

THE FORGOTTEN STUDENTS: COVID-19 Response for Youth and Young Adults Aging Out of Foster Care

THE UPSHOT

COVID-19 has recently changed my life because, to be honest, it has triggered a lot of past childhood traumas. For example, food insecurity, I don't feel like I have access to enough food all the time. I feel nervous having to either go out and get it or spend extra money on delivery services.¹ –Ivory Bennett

In March 2020, the coronavirus pandemic upended American higher education and shuttered campus doors across the country. As the opening vignette illustrates, many college students reported severe housing and food insecurities as a result. Nevertheless, not all college students experienced COVID-19's effects and consequences equally. For example, Ivory, a current student enrolled at Concordia University Texas who spent 17 years in foster care, illuminated some of the difficulties she has personally faced in the wake of COVID-19. College students impacted by foster care make up approximately 5% of all undergraduates, and many are struggling to have their basic needs met as educational costs continue to rise.² As campuses prepare to reopen in varied capacities in the fall, the ongoing crisis continues to pose a significant threat to youth and young adults aging out of foster care. As part of its COVID-19 response, Congress must prioritize the availability of essential supports and resources for this vulnerable group. This policy brief outlines recommendations for the federal government to consider, including:

- Issuing a moratorium on aging out of foster care and implementing extended foster care until the age of 21 in all 50 states,
- Lifting the cap on Chafee Program housing assistance,
- Increasing Chafee Program funding to provide personal and educational supports to foster youth, and
- Strengthening postsecondary data to provide a clearer picture of the experiences and outcomes of students with foster care experience nationally.



MAURIELL H. AMECHI

Visiting Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Foundations and Leadership,
Old Dominion University; Founder and Owner, Foster Youth Empowered, LLC

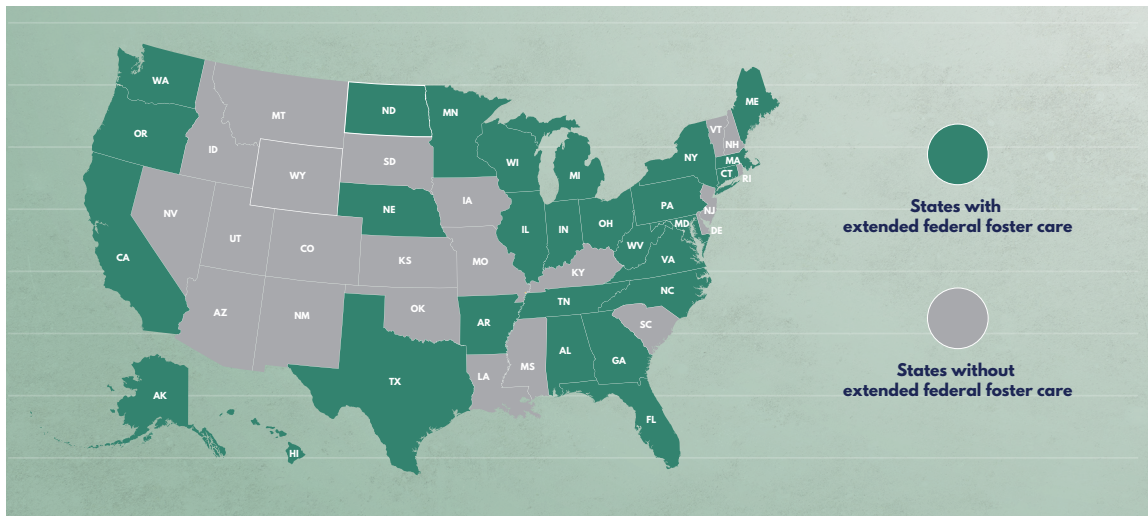
NARRATIVE

Aging Out of Foster Care During COVID-19

Becoming self-reliant can be an immense undertaking for any young person—let alone during a national crisis. It's a process that requires the securing of basic needs, including adequate food, clothing, transportation, and a fixed and stable residence. However, youth aging out of foster care at the age of 18 are often thrust into adulthood without sufficient preparation, losing all support, including material and financial resources and critical safety nets, previously provided through state or tribal child welfare agencies. Each year, approximately 20,000 youth come of age and begin transitioning to independent adulthood.³ Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) are disproportionately impacted by foster care, experience a greater number of placements, and are more susceptible to aging out before finding a permanent home or reunifying with biological family.⁴ There is also a strong correlation between youth homelessness, having a history of foster care, and being Black or Hispanic.⁵ It's not surprising the current crisis has already proven to be devastating for this population. A recent poll of young adults aging out of foster care revealed that about half faced insecurities related to employment, which can negatively impact their ability to secure other necessities, like housing and food.⁶ Financial vulnerabilities have contributed to increased levels of depression or anxiety. We also know that youth labeled with a dis/ability in foster care may encounter greater obstacles in becoming self-sufficient post-high school.⁷

As the COVID-19 epidemic surges on, studies suggest that people under the age of 40 account for a disproportionate number of new coronavirus cases.⁸ Unlike their counterparts, youth and young adults aging out of foster care typically have fewer support networks or safety nets to depend on in a crisis. Inaccessible medical insurance often compounds their situation further, which ultimately places them at an increased risk of experiencing the worst effects of COVID-19.⁹ For example, Dosha Joi, a tireless advocate and nursing student from Milwaukee, WI, who experienced years of abuse and multiple placements in foster care, tragically succumbed to coronavirus-related complications on May 14, 2020.¹⁰ Congress must take swift action to prevent this indispensable but often forgotten student population from bearing the brunt of the coronavirus pandemic.

Extending foster care up to age 21 is one critical support structure for these students—but as shown in Figure 1, only 28 of the 50 states currently provide extended foster care.¹¹ In response to COVID-19, nine states, as well as the District of Columbia, have issued a temporary moratorium related to aging out of foster care: Alaska, California, Connecticut, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, Rhode Island, and South Carolina.¹² Yet despite the progress some states have made in closing existing inequities in child welfare policy, 22 states have neglected to extend federally funded foster care, and 41 states have not yet enacted a moratorium related to aging out during the national crisis. Consequently, young people in those states are being placed at a severe disadvantage in transitioning to adulthood.

Figure 1: Extended Foster Care in the States

Transitioning to and Through College

Around 70% of young people with lived experience in foster care have aspirations to pursue postsecondary education.¹³ However, the significant barriers they face even transitioning to college can often prove to be insurmountable, not to mention the endless hurdles they traverse to finish their degrees.¹⁴ Studies have revealed an alarming gap in college completion among this population—more than two-thirds of foster youth who start college do not graduate within six years.¹⁵ Although the pandemic has disrupted educational pathways for all students, youth and young adults aging out of foster care may experience the biggest setback.

We already know that many prospective students have started rethinking their postsecondary plans in the wake of COVID-19. According to a national poll, nearly 20% of incoming first-time undergraduates have modified their college choice.¹⁶ But in contrast to their non-foster care peers, foster youth often lack access to college-savvy parents or other adults to guide them through the complicated application and enrollment process, especially when it comes to applying for student aid.¹⁷ Generally, these students are the first people in their families to pursue college—magnifying the role of school and community-based networks in facilitating access to essential forms of social capital during the enrollment process.¹⁸ Given the widespread K-12 school closures in the Spring 2020 semester, it is likely that some college-hopeful students in foster care encountered challenges in seeking necessary guidance counseling. Therefore, it should come as little surprise if a significant number of them delay college attendance.

Studies also suggest that a growing number of first-year students from low-income families have failed to apply for student aid for which they would be eligible.¹⁹ Additionally, as more colleges and universities adopt fall-term plans for online instruction, youth aging out of foster care may face additional burdens created by the digital divide and lack of access to broadband Internet, personal computers, and safe, quiet spaces to work. Congress must take actionable steps to address these complex challenges as part of its ongoing COVID-19 response. Leveraging the success of existing programs, notably the Chafee Program, presents one strategy for addressing such issues.

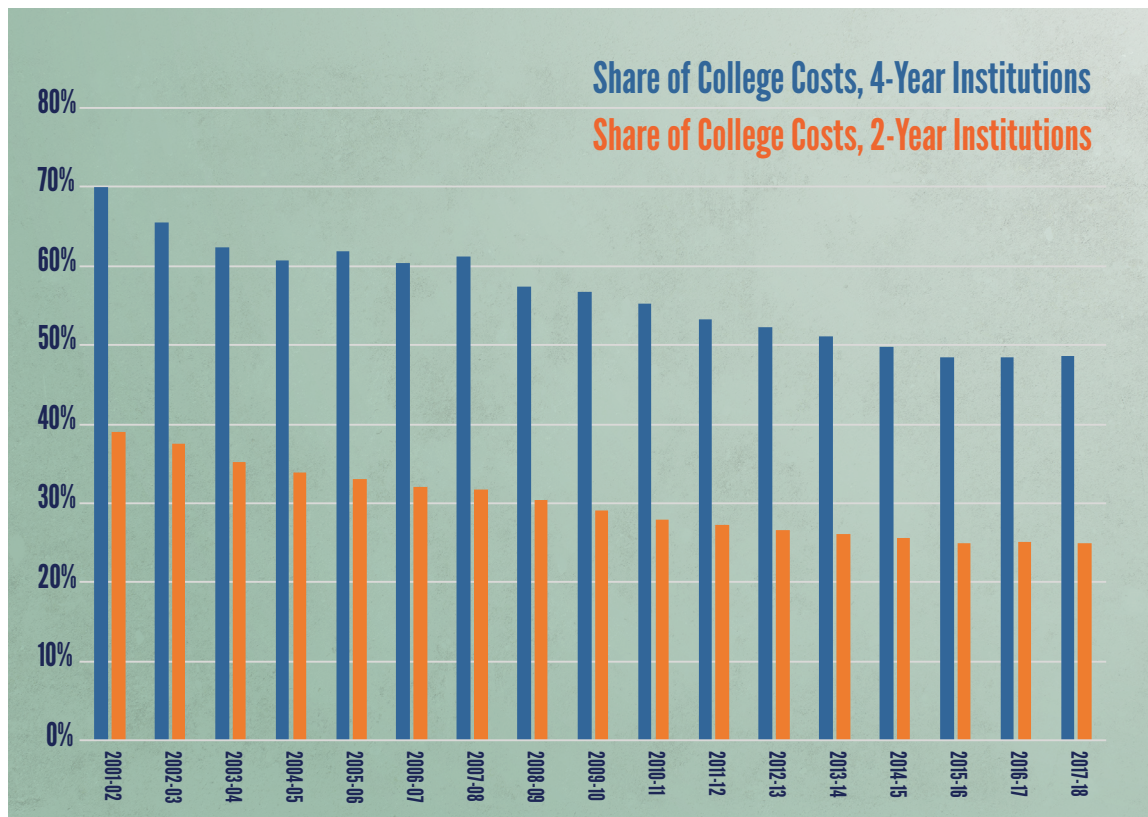
What is the Chafee Program?

The John Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transitions to Adulthood (Chafee Program) has been instrumental in helping young people aged 14–21 become self-sufficient for two decades.²⁰ Tackling the myriad issues that make foster youth more susceptible to deficit outcomes, the Chafee Program is administered through the US Department of Health and Human Services and provides holistic support in several core areas, including:

- Completion of a high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) certificate,
- Postsecondary education and vocational education readiness,
- Education and training vouchers (providing up to \$5,000 towards postsecondary education),
- Independent living skills training (such as budgeting and financial management),
- Career exploration and job placement,
- Preventative health activities, and
- Housing assistance (up to 30% subsidized room and board expenses).

Youth in states that extend foster care to age 21 can also be served under the program until age 23. Despite the Chafee program's broad scope, federal subsidies allocated to states through the program have increasingly fallen short—stagnating at or around \$140 million since its enactment in 1999.

For example, education training vouchers (ETVs) represent a form of student aid meant to lessen financial concerns and eliminate college affordability barriers.²¹ To qualify for this grant, ETV participants must complete a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) each year. Participants are also required to submit an official transcript at the end of every term to demonstrate educational progress. In addition to college tuition and fees, ETV funds can be used to cover rent, food, transportation, health insurance premium costs, disability services, and childcare expenses. Although the current ETV grant ceiling is \$5,000 per year, the amount awarded to a student is based on their estimated unmet financial need. In 2001, ETVs covered as much as 70% of college costs at two-year institutions and nearly 40% at four-year institutions, but their purchasing power has shrunk considerably over time. Today, as seen in Figure 2, ETVs cover a smaller percentage of expenses at public colleges and universities—accounting for only 49% and 25% of expenses respectively at two- and four-year institutions. This dramatic loss of purchasing power warrants a swift and diligent response from Congress.

Figure 2: Chafee Program Education Training Vouchers' Shrinking Coverage of College Costs

Note: Attendance costs are the average undergraduate tuition, fees, and room and board rates for public four- and two-year institutions. **Source:** National Center for Education Statistics

Difficulties in Tracking Outcomes For Students with Foster Care Experience

Despite the important role of the Chafee Program in reducing college barriers, data gaps exist in tracking outcomes for students with foster care experience nationally. Self-reported information from the FAFSA is the primary mechanism used to track foster care populations in the higher education system. Specifically, question 53 of the form asks: “At any time since you turned age 13, were both your parents deceased, were you in foster care or were you a dependent or ward of the court?”

Unfortunately, this question is not the most robust measure of foster care status for multiple reasons. First, the question does not disaggregate students with foster care experience from students with no history of foster care who may still be financially independent. Second, due to the age limitations incorporated into the question, it excludes some students with lived experience in foster care. Finally, it does not provide a complete picture of the foster care system’s nuances. Some foster youth experience frequent mobility in school placement which may result in disruptions and setbacks in educational progress.²² Foster care placements also vary widely in terms of type, such as group homes, family foster homes, or supervised independent living. These factors have been shown to impact other educational outcomes including high school completion.²³ Ultimately, the lack of distinct identifiers for this vulnerable population in federal datasets managed by the US Department of Education continues to undermine broader efforts to promote equitable college pathways.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

*I wish the government did a better job in assisting foster youth, so when things like [the coronavirus pandemic] happen, they aren't pushed to the backline or it's not as hard on [us]. [As] an at-risk population, we have to fight so much harder because, for some reason, our voices never really get heard to the full force until something happens. And I wish it was different.*²⁴ —**Michael Thomas**

Federal policymakers must consider the vast number of young adults aging out of foster care and entering adulthood during the coronavirus pandemic. Without sufficient resources, support, and preparation for independent living and access to higher education, many will encounter roadblocks even more detrimental than those they face during regular economic times. As Congress weighs future policy reforms related to COVID-19 response, there is an opportunity to mitigate some of the unique challenges it poses to young adults like Michael Thomas, a Black male undergraduate aging out of foster care. To alleviate the effects of the crisis on the foster youth student population, Congress should consider:

- Implementing extended foster care and a moratorium on aging out.** Extending foster care for young adults aging out in all 50 states is one of the most impactful ways that Congress can help improve some of the tough challenges that lie ahead during the current crisis and in its aftermath. Preserving eligibility for foster care benefits will protect a vast amount of foster youth from losing essential safeguards, such as guaranteed housing, food access, and assistance with pursuing college or workforce opportunities. Accordingly, this reform will also require the temporary suspension of school, program, and work requirements. In the short-term, Congress should consider placing a moratorium on aging out of foster care during the pandemic, given that this population faces an undue burden of securing employment amid a declining job market and looming economic downturn. Recently, members of Congress introduced bipartisan legislation—*Supporting Foster Youth and Families through the Pandemic Act* (H.R. 7947)—which advocates for similar reform.²⁵ COVID-19's long-term effects and the ensuing consequences for this vulnerable group may be even more devastating if protection measures are underutilized or not exercised promptly.
- Increasing funding for the Chafee Program.** The Chafee Program has played a pivotal role in alleviating the myriad of obstacles that undermine foster youths' transition to independent adulthood. More than 600 child welfare advocates and partners representing 47 states have already united in urging Congress to increase Chafee funding by \$500 million.²⁶ Currently, there are multiple pending bills in Congress (H.R. 6766 and 7947) calling for increased funding to the Chafee program, which should be swiftly implemented to address the challenges facing youth and young adults aging out of foster care.²⁷

- **Lifting the cap on Chafee housing assistance.** Drastic increases in homelessness and housing insecurity could be some of the long-term consequences for young people aging out during COVID-19, especially in states without extended foster care. We already know the economy has declined severely due to the pandemic. Because of this national emergency, many more Americans will lose their jobs and a stable income source, placing them at heightened risk of eviction. Congress should respond by temporarily removing the 30% Chafee spending limit on housing assistance offered to young adults transitioning from foster care. Removing this restriction would provide states with greater flexibility in responding to this economically vulnerable population's dire needs.
 - **Increasing the maximum Chafee Education and Training Voucher (ETV) grant.** Congress can also ensure that ETV funds help this vulnerable student population cope with precarious circumstances by raising the maximum grant to \$12,000. The current national crisis has likely exacerbated hidden college costs not always captured in college tuition estimates, such as rent, utilities, food, medical expenses, and transportation. This policy reform may also help reduce the digital divide by ensuring that college-bound foster youth have sufficient student aid to cover costs for online instruction, such as computers and broadband Internet.
 - **Strengthening postsecondary data on college student experiences and outcomes.** Closing existing disparities in postsecondary education between foster youth and their non-foster care peers necessitates better data and improved accessibility for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers alike. Education datasets managed by the Department of Education are considerably limited in helping concerned stakeholders understand the experiences and outcomes of students aging out of foster care. This problem can be addressed by adding distinct identifiers for foster care status, among other relevant questions, in future iterations of the two nationally representative surveys tracking student postsecondary outcomes, the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) and the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS). Given the potential long-term effects and consequences of COVID-19 for all students, and especially for students with foster care experience, policymakers must enact reforms that strengthen postsecondary data collection for this often-forgotten student population.
-

ENDNOTES

1. "Current/Former Foster Youth on the Impact of Coronavirus." *National Foster Youth Institute*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=idJhivYOXYc. Accessed 17 July 2020.
2. "2015–16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey Study (NPSAS:16)," *US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics*.
3. The AFCARS Report: Preliminary FY 2018 Estimates as of August 22, 2019. Washington, DC. *Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System*. Accessed 17 July 2020.
4. Knott, Theresa, and Donovan, Kristen. "Disproportionate Representation of African-American Children in Foster Care: Secondary Analysis of the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System." *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 32, no. 5, 2010, pp. 679–684, doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2010.01.003. Accessed 31 Oct. 2019.
5. Morton, Matthew H., et al. "Prevalence and Correlates of Youth Homelessness in the United States." *Journal of Adolescent Health*, vol. 62, 2018, pp. 14–21, doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.10.006.
6. Greeson, Johanna, Jaffee, Sara, Wasch, Sarah. "The experiences of foster youth during COVID-19." *The Field Center for Children's Policy, Practice, and Research*, May 2020, fieldcenteratpenn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Foster-Youth-COVID-19-One-Pager-FINAL.pdf. Accessed 6 May 2020.
7. Harwick, Robin M., et al. "In Their Own Words: Overcoming Barriers during the Transition to Adulthood for Youth with Disabilities Who Experienced Foster Care." *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 73, Pergamon, Feb. 2017, pp. 338–46, doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.01.011. Note: The term "dis/ability" as opposed to "disability" is used to acknowledge the social construction of ability in specific societal contexts.
8. Bosman, Julie, and Mervosh, Sarah. "As virus surges, younger people account for disturbing number of new cases." *The New York Times*, 27 June 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/06/25/us/coronavirus-cases-young-people.html. Accessed 17 July 2020.
9. United States, Congress, House. Dosha Joi Immediate Coverage for Foster Youth Act. Congress.gov, www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/6959. 116th Congress, 2nd session. Accessed 17 July 2020.
10. Fitzgerald, M. (2020, May 20). *D.C. Lawmakers Push Reform to Honor Relentless Advocate for Wisconsin Foster Youth, Taken by the Coronavirus. The Imprint*, chronicleofsocialchange.org/child-welfare-2/wisconsin-foster-joi-coronavirus-bass-moore/43815. Accessed 17 July 2020.
11. Extended Foster Care, jlc.org/issues/extended-foster-care, Accessed 3 July 2020; Fernandes-Alcantara, Adrienne L. "Youth Transitioning from Foster Care: Background and Federal Programs." Congressional Research Service, crsreports.congress.gov. Accessed 19 May 2019.
12. "Executive Orders and Administrative Policies Supporting Older Youth In and Leaving Foster Care In Response to COVID-19," childwelfarecovid.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/EO-and-Admin-Summary_Older-Youth_-_May-1-2020.pdf. Accessed 6 August 2020.
13. Davis, Ryan. "College Access, Financial Aid, and College Success for Undergraduates from Foster Care." July 2006, files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED543361.pdf.
14. Geiger, Jennifer M., and Beltran, Susanny J. "Readiness, Access, Preparation, and Support for Foster Care Alumni in Higher Education: A Review of the Literature." *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, vol. 11, no. 4–5, 2017, pp. 487–515. doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2017.1354795; Amechi, Mauriell H., Stone, Blayne D., and Williams, Janelle L. "Transitions and Pathways: HBCU College Choice Among Black Students with Foster Care Experience." *Journal of the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2020.
15. United States Government Accountability Office. "Actions Needed to Improve Access to Federal Financial Assistance for Homeless and Foster Youth," no. 16–343, May 2016, www.gao.gov/assets/680/677325.pdf. Accessed July 2016.
16. Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on College-Going High School Seniors." *Arts & Science Group, LLC*, www.artsci.com/studentpoll-covid19. Accessed 17 July 2020.
17. Amechi, Mauriell H. "'There's No Autonomy': Narratives of Self-Authorship from Black Male Foster Care Alumni in Higher Education." *Journal of African American Males in Education*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2016, pp. 18–35.

18. Amechi, Mauriell H., Stone, Blayne D., and Williams, Janelle L. "Transitions and Pathways: HBCU College Choice Among Black Students with Foster Care Experience." *Journal of the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2020.
19. St. Amour, Madeline. "FAFSA Renewals Down, Especially for Lower-Income Students." *Inside Higher Education*, 27 May 2020, www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2020/05/27/fafsa-renewals-down-especially-lower-income-students.
20. Fernandes-Alcantara, Adrienne L. "Youth Transitioning from Foster Care: Background and Federal Programs." Congressional Research Service, crsreports.congress.gov. Accessed 19 May 2019.
21. About Education and Training Vouchers. Foster Care to Success, www.fc2sprograms.org/faqs. Accessed 6 August 2020.
22. Naccarato, Toni, et al. "Employment Outcomes of Foster Youth: The Results from the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Foster Youth." *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 32, no. 4, Elsevier Ltd, 2010, pp. 551–59, psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1016/j.childyouth.2009.11.009.
23. Clemens, Elysia V., Lalonde, Trent L., and Sheesley, Alison. P. "The Relationship between School Mobility and Students in Foster Care Earning a High School Credential." *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 68, 2016, pp. 193–201, doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2016.07.016. Accessed 25 July 2020.
24. "Current/Former Foster Youth on the Impact of Coronavirus." *National Foster Youth Institute*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=idJhIvYOXYc. Accessed 17 July 2020.
25. "Ways and Means Leaders Introduce Bipartisan Bill to Provide Emergency Support for Foster Youth and Child Welfare Services," waysandmeans.house.gov/sites/democrats.waysandmeans.house.gov/files/documents/Supporting%20Foster%20Youth%20Act%20-%20Section%20by%20Section.pdf. Accessed 7 August 2020.
26. Grassley, Chuck, Davis, Danny, Wyden, Ron, and Walorski, Jackie. childwelfarecovid.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/National-and-State-Chafee-Support-Letter-1.pdf, 2020. Accessed 25 July 2020.
27. United States, Congress, House. To temporarily modify the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and for other purposes. Congress.gov, www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/6766?s=1&r=2. 116th Congress, 2nd session. Accessed 25 July 2020; "Ways and Means Leaders Introduce Bipartisan Bill to Provide Emergency Support for Foster Youth and Child Welfare Services," waysandmeans.house.gov/sites/democrats.waysandmeans.house.gov/files/documents/Supporting%20Foster%20Youth%20Act%20-%20Section%20by%20Section.pdf. Accessed 7 August 2020.