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John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood

Children are removed from families and placed into foster care due to incidents of abuse, neglect, or other family crisis. On September 30, 2025, more than 102,000 young people aged 14 or older were in foster care. More than 15,000 young people *emancipated* from care in FY2025, meaning they exited due to age (typically at age 18, or up to age 21, depending on the jurisdiction) without having been reunited with family or placed in a new permanent family.

The John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (hereinafter, “Chafee program”) provides funds to states, including territories, and Indian tribal entities (hereinafter, “grantees”) to address poor education, employment, and other outcomes experienced by many current and former foster youth as they transition to adulthood. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Administration for Children and Families administers the Chafee program. The Chafee program is authorized under Title IV-E, Section 477 of the Social Security Act (SSA). It was established by the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (P.L. 106-169), succeeding a similar program created in 1985. The Chafee statute has been amended five times, most recently in 2018 by the Family First Prevention Services Act (P.L. 115-123), which renamed the program and expanded program eligibility and HHS’ authority to redistribute funding.

Supports

The Chafee program provides grantees with flexible funding for the purpose of helping current and former foster youth (see **Table 1**). Grantees have discretion in administering the program, but they are expected to provide a range of supports and services, such as educational assistance, career services, life skills training, preventive health activities, and help in building meaningful youth-adult connections. Grantees may dedicate as much as 30% of their funding toward *room or board* for youth ages 18 or older, until age 21 (or until age 23 if a grantee has extended foster care and elected to extend Chafee eligibility as well).

Education and Training Voucher (ETV) Program

The Chafee statute includes a separate authorization for the ETV program. Grantees may use ETV funding to provide a voucher—worth up to \$5,000 or the *cost of attendance* per year (whichever is less)—for a Chafee-eligible youth to attend an *institution of higher education*, as these terms are defined by the Higher Education Act (HEA). HEA defines *cost of attendance* as the costs for tuition, fees, books, supplies, transportation, room and board, and child care, among other expenses. HEA defines *institution of higher education* to include many public or nonprofit, for-profit, and vocational institutions of higher education.

Table 1. Chafee Program Federal Eligibility Criteria

Currently in Foster Care
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children and youth age 14 or older. • Children who are likely to remain in foster care until age 18, exclusively to ensure they have “regular, ongoing opportunities to engage in age or developmentally-appropriate activities.”
Formerly in Foster Care
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children and youth who experienced foster care at age 14 or older, and <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • aged out of foster care at age 18 or older; • exited foster care for kinship guardianship or adoption at age 16 or older; or • exited foster care for a reason other than aging out, kinship guardianship, or adoption. • Eligible until age 21 (or age 23 if a grantee has extended foster care until age 21 and elected to extend Chafee).

Source: Section 477(a) of the Social Security Act and HHS guidance.

Young people are eligible to receive ETVs for as many as five years (until age 26) so long as they are making satisfactory progress toward completing their education, and regardless of whether they attend in consecutive years. Youth may attend on either a full-time or part-time basis. Grantees have flexibility in implementing the ETV program (e.g., adding extra eligibility or application requirements). Grantees are required to take steps to prevent duplicating benefits under the ETV program and other federal programs.

Funding

The Chafee statute authorizes \$143 million annually in mandatory funding for the general Chafee program. ETV is authorized separately and funded on a discretionary basis at up to \$60 million annually, though the appropriated amount has generally been less (e.g., about \$44 million in FY2026).

To receive funds, a *state* must have a Title IV-E plan and submit a five-year plan (and annual updates) to HHS that describes how it intends to carry out its Chafee-funded program and affirms that it meets the law’s requirements. An Indian tribal entity with an approved Title IV-E plan, or that provides foster care under a Title IV-E agreement or contract with a state, may similarly apply for and receive funding. As of FY2025, the 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and seven tribes were allotted Chafee and/or ETV funds.

Chafee and ETV state grants are allocated based on each state's share of all children in foster care. Tribal grants are allocated (out of a state's allotment) based on the tribe's share of children in foster care in a state. The Chafee statute includes a *hold harmless* clause that prohibits any state from receiving less in general Chafee funds than the amount it received in FY1998 under the predecessor program to Chafee or \$500,000, whichever is greater. Grantees must provide a 20% non-federal match to receive their full federal Chafee and ETV allotments.

Grantees must annually request to receive their allotments and spend the funding in a two-year period, either the fiscal year it is received or in the succeeding fiscal year. If a grantee does not apply for its full allotment, HHS must distribute the funds to one or more other grantees on the basis of relative need for additional funds. Further, if a grantee does not use its full allotment within the permitted two years, HHS may redistribute those unused funds to grantees that apply for additional funding to carry out their Chafee programs. HHS must distribute any such unexpended funds to grantees that apply for them, based on their relative shares of all children in care across the grantees seeking additional funds.

Grantees have struggled to expend Chafee funds throughout the program's history. According to a 2025 Government Accountability Office report, grantees did not spend about 5% of each year's funding (more than \$9 million annually) in each of FY2019 to FY2022. Nearly all of this initially unspent funding was subsequently redistributed to other grantees and used for Chafee or ETV purposes (grantees have approximately one year in practice to spend redistributed funds). However, about \$670,000 of Chafee FY2020 funding (nearly all of it ETV funding) ultimately went unused and was returned to the U.S. Treasury.

Performance Measurement and Evaluation

In response to a Chafee statute requirement, HHS established the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) to capture the characteristics, service receipt, and outcomes of certain current and former foster youth.

Through NYTD, grantees reported providing independent living services (using Chafee funds or other resources) to more than 93,000 young people ages 14 to 26 in FY2023. More than two-thirds of these youth were in foster care when they were served, and most (60%) received from one to three services. As reported via NYTD, the frequency and type of services provided varies by young people's age, state, and other factors. In recent years, the prevalence of receiving room and board financial assistance has increased while receipt of most other supports and services has declined. One analysis estimates that less than a quarter of eligible youth ages 14 to 21 received transition services in FY2021, and just under half ever received independent living services between ages 14 and 21.

Students with foster care history report significant unmet educational assistance need, relative to other students. More than 14,000 youth received an ETV per year in recent years. A study of the ETV program in 10 states found that nearly

two-thirds of those eligible for ETV and enrolled in college were not awarded or did not use a voucher.

Current and former foster youth continue to experience poor outcomes relative to youth in the general population. For example, one analysis of NYTD data found that 79% of youth who experienced foster care at age 17 and reached age 21 in FY2021 reported having a high school diploma, GED, or higher certification. The comparable estimated rate among their peers in the general population was 92%. Further, roughly one-fourth (24%) of these follow-up youth were enrolled in postsecondary education or training and 56% were currently employed, compared to rates among their peers of 50% and 64%, respectively. More than one-fourth of these youth were parents (26%), and about a third (35%) had ever been incarcerated.

The Chafee statute also directs HHS to reserve a portion of the program funding to conduct evaluations of Chafee-funded activities deemed to be "innovative or of potential national significance." HHS has sponsored evaluations, but evidence on the effectiveness of programs for the Chafee-eligible population remains limited. HHS is exploring new approaches to testing promising programs, services, and practices for young people transitioning out of foster care.

Recent Policy Changes and Proposals

During the COVID-19 pandemic, The Supporting Foster Youth and Families Through the Pandemic Act (Division X of P.L. 116-260) increased funding and temporarily expanded eligibility, broadened use of funds, and provided other flexibilities for the Chafee and ETV programs. Subsequent bills and Biden Administration budget requests proposed making similar types of flexibilities permanent under the Chafee and ETV programs.

The Trump Administration has proposed making changes to Chafee/ETV policy and practice through its "Fostering the Future for American Children and Families" Executive Order and FY2027 budget request. These proposals generally seek to encourage efforts to promote education, employment, and "self-sufficiency."

In May 2026, the House passed H.R. 7432 with bipartisan support. This bill as amended would make changes to the Chafee program related to eligibility, ETV use of funds and outreach, housing supportive services, youth access to legal counseling, supports for parenting and expectant youth, and facilitating supportive relationships for youth.

Other topics related to older youth with foster care experience have received recent congressional consideration, including Chafee outreach and service receipt, extended foster care, and transportation supports.

For further information about the Chafee program and other supports for former foster youth, see CRS Reports RL34499, R46734, and IF11010.

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