

Responding to COVID-19: HOW YOU CAN SUPPORT YOUTH & YOUNG ADULTS IN FLORIDA WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED CHILD WELFARE OR HOMELESSNESS

Some young people do not have access to a strong support system to which they can turn in times of crisis like this one. Many others often can rely on parents and family to guide and support them and talk through crises like these. However, youth with experience in foster care or homelessness may lack the support and help they need to prepare for, respond to, or cope with a public health crisis such as COVID-19.

This publication aims to give you some concrete tips, ideas, examples, and resources during the COVID-19 crisis so that you can play a vital role in supporting the young people that you serve.

1. Check in on youth as frequently as possible during this period of time and provide emotional support and reliable information.

Higher education liaisons, caseworkers, independent living workers, mentors, guardians ad litem, child-welfare professionals, foster parents, caregivers, and lawyers should check in with young people frequently and provide emotional support, information and resources. A health scare and increased instability may be traumatizing, cause anxiety, or bring up traumas or experiences from the past for many young people. Let youth know you are there for them so they do not feel alone. Be there for youth to talk things through, provide concrete information about resources and supports, and be equipped to help connect them with services and supports. Here are **some tips** about helping young people manage their anxiety around the virus. **Proactive adult-initiated regular check-ins with youth are highly recommended! Young people should have access to multiple caring and supportive adults during times like these!**

Please check in on us. Not in person, just over the phone, so we know someone is thinking about us. Sometimes it could feel like no one cares so it means a lot when someone asks how we are, especially in time of crisis.

- JUSTICE MCGUILL
FLORIDA YOUTH SHINE
NATURE COAST CHAPTER MEMBER

2. Help youth find a place to live, services, and funds, if youth are in college, work programs, or other situations where they must leave the residence halls, career housing, or current living situation.

Youth who have experience in foster care or are experiencing homelessness may not have a home to go to if they need to leave their dorm or residence hall. Some institutions are providing options for students to remain on campus, while others are asking students to leave immediately. Consider reaching out to the young person's school, with their consent, to see what options may be available. We must make sure these young people do not experience homelessness or end up in other unsafe living situations due to displacement.

- **Florida child welfare agencies must help students who are in foster care or extended foster care (i.e. foster care past age 18) find a placement or another place to live.** Child welfare agencies should reach out to all of their youth in college or training programs and help them arrange for placement and address any other needs like accessing food, health care, and mental health support. Advocates may need to help to make sure this process occurs. Help the youth reach out to their own caseworker and ask for help. Here is the link to the [Independent Living Coordinators for the Community Based Care](#).
- **For students experiencing homelessness**, look at potential housing options listed on [this SHC tip sheet](#). Consider partnering with a local hotel/motel for temporary housing, or petition to remain on campus.

- **The Children’s Bureau urges all child welfare agencies to immediately contact all youth and young adults in colleges or in other settings who may need assistance finding and securing housing while schools are closed.** Dr. Jerry Milner recently released a **letter** about the urgency for child welfare agencies to help these students with housing. The letter explains that:

The time to act is now. We urge all child welfare agencies to immediately contact all youth and young adults in colleges or in other settings who may need assistance finding and securing housing while their college or university is closed. Some schools and universities are offering the ability to remain in campus housing due to unique circumstances. We urge child welfare agencies to work with college and universities, urging them to continue to provide housing as appropriate to meet the special needs of youth in foster care/formerly in foster care. For those youth and young adults who are not able to stay at their colleges or universities, the child welfare agency should be prepared to offer assistance to young people in identifying housing. This could be through foster homes, assisting young people to contact relatives and other caregivers, or identifying other settings so that no young adult is without housing. In all circumstances, we encourage child welfare agencies to be attentive to youth and young adults affected by these circumstances. Youth may require assistance not only with housing, but also accessing food, health care, and emotional support. We ask child welfare agencies to act with a sense of urgency to reach out to and support youth/ young adults at this moment.

This letter can also be used when working with campus administrators to try to advocate to help serve these students and this population. There has been success around the nation assisting youth with utilizing the document to work with campuses.

3. Help youth access programs and funds that could assist in meeting needs.

Many additional obstacles and needs will arise with a crisis. Including housing, youth will also have additional needs. Help assess these, connect them to resources and help them communicate to businesses/Individuals that can assist. During this time there are unique needs for each youth. Some examples are:

- **Aftercare Services for Youth Who Have Been in Foster Care:**

Aftercare is available to young adults aged 18-22 who were in licensed care on their 18th birthday and do not currently receive **P ESS** (Postsecondary Educational Services and Supports) or **E FC** (Extended Foster Care). (Fla. Admin Code 65C-42.003). One of the services that can be provided is assistance with room and board, which can include help finding temporary housing, and help paying for rent and food. Child welfare agencies should proactively reach out to eligible youth and let them know of the availability of aftercare services to assist them during this crisis.

Case workers and advocates should help youth request these services and funds by contacting the **Independent Living Coordinator for the Community Based Care** lead agency for the county where the youth’s child welfare case was open.

Try your best not to overwhelm youth. Help us step by step on what we need to do and obtain first. For example, if the first step is to secure certain documents, don't assume that we have them or that know exactly how to get them. This may be the first time many of us are trying to navigate complex forms, please walk us through this process. Also, follow up with us with each step. Sometimes, we begin to feel overwhelmed and may feel it is too much to handle and we need an extra push and follow up. Also, keep up to date with what's going on federally so you can explain it to us in a less confusing way.

- MARIA BATISTA
FLORIDA YOUTH SHINE
STATEWIDE MEMBERSHIP CHAIR
PALM BEACH CHAPTER MEMBER

- **Emergency funds from institutions or organizations:** Students experiencing homelessness (with or without involvement in foster care) can utilize [emergency aid](#), if available from their universities or other community groups, to help with unexpected expenses related to the COVID-19 crisis. **If you are a school or agency that has the capacity to develop these funds, we encourage you to do so!**
- **Young people may be freaked out about finances:** Florida Youth SHINE and Florida's Children First created an easy to understand document with tips for young people navigating their finances. Provide [this document](#) to young people as they may find some of these tips helpful and qualify for additional assistance.
- **Research and connect resources to young adults in need in an easy to understand way:** Currently, tons of organizations, companies, and individuals are sharing resources to help individuals in crisis. The information can be complex, hard to find, and hard to keep track of. Direct youth to specific resources utilizing key lists.
 - [FindHelp.org](#) is a national website where you can enter your zip code and find lists based on needs of agencies and programs that may be able to assist young people.
 - **Florida Youth SHINE** created a Google [document](#) that they are updating daily as resources become available.
 - **Together We Rise, a non-profit organization, is trying to provide emergency assistance** to as many college students as possible who have been displaced and have experience in foster care. Help young people fill out [this form](#) (located at the bottom of the website) to see if they can get help from Together We Rise.
- **U-Haul will provide 30 days of free self-storage** at U-Haul owned and operated facilities to help college students impacted by the virus. The free month applies to new customers with college IDs and is a limited-time offer subject to availability. [Find a location here.](#)
- **Assist youth and walk them through filing applications such as unemployment benefits, food stamps, or any other emergency assistance that may be made available:** This can be so overwhelming for youth. They may have lost their jobs and may qualify for additional aid such as unemployment or other federal emergency assistance that is still TBD. Help them connect with services, fill out forms and explain these processes. Do this via phone or video chat. This can be extremely helpful as sometimes they just need someone to walk them through complicated processes.

4. Create youth and young adult friendly materials to explain what is happening and what young people should do to stay healthy, as well as when to seek care.

Most of us didn't have a pile of hand sanitizer or cleaning supplies. Anything at this point can help some youth, even basic hygiene products. Consider dropping this off at our door, even if we don't ask. Also, many youth may have not gotten the skills and education about proper hygiene and infection control. Even if you think we know the basics, remind us of simple things like avoiding public areas, washing hands, and educating us on what the public may have touched. It's not always something we know.

- MARC LOUIS

FLORIDA YOUTH SHINE EVENTS & MEETINGS CHAIR
BROWARD CHAPTER MEMBER

This is undoubtedly the first time youth and young adults have experienced a public health crisis of this type and magnitude. It is extremely scary and confusing. They need information that is clear and understandable and they need it to be delivered in ways that they can consume. For example, terms like "social distancing" should be explained in ways that are clear and help youth protect themselves. Consider these tips from The Hope Center about Supporting [#RealCollege](#) Students During COVID-19.

5. Help young people access local resources that provide the most recent information about the frequently changing conditions and access to new resources and supports.

Young people may need help understanding what information sources are reliable. Help them identify reliable sources for news and information. For example, Florida's Department of Health provides updated information at [Florida Health COVID-19](#) and will answer questions by phone at [866-779-6121](tel:866-779-6121) or by email at COVID-19@flhealth.gov.

Encourage students to consult their college's or program's websites on a regular basis for any changes. They should also use school portals or email to connect with their teachers regarding any questions or concerns they have concerning assignments or access to the internet.

Help us by informing yourself on the struggles, laws, resources, and updated information regarding foster youth in your state. Understanding the current issues at hand and the stories of youth will give you good insight on how to address the struggles we are currently facing. Stay current on all of the updates coming from the federal and state level and communicate those things to us.

- BRIAN THOMPSON
FLORIDA YOUTH SHINE
BROWARD CHAPTER MEMBER

6. Create forums and opportunities for youth and young adults to connect with each other. Ensure youth have technology and other virtual/safe resources to participate in remote learning and stay connected with peers and other supports.

- **Ensure youth have necessary technology.** First, help young people take advantage of opportunities to continue their studies. While some colleges may be continuing classes online, it is critical to recognize that students might not have access to the internet, laptops, or a safe and stable place to study. Youth and young adults from foster care, or who are experiencing homelessness, often rely on public spaces for internet access, to meet with friends, and to find safety. If we are telling young people to stay away from these public spaces, we need to provide alternative educational opportunities, such as providing laptops, wi-fi hotspots, and a place to take classes and study.

- o **Connect youth with the following free or affordable internet services:** Comcast is offering free broadband internet to low-income households. [To qualify for Internet Essentials](#), youth must be eligible for public assistance programs such as the National School Lunch Program, Medicaid, or SNAP.

Spectrum is also offering free internet for students in K-12. [Contact link.](#)

- **Provide young people with safe ways to maintain social connections that will help them get through this challenging time.** Create opportunities for togetherness and community that are alternatives to congregating in groups and public spaces so they do not feel alone. Doing "watch parties" on the internet, scheduling online or web-based activities should be considered. You can also help youth stay connected by setting up a private Facebook page for groups to safely talk and provide support to one another.

7. Help youth take care of their health and behavioral health needs.

- **Assist youth with receiving appropriate physical and behavioral health care.** This includes helping youth continue to meet existing needs and also meeting any new needs that have arisen during this crisis. Help youth connect with their treatment providers to figure out how to continue treatment, including appointments and prescriptions. Help youth access telehealth options for medical appointments if needed.
- **Provide appropriate resources.** The National Association of Mental Illness is operating a mental health hotline **if you or youth are experiencing anxiety or other wellness needs call 800-950-6264 or text 741741.** **This guide was released from the National Association of Mental Illness** as a reference for those needing help.

8. Help young people maintain any public benefits that may be impacted by changes in work or training schedules and assist them in receiving work study wages.

- **A young person's work hours may be cut or suspended due to COVID-19 precautionary measures** and this may impact their receipt of crucial public benefits like SNAP, TANF, or School Readiness (child care assistance). Please work with youth to call the **Customer Call Center at Florida ACCESS 866-762-2737** to report changes and determine alternative ways to comply. Federal guidance allows schools to pay work study students if work is no longer possible due to school closures. Assist youth in receiving these wages.

9. Help youth apply for Reemployment Assistance (formerly Unemployment Insurance).

- **Reemployment Assistance is available to young people who were working but become unemployed.** Assistance is also available for those who are still working but had their hours cut and now earn less than \$275 in gross earnings per week. More information about that process can be found [here](#). Help young people apply for assistance [here](#).

***Please note these websites will experience high traffic during this crisis and their may be obstacles youth experience in qualifying. Do your best to walk them through this process and advocate if they qualify. You just may need to be patient and advise youth to do the same as this application is processed.**

10. Help young people learn about the laws that can assist them.

- **The Homeless Youth Handbook** available [here](#) has information on a number of topics relevant to young people and poor people, generally. It is easily accessible on mobile devices and contains information applicable to many people, not only youth who are homeless.

Reach out to youth and young adults weekly. Especially as new information is coming from the federal and local level. Explain to youth the difference between the federal/state/city/county guidelines. **DO NOT FORGET** to reach out to the youth that you don't think need assistance and are normally independent. Some may hide their thoughts and fears better than others. Just because they do not seem scared and like they have it together doesn't mean they are not.

This is a very scary time with many unknowns. Teenagers are not only looking for emotional support, but they want to know the answers to the questions that they hear from the press conferences. It may not be an answer they like, but they will appreciate/respect you more if you truly answer their questions. With social media live streaming most news conferences, this is the perfect opportunity to go over what they are saying so you can better explain it to them.

- JESSICA OVERSTREET
FORMER YOUTH FROM FOSTER CARE
FLORIDA YOUTH SHINE ALUMNI

We are Proud to Work with These Organizations
to Bring You This Important Information.

Juvenile Law Center
Fighting for the rights
and well-being of youth



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