



Answers...

A handbook

for youth

by youth

in foster care

This handbook was created by the Youth Leadership Advisory Team, (YLAT).

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The editors are on the staff of the Independent Living Initiatives Project, under whose auspices the activities described here were conducted. The project is a collaborative program of the Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service at the University of Southern Maine and the Maine Department of Human Services.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the following individuals and organizations for initially creating and later improving this handbook.

First and foremost, thank you to the young adults in the Department of Human Services' care for letting their voices be heard, for granting us access to a wide range of attitudes, beliefs, hopes and dreams about Maine's foster care system and giving life to the Youth Leadership Advisory Team:

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Trisha J.	Twiki C.	Nate H.	Jim D.
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Crystal C.	Liz P.	Amy B.	Jason M.
Frank H.	Angie H.	Maria G.	Kevin C.
Rebecca L.	Amy L.	Eddie W.	Shauna K.

Next we would like to thank the Department of Human Services, Bureau of Child and Family Services' staff and administrators for their interest, vision, and ongoing support toward developing the Youth Leadership Advisory Team for all youth in care. Special appreciation to Margaret Semple, Diane Towle, Sandra Hodge, Hugh Sipowicz, Nancy Carlson and Rosalynne Petrie. We also salute the Life Skills Caseworkers who provide day to day support to youth in care: Cathie Richards, Chris Hunninghaus, Maureen Talon, Kate David, Tonya Charette and Cathy Roessler.

We are particularly grateful to Commissioner Kevin Concannon for his personal attention and commitment to listening to the voices of young adults in foster care.

Finally, our appreciation to Freda Bernatovicz, Director of the Institute for Public Sector Innovation, for her support for Youth Development. Thanks to Jennifer Long, Sue Walker, Anne Bernard, and Amy W. We are grateful to Sharon Berliner for making sure the first edition was completed and to Jeff C., who originally had the handbook idea in 1993. Ideas, support, insight and inspiration have built a community of support for youth in care, by youth in care.

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Original Printing, Spring 1998
Revised, Fall 2000

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This handbook was originally written for you by a team of 22 youth in foster care who came together for a two-day summit (fancy name for a big meeting). The purpose of the summit was to provide youth in foster care with a way to help other youth in foster care understand the system. This group of youth became the Youth Leadership Advisory Team. Now, this handbook has even been revised and improved by the Youth Leadership Advisory Team.

This handbook addresses many of the issues and questions that you may have about the foster care system. It is meant to be a guide/source of information.

The book can be used in many different ways. You can read the whole book, or you can look up the answers to questions you have right now. Jumping around in the book to read about things that interest you is o.k. too. The Table of Contents will help get you started.

If you have any questions or need additional information, please talk to your caseworker, care provider, Guardian Ad Litem, mentor or other adult you trust.

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WHAT IS FOSTER CARE FROM A TEEN'S POINT OF VIEW?

Foster care is when you are removed from your family's home because it is not safe for you to live there anymore. A Judge of the District Court can place you in the custody of the Department of Human Services (foster care). The reason you are placed in foster care is to keep you safe while your family has an opportunity to make positive changes.

**“Sitting in the corner
alone and afraid
trying to hold to hope
for the life I've made.
It's so hard to smile
while holding back tears
But if you dig down deep
somewhere in your soul,
you will find the strength
to fill in the empty hole.
It might take time, long hours
of pain
But nothing to lose, and
everything to gain.”**

Chanthy L., age 17

When you come into foster care you will be placed in a foster home, relative's home, group home, residential placement or shelter. Being removed from your home and placed somewhere new can bring up a lot of feelings. You may feel angry, confused, sad, afraid, relieved and/or glad. It is important to talk to a person you trust about your feelings. All your feelings are O.K.!

“It's OK to be mad and sad. It's how you deal with it that counts.”

Muriel G., age 17

You may have many questions about the rules and routines of your new placement. Ask your care provider to go over them with you. Knowing about your placement may help you be more comfortable.



DID I DO SOMETHING WRONG?

It is important to realize that even though you were removed from your home **it was not your fault!** Youth come into foster care for many reasons:

1. Parents or caretakers are not able to keep you safe.
2. Physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse.

“When things aren’t working the way you want them to, don’t give up and run away. Reach for something better.”

Lizz M., age 17

“Don’t be like a leaf, moving only when blown by the wind. Instead, be like the wind, moving all obstacles from your path.”

Corey M., age 19

3. Voluntary placement by parents or care providers.
4. Crisis in the family such as severe conflicts between youth and parent, care provider or brothers/sisters.
5. Parents or care providers cannot control youths’ behavior.

6. Youth are convicted of committing an offense and a judge decides that it is in the youth’s best interest to have the Department of Human Services involved in their supervision. (This reason can give time for both the youth and the family to make positive changes.)

“Good things come to those who wait. Be patient with life; you might be surprised at what you find.”

John R., age 17

“Life in foster care is challenging. Success is derived from challenges.”

Jesse R., age 19



WHEN THINGS ARE NOT WORKING, WHO CAN I TURN TO FOR HELP? (CHAIN OF COMMAND)

Ask your case-worker for the names and numbers of these people

COMMISSIONER _____



DIRECTOR _____



REGIONAL PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS _____



SUPERVISORS _____



Start here →

CASEWORKERS _____

“It feels good knowing that I was part of the group that finally got DHS out of the dark, and finally showed the people that we have a voice and that we aren’t afraid to speak up.”

John R., age 17



HOW TO ADVOCATE FOR YOURSELF

As you are going through the chain of command, trying to get what you need, remember a few helpful hints when advocating for yourself. Most of all, remember that you have a right to ask for help.

DO know that you have a right to ask for help.

DO ask for help from an adult that you trust (Your Guardian Ad Litem, Life Skills Case-worker, Counselor, Mentor, Advocate, Foster Parent, or Friend).

DO know that you have control over some things, even though it feels like everyone else has control. You can control:

- Who you ask to help you
- Using the chain of command
- Speaking your truths

DO be clear about:

- What's happening
- What's needed
- How you feel

DO brainstorm different solutions and backup plans.

DO be straightforward and truthful.

DO be ready to negotiate.

DON'T feel like you are bothering people.

DON'T hesitate to ask for help.

DON'T think that you have no control.

DON'T think that you have to go through this by yourself.

DON'T think it's too late.

DON'T start without thinking things through.

DON'T use sarcasm or degrading language.

DON'T swear or namecall.

DON'T prejudge others.

DON'T give up.



“You’ve got to regain your goals and dreams to continue with life. If you don’t have your goals and dreams, you don’t have much of your life.”

(Brad Levesque)

RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES...OF YOUTH

Listed below are some of your rights and responsibilities while in foster care.

1. To be protected from physical, emotional and sexual abuse and/or neglect.
2. To be placed in a substitute care setting that can best meet your needs.
3. To be told why you came into foster care and why you're still in foster care.
4. To be placed with siblings if it's possible and the Department believes it's in your best interest.
5. To visit and talk with biological parents, siblings, relatives, and other individuals important to you unless restricted by the court and/or DHS, or if you don't want to. Many factors are taken into consideration about visits.
6. To learn about and participate in court reviews and case planning conferences. You can attend these reviews/conferences or have input by writing or calling your caseworker.
7. To receive honest information about the decisions the Department is making that affect your life.
8. To be listened to, respected and heard; and to listen to, respect and hear others.
9. To have visits and talk privately with your caseworker at least once every three months.

“It's OK to ask for help.”

Muriel G., age 17

10. To be able to talk with an adult you trust about any type of abuse or neglect by your biological parents, foster parents, other caregivers or any other person.
11. To work with your social worker and care provider to make rules and to responsibly follow them.
12. To help make a visitation plan.
13. To keep scheduled appointments or if you need to cancel, call ahead of time.
14. To get regular medical, dental and eye exams.
15. To be placed in the least restrictive setting that will meet your needs.
16. To participate in school, religious, cultural and other activities.
17. To have all information in your individual and family case kept confidential. (See section on confidentiality on page 13 for more information.)
18. To go to school.
19. To have privacy and respect others' privacy.
20. To write a formal complaint to the Department about the services you are unhappy with.
22. To have a permanent plan for placement within twelve months of coming into custody, and to take part in developing and committing yourself to this plan.

“Take life one step at a time, minute by minute, day by day; that way, you’ll never miss anything.”

Lizz M., age 17

“There is light at the end of the tunnel.”

Chanthy L., age 17



RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES...OF YOUR BIOLOGICAL FAMILY

Listed below are some of the rights and responsibilities of biological parents while youth are in foster care.

1. To tell you why you're in foster care. If your family does not do this, your caseworker can explain things to you.

2. To be told by the Department what changes need to be made so you can go home.

3. To be told about and take part in court reviews and case planning meetings.

4. To keep scheduled visits with you and contact you through phone calls and letters, unless restricted by court, DHS or you.

5. To work with DHS to develop a permanent plan for you.

6. To tell DHS of their address, telephone number, living arrangements and any other changes that may affect your case.

7. To give financial support to the state for your care, depending on their ability to pay.

8. To be part of your life through activities such as school meetings, as long as it is safe for you.

9. To make a written formal complaint to the Department about services they are unhappy about.

10. To be informed of your health, education and placement.

11. To terminate their parental rights if they are not able or willing to make it safe for you to return home.

If you are uncomfortable with your parents using any of these rights or responsibilities, please tell your caseworker.

RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES... OF CARE PROVIDERS

Listed below are some of the rights and responsibilities of your care providers.

1. To keep you safe and provide for your day-to-day care.
2. To treat you with dignity and respect.
3. To keep information about you and your family confidential, unless it is in your best interest to give professionals information.
4. To show understanding, give guidance and unconditional acceptance.
5. To prepare you for moving to your next placement whether it be going home, to another placement or independent living.
6. To help in your growth and development by encouraging your success in areas such as school and day-to-day life skills (not only things like cooking and laundry, but also good communication skills and “hanging in there” through difficult times).
7. To make sure you get medical and dental care.
8. To help you, or get you help, to deal with your thoughts and feelings about being in foster care.
9. To get enough training to be a care provider for youth who have been abused and/or neglected.
10. To make their home ready to welcome you.
11. To help you in continuing to learn about your culture and heritage.

Remember, if you have concerns about any of these issues, please talk with your caseworker about them.

RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES... OF YOUR CASEWORKER

Your caseworker will work with you, your biological parents, care provider and other individuals involved in your life. Listed below are some of the roles and responsibilities of your caseworker.

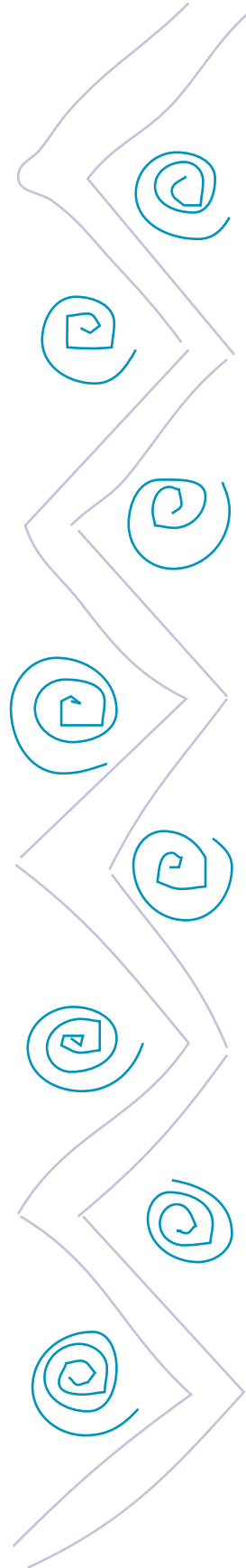
1. To tell your parents what changes need to occur so you can go home.
2. To set up visits between you, your family and/or other individuals important to you, if it's safe for you.
3. To give or find services to meet your and your family's needs.
4. To keep information about you and your family confidential, unless sharing the information helps to meet your and/or your family's needs. For instance, giving some background information to a therapist is important.
5. To give services to help your care provider meet your needs.
6. To meet with you to talk face-to-face at least once every three months. (You can still call and/or e-mail as often as needed.)
7. To tell the court of your and your family's progress, and to make recommendations to the court regarding reunification with your family.
8. To get you independent living services if you are 16 years of age or older.
9. To work with you on choosing the least restrictive placement that is best able to care for you. Your caseworker can explain your placement options so you can help choose.

While you are very important, please remember that your case worker has many other cases to work on also. Try to be patient and understanding. But if you feel your needs are not being met, turn to the section *When Things Are Not Working, Who Can I Turn To For Help (Chain Of Command)* on page 6, and start working your way up the chain.



CONFIDENTIALITY

Confidentiality means that information about you and your situation is private. Information in your case record at the Department of Human Services cannot be shared with others unless it is to meet your needs. Some confidential information, like medical, educational, and / or reasons for your removal from your biological home, may be shared with your care provider and professionals you are meeting with. You can ask your caseworker what information is shared. All professionals, including your care provider, must keep the information that is given to them confidential. Friends or other people may ask why you are no longer living with your family. Remember, it is your right to tell **or** not tell them about your situation. These questions may be difficult to answer. It may help to talk with your caseworker, care provider or other adult you trust, so you can answer them in a way that lets you feel comfortable.



COURT PROCESS/LEGAL TERMS

When a child/youth is placed in the custody of the State of Maine there is a hearing (meeting at court). Biological parents have the right to be represented by attorneys. The child is represented by a Guardian Ad Litem who is appointed by the court. The Department of Human Services' Caseworker is represented by an Assistant Attorney General.

The Department assigns codes to represent the legal status of children in care. The codes and legal terms you may hear are listed below.

■ **Children in custody under the Child and Family Services and Child Protection Act:**

C-1 The Superior Court, District Court or probate court has made a *preliminary protection order* giving temporary custody to the Department of Human Services because it has decided that the child or youth is at immediate risk of serious harm. A hearing on the *child protection petition* (the papers the judge first signs) must be held within ten days of the time the judge gives temporary custody to the Department in an emergency situation.

C-2 A hearing is held on the *child protection petition* and the court has ruled that the child is in jeopardy (put in danger). The child is then placed in full custody of the Department of Human Services by a District Court. (Unless you have come into custody through the Juvenile Court you probably fit into this category.) At the C-2 hearing the judge may also decide that the child is not unsafe and can go home.

C-3 The court has terminated the rights of the child's parents and the child is available for adoption.

C-5 Children are placed in the custody of the Department of Human Services by a juvenile court because they have committed a crime and it would not be in their best interest to stay at home.

■ **Children in custody under the Divorce Laws:**

C-6 Children are placed in the custody of the Department until a divorce is final.

C-7 Children are placed in the custody of the Department of Human Services in a divorce judgment by the Superior or District Court.

■ **Children in custody by the Probate Court's acceptance of the parents' Surrender and Release of a child:**

V-5 Children are placed in the Department's custody because they have been voluntarily surrendered and released by their parents for the purpose of adoption in probate court.

■ **Child Welfare Voluntary Statuses:**

V-2 Children are placed in the Department's care through a voluntary agreement between the Department and the parent; parents keep custody.

V-9 Young adults between 18 and 21 agree to be in the Department's extended care program and are provided services to continue their education.

■ **Legal Terms:**

Adjudication: A hearing to figure out if there has been a crime.

Appeals: Someone asks for a hearing to change the court's decision. Any court decision is subject to an appeal. Appeals can take several months to resolve.

Arraignment: The court gives an individual a chance to admit or deny the crime or to let the judge decide.

Cease Reunification: The court decides that since the biological parents did not do what was required of them for the child to go home, the Department is no longer required to provide reunification services for the purpose of the child returning to their biological parent's home.

Disposition: This is the decision about where the youth should live (such as in state custody), as well as what the parents, DHS and the youth must do to change the problems.

Please understand that sometimes court hearings are continued and changed to another date for various reasons. For instance, someone may not show up, or everyone at court may feel it's a good idea.

continued

Guardian Ad Litem (GAL): A lawyer or a trained adult volunteer, assigned by the court to study and protect the best interests of a youth in a civil or criminal abuse or neglect case. The GAL and the youth should talk on an ongoing basis. The GAL is your voice in the courtroom when you are not there.

Judge: The judge decides what is best for the youth. The judge issues court orders, reads reports, hears arguments and decides whether the youth should be placed in the custody of the state.

Judicial Review: A court review that looks at the progress of the parents and the youth in order to decide the safest place for the youth to live. There must be a Judicial Review at least every 6 months. At least every 12 months, the judicial review must identify your permanent plan.

Juvenile Court: A district court or another court that only addresses matters affecting children younger than 18.

Notice of Hearings: Everyone involved in the case must be served with a notice telling them when and where there's going to be a hearing. "Parties" includes people like parents, attorneys, GALs and your caseworker.

Termination of Parental Rights: If family reunification has been ruled out and adoption is a possibility for the child, the Department may petition (request) for termination of parents' rights to the child. If the court terminates parental rights it means the child is free for adoption. It also means that your biological parents have no legal rights pertaining to you anymore. (They don't have access to information about you, don't work with your caseworker anymore, etc.)



VISITATION RIGHTS

When the goal of foster care is to return you to, or maintain a healthy relationship with, your biological parents, the Department of Human Services is committed to arranging a visitation

“A little hope is all you need.”

Lizz M., age 17



plan that is based on the safety of you and your parents. Visits may be extended as the parent-child relationship improves. Any help needed should be provided to you and your parents in order to make visits successful. Visitation can also be scheduled with relatives, siblings and/or other individuals with whom you have a positive and meaningful relationship.

It is the caseworker’s role to schedule all visitations. The separation and loss you may feel from being removed from your family can be hard. You should work

with your caseworker on setting up a visitation plan. The amount of visitation is different for every case and is based on reasons such as why you came into foster care, the physical distance between you and the individual(s) you are visiting and everyone’s schedules. Visits should be in a relaxed and natural setting, such as the parent’s home, community parks or visitation center. If a conflict arises and you or your visitor cannot attend, a call should be placed to the caseworker to cancel the visit.

“If you’re scared, it’s OK. You’re not the only one.”

Muriel G., age 17



Please talk with your caseworker if you are not comfortable with visitation at any time. You have the right to choose whether or not to participate in a visit.

OUT OF HOME PLACEMENTS

“Foster care doesn’t make you less of a person, it makes you a stronger person.”

Nichole C., age 17



■ **Family Foster Home:** A private residence in which a youth resides. This home is the most family-like setting available to youth who are removed from their

biological home. The home is limited to a total of six children under the age of 18, including the host family’s biological children. Sometimes, your foster home can be with a relative.

■ **Therapeutic Foster Home:** This foster home gives special care to youth with behavioral, emotional and/or medical needs. The foster family gets special training and support. This foster home is limited to two youth.

■ **Group Home/Residential Facility:** This is a licensed facility with 24-hour staff which provides residential care for twelve or fewer youth. This placement

provides individualized treatment for youth such as psychiatric consultation, group work and individual work.

■ **Shelter:** A residential facility that provides care for youth in crisis on a short term basis, up to three weeks.

■ **Diagnostic Facility:** Short term placement that provides medical, educational, psychiatric, psychological and substance abuse evaluations and family assessments.

■ **Transitional Living Program:** In this kind of program, youth get ready for living on their own. The program teaches a lot of life skills and helps you set and follow goals (for your education, work, relationships...).

As you do well in these areas, you’ll be getting ready for your own place. It’s not as easy as it sounds, but these programs have helped youth who are ready for big responsibilities.

“No one better knows oneself than oneself.”

Nate P., age 17



HOW WILL I GET THE CLOTHES I NEED?

The Department of Human Services, as your legal guardian, wants to help you get the clothes you need and there's a couple of different ways this works.

MONTHLY CLOTHING ALLOWANCE

Every youth under the age of 18 receives a CLOTHING ALLOWANCE. This CLOTHING ALLOWANCE right now comes to around \$100 each month. Twice a month about \$50.00 is sent to your care provider (that means foster parent, group home staff, or someone like that). This money should be saved and used ONLY for CLOTHES and FOOTWEAR for you.

AND

CASH ALLOWANCE TWICE A YEAR

Youth under the age of 18 also receive CASH ALLOWANCES for clothing and footwear twice each year. One comes on April 15th and the other comes on August 1st. This should help you get summer clothes and school clothes. It's important to be a "smart shopper." Look for sale items whenever possible and try to avoid really expensive items like \$100 sneakers. It's easy to use up all of your money fast.

IMPORTANT!

If you are out on your own or in an emergency shelter, you are not eligible to receive the cash allowance.

PURCHASE ORDERS

SOMETIMES, your caseworker can supplement your clothing allowance with a PURCHASE ORDER for specific needs. A PURCHASE ORDER is a letter that lets you be able to buy specific items for a specific amount of money. At many stores, you have to go the CUSTOMER SERVICE DESK to buy your items with a PURCHASE ORDER.

Some specific needs that a PURCHASE ORDER may be given for are:

- If you gain or lose a lot of weight.
- If your clothes were destroyed or lost.
- If you had to move to a new place to live without enough or the right clothes.
- If there is a special medical reason.
- Sometimes for food or personal hygiene items.

IF YOU ARE OVER AGE 18:

For youth over the age of 18, you may be able to receive the CLOTHING ALLOWANCE that is sent out twice each month. You may also be eligible for purchase orders to help with seasonal clothing (warm weather and cold weather clothes) and school clothes. It is important that you and your caseworker discuss these options before you sign your V-9 agreement. Once you have figured out what clothing assistance you can receive after age 18, ask your caseworker to write it in your V-9 agreement. If you have additional needs, talk this over with your caseworker.

SCHOOL

Every youth has the right to be in school and to be learning! If your school program is not working for you, whether it is too hard,

too easy, confusing, etc., you have options in changing it. It is important that you talk to your caseworker, care provider and teachers, because they may not know that you are struggling.

Sometimes you will take tests at school with psychologists to find out where you are educationally and to set you up with a school program that will help you succeed.

“In 1992 a high school graduate earned almost \$6,000 per year more than a high school dropout. Going to college boosts income even more. In 1992 college graduates had a mean annual income of \$32,629, while high school graduates had a mean annual income of \$18,737.”

Bureau of Census

If you need special education services, the school will set up meetings, called Pupil Evaluation Team (PET) meetings. These meetings include teachers, care providers, social workers, your caseworker and other people working to help meet your school needs. When you are receiving special education services you will be assigned a Surrogate Parent (reference glossary). Remember that it is **very important** that you tell the adults you are working with when things are not going well in school. It is your right to have school services that will help you learn. This includes, but is not limited to, tutors, special education classes, social workers, modified work load, classes that better meet your needs, etc.



PAYING FOR COLLEGE

TUITION WAIVER

Beginning in the fall of 2000, if you are in the care of the Department of Human Services at the time that you graduate from high school or get your General Equivalency Diploma (GED), you are eligible for a “tuition waiver” if you are planning to attend one of the University of Maine system colleges, one of the state’s Vocational Technical colleges, or Maine Maritime Academy. If you meet the requirements which are described below, you may attend one of the schools covered by the tuition waiver, tuition free, until you complete your college undergraduate degree. The tuition waiver is available by law (P.L. # 2657). The Finance Authority of Maine is putting the law into place and wrote the rules about the tuition waiver. The tuition waiver is available to no more than 25 “new students” (freshman) per year.

The law is not retroactive for those who were in DHS custody before or if you are already in college.

WHAT YOU NEED TO DO:

According to the tuition waiver law, you must apply for federal financial aid by completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) for each year that you attend college. You will need the federal grant assistance (PELL grant, SEOG) in order to pay for your dorm room, food, books, and fees. Ask your Life Skills worker or guidance counselor about getting the FAFSA application.

YOU ARE ELIGIBLE FOR THE TUITION WAIVER IF YOU:

- Are in the care of the Department of Human Services when you graduate from high school, or get your GED,
- Are a resident of the state of Maine, and
- Have been accepted for admission to one of the schools covered by the tuition waiver.

YOU WILL REMAIN ELIGIBLE FOR THE TUITION WAIVER IF YOU:

- Are a full-time student in good academic standing. (i.e. not failing coursework, or getting on academic probation) and
- Submit a re-application form each year to the Finance Authority of Maine with the documentation described below.

HOW TO APPLY FOR THE TUITION WAIVER!

IF YOU ARE AN INCOMING FRESHMAN, YOU APPLY BY SUBMITTING:

- An application form to the Finance Authority of Maine.
- A letter from your Department caseworker indicating that you were in care at the time you graduated from high school, or got your GED.
- A letter from the college's financial aid office where you plan to attend indicating that you have applied for federal financial aid (FAFSA form) or a copy of your FAFSA award letter.
- A copy of your high school transcript, or GED certificate.

AFTER YOUR FRESHMAN YEAR, YOU RE-APPLY BY SUBMITTING:

- A re-application form to the Finance Authority of Maine.
- A copy of a letter from Registrar's Office of the college you are attending indicating that you are a student in good academic standing.
- A letter from the college's financial aid office indicating that you have applied for federal financial aid (FAFSA form) or a copy of your FAFSA award letter.

WHO DO I CALL FOR AN APPLICATION?

You may obtain an application from:

Ms. Rochelle Bridgham, Program Officer
Finance Authority of Maine
5 Community Drive
Augusta, Maine 04333
E-mail: Rochelle@famemaine.com
Tel: 1-800-228-3734, or (207) 623-3263

Any questions that you have about applying for the tuition waiver should be directed to Ms. Bridgham at the Finance Authority of Maine. Your application should be submitted as soon as possible prior to the beginning of the school year.

“I hope to represent Maine's youth in foster care by showing that Maine's youth who are in care are able to go college, to show that we can do anything that we want to in life as long as we believe in it.”

(Maria G, age 20)

WHAT IF I AM NOT ELIGIBLE FOR THE TUITION WAIVER? (HOW CAN I AFFORD SCHOOL?!?)

IF YOU ARE ALREADY IN SCHOOL:

For those students who are beyond their freshman year (for the 2000-2001 school year) in one of the colleges covered by the tuition waiver, the Department of Human Services will continue to provide financial assistance until their undergraduate degree is completed provided the following conditions are met:

- Complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) for each academic year.
- Remain in good academic standing. (i.e. not failing courses, or on academic probation).
- Complete the Department's application for college financial assistance. (this form may be obtained through your Department caseworker, or Life Skills caseworker).

IF THERE ARE MORE THAN 25 NEW STUDENTS

If there are more than 25 "new students" (freshman) in an academic year who are planning to attend one of the schools covered by the tuition waiver, the Department will provide financial assistance for those students if the above conditions are met.

POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE FOR STUDENTS NOT IN ONE OF THE COLLEGES COVERED BY THE TUITION WAIVER

The Department of Human Services will continue to provide post-secondary education financial assistance for those students who are not attending one of the colleges covered by the tuition waiver provided you meet the conditions described above.

If you will become 21 years of age before you complete your undergraduate degree, it is possible to receive financial assistance from the Department until you complete your college undergraduate degree. The conditions listed above will also apply to you as well.

IMPORTANT NOTE: If you plan to spend a semester of college abroad as an exchange student, talk with your worker in advance in order to make financial plans!

If you have questions about the financial assistance from the Department of Human Services, you may contact your Life Skills caseworker, or the following person:

Hugh Sipowicz, Independent Living Program Manager
Tel: (207) 287-6259 E-Mail: hugh.e.sipowicz@state.me.us

"All we have is hope. I have plans and hopes for my future. I want to go to college. I want to give back what has been so nicely given to me."

(Marion R, age 17)

INDEPENDENT LIVING (FOR YOUTH 16 AND OVER) AND LIFE SKILLS CASEWORKERS

Getting ready to live on your own is a lot of work, but there is a lot of help out there. Staff, foster parents, counselors, teachers, adult friends, and Children’s Services caseworkers are some of the people who can help you. In addition to all of these people, there are Life Skills caseworkers for every region. Their job is to help you gain the knowledge and the skills you need to make it on your own. Life Skills caseworkers can help you to identify and meet your goals in areas such as housing, employment, relationships, school, health, money, getting into and paying for college, and making good decisions (just to name a few). You might see a Life Skills caseworker one-on-one, in a group with other foster kids, at a teen conference, or on a teen adventure trip. Your Life Skills caseworker is an additional person who can help you, but your Children’s Services caseworker and Supervisor continue to make case decisions (such as placement) even after a Life Skills worker gets involved. If you want to talk with a Life Skills caseworker, ask your Children’s Services caseworker for the name and number of the worker in your region.

FOSTER CARE INDEPENDENCE ACT OF 1999

The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 offers new help to young people who are getting ready to leave the foster care system. This Act created the Chafee Independence Program. Your Life Skills worker can tell you about how this can help you, but here are some important parts of the Chafee Program:

- Increases the funds for state independent living programs.
- States can provide Medicaid to youth between the ages of 18 and 21 (if they were in foster care when they turned 18).
- Increases assets that you can have and still be able to receive Medicaid. (From \$1,000 to \$10,000!)
- Tells states to make sure that foster parents are ready to be foster parents!
- Gives more money to help states find adoptive families for older youth who wish to be adopted.
- Increase financial assistance of 18 to 21 year olds who are leaving foster care.
- Says that young people in care must be a part of designing programs for themselves.

“The stereotypical DHS child doesn’t exist. Every child is unique and uniqueness isn’t negated because of DHS custody.”

Jesse R., age 19

V-9 (EXTENDED CARE): IT'S MORE THAN JUST A VITAMIN.

A V-9 is a voluntary contract between you and the Department that allows DHS to keep your case open past your eighteenth birthday, almost always for educational or extreme health reasons. Some of you may choose a V-9 contract when you turn eighteen. A V-9 does not mean that you stay in the custody of DHS. It does mean that you can continue to get services, such as an apartment lease, "Rent a Center" payments, or funding, until your twenty-first birthday. You need to talk with your caseworker before your eighteenth birthday about the V-9. You are responsible for all damages or contracts you take on as an adult, like holes in the wall at your apartment. You must sign a V-9

"Trust someone. You have to start somewhere."

Muriel G., age 17

before your eighteenth birthday. If you do not sign a V-9, your DHS case will be closed on your eighteenth birthday. It is almost impossible to get a V-9 reopened after it has been closed. A V-9 is a completely voluntary program and can be ended by you or by DHS at any time. A V-9 is a very individual contract between you and your caseworker. One can look very different from another. Ask your caseworker for more information.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN I TURN EIGHTEEN?

At eighteen everyone becomes a legal adult. You then have all of the legal responsibilities of an adult including voting, registering for selective service, getting health insurance, signing medical and school permission forms, making your own decisions and being responsible for them. Remember that you have the choice to continue in care by signing a V-9 contract.

- **VOTING** — You can register at the Department of Motor Vehicles, your city or town hall or by mail once you turn eighteen. You only need to re-register if you change your address.
- **SELECTIVE SERVICE** — All males between 18-25 are legally required to register for the selective service (the draft). You can do this at your local post office. You cannot receive financial aid for college unless you register.
- **PERSONAL RECORDS** — You can and should obtain your own copies of these items: (1) your birth certificate (from the town hall where you were born or from Vital Records, 221 State St., Augusta), (2) your Social Security card (at the Social Security office), and (3) a picture ID (at the Department of Motor Vehicles), as well as other important records.

continued

■ **MEDICAID** — Medicaid is health insurance for all youth in custody who do not have other medical coverage. Basically everyone must reapply for Medicaid when you turn eighteen or you could be closed out! If your income is under a certain amount you can continue to receive Medicaid until you are 21. Ask your caseworker for help. You can apply for Medicaid at your local DHS office.

■ **DRIVER'S LICENSE** — If you are under eighteen, you will need permission from the Regional Program Administrator at DHS to get your driver's license. Your caseworker and care provider should agree that you are ready for this huge responsibility. You must also be covered by insurance on the car you will be driving (this is your responsibility). Maine requires that everyone under eighteen take driver's education before getting a permit or license.

If you are under eighteen and in the custody of the Department, you may not own a car, motorcycle, snowmobile, or other off-road vehicle. Sorry.

■ **FINANCIAL AID** — There is some money available from DHS to help pay for college for kids on the V-9 program. You must be accepted by your school and file a FAFSA (Federal Application for Student Aid) form to be eligible. Students should also plan to contribute some of their own earnings. Talk to your guidance counselor and your Life Skills caseworker for more information. If you choose to attend a

IF YOU ARE TURNING EIGHTEEN, HAVE YOU...

- ___ Signed a V-9 or talked with your caseworker about it?
- ___ Got a copy of your Social Security Card?
- ___ Got a copy of your birth certificate?
- ___ Registered for the Selective Service (if you are a male)?
- ___ Completed your FAFSA application by May 1st (for college bound youth)?
- ___ Asked your caseworker if you are eligible for social security / disability?
- ___ Applied for Medicaid or other health insurance?
- ___ Made a list of important phone numbers and addresses (doctors, friends, family)?
- ___ Obtained a picture ID?
- ___ Found the family planning clinic in your town?
- ___ Registered to vote?

University of Maine school, chances are that most of your bill will be covered. A private college in or out of state could mean you need to take out some loans.

- **HEALTH** — If you do not have a doctor or a dentist in your area, your caseworker or care provider can help or you can try *The Yellow Pages* in your area phone book. Make sure to ask your doctor if he or she accepts your health insurance when you call. You should get a copy of your immunization (shot) record from your doctor or caseworker. All schools (even colleges) require you to have this and you should keep track of when your next shots are due.

Every teen (and adults, too) should find out where their local family planning clinic is, whether you are sexually active or not. Your family planning clinic can give you straight answers about birth control, pregnancy, infections and your health. Family planning clinics/crisis pregnancy centers are for guys, too. You

can go with your caseworker or care provider or you can go on your own or with a friend. Teens can confidentially obtain birth control information, be tested for sexually transmitted diseases, and get free condoms with or without parental or DHS consent.

If a foster youth gets pregnant, their caseworker will do an assessment to make sure the baby is safe (fed, nurtured, receiving medical care, etc.). It does not mean the baby is in DHS custody.

TOP TEN QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR CASEWORKER BEFORE YOU SIGN A V-9 CONTRACT:

10. What if I want to go to school out of state?
9. Will the Department pay *all* of my expenses?
8. Is everyone in DHS custody entitled to a V-9?
7. Does the V-9 only help with college? What if I'm still in high school? How about technical school?
6. How much \$\$\$ do I have to contribute towards my education?
5. Can I get an apartment? Will DHS pay for all of it?
4. What about food and spending money?
3. What if I decide to take a little time off from school?
2. What if I'm still in college when I turn 21?
1. Can I still get purchase orders?



**“Life is a one-way road,
but where you go is up
to you.”**

Nate H., age 17



hat you’ve been through and what you’re experiencing may be very difficult. Remember—you’re **not alone!** Keep on keepin’ on, and keep your hopes and dreams alive.



**“I can do all things
through him who
strengthens me.”
Philippians 4:13**

Corey M., age 19



**“Be a drummer and
make your own
beats.”**

Nate P., age 17



**“There is a better
tomorrow.”**

Chantry L., age 17

LIFE SKILLS STAFF

INDEPENDENT LIVING PROGRAM COORDINATOR:

Hugh Sipowicz
Central DHS Office
221 State Street, SHS #11
Augusta, ME 04333-0011
287-6259
Hugh.E.Sipowicz@state.me.us

LIFE SKILLS CASEWORKERS:

Biddeford DHS & Sanford DHS

Kate David
208 Graham Street
Biddeford, ME 04005-3350
286-2482, 1-800-322-1919
Kate.L.David@state.me.us

Portland DHS

Tonya Charette
161 Marginal Way
Portland, ME 04101
822-2000, 1-800-482-7520
Tonya.J.Charette@state.me.us

Rockland & Augusta DHS

Chris Hunninghaus
35 Anthony Avenue
Augusta, ME 04333
624-5247, 1-800-452-1926
or
360 Old County Road
Rockland, ME 04841-5509
596-4262, 1-800-432-7802
Chris.H.Hunninghaus@state.me.us

Skowhegan & Lewiston DHS

Cathy Roessler
Skowhegan DHS
140 North Avenue
Skowhegan, ME 04976-1996
474-4868, 1-800-452-4602

or

200 Main Street
Lewiston, ME 04240-7098
795-4340, 1-800-482-7517
Cathy.M.Roessler@state.me.us

Bangor/Dover/Ellsworth/Machias DHS

Maureen Talon
396 Griffin Road
Bangor, ME 04401-3095
561-4276, 1-800-432-7825
Maureen.A.Talon@state.me.us

Houlton/Caribou/Fort Kent DHS

Cathie Richards
14 Access Highway
Caribou, ME 04736-9600
493-4155, 1-800-432-7366
Cathie.L.Richards@state.me.us

YOUTH LEADERSHIP ADVISORY TEAM (YLAT)

WHO IS YLAT?

YLAT, or the Youth Leadership Advisory Team, is a statewide youth in care advocacy group. We came together to make the voices of youth in care heard.

YLAT offers a helping hand by sharing our experiences and point of view. This is one way to have influence on the child welfare system, over our own lives and our care plans. Through this effort we are learning leadership skills. This group also allows us to stay connected with others in care and to give back something to those who have helped.

IN YLAT WE . . .

- Have fun.
- Advise, assist and connect with younger youth in care.
- Speak out to educate government, peers, general public and care givers.
- Promote positive changes while working with the Department of Human Services.
- Create energy and experiences that become a way of life.
- Build positive, long-term relationships in the community.
- Perform community service projects.
- Challenge ourselves and others to participate and work for trusting relationships with peers and adults.

WHAT YLAT HAS DONE:

- Created a web site for youth in care. Here's how you get there — www.ylat.usm.maine.edu
- Provided training about what youth in foster care experience. We have trained caseworkers, foster parents, judges, lawyers, other service providers.
- Helped plan the annual DHS Teen Conference for youth in foster care.
- Attended and helped plan the annual Youth Leadership Summit.
- Testified before the Maine legislature and helped pass a college tuition waiver bill for youth in care.
- Helped to revise DHS policy on extended care (the V-9 policy).
- The first thing we did was to create this handbook!

HOW TO GET INVOLVED IN YLAT:

If you are interest in learning more about YLAT or getting involved with YLAT, you should contact your Life Skills Worker or the YLAT Coordinator. You can call YLAT for free at 1-877-792-9528.

YLAT Coordinator – Penthea Burns
PO Box 15010
Portland, ME 04112
(207) 780-5861, 1-877-792-9528
pburns@usm.maine.edu

“I hope to show everyone that we are kids who care; kids who are taking action to change a not-so-great situation. We deserve respect and praise.”

(Crystal, age 18)

TEEN CONFERENCE

Since 1991, the Department of Human Services and youth in care (age 16 and older) have held an all day conference for teens in foster care. Youth from all over the state come to attend this conference that happens in the spring time. This is always a great chance for youth to get together to talk about the foster care system and to have a really great time!! Talk with your Life Skills caseworker or your Children's Services caseworker for more information. See you there!

BRAD LEVESQUE YOUTH LEADERSHIP AWARD

Each year the Brad Levesque Youth Leadership Award is given to a worthy youth in care who meets the criteria that Brad helped to develop. Brad spent most of his teen years in foster care, all the while fighting cancer. In his determination to not let cancer be his focus, Brad rarely allowed it to slow him down in reaching his goals. Brad committed many of his years in care to help improve the lives of other teens in foster care.

Brad's life has had an impact on many people, and his memory and legacy will continue to do so. The following criteria were developed by Brad in 1994:

1. Youth in care between the ages of 15 and 21.
2. Demonstrated active volunteer capacity.
3. Interested in pursuing education beyond high school.
4. May be medically, physically challenged.
5. May have resided in group/residential programs.
6. May have participated in outdoor adventure programs.

FRIEND OF YOUTH IN CARE AWARD

The Friend of Youth in Care Award has been established by Maine's Youth Leadership Advisory Team. Each year the award will be presented to a caring adult who has exhibited leadership on behalf of youth in care.

Youth in foster care face many challenges. Caring adults can assist youth who are facing these challenges by providing support, advocacy and friendship. Additionally, there are those people who come up with creative solutions to make the system better for all youth in care.

The Friend of Youth in Care Award will go to those adults who are willing to:

1. Make a commitment to youth in care.
2. Advocate for youth in care.
3. Be leaders on behalf of youth in care.
4. Be a positive role model for youth.

YOUTH SUMMIT

Since 1998, selected youth in Maine's foster care system have attended a two day retreat we call a Youth Summit. At these Summits, youth have discussed ways that the foster care system can be improved and then they move into action. It was at the first Youth Summit that this handbook was created. At the second Youth Summit, youth prepared to testify before the Maine Legislature and helped pass the Tuition Waiver Bill. After the third Youth Summit, the youth created a newsletter and a web site. What's next? Stay tuned. Or better yet, get involved!

OTHER YOUTH IN CARE GROUPS

California Youth Connections

California Youth Connections is an advocacy/youth leadership organization for current and former foster youth. We are young people, who because of our experiences with the child welfare system, now work to improve foster care to educate the public and policy makers about our unique needs and to change the negative stereotypes many people have of us. <http://www.calyouthconn.org>

Canadian Youth in Care Network

The National youth in Care Network (NYICN) is a non-profit charitable organization run by and for young people, aged 14 to 24, who are or have been in the care of child welfare authorities across Canada. The NYICN was founded in 1986 by a group of young people dedicated to the idea of youth empowerment. Many of our members are experienced peer mentors and peer advocates with the underlying philosophy of “youth helping youth.” <http://www.youthincare.ca>

Say So

Say So (Strong Able Youth Speaking Out) is a statewide association of youth aged 14 to 24 who are or have been in the out-of-home care system that is based in North Carolina. This includes all types of substitute care, including foster care, group homes, and mental health placements. Our mission is to work to improve the substitute care system by educating the community, speaking out about needed changes, and providing support to youth who are or have been in substitute care. <http://sayso-nc.tripod.com>

Irish Association of Young People in Care (IAYPIC)

IAYPIC is a growing number of young people and supportive adults who have identified the need for a forum in the Republic of Ireland, to represent the interests of young people in care. IAYPIC believes that all children and young people who are or have been in care have the right to freely express opinion about their experiences. <http://homepage.eircom.net/~iaypic>

As you learn of others, add them to your list:

NAME	WEB ADDRESS

GLOSSARY OF TERMS YOU MAY HEAR WHILE IN FOSTER CARE

Following is a list of terms that you may hear used in the foster care system:

- **Children’s Emergency Services (CES):** When the Department of Human Services is closed (like at night or on weekends) there is still a way to reach someone if there is an emergency. If you call 1-800-452-1999, you’ll reach someone who can help you deal with your emergency or get someone else who can. If it’s not an emergency, they may ask you to call your worker when the office is open.
- **Biological, Natural, or Birth Parents:** The person(s) who gave birth to or fathered the child.
- **Case Assessment and Case Plan:** A plan that the Department of Human Services, along with the youth and family, makes and updates every six months. It includes the services provided to the youth and family, and makes clear the expectations and progress made toward reaching the goal of permanent placement of the youth.
- **Child Protective Caseworker (CPS):** Works with children and youth and families (sometimes the children and youth are still in their homes) to assess, investigate and provide ongoing social services to families where abuse and neglect of youth has been reported.
- **Children Services Caseworker (CS):** Works with youth and their families to provide services and support, with the goal of permanent placement for the youth.
- **Foster Care:** Care provided to youth when they are removed from their biological family’s custody and are placed in state custody. Foster care includes placement with relatives, foster families, group homes, shelters and other placements for children under the age of 21.
- **Guardian Ad Litem:** An adult appointed by the court to act on a minor’s behalf in a legal proceeding and to protect the youth’s interests in court.

continued

■ **Independent Living:** An approved type of living arrangement in which a child who is at least 16 years old resides with a relative, friends, in a dorm or in his or her own apartment without the day-to-day supervision of an adult.

■ **Independent Living Skills Caseworker:** A Department of Human Services' Caseworker who provides services to youth in state custody who are 16 and older, and whose treatment plan goal is independent living. Services are to help youth learn to live on their own. Sometimes they're called Life Skills Caseworkers.

■ **Life Book:** Pages or a packet of information prepared with or for a child regarding his/her social background. It includes pictures and stories about people, events and places which are important to the child's history and life.

■ **Reunification and Rehabilitation Services:** Services that can bring a family back together by working on the problems that caused the separation of the youth from the family.

■ **Permanency Planning:** The caseworker coordinates services for the youth and family to fix the problems that led to the youth's placement in state custody. The goal is to assure a long-term placement for the youth. This may be going home, staying in long-term foster care until age 18 or 21, or being placed for adoption.

■ **Surrogate Parent:** A person (usually a foster parent or care provider) who is appointed by the Department of Education to make sure that a youth's special education needs are being met.

■ **Therapist/Counselor:** A licensed person who provides youth supportive services such as counseling, goal planning and advocacy for youth and families. This person can have any of these official titles: Social Worker, Psychologist or Psychiatrist.

INFORMATION SHEET

**Fill this
out with
your
case-
worker**

Name _____
Address _____
Phone Number _____
Social Security # _____
Medicaid # _____
Date of Birth _____
Caseworker's Name _____
Address _____
Direct Phone Number _____
Toll Free Phone Number _____
E-mail _____
Supervisor's Name _____
Address _____
Direct Phone Number _____
E-mail _____
Life Skills Worker's Name _____
Address _____
Direct Phone Number _____
Toll Free Number _____
E-mail _____
Therapist Name _____
Address _____
Phone Number _____
Somebody You Trust _____
Address _____
Phone Number _____
E-mail _____



CES After Hours Number **1-800-452-1999**

DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES OFFICES

Augusta DHS
35 Anthony Avenue
Augusta, ME 04333
624-8222, 1-800-452-1926

Bangor DHS
396 Griffin Road
Bangor, ME 04401-3095
561-4100, 1-800-432-7825

Biddeford DHS
208 Graham Street
Biddeford, ME 04005-3350
286-2508, 1-800-322-1919

Caribou DHS
14 Access Highway
Caribou, ME 04736-9600
493-4000, 1-800-432-7366

Dover-Foxcroft DHS
PO Box 322
Dover, ME 04426
564-3444, 1-800-432-1641

Ellsworth DHS
17 Eastward Lane
Ellsworth, ME 04605
667-1600, 1-800-432-7823

Fort Kent DHS
92 Market Street
Fort Kent, ME 04743-1447
834-7700, 1-800-432-7340

Houlton DHS
11 High Street
Houlton, ME 04730-2012
532-5000, 1-800-432-7338

Lewiston DHS
200 Main Street
Lewiston, ME 04240-7098
795-4300, 1-800-482-7517

Machias DHS
13 Prescott Drive
Machias, ME 04654
255-2000, 1-800-432-7846

Portland DHS
161 Marginal Way
Portland, ME 04101
822-2000, 1-800-482-7520

Rockland DHS
360 Old County Road
Rockland, ME 04841-5509
596-4262, 1-800-432-7802

Sanford DHS
39 St. Ignatius Street
Sanford, ME 04073-3800
490-5400, 1-800-482-0790

Skowhegan DHS
140 North Avenue
Skowhegan, ME 04976-1996
474-4850, 1-800-452-4602



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221 State Street, SHS #11
Augusta, ME 04333-0011
287-5060

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1-800-452-1999