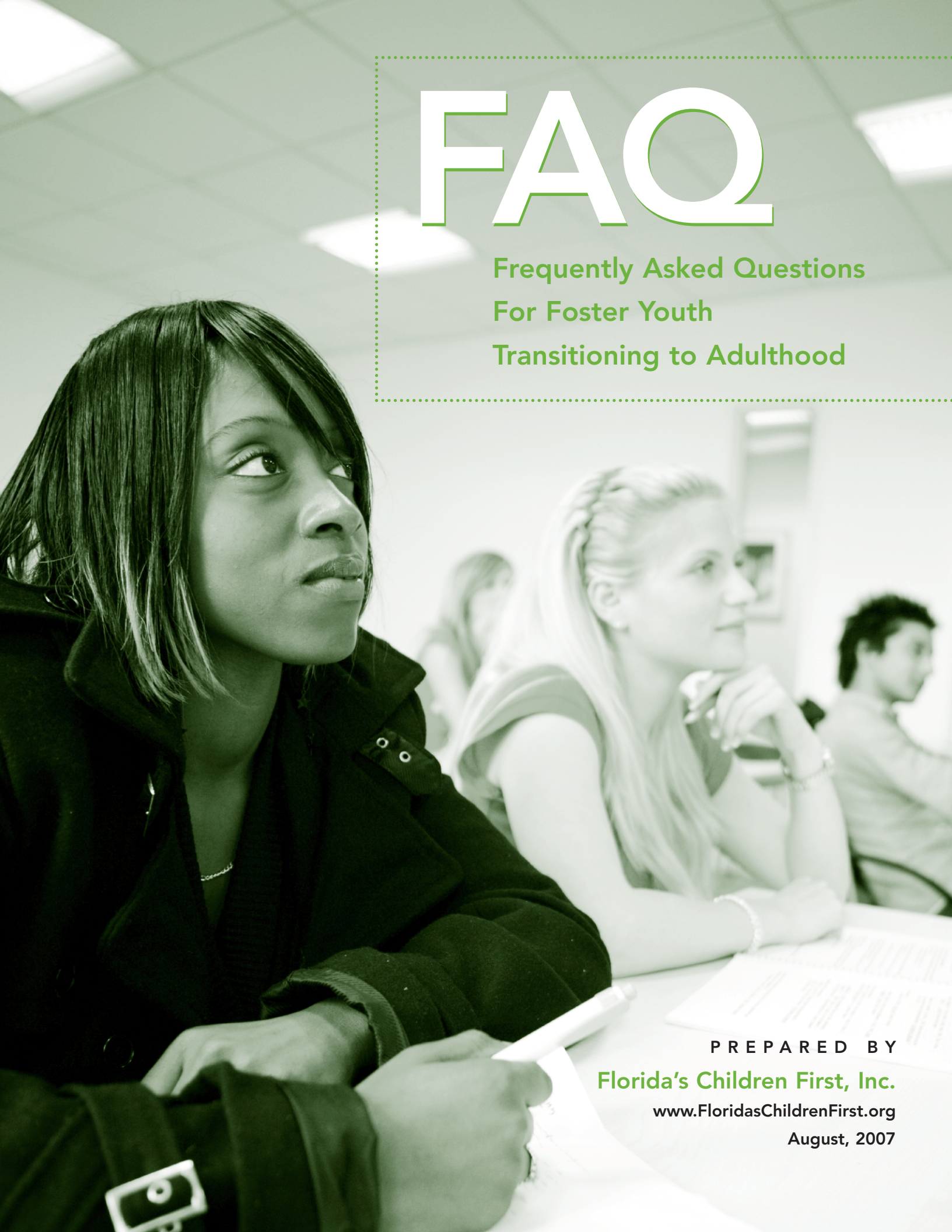


FAQ

Frequently Asked Questions For Foster Youth Transitioning to Adulthood

PREPARED BY

Florida's Children First, Inc.

www.FloridasChildrenFirst.org

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General Questions

GENERAL QUESTIONS

1. Do I have any rights? What are they?

Youth in state care have many legal rights that come from state and federal laws and Constitutions. The Department of Children and Families has created a list of your rights and what you can expect from the Department. Your community based care agency (CBC) caseworker is required to provide you with a copy of that document.

2. What is the "Independent Living Program" and how do I find out about it?

The Independent Living Program provides services to youth in foster care and young adults who were formerly in foster care. The objective of the program is to assist you with obtaining the life skills and education necessary to become self-sufficient, live independently and maintain employment. The services include life skills training and financial, educational and social support. Examples of such services are parenting classes, career counseling, therapy and psychological counseling and assistance with time management and organization. Your community based care agency (CBC) caseworker is responsible for informing you about all of the independent living services, including the Road to Independence Program and aftercare and transitional funds and services.

3. I am worried that I will not be adopted before I turn 18. What can I do to prepare myself for leaving foster care?

In addition to participating in the Independent Living program, there are many other things you can do to help yourself. First, attend school and work with your guidance counselor on the best courses to take. For example, some schools provide classes for credit on consumer issues like financial literacy; others will provide credit for off campus employment and assist you with obtaining and keeping a job. Work with your team to learn your strengths and needs, your aptitudes for careers. Collect and organize your important documents. Take as many life skills classes as possible. You may learn something or meet someone at those classes that will help you.

4. What are the documents that my caseworker needs to provide to me prior to my turning 18? Why is this important?

You need all of the documents and information listed below in order to live independently. Consider making a personal file and keeping all these documents in a safe place. Replacing lost documents can take a lot of time and effort. Be sure you get a certified copy of your birth certificate so that you can obtain a driver's license or Florida identification card and obtain a Passport.

This is a list of the documents that the Department is supposed to give you. [Fla. Stat. §39.701(6)(a)] The Department is required to verify to the judge hearing your case, no later than 3 months after you turn 17 that you have already been provided with the following documents and information:

1. Current Medicaid card and all information necessary to apply for Medicaid coverage when you reach 18, if you are eligible
2. Certified copy of your birth certificate;
3. A Florida identification card (unless you have a Florida driver's license).
4. All information relating to Social Security Insurance benefits, if you are eligible. (See question 10 for more about benefits.)
5. Information and training related to budgeting skills, interview skills, and parenting skills.
6. All information regarding the Road to Independence Program, including eligibility requirements, forms, and assistance in completing the forms.
7. Information confirming that, if you qualify for the Road To Independence Program, you may continue to reside with your foster family or group care provider or a different foster family or group care provider.
8. A bank account and essential banking skills.
9. Information on public assistance and how to apply.
10. A clear understanding of where you will be living when you turn 18, how you will pay for living expenses, and what school or other educational program you will be attending.
11. Notice of your right to request extended jurisdiction of the juvenile court.
12. Notice that you have been encouraged to attend all juridical review hearings after you turn 17.

5. How can I get a driver's license?

If you are under 18, your foster parent, a group home employee or your CBC caseworker can sign the application for your learner's driver's license. Then when you are eligible for a regular driver's license, your CBC caseworker can sign that application. However, the caseworker can only sign if getting a driver's license is part of your transition plan, so make sure it is in included in your plan. [Fla. Stat.§322.09(4) and (5)]

If you are over 18 you do not need anyone to sign for your license. You must bring proof of identity, your social security number and proof that you took a Traffic Law and Substance Abuse education course.

You will need to bring a car for the driving test. It must have a valid license tag, proof of insurance, and pass a vehicle test. You can get information on the requirements, including a copy of the handbook to study at http://www.hsmv.state.fl.us/html/dlnew.html. You can also obtain information and handbooks at your department of motor vehicles, look in the government section of your phonebook – usually the blue pages in the front.

6. Where can I get more information if my questions aren't answered here? Is there a place I can get information on the resources in my community?

The Florida 211 Network is a great place to start when you need help and aren't sure where to turn. In most parts of the state you can call 211 from any phone and be connected with people who are familiar with all the government and public services available in your community. You should call 911 when you have a police, fire or medical emergency. But when you need help that doesn't fit in one of those categories, then call 211.

Court

COURT

7. Should I attend my court hearings? Will the judge listen to me?

Yes. You have the right to attend all of your court hearings, and the judge will listen to you. It is important for you to attend your hearings, so you can have a say in what happens in your life, discuss your concerns, and ask for help with things you need. If you are under age 18, then your case is heard by the juvenile court at least twice each year. Your caseworker is required to inform you of your court hearings and to arrange for your transportation if you are under age 18.

You also have the right to schedule your own court hearing, so you can talk to the judge. If you have an attorney and/or a guardian ad litem, they can help schedule a court hearing for you. You can also call the judge's office yourself and ask the judge's assistant to please schedule a court hearing in your case. The judge's assistant will be able to give you a date and time when the judge is available to hear your case. Ask the judge's assistant to please help you contact the other people involved in your case, so they will know about the court hearing you schedule.

If you do not know the name of the judge that hears your case, then you can ask the Court Clerk's office for the information. The phone number for the Clerk of Courts is in the government section (usually blue pages in the front) of the phone book and is available on the Internet. Ask for the Juvenile division, then give them your name and date of birth, let them know that you are a foster youth, and ask them to please tell you the name and phone number of the judge that hears your case and your case number.

It is also very helpful to have legal representation when you go to court. You can call your local legal aid program, (in the phone book or online at FloridaLawHelp.org) to try to find a free attorney.

8. What is extended jurisdiction? How will it impact RTI? If jurisdiction is extended, do I have to stay in licensed foster care until I'm 19? What level of involvement will the courts have in my life?

The juvenile court's jurisdiction (which is the ability of the court to hear your case) normally ends when you reach the age of 18. However, the Court is permitted to retain jurisdiction for one additional year – until you turn 19. [Fla. Stat. §39.013(2)]

Extended jurisdiction does not require you to stay in licensed foster care (although you may, if you wish).

Extended jurisdiction does not mean that the Court will interfere in your life.

Extended jurisdiction does not mean that you are still in "foster care." After 18, you are no longer in foster care.

Extended jurisdiction simply means that the Court will have authority to require the Department to provide you with all of the services to which you are entitled as a transitioning foster youth.

To obtain extended jurisdiction, you must file a motion (a legal paper) with the Court requesting extended jurisdiction or make the request at a Court hearing. The request can be made any time before you turn 19. Preferably, the request should be made before you turn 18.

Extended jurisdiction is expressly for the purpose of making sure that the following services have been satisfactorily provided to you, if you are eligible:

1. Appropriate aftercare support;
2. Road to Independence Scholarship (now called Road To Independence Program);
3. Transitional support;
4. Mental health services; and
5. Developmental disability services.

We recommend that every foster youth file a motion requesting extended jurisdiction because there is no downside (which means it cannot hurt) and the assistance of the juvenile court judge may be needed at some point in time to enforce certain rights or to require the Department to take certain action to help you. If you do not request extended jurisdiction, then the Juvenile Court Judge cannot help you after you turn 18. Since it is your choice as to whether or not the judge hears your case, and your consent is required, you can always withdraw your consent if you change your mind and don't want the court to hear your case anymore.

Money

MONEY

9. Am I entitled to an allowance?

Yes, all youth in state care are entitled to receive an allowance every month. If you live in a foster home then your foster parents receive money every month that they are supposed to give you as an allowance. This is separate from money they get to purchase you clothes and buy personal hygiene items for you. The amount of allowance varies by age and provider but it ranges from $10 to $20 a month. You may save this money or spend it each month. Although there may be some restrictions on what you can buy (for example no cigarettes or knives), it is your money so use it wisely. Allowance cannot be with held as a form of punishment. [(Fla. Admin Code 65C-30.007(10)(k)]

10. Can I get a job?

Unless working would interfere with your education or other needs, you can obtain a job. The money you earn is yours to save or use, as you want.

11. I heard that I am getting government benefits, but I never see the money. What happens to it?

Many youth in foster care with disabilities receive SSI (Supplemental Security Income) benefits; others receive Social Security benefits because a parent is dead or disabled. Some youth might get veteran's benefits or child support. If you are receiving benefits, the money is put into an account called the Master Trust. [Fla. Admin. Code 65C-17.002]

If you do not know whether you have any money in the Master Trust, or don't know what it is being spent on you should ask your caseworker for an "Accounting." An Accounting is a list of the money that comes in to your account and what money is spent on. You are entitled to know what is happening in your account.

The State is allowed to deduct the cost of your care (foster care board rate or group home rate) from the money that is put in the account each month. The State is supposed to send you a notice telling you that it is deducting the money from your account. It is also supposed to send you an application for a "waiver" which is a way of requesting the State deduct less money so that you can save money for your future use. If you are going to need money for an apartment and deposits you should ask for help applying for a waiver. When you turn 18, the State is supposed to give you all the money in your account. If you do receive money, think very carefully about how to use it. Don't let others take advantage of you—that money is for your current and future needs.

You can read more about your rights regarding money in a separate brochure called, Know Your Rights: Money.

12. How old do I have to be to open a bank account?

Ordinarily you must be 18 or have an adult co-signer in order to open a bank account. However, Florida recently changed the law so that youth in foster care may open bank accounts after they turn 16. [Fla. Stat. §743.044] In order to open an account when you are 16 or 17 you will need to take a financial literacy class. Your caseworker or independent living coordinator should be able to help you find a class. Then you will need a Court Order, a piece of paper signed by your judge, that states that the "disability of non age" is removed for purposes of opening bank account. The Order should not reference your foster care status, to protect your privacy. Three months before you turn 18 you can get a similar court order that will allow you to sign a lease. (See question 53).

13. What is the difference between a debit card, a credit card and an ATM card? Why do I have such big expenses with my debit card?

A credit card allows you to buy things on credit. That means the bank trusts that you will pay your bill later for money that you are borrowing today. When you first get a credit card it will have a small limit. If you try to buy something that costs more than the limit, your credit card will be refused. Building good credit and not getting stuck paying lots of interest is important. You should learn a lot more about finances before you use a credit card.

Money

An ATM (automatic teller machine) card lets you take money out of your bank account. You cannot use an ATM card to buy things at a store or pay at a restaurant. An ATM card will only have the bank's name on it; it will not have a MasterCard or Visa symbol. If you use your ATM card at a location other than a branch of your bank you will probably be charged an additional fee.

A debit card lets you do two things, take money out of an ATM and pay for things at a restaurant or store. A debit card will have a MasterCard or Visa symbol on it. When you use the debit card, money is taken directly out of your account (the same as an ATM card).

Using your ATM or debit card can be very expensive if you do not carefully monitor what is in your account. Check to find out whether your bank gives you "overdraft protection." That means the bank will let you use your ATM or debit card to take out more money than you have left. That might seem nice, but it can cost you a lot of money. The bank will charge you a fee every time you take out more money than you have.

So, if you have $25 in your account and you use your debit card to buy a pair of jeans that costs $28 – then you will owe the bank $3 plus the fee (which might be $30). If you then use the debit card to buy a cheeseburger and soda for $5, you would owe the bank $5 plus an additional $30. That means the bank will automatically take the next $68 you put into your account.

If you are not good at keeping track of how much money is in your account then you can ask the bank to stop the overdraft protection. In that case you will have to use cash or checks to pay for things.

14. I heard that some people get money back from the government through EITC. What is that and how do I qualify?

EITC is the Earned Income Tax Credit. It is a program that is part of the IRS (Internal Revenue Service) that actually pays you money if you earn some, but not a lot of money. If you are under the age of 25 you might be eligible for EITC if you earn money by working and you have children. You must have earned some money by working, not just by getting government benefits. Your child must have lived with you for more than half of the year that you are seeking the credit for. Once you turn 25, even if you don't have children you might be eligible for EITC.

You can receive EITC even if you are getting other public assistance such as TANF, food stamps, SSI and Medicaid. It does not count as "income" for public benefits decisions. You can also get EITC for past years if you were eligible.

You do not have to make enough money to be required to pay taxes in order to get EITC, but you must fill out a tax form to get it. You can get free help preparing your taxes from a VITA (Volunteer Income Tax Assistance) program. To find the closest program, call 1-800-829-1040. This can be extra money for you and your family, it is definitely worth finding out whether you are eligible to get EITC!

Transition, Education & Career Plans

TRANSITION, EDUCATION & CAREER PLANS

15. What is a transition plan and how do I get one?

A transition plan is a written plan with strategies to help you live independently and to help you determine your personal support system, which includes such people as your friends, foster family, Guardian Ad Litem, relatives and any other adults that have helped you along the way. It is up to you and your provider agency to come up with your transition plan together. Your transition plan is developed at a staffing that you and your caseworker attend, as well as any other interested parties. During the staffing, you should make sure that your caseworker understands your plans for the future and that you incorporate all of your transitioning needs into your plan. The plan should identify who is responsible for the task and when it will be done. By being specific, you and the adults around you will be able to hold each other accountable. Remember, you are the person who knows you best and knows your hopes and goals.

16. What is an education or career path and who should help me make one?

Beginning at age 13, you must choose an educational or career path based upon your abilities, needs, and interests. This is a goal that you would like to work on achieving after graduating high school. There are four main goals:

1. Obtaining a 4-year university degree;
2. Obtaining a 2-year college degree;
3. Obtaining a career/technical certificate; or
4. Beginning employment after completion of high school or enlisting in the military.

You must choose your own goal, with the assistance of your caseworker, foster parents, and teacher. The goal becomes part of your case plan, and everyone tries to assist you in reaching that goal. The goal is flexible, and you can change that goal while in foster care or after leaving foster care.

Based on your choices, foster parents, caseworkers and other adults in your life must help you identify:

1. The core courses necessary for a chosen goal.
2. Any elective course that would provide additional help in reaching a chosen goal.
3. The grade point requirement and any additional information necessary to achieve your goals.
4. If your foster parents' involvement is insufficient or unavailable, a teacher, school staff member, employee of the department or community-based care provider, or community volunteer will be willing to work with you as an academic advocate or mentor.

17. What if I change my career goal?

You may change your goal at any time, AND you should ask for a meeting/staffing to write a new plan adjusted to your new goal. It is important for you to select your goal and do your educational path carefully.

HEALTH

18. What is Medicaid and why should I apply?

Medicaid is essentially free health insurance for people who cannot afford to buy private health insurance.

Medicaid is available only to certain individuals and families by federal and state law. Under Florida law, you are entitled to receive Medicaid as a former foster child until age 21. You may be eligible to have Medicaid after the age of 21 if you are part of the Road to Independence program, have a disability, are pregnant or meet other criteria.

Medicaid does not pay money to you; instead, it sends payment directly to your doctor and other health care providers. You may also be asked to pay a small part of the cost (co-payment) for some medical services.

You must apply for Medicaid so that if you need medical attention, Medicaid will pay the cost of the doctor or hospital visit. Take charge of your health care! Be sure your IL worker submitted all of your paper work before you leave foster care at age 18 so there will be no gap in your health care.

19. My Medicaid coverage was stopped before 21, how can I get it back?

There are only two reasons that former foster youth should loose their Medicaid before the age of 21. One is when they die and the second is when they move out of state.

If you move out of state, you might be eligible for Medicaid under other criteria in the new state, so you should check with the local benefits office.

If you move back to Florida before you turn 21 or if a mistake was made in stopping your Medicaid, you are can have your Medicaid coverage start again (reinstated). You must go to your Community Based Care provider to let them know that you are still living in Florida and that you want your Medicaid coverage back.

After you are 21 you must go to the local DCF office to apply for Medicaid.

20. What does Medicaid cover?

Until you are 21, you are eligible for the EPSDT (Early, Periodic, Screening, Diagnosis and Treatment) coverage of Medicaid. That means Medicaid will pay for all medical care and services that are "medically necessary." Medically necessary means that a doctor has determined that you need the service and has written a prescription saying that it is medically necessary for you to receive the care, medication or services.

Medicaid will cover your care if you are sick or injured. Go to the doctor if you don't feel well, do not wait until things get so bad that you have to go to the hospital. Medicaid will also cover things like mental health counseling and prescription medication including

Health

birth control, so seek help when you need it. Medicaid also provides good maternal and prenatal care. If you are pregnant go to a doctor early so you and your baby can stay healthy.

Finally, it is also important to go to the doctor for regular check ups. You can have a health check up once a year. If the doctor discovers any health concerns, Medicaid will cover the follow up treatments. You should have your last health check up at least 4 months before your 21st birthday so there will be enough time to get any follow up treatment that you need.

Under 18

PROGRAMS FOR YOUTH UNDER 18

21. What are the Independent Living programs for a youth under age 18? When do I become eligible?

If you are under age 18, there are three different programs:

1. Pre-Independent Living Services;
2. Life Skills Services; and
3. Subsidized Independent Living.

You become eligible for Pre-independent living services at age 13, and these services include life skills training, educational field trips, and conferences. You become eligible for Life Skills Services at age 15, and these services include independent living skills training (including training to develop banking and budgeting skills, interviewing skills, parenting skills, and time management or organizational skills), educational support, employment training, and counseling. The cornerstone of the program is your identification of your needs, interests and abilities with the help of the adults in your life and then planning actions/services to help you meet your goals. You may become eligible for Subsidized Independent Living at age 16, and this program allows mature youth to live on their own if they qualify.

22. What is subsidized independent living (SIL) and what are the eligibility requirements? Can I live with a relative or friend and receive SIL, and if I do, will I be eligible for RTI when I age out?

Subsidized independent living ("SIL") is an optional way of achieving independence prior to turning 18 with requirements established by Florida laws.

Florida law now requires that all youth be formally evaluated at age 16 to determine whether they are eligible for SIL.

As a youth in SIL, you can live in an unlicensed setting, including your own apartment, the home of a relative or family friend, or a special home run by your community based care provider. Although you are not technically in foster care, you will still have an open court case. That means that a judge will still conduct hearings and make decisions involving you, and a caseworker will continue to be assigned to the case. In addition, you will receive money each month to help with expenses.

A youth eligible for SIL is:

- At least 16 years old, but not yet 18
- Adjudicated dependent
- Living in licensed out of home care (foster care) six months prior to entering into SIL (this does not to be a consecutive period of time or the time period immediately preceding SIL)

In addition, a candidate for SIL must demonstrate independent living skills. The Department of Children and Families determines how you can demonstrate these skills:

- You must be employed at least part-time and must earn at least $100 per month **or** be involved in extra-curricular activities.
- You must have sufficient savings or other means to pay for move-in and first month's living expenses.
- You must be in school full-time, and must maintain adequate progress in school.
- You must be able to show that you have the necessary skills to live on your own with little supervision.
- You must not have exhibited irresponsible behavior in the last 6 months, for example, running away, committing violent acts toward others, delinquency charges or property crimes.

It is important to remember that exceptions for some of these criteria can be made if you are otherwise a good candidate for SIL.

If you are in SIL when you turn 18, you are eligible for RTI.

18 & Older

PROGRAMS FOR YOUTH 18 & OLDER

23. What programs and services are available for a youth at age 18?

If you are in foster care at age 18, then you may be able to receive assistance from three different programs:

1. Road to Independence;
2. Transitional Support Services; and
3. Aftercare Services.

The Road to Independence and Transitional programs require that you have been in foster care for at least 6 months, while the Aftercare program just requires you to be in foster care at age 18. If you are eligible, you can receive assistance until your 23rd birthday.

The Road to Independence program requires you to be in school, and you can receive a stipend of up to $,1014 per month. The amount of the Road to Independence stipend is based on an assessment of your needs. The Transitional program does not require you to be in school, but does require a transitional plan that outlines specific steps you must take in order to become independent. You can receive funds and services from the Transitional program. From the Aftercare program, you can receive emergency funds to prevent homelessness, as well as services. If you are eligible, you can receive assistance from all three programs.

RTI Program

ROAD TO INDEPENDENCE PROGRAM

24. What is RTI and how do I qualify?

RTI is the Road to Independence Program, a program that can provide former foster youth with funds and services to help you receive the education and training you need to become independent and self-supporting. In order to qualify, you must:

- Apply after you turn 17, but before you turn 21 (you can renew the award until you turn 23).
- Have been adjudicated dependent and spent at least 6 months in foster care prior to your 18th birthday (this includes time spent in shelter care).
- Have been living in licensed foster care or SIL on your 18th birthday OR have been adopted or placed into a dependency guardianship after the age of 16.
- Be a Florida resident.
- Be enrolled in school full-time (except a youth who has a documented disability can enroll part-time).

25. I am turning 18 soon and was told that I am eligible for the Road to Independence program. When do I receive my first Road to Independence stipend check?

The rules state that you are supposed to receive your first Road to Independence check at the beginning of the month that you turn 18 years old. Also, the rules state that you are supposed to receive your full check for the month and not a lower amount, even if you turn 18 later in the month. [Fla. Admin. Code §65C-31.004(1)(c)(3)

26. What is Direct Deposit and how do I qualify?

The law now requires the Department to pay all awards under the Road to Independence Program (all money paid to you, including your monthly stipend) by direct deposit, unless you choose otherwise. [Fla. Stat. §409.1451(5)(d)2]

Direct deposit means that the money is paid electronically to your bank account. You do not receive a paper check. The benefit of direct deposit is that you no longer have to travel to the Independent Living office every month to get your check. It also means that the full amount of the deposit is available to you on the first day that the money is deposited. Direct Deposit will assist you in establishing credit.

The only condition to obtaining direct deposit is that you must complete an approved life skills course in financial literacy.

RTI Program

27. I'm in school and I'm receiving a monthly Road to Independence stipend, but I'm not receiving Transitional Support funds. Am I required to have a written Transition Plan with tasks that I must complete to continue to receive my Road to Independence stipend?

No. If you receive Transitional Support funds, then you must have a Transition Plan with tasks that you are accountable for working on completing in order to receive continued assistance. However, if you solely receive the monthly Road to Independence stipend, then you are not required to complete tasks in a Transition Plan in order to continue to receive your stipend.

To receive your Road to Independence stipend, you must be in school and make satisfactory progress in your classes--that is the task you need to complete. You can lose your Road to Independence stipend if you are not in school. However, you cannot lose your Road to Independence stipend if you don't complete tasks in a Transition Plan.

Regardless, it is very important for all young adults in the Road to Independence program to work together with your caseworker to plan for your transition to independence. You are well advised to voluntarily agree to accept services offered that would help you with your goals. It is also very important for you to be responsible and to work on accomplishing what you need to do to complete your education and make your transition to adulthood successful.

28. I voluntarily terminated my RTI funds. Now I want to start them again. Is there a waiting period for me to qualify?

If you are participating in the RTI program and voluntarily withdraw, drop out, or are terminated from the program, you are entitled to apply for reinstatement of your RTI award. It is important to remember that you can only apply for reinstatement ONE time. [Fla. Admin. Code 65C-31.004(3)]. To qualify for reinstatement, you must meet the eligibility requirements listed above.

Your community-based care provider "CBC" usually requires you to be enrolled in school for a set period of time before your RTI award will be reinstated. However, you may also receive transitional support services to help you to attend school while you are waiting for reinstatement of your RTI award.

29. What are they talking about when they say Needs Assessment and Cost of Attendance for the RTI Program?

Needs Assessment and Cost of Attendance are names for the process used to figure out the amount of money each youth can receive in the RTI stipend. Understanding what they are and figuring out how they apply to you can mean more money in your stipend.

30. I have finished high school and will be attending a post-secondary institution full-time. What documents do I need to provide for the Road to Independence Program Needs Assessment?

If you are eligible and have completed an application for the Road to Independence Program, a caseworker will work with you to figure out how much money you will receive each month. The caseworker looks at how much it is going to cost you to attend school and pay for living expenses, and how much money you will be receiving from any other sources. Then, using all of that information, the caseworker completes a Needs Assessment form to figure out how much money you will need to make sure your educational and basic living expenses are covered while you are in school. Your monthly RTI award will depend on your particular financial needs.

Before the caseworker can complete the Needs Assessment and figure out how much money you will receive each month, there are a number of documents you need to provide. It may be a good idea to visit your school and meet with admissions and financial aid office staff to make sure you have everything you need before the Needs Assessment is done.

31. What documents do I need for a Needs Assessment?

The caseworker can help you determine what documents are needed, and should work with you and your school to make sure you get everything in. If documents are missing, the caseworker will let you know. Remember, it is YOUR responsibility to make sure all the information makes it to the caseworker. If you do not provide all the necessary documents, your monthly award could be delayed and/or reduced. Here is a list of the documents you should gather:

- **Proof of full-time enrollment.** This shows that the school has accepted you and that you plan to attend full-time.
- **A printout of your "Cost of Attendance."** You can get a printout of your Cost of Attendance from your school's financial aid office. Some schools might call this your "Student Budget." More information about Cost of Attendance is provided below.
- **Proof of tuition and fee exemption.** If you will be attending a state university or community college in Florida, you do not have to pay tuition or school fees. Your IL caseworker will provide you with a tuition exemption letter, which you need to provide to the financial aid office at your school.

RTI Program

- **An award letter stating that you have been awarded a Pell Grant (if you have one).** If you are eligible for a Pell Grant, you have to apply for one, and your caseworker must help you apply.
- **Any award letters for other scholarships or grant money (if you have this).** If you have received any other grants or scholarships to help you pay for your education, you must provide that information. And Congratulations to you!
- **Statement of earned income (if you have this)**. If you have been working and intend to keep the same job while attending school, you should provide several of your most recent paycheck stubs to show how much income you earn. Be certain to tell your caseworker if you are working a temporary or seasonal job. If you are not working now but have a job lined up, you should provide a letter from your employer stating how many hours you will be working and what your hourly pay will be.
- **Documentation of other sources of funds or services.** If you receive any other money or services that will help you attend school and reduce your expenses, you should let the caseworker know and provide documentation.

32. What does "Cost of Attendance" mean?

Your Cost of Attendance, also called your Student Budget at some schools, tells you how much money you will need in order to pay for tuition, books, housing, food, transportation, etc.—all the costs of attending school full-time. Your school's financial aid office should be able to provide you with a printout of the current Cost of Attendance or Student Budget for your school and you may request that the school adjust the average budget to meet your particular needs as described below.

The caseworker will use the information on the Cost of Attendance or Student Budget printout to determine how much it will cost you to go to school full-time and pay for your living expenses. If the Cost of Attendance of Student Budget you received from your school's financial aid office does not contain certain expenses you know you will have, you can talk to your school's financial aid office about having those expenses added in. For example, if you have a child, you can ask the financial aid office to include the costs of paying for childcare while you attend classes and study. If you have a disability, you can ask the financial aid office to include the costs of special equipment you will need to attend school. Not all expenses can be included in your Cost of Attendance—talk to the financial aid office about what can be included and what cannot.

If your school's financial aid office does not have a Cost of Attendance or Student Budget for you, it's because you did not complete a financial aid application. This application is called the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and can be completed online. If you need help completing the application, you should talk to your assigned caseworker or the financial aid office as early as possible. Under the new law, your caseworker MUST help you with this process.

33. What Documents do I need for the Summer Needs Assessment?

During the summer months, you have the option of attending school and receiving funding for your educational and living expenses, or working and receiving funding only for your living expenses. If you choose to attend school, you will need to provide the same documentation as listed above. If you choose to work, you will need to provide documentation relating to your job and the amount of money you will be earning. If you choose to work but have difficulty finding employment, the caseworker will ask you to provide information about your job search.

34. How long will the whole process take?

After you have applied for the Road to Independence Program, you will be notified within 10 working days whether or not you are eligible for the Program. If you are eligible, then it's up to you to get all the requested documents in. If you are under 18, your Needs Assessment should be completed no later than 30 days before you turn 18. You will then meet with the assigned caseworker, who will explain your award to you and have you sign a form. Your first check will be available at the beginning of the month in which you turn 18 (for example, if you turn 18 on August 20, your check should be available on August 1).

If you are over 18, the Needs Assessment should be completed within 30 days after you apply for the RTI Program and get all the requested documents in. You will then meet with the assigned caseworker, who will explain your award to you and have you sign a form. Your first check will be available at the beginning of the next month.

35. Can I work part time and receive RTI?

The RTI rules allow you to earn approximately $5,000 during the school year without reducing your monthly award, and approximately $1,500 during the summer without reducing your monthly award. This means that if you earn the Florida minimum wage ($6.67/hour), you can work approximately 20 hours per week and still continue to receive the same RTI award. If you earn more than that, you can still receive the RTI award, but it will be reduced based on your extra earnings. If you lose your job, quit your

RTI Program

job, or change your hours significantly, you should notify your assigned caseworker as soon as possible. If you are trying to decide how many hours to work, keep in mind that you have to pass your classes to continue receiving the RTI award. It is important to keep a balance between work and your studies to maximize your potential and to stay eligible for the RTI program.

36. Why am I required to either go to summer school or seek summer employment to keep my eligibility?

The intent of the financial support is that you receive from both state and federal funds for the Road to Independence Program. This program is meant to support your transition to adulthood. Thus, there is the expectation that you attend school full time during the academic year and that you either attend school during the summer, or you diligently seek employment so that you are doing your part in working towards your self-sufficiency and independence. In order for most students to work, go to school, and graduate within a reasonable time, attending summer school may be essential.

You can take any type of class in the summer that will advance your academic direction. For example, if your course of study requires electives, you can take them in the summer. You do not have to take a difficult class if you need a break from a rigorous academic program. The choice is yours, but try to be sure that the classes you take are consistent with the credits you need to advance your educational goals. You can also seek an internship experience, whether for pay or volunteer, that may give you school credits. This can be used as proof of compliance with "the rules."

It is important for you to remember that all youth receiving RTI must either be in school or diligently seeking employment. The thinking behind that is if you are a youth committed to achieving your goals, then you will make a productive use of your time. Also, adults do not have three-month vacations from work and this program is supposed to prepare you for the world of work. Thus, if you choose to take a break from school and do not seek work, including an unpaid internship experience, you may have your RTI payments suspended for the summer months.

If you look for a summer job but are not successful then you will need to provide proof of your diligent efforts to seek employment. You will be expected to keep a written record of your work search, including the date and method of each employer contact, the result of your contact and the employer's name and address. You should also obtain a phone number for the employer and whom you spoke or met with. Should you obtain employment then you must let your caseworker know within the first week. You will be expected to provide copies of your pay stubs to document your eligibility to receive the RTI funds for the summer.

Please be advised that your RTI stipend could be decreased for the summer if you earn more than the income protection allowance, which is based on 20 hours per week at Florida's minimum wage (which currently is $6.71) on a monthly basis. While it is clear that this application of your hard earned monies towards your RTI stipend appears as a de-motivator for seeking summer employment, it is important to understand that the State funds are there to support your own efforts at gaining self-sufficiency and independence. It would be wonderful if the rules provided you with the opportunity to save those extra-earned dollars, but this is not the case now. Therefore, if you think this issue is important enough to warrant discussion at a higher level, then we suggest that you become involved in youth advocacy where you can constructively become a positive change agent for former foster youth.

37. If I miss school because I am pregnant, suffer injuries in an accident (including a car accident), am hospitalized or on bed rest on my doctor's orders, or I need to take time off from school because of the death of a close family member, will I still be able to get my Road to Independence program money?

Pregnancy and Childbirth: Early in your pregnancy, you should speak to your caseworker and teachers to plan for how you will make up schoolwork if you miss school due to pregnancy or childbirth. If you are in high school, school board policy will allow you to take 20 school days' maternity leave. If you are in college or a vocational program, you can also take a reasonable amount of time off without losing your full-time status. You should speak to your professors and school administrators to find out the school's policy. If you feel like you cannot physically attend school during your pregnancy, consider enrolling full-time in an online educational program.

If you experience serious pain or illness during your pregnancy, or if a doctor says that you should not carry on normal activities, then your pregnancy may qualify as a temporary disability. In that case, you can maintain eligibility for RTI by going to school part-time. If you are in high school, you should look into enrolling in the hospital-homebound instructional program. You should talk to a school guidance counselor for information about this program. If you are in a post-secondary program, you should consider enrolling in an online educational program. You should also speak to your independent living caseworker and ask that you be permitted to attend school part-time without losing RTI eligibility because of the medical complications that you are experiencing due to your pregnancy or the birth of your child. The key is to speak with your worker and develop your options as soon as something happens.

RTI Program

Accident or Illness: If you have an accident and must miss school for medical reasons, or if you suffer injuries that are serious enough to qualify as a temporary disability, you should ask your doctor to write a letter that will allow you to maintain RTI eligibility if you miss class. Again, it is important that you demonstrate commitment to your education. One good way is to communicate early with your IL worker and seek the assistance you need.

A short absence from school for any reason (including an accident, hospitalization or death of a close family member) should not affect your RTI eligibility as long as you remain enrolled in school and maintain satisfactory progress during the school year.

38. What are my rights to receive RTI benefits if I am disabled?

Under the Road to Independence program, if you have a documented educational, medical, mental, developmental or physical disability, you are eligible for the same opportunities and services as non-disabled youth. The law requires the Department of Children and Families to provide reasonable accommodations and services to ensure equal opportunities for you. If you suspect you have a disability, you must request an evaluation or provide evidence from a qualified professional before you can receive accommodations.

The Road to Independence Program requires non-disabled students to attend school full time, but students with a disability may attend part time, remain eligible and receive full benefits. You must, however, maintain appropriate progress in order to continue receiving funds even if you are only attending school part-time.

You are advised to keep a file with copies of medical and other records documenting an accident, hospitalization, or death of a family member, so that you have proof that you were absent from school because of one of these reasons. Once again, you can empower yourself by communication your situation to your IL worker and explaining your plan for dealing with your situation or by seeking help and referrals to assist you in recovering. If you drop out of school altogether, your RTI may be terminated.

Transitional Assistanc

TRANSITIONAL ASSISTANCE

39. I'm over 18 and not currently in school, so I'm not eligible for the Road to Independence stipend. I applied for Transitional Support, and I was told that I need to work on a Transition Plan in order to receive funds and services. What is a Transition Plan?

In order to receive Transitional Support funds and services, you must have a written Transition Plan that is developed by you, together with your caseworker. The plan contains the services that will be offered to you to support your efforts to achieve self-sufficiency. Additionally, you will have tasks to complete and are accountable for making progress towards completing the tasks. If you and the caseworker do not agree on any part of the plan, then you are provided a grievance process. This means that you would be able to talk with supervisors in the community based care agency to try to work out the disagreement. If you are denied Transitional Support funds or services for any reason (which would include a disagreement over the Transition Plan), then you have the right to appeal the denial.

If you are provided monthly Transitional Support funds, then usually the funds are approved for three-month periods. Before the three months are over, you would then apply for additional funds. It is important for you to show that you are working on making progress on you Transition Plan, so that you can continue to receive Transitional Support funds and services. If you are denied continued Transitional Support for any reason, then you have the right to appeal.

40. How many times can a youth apply for Transitional Assistance?

There is not a limit on the amount of times you can apply. Each application will be reviewed both on its merit and for availability of funds. Each application will require a plan to show how the funds will be used to support your own efforts to achieve self-sufficiency.

41. My transitional funds were terminated since I did not make enough progress on goals. Now that I am working on goals, can I start back on my transitional funds?

If your funds were terminated and you are now working towards completion of the goals you should go back to your community based care provider to develop a new plan so that your funds may be reinstated. Be prepared to demonstrate why this time will be different and you will be able to meet your goals. You are accountable for the completion of, or progress towards, the specific tasks/goals included in your transition plan in order for the transitional funds to be renewed beyond the three-month period. If you and the department or the community-based care provider cannot come to agreement regarding ANY part of the plan, the dispute may be resolved through an informal agency grievance process in an effort to resolve the disagreement.

Aftercare

AFTERCARE

42. How many times can a youth apply for Aftercare funds in one year?
There is not a limit on the amount of times you can apply. Aftercare funds are basically for emergencies. Emergencies are determined on a case-by-case basis. Approval is also subject to available funds. An emergency is usually something unforeseen or unforeseeable.

Education

EDUCATION

43. I want to complete high school but I changed foster homes a lot and now I won't graduate when I am 18. Can I stay in school?
Students who are not in a special education program have a legal right to remain in school until they turn 19. Schools have the discretion to allow you to remain in school past 19, in other words, they can let you stay, but you don't have a right to stay. If you are in special education, you have a federal right to remain in school until the end of the school year when you turn 22 years old, regardless of what is or is not included on the IEP.

44. I am in special education classes. I have a transition plan as part of my IEP. Do I need one for Independent Living?
Yes. And it would be good if they were consistent. For example, an exceptional education student could decide to stay in high school until age 22. The IL goal would need to be complete high school by age 22. If the IL goal were to enroll in community college by age 20, the plans would not be consistent.

45. Is there a time frame for a youth to finish his/her GED?
There is no time frame if you are making satisfactory progress and you are attending school regularly. However, enrollment is not the same as satisfactory progress. You may want to show your IL worker some practice tests or other work to demonstrate your progress. When you enroll in adult education classes, you are usually given a "placement test" to determine which subjects you need to study the most. If you are struggling in something, you may want to ask your IL worker for tutoring assistance so that you will be able to pass the GED and move on to another goal.

46. What do they mean by "satisfactory progress" for: High school, GED, Post Secondary, vocational.
The law does not define "satisfactory progress." Our best interpretation is that it requires you to be able to show actual accomplishment(s) towards your chosen goal. In some schools, a passing grade average is needed to stay in school; others use a work portfolio as evidence of progress. Some issues are common sense, like if you drop 3 of your 4 classes; you are not making satisfactory progress towards graduation, even if you received an "A" in your one remaining class. You will know if you are making progress towards your goal and can tell your IL worker about it. You may be asked to provide some documentation for the IL worker's file to support your progress.

47. Can a youth who is in foster care when they turn age 18 receive a tuition exemption to attend a post-secondary school? Can a youth in a relative or a non-relative placement when they turn 18 receive a tuition exemption?
Yes. If you are in foster care at age 18, you are eligible for a tuition exemption (free tuition) and fee waivers to a state post-secondary school. [Fla. Stat. §1009.25(2)(c)] If you are living with a relative on your 18th birthday and were placed there by a dependency court judge, you are also eligible for tuition exemption and fee waivers to state education programs. If you have spent at least 6 months in foster care after your 16th birthday and were then placed in guardianship by the court, you also may qualify for a tuition exemption.

48. Do I have an option to attend private school and is there money to pay for it?
All youth who were in foster care at age 18 are entitled to a tuition exemption (free tuition) at a state post-secondary school. [Fla. Stat. §1009.25(2)(c)] You may select a private school, but you will have to pay tuition as the exemption only applies to state schools. However, there are many scholarships available for private schools and some expenses may be covered by the part of the Road to Independence Program funded by the federal education and training voucher program. Depending on your personal dedication and academic scores, you may be able to attend a private school.

Education

49. Why is Financial Aid necessary? What is a FAFSA? What are Pell Grants?

"Financial aid" is the term that colleges and universities use to describe the sources of money that students get to help pay for school and their living expenses during school. The actual costs of attending school full time usually exceed the RTI stipend and tuition exemption. Unless you are wealthy, you will need additional financial aid to afford school. If you receive RTI benefits you must apply for financial aid using FAFSA.

FAFSA, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid is the form used by all students (not just youth in foster care) to apply for financial aid. You must fill it out each year you attend college. This form helps the government and the school decide how much money you need each year. The FAFSA is also the tool the government uses to decide whether you are eligible for federal assistance. Schools may use to decide whether you are eligible for scholarships.

Most foster youth who complete a FAFSA will receive a Pell Grant. (Certain criminal convictions and immigration status might preclude you from getting a Pell Grant). A Pell Grant is money paid for your college expenses by the federal government. Currently it pays up to $4,310 a year for college expenses for full time students. This is a grant, not a loan, which means that is "free" money and you do not have to pay it back. The money that you receive from the Pell Grant may be used in calculating your "needs assessment" in the time frame and for the actual amount received.

Under the new laws, your IL worker must assist you in completing the federal financial aid forms. You may also get help from your high school guidance counselor or the financial aid office at your selected school. They work at helping students "find" money to go to college as part of their jobs. With a little work, you may be able to find other grants-in-aid that when added to your RTI and your Pell Grant will allow you to work less and focus on your education more.

Appeals

APPEALS

50. What do I do if I am denied post-18 assistance?

If you are denied assistance from any program (Road to Independence, Transitional, or Aftercare), if you are partially denied assistance, or if your assistance is terminated, then you have the right to appeal. Your community based case agency (CBC) is required to give you a letter that explains why your assistance was denied or terminated and explains how you can appeal. You cannot be denied any assistance verbally--if you ask for assistance and are denied, then you must be given written notice of your right to appeal. If you do not receive written notice of your right to appeal, then ask for this notice or contact the lead foster care agency.

To exercise your right to appeal, all you need to do is verbally tell your CBC caseworker that you want to appeal. It is a good idea to also let them know in writing that you want to appeal.

When you appeal, it is very important to follow any deadlines. If your assistance was terminated and you appeal within 10 days, then you will continue to receive assistance while your appeal is processed. If your assistance was denied, then you need to appeal within 30 days. To make sure that you don't miss any deadline, you should always appeal as soon as you find out that your assistance was denied or terminated.

To help you with your appeal, it is important to have an attorney to represent you. You can call your local legal aid program, (in the phone book or online at FloridaLawHelp.org) to try to find a free attorney.

51. What is an appeal? How do I appeal? What decisions can be appealed? Who is supposed to tell me about my rights?

An Appeal is the legal method for having someone check over the decision made about your benefits. An appeal can be filed whenever you disagree with a decision made by your caseworker on a benefit or service you have requested from the IL Program. An appeal can be filed if you are denied, in whole or part, some funding or services that you believe you need in order to achieve self-sufficiency. Your caseworker must give you a decision in writing on each of your requests, and must tell you about your right to appeal.

If you are thinking about an Appeal, remember the following:

1. **Keep copies of all your documents**, no matter what or no matter if you feel the documents are irrelevant;

Appeals

2. If you feel the provider has denied or reduced your benefit in error, ask for a specific reason in writing for the denial, termination or reduction;
3. Contact a legal services provider immediately, preferably before the ten (10) days following your notice of the denial, termination, or reduction of benefits and always within 30 days of the action.
4. If you did not contact a legal services provider during the ten (10) days following your receipt of the notice of denial, termination or reduction of benefits – file your own notice of appeal immediately; then contact a legal provider.
5. Do not wait to the last minute before a hearing to contact a lawyer to assist you in your appeal. The attorney will not be able to adequately represent you at that hearing and you may be jeopardizing your rights to the benefits.
6. **Do not assume that once you call or contact an attorney without meeting them or sending them all your documents, that they can magically make everything better – they can't.** A phone call is not enough – you must meet with the attorney to discuss strategy for your case;
7. If the attorney advises you to request copies of documents in a court file (juvenile or dependency) you must get those documents as you may be the best person with access to the court files. (juvenile and dependency);
8. If you receive any documents from the office of appeals during your appeals process, you must call your attorney immediately so she/he can schedule your hearing in their calendar.
9. The most important piece of advice is the following: as with any contract in your life – read, read, read the document/application and attached documents before you sign or initial anywhere. If you do not understand one thing in the application, ask your caseworker or provider to explain it to you. If the worker or provider will not or does not have time to explain it to you, write on the application where you are to initial or sign that you requested an explanation of this portion and you were not given an explanation. Always, you need to know what you are signing.

52. I applied for Transition funds or Aftercare funds, but I only received part of what I asked for and I need the rest of the funds. Can I appeal?

Yes. If you only receive part of what you asked for (for example, only receiving $250, when you asked for $500), then this is called a partial denial, and you have the right to appeal. You are required to be given a letter explaining that your request was partially denied, explaining why, and explaining how you can appeal. If you do not receive a letter, tell your caseworker that you want to appeal, and contact an attorney for assistance with your appeal.

53. I applied for Transition funds to buy some furniture at a discount store. Instead of money, I was given a gift card to a department store where the furniture is expensive. I need some basic furniture, and I would like to shop at a discount store, so I can get the most furniture possible at the cheapest price. Can I appeal the decision to only give me a gift card?

Yes. If you were given a gift card, then your request for Transition funds was denied, and you have the right to appeal. You are required to be given a letter explaining that your request was denied, explaining why, and explaining how you can appeal. If you do not receive a letter, tell your caseworker that you want to appeal, and contact an attorney for assistance with your appeal.

Living Arrangements

LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

54. Can I live with my foster parent after 18? What if I want to move to another foster home? Does staying in my foster home hurt my foster parents' license?

If you are eligible for the Road To Independence Program, then you may be able to continue to live in foster care after you turn 18.

First you need to ask whether your foster family or group home is willing to let you stay after you turn 18. If they are not willing to let you stay, or you don't want to stay there then you can request a different licensed placement.

If you elect to remain in foster care, you will not be counted as a "child" in calculating any licensing restriction on the number of children in the foster home. Thus, your foster parent will still be able to take a full contingent of foster children.

You will need to make your own arrangements to pay rent and we recommend that you and your foster parent write down and sign an agreement that covers at least one year. The agreement should state how much rent you have to pay every month and what is included with the rent. For example your rent might cover your room and electricity and water, but not food and laundry. Having a written agreement will prevent misunderstandings about how long you are going to live there and what is expected from you and your foster parent.

55. I am turning 18 and want to sign a lease for an apartment before I actually celebrate my 18th birthday. Can I sign a lease?

Contracts signed by youth under the age of 18 usually cannot be enforced, so landlords may not agree to rent an apartment to a minor. Florida passed a special law to give youth aging out of foster care the ability to sign leases before they turn 18. [Fla. Stat. §743.045]

To take advantage of this law, you will need a Court Order, a piece of paper signed by your judge, that states that the "disability of non age" is removed so that you can enter into a contract to lease an apartment. This means that you will be able to rent an apartment and sign a lease without having to legally be an adult. The Order should not reference your foster care status, to protect your privacy.

You are entitled to a hearing called a Judicial Review by your judge 90 days before your 18th Birthday. At that hearing you should request and should be given an "ORDER" signed by your judge removing your "disability of non age" and allowing you to enter into a lease before you actually turn 18 years old.

If you do not or have not received such an Order and a landlord will not accept your application, then you should request help immediately from your caseworker. If your caseworker will not get that order for you, then follow the instructions for getting a hearing before your judge.

DO NOT wait till the last minute. You may want to request this Order when you are 17½ years old.

DO NOT LOSE THE ORDER and if you decide to enter a lease before you are 18 - Bring the Court Order with you to show the Landlord.

56. I applied for Aftercare or Transition funds to rent an apartment. Affordable apartments are hard to find, and I keep losing apartments to other renters who come in with money in their hands. Some landlords also tell me that they don't want to deal with a government agency and won't rent to me. Can I receive the funds directly?

Yes. The law requires that you be given Road to Independence, Transition, and Aftercare funds directly, unless you request in writing for the funds to be given to someone else, like a landlord. [Fla. Stat. §409.1451(5)(d)1] If you disagree with the decision of your caseworker, see the section on appeals. If you want the funds sent to a third party and provide the documentation your worker needs, the turnaround time should be less than a week. Under new laws, the CBC can also work on some options that would be of help to you, but even in that event, you can still insist that you receive payment and not any third party.

57. Explain my rights and responsibilities as a tenant. What are the repercussions for getting evicted?

Tenants generally must pay their rent in full and on time, keep their apartment reasonably clean, and abide by any rules established in a lease. The landlord has to keep the premises livable. For example, if the water is in the landlord's name, it must be kept on. Or, if the water pipe to the building breaks, it must be fixed promptly and at the landlord's expense. If you get evicted, it goes on your credit report and may prevent other landlords from renting to you. You can obtain more detailed information on your rights as a tenant from your local legal aid program (in the phone book or online at FloridaLawHelp.org).

Eligibility Questions

ELIGIBILITY QUESTIONS

58. Can I qualify for services and support if I have a disability? What if I am not sure whether I have a disability? Are their other services I can obtain?

Youth with disabilities are eligible for transition services, including the Road To Independence Program. Youth whose disabilities prevent them from attending school full time may attend part-time and still participate in the RTI program.

Generally, a disability is a physical or mental condition that interferes with two or more activities of daily living. Sometimes youth have a condition that qualifies as a disability for youth, but not for adults. That is why youth who receive SSI must complete a separate application for adult SSI benefits when you are 17½.

You, and the adults who support you, may not know for sure whether you have a disability. You must request a determination of eligibility if you, your advocate or loved ones have any concern that you may have a disability. The Court may order you to be evaluated for a mental health or developmental disability. It is not too late to be evaluated simply because you are aging out of foster care. Just the opposite is true: now is the time to know about your condition because an adult with a disability may be entitled to special services such as housing and job support, training and case management.

Many young people with developmental disabilities have been found eligible for developmental services while they were in foster care, but they are not actually receiving these services because there is a "waiting list." The Court, your caseworker or the RTI specialist should make sure that the Agency for Persons with Disabilities (APD) reconsiders your situation to determine whether you should be getting services. APD is supposed to do this while you are still 17. Moreover, due to recent decisions it is clear that (1) the Court can require APD to come to court to explain what if any services you may need and why you are not receiving services that would be paid for by APD and (2) if APD refuses to provide you services despite your being eligible, then an administrative law judge must hear your appeal, if you choose to challenge APD's decision.

The Court also may order DCF to pay for developmental disability services if you are entitled to them, as part of the services available to you under the Road to Independence. These services will likely end when you no longer receive RTI assistance. At least as of now, the Court with jurisdiction over you while you were in foster care cannot order APD to pay for your services.

59. Am I eligible for independent living (IL) services if I have immigration issues?

Your immigration status has no impact on your receipt of Independent Living services, Road to Independence benefits, Aftercare benefits, or Transitional benefits. You are entitled to receive the same IL and post-18 benefits as any other youth, regardless of your immigration status. (However, under federal law, your immigration status may have some impact on Medicaid benefits and financial aid for college.)

In addition, it is important to know that you are eligible to apply for permanent residency (also known as "a green card") to legalize your immigration through what is called "special immigrant juvenile status." To accomplish this, you need an order from the juvenile court, and this order is then provided to federal immigration authorities with an application for special immigrant juvenile status. This should be done as soon as possible for you. The juvenile court can retain jurisdiction until you turn 22, in order to ensure that the application process is finalized. You can also receive a work permit while the application is being processed. The Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center (FIAC) or a local legal aid program might be able to help you with this.

60. Am I eligible for any services if I am/was in a juvenile justice program or on runaway when I turn 18?

Yes. If you were living in a juvenile delinquency program, or were on a runaway status, on your 18th birthday you still qualify for post-18 services provided you meet the other eligibility criteria.

61. Do I qualify for RTI, Aftercare, or Transitional money/support if I was in a non-relative or relative placement when I turned 18 and/or if I spent less than 6 months in licensed foster care.

Unfortunately, if you are in the legal custody of a relative or non-relative when you turn 18, you will not qualify for any of these services or financial support However, Florida law changed on July 1, 2007 for youth who were adopted from foster care or placed with a court-approved dependency guardian after the age of 16. Those youth are eligible for Independent Living Transition Services so long as they spent at least six months in foster care within the 12 months before they were adopted or placed in guardianship. [Fla. Stat. §409.1451(2)(b)]

If you turn 18 while living in foster care, but have spent less than 6 months total in foster care, you are eligible for Aftercare Support services including:

- Mentoring and tutoring
- Mental health services and substance abuse counseling
- Life skills and parenting classes
- Job, career skills, and financial literacy training
- Temporary Financial Assistance

One option for you, if you have spent at least 6 months in foster care, is Subsidized Independent Living (SIL). If you were in SIL when you turn 18, you would be eligible for post-18 services.

62. What are my rights to receive RTI, transitional, or aftercare benefits when I am raising my own child or children?

Being a parent does not eliminate you from being eligible for or receiving Independent Living Services. If you are a parent, you are eligible to receive Aftercare and Transitional Services as well as the Road to Independence Program benefits. You may receive funds and services from all three at the same time. Your case-worker must help you getting any services that you need, including prenatal care, daycare, other public benefits, and housing.

Aftercare Support Services: Aftercare funds and services are available to help parents in many different ways. If you are a parent, you may receive financial assistance to help pay for housing, electric, water, gas, food and other necessary expenses. In addition, Aftercare Support Services provide access to parenting classes, job skills training, and life skills training. Emergency funds are available in special circumstances and not only to prevent homelessness.

Transitional Support Services: Transitional Support Services are available to help you with critical needs. Eligibility requires that the services are critical to your efforts to achieve independence. Funds are awarded, sometimes on a monthly basis, but usually for three months, and you may re-apply for transitional funds after the three months have passed. All Transitional Services require a plan showing how the Transitional assistance will support your own efforts to achieve self-sufficiency. Services include short-term financial assistance, housing, education, employment and counseling. In addition, your independent living caseworker must help you find prenatal care, daycare, and other needed services.

Road to Independence Program: Currently, under the Road to Independence Program, being a parent does not qualify as a disability. If you need childcare in order to attend school, you should ask your caseworker to help you find free or affordable childcare in the community. If free or affordable child care is not available and you would not be able to attend school full time without child care, you should ask for Aftercare or Transitional funds to pay for daycare. If you are experiencing any other problems as a parent that make it difficult to you to attend school or make satisfactory progress in school, you should speak to your independent living worker. You worker may be able to assist you in getting any needed services as a parent to allow you to attend school while continuing to receive RTI benefits.

Names & Numbers

IMPORTANT NAMES & NUMBERS

Caseworker: _____

Caseworker Supervisor: _____

Independent Living Staff: _____

Legal Aid: _____

Your caseworker should usually be the first person you call with problems. If he or she does not return your call, or cannot assist you, then you should call his or her supervisor. Ask your caseworker and Independent Living staff person what they are each responsible for so that you can call the correct person when you need assistance.

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