports provided.

6. **Promote economic security.** We can and should put all children, youth, and young adults who are in foster care on a path toward economic security. Federal policy can promote this by doing the following:
 - Preventing poverty and creating pathways to economic security through child and youth savings accounts.
 - Ensuring foster children and youth receive benefits due them.
 - Providing a path out of poverty by supporting educational success, workforce opportunities, and more equitable economic policies.
 - Improving access and support available for youth transitioning from foster care through existing federal safety net and housing programs.

About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a non-profit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organisation's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts and publishes multi-method, multidisciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organisations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

Learn more at www.frameworksinstitute.org

About Health+ Studio

Health+ Studio is a women-led social impact strategy and communications agency that uses research-informed strategies and programs to eliminate barriers and create opportunities for health and wellbeing. We aim to foster collective impact to create a more just and equitable society for all.

Learn more at www.healthplusstudio.com

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