

# Be Your Own Advocate!



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## Why am I here?

Being separated from your home and family is a big deal. But it's important for you to know that it's not your fault. Your parents have a responsibility to take good care of you. When this isn't happening a report may be made to the Arkansas Child Abuse Hotline. If the report is accepted, people from the Department of Human Services, **Division of Children and Family Services** (DCFS) (see Appendix VII: Glossary for more information) and the courts will get involved to help you and your family. Sometimes this involvement results in children and youth like you being temporarily placed out of your home and into foster care.

## How long will I stay in foster care?

The answer is different for each youth depending on a lot of different things. Right when a foster care case opens, it is difficult to guess how long that foster care case may last. Some youth may only be in foster care for a few weeks, others a few months, and some for over a year or longer.

No matter how long you may be in foster care, we hope this book gives you information to help make more sense of your time in foster care. The quotes in the orange boxes throughout this document include tips and advice from other youth who have been or are in the Arkansas foster care system. Be sure to talk to your FSW caseworker and your attorney ad litem (see page 2 for more information) to get more information about the progress of your family's specific case.

*Teens coming into foster care need to realize that it will be very difficult in the beginning, but I promise, it does get better. When I came into foster care I was very upset and didn't want to cooperate with anybody. But after a couple months living with my foster parents, I have grown to love them....Teens who just arrive in foster care think it's so horrible and they'll never be happy, but if it turned out well for me, it could turn out well for anyone.*

◆Rachel, Yellville◆

## Is it normal to feel this way?

Foster care is not easy. It can be difficult being separated from your family, moving to a new place, meeting new people — even under the best of circumstances. You might be confused, relieved, angry, sad, scared, or you might not even know how you feel. All of these feelings are completely natural.

Some of these feelings will go away or change and some may not. Some feelings will take longer than others to work through and figure out. Remember, you don't have to handle everything by yourself. Talking about how you're feeling can help a lot, so be sure to share what you're going through with your therapist, your caseworker, or anyone else you trust. If you want to talk with other youth in foster care who have gone through some of the same things you have, there are resources like your Youth Advisory Board (see page 7 for more information) and FosterClub.org (see page 16 for more information).



## Who's here to help me?

There are a lot of people who are here to help. Your Family Service Worker (FSW) caseworker is the DCFS person whose job it is to look out for you. However, if you are placed in a different county from your home county, you may also have a secondary FSW caseworker. Both your primary and secondary FSW caseworkers will help you understand why you are here. Every situation is different so you should talk to your FSW caseworker about why you are in foster care.

### *Some tips to help you through foster care...*

*"When I first entered into foster care...I had no idea about what was going to happen or even if I was going to see my parents again. I can tell you if you're scared, it's normal and it's ok. I also want you to know that it will get better. You're only in foster care because they want to help you."*

**♦Alyssa, Morrilton♦**

In your first month in foster care or when you move to a new foster home or other placement, your **FSW caseworker** must visit you at least once a week. After the first month of foster care, your FSW caseworker must visit you at least once a month in your foster home, but then your FSW caseworker must also contact you once a week by phone and/or see you in other places like at school or driving you to appointments. Your FSW caseworker will give you his or her contact information so you can contact him or her whenever you have a question or need help.

Sometimes your FSW caseworker may change, so be sure to know who your FSW caseworker's **Supervisor** is if you can't reach your FSW caseworker. Supervisors can help provide extra support when needed.

If you are 14 years old or older, you will also have a Transitional Services Coordinator who will help you with your transitional plan (see page 5 for more information). Your **Transitional Services Coordinator**, along with the rest of your team, will help make sure you are learning skills and gaining information that you will need when you become an adult.

Other people you may meet from DCFS are **Program Assistants** (PAs) who sometimes help drive youth to appointments or supervise visits with your parents if supervised visitation is a part of your case plan.

### *Some tips to help you through foster care...*

*"Be calm and respectful. It will pay off! Know that you are not alone! Find out who your caseworker is and get his or her contact info. Be patient and try to ask lots of questions. Try to be positive and be very honest!"*

**♦Shady, Fort Smith♦**

Your **attorney ad litem (AAL)** is the person who will represent your best interests in court. It is his or her job to make sure that your legal rights are protected. He or she will help you

## YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO...

- ✓ Be nurtured by foster parents who meet your needs or be placed in the custody or foster home of relatives or fictive kin, if appropriate
- ✓ Be heard and involved with the decisions in your life
- ✓ Have complete information and direct answers to your questions
- ✓ Be informed about and have involvement when appropriate with your birth family and siblings
- ✓ Have ongoing contact with other important people in your life
- ✓ Have reasonable access to your caseworker or other person at DCFS
- ✓ Express your opinion and have it treated respectfully
- ✓ Request support and services that you need
- ✓ Have individualized care and attention
- ✓ Be notified of changes impacting your permanence, safety, and well-being
- ✓ Have a stable, appropriate placement
- ✓ Be notified of placement changes
- ✓ Receive free appropriate education, training, and career guidance to prepare you for adulthood
- ✓ Have reasonable access to and have your best interest represented by an attorney ad litem in all court proceedings
- ✓ Receive quality child welfare services
- ✓ Have a plan for your future and the support needed to achieve it
- ✓ Receive a copy of your case record upon exiting foster care
- ✓ Be cared for without regard to race, gender, religion, or disability

better understand your rights and the legal process. You should also make sure you have your attorney ad litem's contact information so that you can easily call or email him or her with questions or concerns.

Sometimes, you may also have a **CASA** volunteer. CASA stands for Court Appointed Special Advocate. This is a person from the community who volunteers to help you while you are in foster care. They will spend time with you and get to know you, so they can help the judge understand how you feel and what you want. Every case is different, so not everyone has a CASA. But if you don't have one and you think you'd like one, ask the judge if it's possible.

You may also have a **therapist**. This person is here to listen to you and talk with you. They are specially trained to help you deal with your emotions in a healthy way.

### What are my rights?

**Be your own advocate!** The most important right you have is to know your rights. When you know your rights, you can be a stronger advocate for yourself. Speak up. Voice your concerns. Ask questions. Talk to your primary or secondary FSW caseworker, attorney ad litem, CASA, or therapist. They are here to help you!

The blue box on the left of this page provides you with a summary of your rights. The other information on the next few pages will provide a few more details about your rights related to your living situation, visitation, court participation, education, health, etc. and what to expect in foster care.

### Where will I live?

While you are away from your family, you have **the right to have a stable, appropriate placement**. There are different kinds of places you may live:

In a foster home, you will live with a temporary family who will take care of you. You will have a foster mom or a foster dad or both. You may have foster brothers and sisters. You might also live in a foster home that is considered **Therapeutic Foster Care (TFC)**. TFC foster parents are specially trained to help youth who are dealing with emotional and behavioral issues.

If you have a relative you have a **right to live with them if they meet safety standards**. You also have the **right to live with other people you know and trust like a godparent, a good friend's parent, or a coach** (sometimes called "fictive kin") who are willing and able to take care of you, if appropriate. This is called a **Provisional Foster Home**.

Tell your FSW caseworker if you know of any relatives or fictive kin who might serve as your Provisional Foster Family. As mentioned above, relative and fictive kin have to meet certain safety standards before DCFS can make them a Provisional Foster Home. Once those safety standards are met, then the good news is Provisional Foster Homes can be opened more quickly than non-provisional foster homes. Sometimes Provisional Foster Homes can be opened as quickly as a couple of days.

When you first come into care, you might stay at an **Emergency Shelter** if there are not any available foster homes or appropriate relatives or fictive kin. Emergency Shelters care for youth on a short-term basis. You might also live in a **Residential Facility**, sometimes called a **Group Home**. This is a home or facility where a number of unrelated youth live with **house parents** (check the glossary) or staff who will care for you. If you have emotional and behavioral difficulties, you may be placed in a **Residential Treatment Facility** where specially trained staff can help meet your needs.

If DCFS has to change your placement, you have the right to be notified by DCFS of a placement change in advance. You also have the right to ask your attorney ad litem to object to any proposed placement changes. Your attorney ad litem may or may not be able to stop a placement change, but he or she can at least try to stop a placement change if you do not want to move to a different placement.

### **When will I see my family?**

You have the **right to spend time with your parents** unless the judge decides that it is not in your best interest. You can also write them and call them if the judge allows it.

You have a **right to live with your siblings while you are in foster care**. Sometimes this may not happen because either DCFS or the courts believe that it is not in your best interest, or there is not a foster home that has room for you and all of your siblings. In these situations, it is DCFS' job to keep trying to find a place where you and your siblings can all live together.

If you and your siblings have been placed in different homes, you have the **right to spend time with your siblings at least once a week**. This weekly contact with your siblings might be face-to-face or it might be a phone call, email, or through Skype, FaceTime or a similar program.

There are some exceptions. If your sibling has been placed in a residential treatment facility or the case plan says you cannot see your siblings, you may not be able to see or talk to them weekly. Another reason visits or other contact may not happen weekly is if there is a safety



concern related to siblings spending time together. However, DCFS or your placement provider should never prevent you from seeing your siblings due to bad behavior.

Because staying connected with your siblings is so important, you also have the **right to spend birthdays and holidays with your siblings and even attend events like their athletic games, school plays, and graduations.** DCFS needs to include you in your siblings' **case plan staffings** (see Appendix VII: Glossary for the definition) and decisions affecting them even if you have different FSW caseworkers.

Your FSW caseworker will also let you know if your sibling goes to a new foster home or other placement or leaves foster care. If you have siblings who are not in foster care, DCFS will do its best to make sure you can also have contact with those siblings as long as it is in your best interest and approved by the court.

You have the **right to spend time with other relatives such as your grandparents and great-grandparents as long as the courts approve too.** Talk to your FSW caseworker and attorney ad litem about spending time with your family.

## **Do I have a say in what happens to me and my case?**

Absolutely! You have the **right to be heard and involved with the decisions that affect your life.** This includes the **right to help develop the case plan, including your Transitional Plan** (see below for more information), and the **right to participate in all staffings and court hearings related to your foster care case.** Be sure your FSW caseworker and/or attorney ad litem let you know ahead of time when your staffings and court dates are. And be prepared, some youth say sometimes it feels like there are a lot of court dates.

### **Some tips to help you through foster care...**

*"You can call your caseworker anytime. DHS is on your side even if it may not seem like it sometimes."*

◆Anonymous◆

If you are 16 or older, you should expect the court to ask you about your desired permanency goal. If you do not feel comfortable speaking up in court, your attorney ad litem can share information about your wishes regarding permanency with the court on your behalf.

If you enter foster care when you turn 14 or if you come into care after the age of 14, DCFS will make sure you are actively involved in the development of your **Transitional Plan.** The Transitional Plan includes all of the life skills, resources, and future-planning for your successful transition to adulthood. It is a way for you to be involved in planning for your future. By the time you turn 17 years old, your transitional plan will include plans and services to help you reach your goals related to education, employment, health, housing, and lifelong connections.

To help you create your Transitional Plan, **you have the right to a Transitional Team**. In addition to helping you with your Transitional Plan, the Transitional Team is there to support you and make sure you develop and maintain healthy relationships with adults you trust who will continue help you even after you leave foster care.

In addition to your FSW caseworker, Transitional Services Coordinator, attorney ad litem, and CASA you can choose other people who you want on your Transitional Team. The Division is allowed to have input on who you select to be on your Transitional Team. If you are comfortable with it, you can lead the Transitional Team meetings with assistance from your FSW caseworker.

Your FSW caseworker will schedule your Transitional Team meetings at least once every six months. If you want to have your Transitional Team meetings more often, just ask your FSW caseworker.

### **What services and supports are available to me?**

You have the right to receive quality child welfare services. Your FSW caseworker will work with you and your family to make a **case plan** (look in Appendix VII: Glossary for more information). The goal of the case plan is to help address the issues that caused a case to be open as well as provide other supports to your family. The services in a family's case plan will depend on family members' individual needs and strengths. Services required in the case plan might include counseling or tutoring.

You were brought into foster care in order to keep you safe. Parents, with the support of DCFS, must meet their case plan goals so DCFS can safely return you to your parents. The case plan also describes what DCFS must do in order to best take care of you while you are in foster care and help you to prepare for adulthood. Eventually the judge will decide if the case plan goals have been achieved or not, and what the next steps will be in terms of your permanency goal. Please see page 11 for more information about permanency and the different permanency goals.

#### **Some tips to help you through foster care...**

*"Don't be afraid to tell them how you feel.*

*Tell them what you need or want.*

*Don't be afraid to talk to other kids in foster care."*

◆Anonymous◆

As a teenager, **life skills** (see Appendix VII: Glossary for more information) classes will be offered to you. Life skills classes will cover different topics like how to cook, how to open a bank account, how to fill out a college application, and write your resume. Life skills classes are also a great opportunity to spend time with other youth who are in foster care. If you are not currently participating in life skills classes, talk to your FSW caseworker or Transitional Services Coordinator.

Your foster parents or other caregivers receive a payment each month to help with costs like housing, food, clothing, school supplies, and other personal care items for you. They are also supposed to give you an allowance from that payment each month. The amount of the allowance is decided by the foster parent based on your age.

Sometimes if there is a need your foster parent may request an additional clothing voucher for you for something like a special event, but DCFS must approve this. Sometimes DCFS can also help your foster parents or other caregivers pay for things like sports uniforms, school field trips, and summer camps as appropriate.

In addition, some youth may have a trust fund while they are in foster care that comes from child support payments or certain federal benefits. A trust fund account can help pay for some expenses. Ask your FSW caseworker if you have a trust fund and what that money can be used for.

Here are some other services and supports you should know about:

### **Casey-Ansell**

If you are 14 to 18 years old, you will take the Casey-Ansell or similar assessment, which is like a test. You won't get a grade on the assessment. The assessment just helps DCFS know what kinds of life skills classes and other services or supports would be most helpful to you.

### **Youth Advisory Board**

The Arkansas Youth Advisory Board (YAB) is made up of a group of foster youth between the ages of 16-21 who are or have been in Arkansas's foster care system. These current and former foster youth are here to help represent your wants, goals, and needs and to advocate for you. YAB's goal is to make foster care in Arkansas better.

A YAB member will be available to talk to you upon your request—just ask your Transitional Services Coordinator who your YAB representative is. Anything you say to a YAB member is strictly confidential unless you say you may harm yourself or someone else. If the YAB member feels that your ideas need to be shared to help improve the foster care system, he or she may ask your permission to share those ideas with your Transitional Services Coordinator or other DCFS staff.

Usually the YAB puts on a Youth Leadership Conference each year. Be sure to ask your FSW caseworker, Transitional Services Coordinator, or YAB representative about it if you are interested in attending.

If you would like to know more about the Youth Advisory Board, or you would like to know more about how you can get involved with the YAB, ask your FSW caseworker or your Transitional Services Coordinator.

## **Arkansas ETV Program**

The Educational and Training Voucher (ETV) Program awards grants to current and former foster youth to help pay for college or vocational training programs. Students may receive up to \$5,000 a year based on the cost of attendance. Funds can be used to pay for tuition, balances due at school, on-campus room and board, meal cards, books, and school supplies (such as uniforms and equipment), federal student loans, and study abroad through qualifying schools. Please see Appendix VI for more information on ETV Eligibility Requirements.

## **What about school?**

You have the **right to receive a public education, training, and career guidance to help prepare you for adulthood**. Even if your foster care placement is in a different school district from the school you went to before you came into foster care, there are laws that say DCFS and the schools will work together to develop a transportation plan to help you stay in your same school if that is in your best interest, if your foster care placement and your original school are relatively close.

If you have to change schools, that change will happen quickly so you don't miss out on classes. Even if the new school hasn't received your records from your old school, you can still go ahead and start attending classes.

Each school district should have a staff member who helps make sure youth who are in foster care are getting what they need. This person is called the foster care liaison. If you want to, ask your teacher or principal who your foster care liaison is.

You also have the **right to participate in all school resources, services, and extracurricular activities that are available to all of the other students in the school**.

## **Can I just be a normal teen?**

There is nothing normal about foster care, but you are a normal teen. You have a right to "normalcy." Normalcy means participating in age appropriate activities and having similar opportunities that other youth have like hanging out with friends, going on field trips, getting a job, dating, participating in sports and other extracurricular activities, and using social media responsibly.

However, normalcy does not mean doing whatever you want. Even teens who are not in foster care have rules to follow. Everyone has slightly different rules for their homes. Your foster parents should let you know what their house rules and expectations are early on so you can all be on the same page. Please be respectful of the rules and other boundaries your foster parents or other caregivers set. For example, be sure to follow curfew. Expect foster parents to monitor your social media activity enough to make sure you are safe and following court orders. And even though it might be annoying, your foster parents or other caregivers are doing a good job if they are asking you questions about what you are doing, how you are spending your time, and who you are hanging out with.

For day-to-day normalcy activities your foster parents are expected to make decisions on your behalf just like they would for their biological children. When making decisions related to age appropriate activities, foster parents and other caregivers must consider things like your age, maturity level, potential risk factors and appropriateness of the activity, your best interest, and your behavioral history. Foster parents and other caregivers then balance that information with the importance of encouraging your emotional and developmental growth.

If you are in a group home or other residential facility, there should be someone there who is designated to make decisions related to normalcy.

Foster parents and other caregivers can always ask for guidance from the FSW caseworker if they need to. There are some situations for which they must get approval from your FSW caseworker like if you want to travel out of state.

***So what does normalcy look like?  
A few more examples...***

- ✓ *Spending the night with friends - no background checks required.*
- ✓ *Learning how to drive - ask your caseworker about the DCFS Driver's License & Car Insurance Reimbursement Program.*
- ✓ *Connecting with friends on social media - but be safe and watch what you post online. Never post anything you would not say to someone's face and remember once something is online, it follows you forever.*

If you want to participate in a particular activity or event, let your foster parent or other caregiver know ahead of time. If you let them know ahead of time, they have more time to consider it, support you if appropriate, and even help arrange for transportation if needed. If you do not think some of the rules or decisions your foster parents or other caregivers make are fair, respectfully talk with your caregiver and FSW caseworker about it.

***Some tips to help you through foster care...***

*"You do have rights. Look at your situation from the adults' view. Be happy with yourself and don't depend on others to make you happy.*

***♦Akala, Vilonia♦***

## **Who makes health decisions for me?**

DCFS, with help from your foster parents or other caregiver, is responsible for making sure you receive regular and appropriate physical and mental health services. There are certain times DCFS is required to take you to the doctor and other health care providers, but you have the **right go to the doctor or dentist whenever you need to go.**

Your FSW caseworker must also give you information about meeting your health care needs once you exit foster care. This includes options for health insurance after transitioning out of care. Your FSW caseworker should also speak to you about the importance of designating another person to make health care treatment decisions for you in case something happens to you and you do not have a relative authorized to make those decisions.



As a teenager, you need to know how to make safe, smart decisions about your body and sexuality. You are encouraged to wait before becoming sexually active. If you choose to be in a relationship with someone, always make sure you feel safe and respected in that relationship. Never feel pressured to be sexually active if you are not ready to be.

However, if you choose to be sexually active, do so responsibly and within a healthy, loving relationship. For young women, you have a right to be on regular birth control like the pill or patch if you want to be, but you are not required to be on regular birth control. Both young men and young women who choose to be sexually active need to protect themselves and their partners from sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and pregnancy each time they are sexually active by using condoms.

Talk to your FSW caseworker, foster parent, or placement provider about questions you may have about safe sex. Your local Health Department is another great place to get quality information about and services related to health needs.

## **What else do I need to know?**

### **Credit Reports**

You want to have a good credit score so that when you are an adult, it will be easier to do things like turn on utilities (such as water and electricity) in your apartment, apply for your own credit cards, and even apply for a loan to buy a home one day.

If you are 14 years old or older, you have the **right to obtain a copy of your credit report free of charge to you each year you are in foster care**. It is important to review your credit report each year to make sure other people have not tried to use your identity to open credit card accounts or other types of loans or services. You do not want other people using your identity to open credit card accounts or other services because that could hurt your credit score.

You have the **right to receive help with understanding your credit report**. If you are 14-years-old or older, DCFS will work with the credit reporting agencies to make sure there are not any problems with your credit reports. If there are problems with your credit report, DCFS or its partners will help fix those problems.

If you are 18 or older, you can access your credit report by going to [www.annualcreditreport.com](http://www.annualcreditreport.com). You are entitled to a free credit report one time each year from each of the three national credit reporting companies (Experian, TransUnion, Equifax).

### **Driver's License or Other Identification**

Before you transition out of foster care, you have the **right to either earn your driver's license or get a state-issued official identification card**. You must meet certain requirements before you can earn your driver's license. Use your license and driving privileges responsibly.

DCFS can also help you or your foster parents pay for car insurance if you meet the program requirements. Ask your FSW caseworker for more information about the DCFS Driver's License and Car Insurance Reimbursement Program.

## **Permanency**

One word you may hear a lot while you are in foster care is “permanency.” Permanency can mean different things to different people (see the text box on the side). Generally permanency means a legally established relationship through reunification (going back to your parents or the person from whom you were removed), adoption, or guardianship. Permanency can also mean an emotional attachment between you and your caregivers, family members, and other adults who play a positive role in your life.

Placement in foster care is meant to be temporary. At some point you will no longer be in foster care. You might reunite with your family. You might get a **legal guardian** (check Appendix VII: Glossary). You might be adopted by a relative or another family. Or you might **transition out** (see Appendix VII: Glossary for more information) of foster care at age 18 or 21. No matter what your situation is, it is important to maintain and develop meaningful relationships with caring adults that will last a lifetime.

Take time to think about who is important to you and who you want to be in your life forever—even after you leave foster care. Your FSW caseworker can help you get connected and stay connected with the important people in your life.

You might think you don't want to be adopted now, but having someone you are permanently and legally connected to may become more important as you get older. It's never too late to be adopted! You can have a safe and permanent adoptive family and keep connections to past families who are important to you.

Look at the following questions in the blue box and see just a few of the reasons why having supportive, caring adults in your life is important!

Talk to your FSW caseworker if you have more questions about lifelong connections and permanency.

### ***29 Things a Permanent Connection Can Mean***

- 1. Lifelong relationship*
- 2. Family*
- 3. Friendship*
- 4. Unconditional love*
- 5. Ongoing support*
- 6. Extended family-like relationship*
- 7. Knowing that someone cares*
- 8. Continuity*
- 9. Someone to go home to*
- 10. Sharing life's ups and downs*
- 11. Someone to call on in times of crisis*
- 12. Someone to call “just because”*
- 13. Being there*
- 14. Defining family together*
- 15. Sharing holidays*
- 16. Celebrating special times together*
- 17. Someone to check in with regularly*
- 18. Shared history*
- 19. Assistance with major decisions*
- 20. Growing and changing together*
- 21. Being accepted no matter what*
- 22. Someone to trust*
- 23. Having someone to stand by you*
- 24. Knowing someone is proud of you*
- 25. Knowing that you are not alone*
- 26. Having a safe haven*
- 27. Being a part of something*
- 28. Feeling free to be yourself*
- 29. Having positive role models*

- ◆ Where will you go for the holidays?
- ◆ Where will you do laundry?
- ◆ Who will you turn to for health and legal advice?
- ◆ Who will you talk to about your problems?
- ◆ Who will you call in an emergency? Where will you stay if you have an emergency?
- ◆ Who will make medical decisions for you if you become sick or seriously injured?
- ◆ When you have children, who will they call grandma and grandpa?

### **Extended Foster Care**

If you are in foster care when you turn 18, you also have the **right to transition into and participate in the Extended Foster Care Program until you turn 21 years old**. While staying in foster care may seem like the last thing you want to do, there are actually really great reasons to stay in foster care until you are 21.

Participating in the Extended Foster Care Program allows you to have continued support from DCFS. You do not necessarily have to live in a foster home, but you can if you want to and if there are appropriate foster homes available. Depending on your strengths, needs, and goals, you may live in a dorm of the college you attend or maybe even get your own apartment, if appropriate. In Extended Foster Care, you will continue to receive a board payment, participate in Life Skills classes, and receive other important benefits.

Because participating in the Extended Foster Care Program is another turning point in terms of you reaching adulthood, you must do at least one of the following requirements or have a reasonable and workable plan to meet one of the following requirements:

- 1) Be completing high school or a program leading to an equivalent credential like earning your GED;
- 2) Be enrolled in an institution which provides a college or vocational education (this includes out-of-state colleges if you are accepted to a college out-of-state and can arrange for paying for the tuition through scholarships, grants, etc.);
- 3) Be participating in a program or activity designed to promote, or remove barriers to, employment like JobCorps or AmeriCorps;
- 4) Be working at least 80 hours per month;
- 5) Have a medical condition that prevents you from doing any of the activities described above.

Remember, adoption or guardianship are about having a lifelong, legal connection to someone who loves you. But if neither of these is an option, you should strongly consider staying in care until you are 21. Otherwise you could be missing out on major benefits such as money to help you pay for housing, college, health care, transportation, and more.

If you do not choose to participate in the Extended Foster Care Program when you turn 18 or leave the Extended Foster Care Program any time after you turn 18 and before you turn 21, you may have the opportunity to return to the court's jurisdiction and/or foster care any time before your 21<sup>st</sup> birthday under certain circumstances and if you meet at least one of the Extended Foster Care Program requirements or have a reasonable and workable plan designed to help you meet one of those requirements. Let your former FSW caseworker or attorney ad litem know if you want to re-enter care.

### **After Care Services**

If you choose to leave foster care after you turn 18 but before you turn 21, there are some funds for after care services. To access after care services, you must have been in foster care until your 18<sup>th</sup> birthday but then elect to leave foster care within a reasonable time frame before you turn 21. You must also have a budget and a plan that includes participation in education, employment, training, or treatment in order to be eligible for after care.

You can request after care support for up to \$2,000, but generally cannot receive more than \$500 of aftercare support in any one month. After care support may include money for things like education or training programs, housing, insurance, housing set-up, transportation, utility bills like your water or electricity bills, or utility deposits.

After care services money will not be given directly to you. Instead, it will be paid to the person or business providing the service or good to you. However, reimbursement for appropriate purchases may be made to you as appropriate if documentation of the expense (like a receipt) is provided. After care support does not include amounts available through the Education Training Voucher (ETV) program (see Appendix VI for more information). Youth eligible for after care may also participate in life skills classes.

### **So now what?**

We know there is a lot of information in this booklet. Take time to read through it, or at least keep it somewhere you can find it if you want to read through it or have questions later. If there is anything you don't understand in this booklet or you don't find the answers you are looking for, please ask your FSW caseworker, Transitional Services Coordinator, or attorney ad litem. Remember they are here to help you!

**Don't ever forget how important you are! Remember to always speak up, ask questions, and**

**BE YOUR OWN ADVOCATE!**

## Appendix I: Responsibilities

In this booklet we've talked about your rights and responsibilities. Here is a summary of others' responsibilities.

### What are DCFS' responsibilities to me?

1. Find the best place for you to live while in foster care. This means finding a foster home, relative foster home, or other facility that best meets your needs in the least restrictive environment and is close to your family to make it easier to stay in contact (as long as you can still be safe).
2. Make sure you have planned, regular visits with your family and relatives.
3. Provide you with the opportunity to practice your faith and participate in the religious activities of your choice.
4. Give you honest information regarding your case and any DCFS or court decision affecting you.
5. Protect your rights.
6. Involve you in your case planning, conferences, staffings, and court hearings whenever possible.
7. Keep a record of your legal documents such as birth certificate, social security card, and court orders for you while you are in care.
8. Communicate with your school about what is going on in your life to make sure you are getting what you need while you are in school.
9. Help your family to reunify if it is in your best interest or find another form of permanency for you if you cannot safely return home.
10. Support you as you grow up, and help you learn skills you will need as an adult.

### What are DCFS's responsibilities to my biological family?

1. Offer and provide services that will help keep your family together.
2. Let you and your parents know why it was necessary to place you in foster care.
3. Not judge or criticize your family. Acknowledge that your family is part of your life.
4. Let your family know how they can still be involved in your life while you are in foster care.
5. Let your family know what they must do before you can return home.
6. Include your family when creating the case plan.
7. Give your family services and supports to meet the case plan goals to help you return home.
8. Return you to your family if and when the changes or conditions required by the court are met.

### What responsibilities does my biological family have?

1. Provide any and all important information about you and your family to DCFS.
2. Tell your caseworker about you, including health conditions, school information, important family customs or cultural practices, and any special needs.
3. Participate in staffings and court hearings.
4. Work with your FSW caseworker to create a case plan that will help you return home.
5. Participate in the services required in the case plan and work on meeting the case plan goals.
6. Be involved, as often as possible, in your medical appointments, educational decisions and issues, and social or religious activities as long as the case plan allows that involvement.
7. Keep in contact with DCFS to give updates on how they are meeting the case plan goals.
8. Maintain contact and communication with you and keep appointments to visit with you.
9. Talk to your FSW caseworker or their lawyer if they have any concerns.
10. Provide financial support to you. The court will decide if and how much your parents need to pay to help DCFS take care of you.



## Appendix II: Who else is here to help?

While DCFS and the courts have an official responsibility to you, there are lots of other organizations with lots of people who can help you, too. Here are just a few:

**Arkansas Legal Services Partnership: 1-800-952-9243 /<http://www.arlegalservices.org/about>**

The Arkansas Legal Services Partnership is comprised of the Center for Arkansas Legal Services and Legal Aid of Arkansas. These organizations assist thousands of clients every year with various legal issues at no or little cost, such as family law, consumer issues, bankruptcy, or evictions. They provide assistance in every county across the state.

**Boys Town/Girls Town National Hotline: 1-800-448-3000/[www.boystown.org](http://www.boystown.org)**

Open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, this hotline is staffed by specially trained counselors who can help with suicide prevention, sexual abuse, parenting troubles, anger, physical abuse, school issues, chemical dependency, relationship problems, depression, emotional abuse, and runaways.

**National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)/ [www.nvdh.org](http://www.nvdh.org)**

Help is available to callers **24 hours a day, 365 days a year**. Hotline advocates are available for victims and anyone calling on their behalf to provide crisis intervention, safety planning, information and referrals to agencies in all 50 states, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Assistance is available in English and Spanish with access to more than 170 languages through interpreter services. If you or someone you know is frightened about something in your relationship, please call the National Domestic Violence Hotline.

**National Human Trafficking Resource Center: 1-800-373-7888**

Human trafficking is a form of modern-day slavery. This crime occurs when a trafficker uses force or fraud to control another person and force them to participate in selling sex and/or sexual acts or doing a job against his/her will and often for very little money.

**Nationwide RAINN National Rape Crisis Hotline: 800-656-4673/[www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org)**

This nationwide partnership of more than 1,100 local rape treatment hotlines provides victims of sexual assault with free, confidential services around the clock.

**National Runaway Switchboard: 1-800-RUNAWAY/[www.1800runaway.org](http://www.1800runaway.org)**

Call if you are a teenager who is thinking of running away from home, if you have a friend who has run away and is looking for help, or if you are a runaway ready to go home. The **24-hour crisis line** has an experienced front-line team member ready to help you now. They provide crisis intervention and travel assistance to runaways. They provide information and local referrals to adolescents and families. They give referrals to shelters nationwide. They also relay messages to or set up conference calls with parents at the request of the youth.

**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)/[www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)**

Are you feeling desperate, alone or hopeless? Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. It's a free, 24-hour hotline available to anyone in suicidal crisis or emotional distress. Your call will be routed to the nearest crisis center to you. Call for yourself or someone you care about. It's free and confidential.

**National Youth Crisis Hotline: 800-442-HOPE (4673)**

Provides counseling and referrals to local drug treatment centers, shelters, and counseling services. Responds to youth dealing with pregnancy, molestation, suicide, and child abuse. **Operates 24 hours, seven days a week.**

## **FosterClub**

FosterClub is the national network for young people in foster care—a place to turn for advice, information, and hope.

Being placed in foster care can be a chaotic and difficult experience for a young person. FosterClub is dedicated to providing a peer support network for children and youth in foster care. Further, FosterClub believes that the experiences young people have in foster care place them in a position to effect change within the system, inform and motivate their peers, build public awareness and create public will for improved care for abused and neglected children.

FosterClub is about providing youth a voice within the system that so heavily impacts their lives. Whether advocating on their own behalf, in concern for siblings or family members, or speaking out on behalf of their 513,000 peers currently in the system, FosterClub's websites, publications and events provide a youth-friendly network which helps the voices of young people to be heard.

FosterClub is dedicated to providing the tools, training and forum to help young people secure a brighter future for themselves and the foster care system. Join today at [www.fosterclub.org](http://www.fosterclub.org)!

### **Helpful suggestions from Toby at FosterClub**

***Friends.*** *Don't lose connection! Some of the best people that I knew, I lost connections with because I don't speak to them anymore. I miss them a lot. I regret not keeping communication with some of them.*

***Moving.*** *Many foster youth tend to move very often. At times they are unable to take everything they want with them on such a short notice. It really sucks that people have to think in a mind setting where they could be moved any day. But realistically, if you know you might be moving, think of the stuff that you want to take with you, wherever you may go.*

***School.*** *I know that personally I moved from school to school very often. Let your voice be heard, and talk about staying in the same school district! I, on occasion, moved from school district to school district, and I was very lucky to graduate on time.*

***Documents.*** *DOCUMENTS ARE VERY IMPORTANT! Your State ID, Birth Certificate, Social Security Card, etc. are very important wherever you are in life. If you have them in your possession, great! Don't lose them.*

***Employment.*** *If you have a job, try to stay with it! I know personally that on many times in my life I had to quit a job because of my foster care situation. Don't bury yourself in that hole!*

***Keep a positive attitude!*** *In general, life can get you down. This is especially true for foster youth and/or anyone aging out of the system. Keeping a positive attitude will make things run a bit smoother. Promise!*

## Appendix III: DHS County Office Contact Information

If you can't get a hold of your caseworker, here are the phone numbers for all of the DHS County Offices. Ask the operator to speak with your caseworker or the DCFS County Supervisor when you call.

### Area 1 County Office Phone Numbers:

Benton: 479-273-9011  
Carroll: 870-423-3351  
Madison: 479-738-2161  
Washington: 479-521-1270

### Area 2 County Office Phone Numbers:

Crawford: 479-474-7595  
Franklin: 479-667-2379  
Johnson: 479-754-2355  
Logan: 479-963-2783  
Scott: 479-637-4141  
Sebastian: 479-782-4555  
Yell: 479-495-2723

### Area 3 County Office Phone Numbers:

Clark: 870-246-9886  
Garland: 501-321-2583  
Hot Spring: 501-332-2718  
Howard: 870-845-4334  
Montgomery: 870-867-3184  
Perry: 501-889-5105  
Pike: 870-285-3111  
Polk: 479-394-3100  
Saline: 501-315-1600

### Area 4 County Office Phone Numbers:

Columbia: 870-234-4190  
Hempstead: 870-777-8656  
Lafayette: 870-921-4283  
Little River: 870-898-5155  
Miller: 870-773-0563  
Nevada: 870-887-6626  
Ouachita: 870-836-2591  
Sevier: 870-642-2623  
Union: 870-862-6631

### Area 5 County Office Phone Numbers:

Baxter: 870-425-6011  
Boone: 870-741-6107  
Conway: 501-354-2418  
Faulkner: 501-730-9900  
Marion: 870-446-2237  
Newton: 870-446-2237  
Pope: 479-968-5596  
Searcy: 870-448-3153  
Van Buren: 501-745-4192

### Area 6 Office Phone Numbers:

Pulaski South: 501-682-9330  
Pulaski North: 501-682-0141

Pulaski Southwest: 501-371-1121

Pulaski East: 501-371-1309

Pulaski J'ville: 501-371-1260

### Area 7 County Office Phone Numbers:

Bradley: 870-226-5879  
Calhoun: 870-798-4201  
Cleveland: 870-325-6218  
Dallas: 870-352-5115  
Grant: 870-942-5151  
Jefferson: 870-534-4200  
Lincoln: 870-628-4105  
Lonoke: 501-676-3113  
Prairie: 870-998-2581

### Area 8 County Office Phone Numbers:

Clay: 870-598-2282  
Craighead: 870-972-1732  
Fulton: 870-895-3309  
Greene: 870-236-8723  
Izard: 870-368-4318  
Lawrence: 870-886-2408  
Mississippi: 870-763-7093  
Randolph: 870-886-2408  
Sharp: 870-856-1053

### Area 9 County Office Phone Numbers:

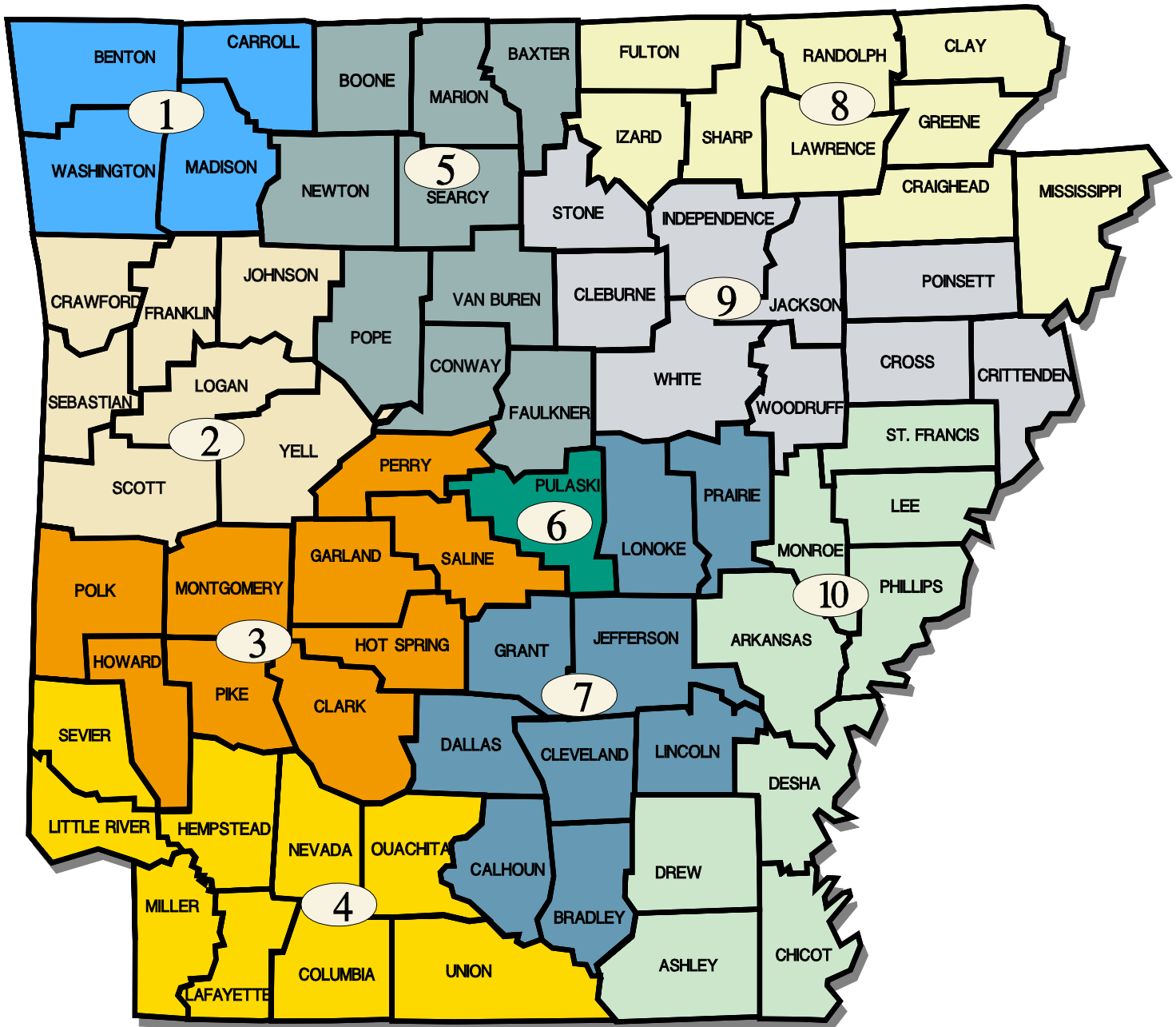
Cleburne: 501-362-3298  
Crittenden: 870-732-5170  
Cross: 870-238-8553  
Independence: 870-698-1876  
Jackson: 870-523-9828  
Poinsett: 870-578-5491  
Stone: 870-269-4321  
White: 501-268-8696  
Woodruff: 870-347-2537

### Area 10 County Office Phone Numbers:

Arkansas: 870-946-4519  
Ashley: 870-853-9816  
Chicot: 870-265-3821  
Desha: 870-222-4144  
Drew: 870-367-6835  
Lee: 870-295-2597  
Monroe: 870-747-3329  
Phillips: 870-338-8391  
St. Francis: 870-633-1242

## Appendix IV: Area Map

In order to be your own advocate, it is helpful for you to know what county you live in and the area number to which that county belongs. Find your county and corresponding area on the map below.



Finally, here are some important phone numbers for state level offices:

Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS) State Central Office: 501-682-8770

Attorney Ad Litem (AAL) State Program: 501-682-9400

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) State Program: 1-866-284-8111 or 501-410-1952

## Appendix V: The Court Process

When you come into foster care, there will be several different types of court hearings – and you have a right to participate in all of them! Below is a description of the different kinds of court hearings involved in foster care cases. If at any time you have questions regarding the court process, talk to your FSW caseworker, attorney ad litem, or CASA. For any questions about your legal rights, ask your attorney ad litem.

**Emergency (Probable Cause) Hearing** – The emergency hearing must be held within five working days after an emergency removal to determine if DCFS acted correctly in removing you from your biological parents, guardians, or custodians.

**Adjudication Hearing** – The adjudication hearing is held within 30 days after the probable cause hearing unless the court finds a good reason to wait until 60 days after the day you were removed to have the adjudication hearing. During the adjudication hearing, the judge decides if there is enough evidence for your case to continue and for you to stay in foster care.

**Disposition Hearing** – The disposition hearing usually occurs right after the adjudication hearing if the judge has decided you are **dependent-neglected** (see Appendix VI: Glossary). The disposition hearing is to decide what action will be taken. The judge will decide if it is safe for you to return home or if you must stay in foster care for a longer period of time. If the court determines you must stay in foster care, the court will approve a case plan for you and your parents, guardians, or custodians. The case plan will include orders like how often you and your parents will visit each other and what kind of services will be put in place to help you safely return home.

**Review Hearings** – The first review hearing must be held within at least six months of you coming into care and must be held at least every six months for as long as you are in foster care. The review hearing is for the judge to reexamine the situation, decide whether the court orders and approved case plan are being followed, and decide whether everyone is working to achieve the goals of the case plan. If you and your siblings are not placed together, the court will review your case every three months to make sure DCFS is still working to find a place where you and your siblings can live together and that you are having some kind of contact with your siblings at least once a week as appropriate.

**Permanency Planning Hearing** – The permanency planning hearing must be held no later than 12 months from coming into foster care. During the permanency planning hearing, the judge decides what your permanency goal will be. These options include, in order of preference, 1) Placing you with a fit parent, 2) Returning you to another guardian or custodian if that is who you were removed from 3) Giving your parents more time to work on their case plan goals if they have made progress but still need some extra time to finish meeting their case plan goals, 4) Adoption, 5) Guardianship, 6) Permanent custody with a relative or fictive kin, 7) Assigning the goal of Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA) which means the Division is responsible for preparing you to age out of foster care at 18 or 21. Only youth who are 16 years old or older may have a goal of APPLA.



**Termination of Parental Rights** – Termination of Parental Rights (TPR) is a permanent, legal action that means a parent no longer has rights and responsibilities as a parent. TPR legally ends the relationship between a parent and his or her child. Parents can volunteer to have their parental rights terminated or the court may order TPR. After TPR, another family can adopt the youth.

## **Appendix VI: Educational and Training Voucher (ETV) Program Eligibility Requirements**

### ***What are the ETV Eligibility Requirements?***

1. You must be a current or former foster student who:
  - was in foster care on your 18th birthday and aged out at that time; OR
  - was adopted from foster care with the adoption finalized AFTER your 16th birthday; OR
  - remains in foster care and have completed a secondary education; OR
  - will have your foster care case closed between the ages of 18 and 21.
2. You must be a U.S. citizen or qualified non-citizen.
3. Your personal assets (bank account, car, home, etc.) are worth less than \$10,000.
4. You must be at least 18 but younger than 21 to apply for the first time. You may reapply for ETV funds, if you have a current grant, up to the age of 23.
5. You must have been accepted into or be enrolled in a degree, certificate, or other accredited program at a college, university, technical, vocational school. To remain eligible for ETV funding, you must show progress toward a degree or certificate.

### ***How do I use the funds?***

Funds can be used to pay for tuition, balances due at school, on-campus room and board, meal cards, books and school supplies (such as uniforms and equipment), one computer package, federal student loans, and study abroad through qualifying schools.

If there are remaining funds after the above expenses have been paid, ETV funds may pay for other items, including rent, food, transportation, health insurance premiums, disability services, and dependent child care expenses to licensed child care providers as appropriate.

Funds may not be used for educational or vocational courses shorter than one year in duration and/or which do not lead to a degree or certification, coursework at non-Title-IV schools, cell phone bills, personal loan repayments, banking late fees, bounced check fees or lost/stolen debit card transactions, computer games or DVDs , and dorm room or apartment damages.

If you have any other questions about the ETV program, access the link below.

To apply, go to <http://humanservices.arkansas.gov/dcfs/Pages/dcfsServices.aspx> , click on Arkansas Education and Training Voucher Program (ETV) and follow the instructions.

## Appendix VII: Glossary

**Advocate**—A person who speaks up on behalf of themselves or someone else in an effort to ensure that their rights are protected and/or to gain services or other benefits.

**Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment**—This is a test that all youth in foster care ages 14 and older will take to help evaluate their life skills in the following nine areas: career planning, communication, daily living, home life, housing and money management, self-care, social relationships, work life, and work and study skills. Youth will take the test every six months to see what progress they have made. When youth get a high enough grade to show that they have the necessary life skills, they no longer have to take the test.

**Case Plan**—This is a written plan that a youth and his or her family along with foster parents, caseworker, and attorney ad litem AAL will make. The goal of a case plan is to help find a permanent placement for a youth, either with biological parents or someone else who will love and care for the youth.

**DCFS**—The Division of Children and Family Services is the state agency whose job is to keep children and youth safe. DCFS is just one of ten divisions within the Department of Human Services.

**Dependent-Neglected Juvenile**—This is the term used for a child or youth whose health and/or safety are at substantial risk of harm.

**DHS**—The Department of Human Services is the bigger agency of which DCFS is a part. In addition to DCFS, DHS includes the following divisions:

Division of Aging & Adult Services (DAAS)  
Division of Behavioral Health Services (DBHS)  
Division of Child Care & Early Childhood Education (DCCECE)  
Division of County Operations (DCO)  
Division of Developmental Disabilities Services (DDS)  
Division of Medical Services (DMS)  
Division of Services for the Blind (DSB)  
Division of Youth Services (DYS)  
Division of Community Service and Nonprofit Support (DCSNS).

**House Parents**—People who supervise and provide care to young people in a group home or residential facility.

**Legal Guardianship**—Placement with a person who is charged with the legal responsibility for the care and management of a child or youth. A legal guardian will be required to appear in court from time to time to give reports about the youth's status, but other involvement such as caseworker visits and the youth appearing in court will stop. A youth is no longer in

foster care if a legal guardian is appointed for him or her.

**Life Skills**—Important abilities and skills for a young person to possess so he or she can successfully transition to adulthood. These include skills and knowledge about taking care of daily life, relationships, employment, housing and home life, money management, health and self-care.

**Mentor**—Somebody, usually older and with more experience, who provides advice and support to a young person.

**Permanence**—For a child or youth in foster care, to have an enduring family-like relationship that is safe and meant to last a lifetime.

**Staffing** – A meeting led by DCFS that involves you, your attorney ad litem, your parents, your parents’ attorney, the DCFS attorney, foster parents, and may also include others who may have helpful information about you or your family’s case such as the therapist. The purpose of the meeting is to share information about how you and your family’s case is progressing and to then work together as a team to help support you and your family in meeting case plan goals and problem solve as necessary. The first staffing will be held within 30 days of you coming into care. Staffings will then be held at least every three months after the first staffing, but can be held more frequently as necessary.

**Transition Out**—When a youth leaves foster care because they turn a certain age, usually 18 or 21. Transitioning out usually results in loss of support from the State for things such as foster care payments, housing, living costs, and health services. Consider staying in care as long as possible so you can receive these important benefits!

**Transitional Plan** – This is a written plan that is a part of your larger case plan. The transitional plan includes all of the life skills, resources, and future-planning for your successful transition to adulthood. By the time you turn 17 years old, your transitional plan will include plans and services to help you reach your goals related to education, employment, health, housing, and lifelong connections.

## Who can I contact?

Who is my **Primary FSW Caseworker**? \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Who is my **Secondary FSW Caseworker**? \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Who is my **Attorney Ad Litem (AAL)**? \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Who is my **CASA volunteer**? \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Who is my **therapist**? \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Who is my **County Supervisor**? \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Who is my **Area Director**? \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_