



KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

A Guide for Youth in Substitute Care



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Prepared by Juvenile Law Center and KidsVoice

With special thanks to the Pennsylvania Youth Advisory Board, including Constance Krebs, Zakiyyah Nu-man, Miguel Melendez, Sheila Givens, and Adam Young.

Juvenile Law Center is a non-profit, public interest law firm that advances the rights and well-being of children in jeopardy. Juvenile Law Center ensures that the child welfare, juvenile justice and other public systems provide vulnerable children with the protection and services they need to become happy, healthy and productive adults. Founded in 1975, JLC is one of the oldest public interest law firms for children in the United States.

KidsVoice is a non-profit, public interest law firm that provides advocacy and legal representation for youth in the child welfare system in Allegheny County. Through a multi-disciplinary approach to representation, KidsVoice ensures that the emotional, physical, and educational needs of their clients are addressed. KidsVoice's advocacy includes educating youth on their rights, providing them a voice in court and improving outcomes for older youth who are transitioning from foster care.

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**JUVENILE LAW CENTER, 1315 Walnut Street, 4th Floor, Philadelphia, PA 19107
215.625.0551 fax 215.625.2808 in PA 800.875.8887**

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INTRODUCTION

This is a guide for dependent youth in out-of-home care in Pennsylvania. Youth in care have all the same wants, needs, and hopes for the future that all youth have. If you are a youth in care you have rights to assistance and protection. This guide will provide you with information about your rights while you are in care. This guide will offer suggestions for how you can prepare to leave the system and meet your goals as a successful, happy, healthy, and productive adult.

This guide will also provide you with tips on how to advocate for yourself so that you can get what you need and meet your goals for your future. As a youth in care, you are your own best advocate. It is up to you to make sure that your voice is heard. Being in out of home care is very frustrating. It may feel like no one cares and no one is listening to you. **YOU CANNOT GIVE UP.** We put this guide together so you can educate yourself and be heard. **WE NEED YOU** to be an advocate for yourself and all youth in care in Pennsylvania. Advocating for yourself is hard work and a big responsibility. We know you are up to the challenge. We hope this guide helps.

Notes about this guide:

This guide contains information that applies to all youth in substitute care in Pennsylvania. We are working on resource guides for each county within Pennsylvania. These guides will help you find resources that are specific to where you live. These guides will be posted on the internet so you can download them at the following websites: www.JLC.org, www.kidsvoice.org and www.independentlivingpa.org.

IMPORTANT TERMS AND PEOPLE

Adoption: When one or two people are given all the legal rights for you, as parents. For this to happen, the parental rights of your biological parents must be terminated.

Child Permanency Plan (CPP): The CPP lists the services and placement to help the youth and family fix the problems that led to placement in care. Some counties call the CPP a Family Service Plan (FSP). The permanency plan for a youth should assure a long-term, stable, family-like setting for the youth. This may mean going home, being placed for adoption, or staying in care until age 18 or 21. The CPP lists the goals of the youth and the family. It also lists the services that must be provided to achieve the goals. No matter what age you are, you should not be discharged from the system unless you are leaving to go to a permanent and stable place. You should be invited to participate in your CPP when you turn age 16.

Child Welfare System: The child welfare system is the government agency that is responsible for taking care of children who are abused or neglected, or whose parents are not able to take care of them. In Pennsylvania, the state child welfare system is called the Office of Children, Youth, and Families and is within the Department of Public Welfare. Each county has a child welfare agency.

County Child Welfare Agency: The agency that is responsible for providing care and assistance to children when their families are not able to care for them, they are abused, or they are neglected. In most counties, it is known as the county children and youth agency. The agency **MUST** follow certain state and federal laws in providing this care.

County Children and Youth Caseworker: The person assigned to your case by the county child welfare agency. The caseworker provides reports to court and must come and see you at least once every 6 months if you are placed through a private provider, and more if you are supervised directly by the children and youth agency. Your caseworker must make sure you are safe and that your needs are met.

Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA): A person who is appointed by the court to look at all aspects of your case and to report to the judge about how you are doing. Not all youth have a CASA, but all dependent youth should have a child advocate (see definition of Guardian *ad litem* (GAL)).

Delinquency: When the Juvenile Court finds that a youth has committed a crime.

Dependency: When the court finds that a youth requires some care or supervision by the county children and youth agency because the youth has been abused or neglected or does not have someone to care for them. This may mean that the youth is put in a foster or group home placement, or it may mean that the youth stays at home and the children and youth agency monitors them. When a youth is found dependent everyone has to come to court so that the judge can make sure that you are doing okay.

(Judicial) Emancipation: A court document that says an individual under 18 years of age has some of the rights of an adult. In most counties in Pennsylvania, you have to show that you are living on your own and are able to financially support yourself to be judicially emancipated.

Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA): The application for federal student aid that must be completed to receive financial aid from the federal government to help pay for college, community college, or vocational training programs. This application is also used to determine eligibility for state and local student aid programs.

Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA): This law was passed in 1999. It increased the amount of money that states can use to provide Independent Living services to older youth in care. FCIA requires that youth be provided with Independent Living services until age 21. This law also allows states to let youth be eligible for Medical Assistance (see definition below) until age 21 even if they are no longer in care. Pennsylvania has not taken this option.

Foster Care Independence Act Education and Training Grant (ETG): A grant to help you pay for post-secondary education or training. It provides up to \$5000 for unmet costs to pay for your education. You may qualify if you were in care at age 16 or older or were adopted from the system when you were 16 years of age or older.

Guardian *ad Litem* (GAL): A lawyer who is appointed to represent you in dependency court. The GAL must tell the judge what you want and also what he or she thinks is in your best interest. Your GAL can be a great advocate for you.

Independent Living Plan: A plan that sets out your goals for learning the skills you need to be independent and able to support yourself when you leave the system

and the services you will need to make that happen. You work on your IL Plan with your IL worker and the plan should be part of your CPP.

Individualized Service Plan (ISP): This is a goal plan for you and your family that is created by the agency that is directly providing your care.

Independent Living Coordinator: This is the person in your county who makes sure youth who are 16 and older are receiving independent living services.

Independent Living Services: These are the services all youth in care who are 16 and older should receive to become independent and productive adults. These services include: educational planning and support, vocational training, job readiness, job placement, budgeting, apartment searching and financial management. You can continue to receive these services until you are age 21, even if you are no longer in care.

Medicaid (Medical Assistance): Medical insurance for all youth in care that covers physical and mental health treatment. It also includes substance abuse treatment. When you leave state care, you will lose your health insurance. You will need to reapply or look for other health insurance options.

Pennsylvania Youth Advisory Board (YAB): This is a group of youth who are in the substitute care system or were in the system. The YAB works to educate and advocate for positive change in the substitute care system. If you want to help make changes in the system, you should check out the YAB. The State YAB meets four times a year. You can also join your regional YAB. Ask your IL coordinator for more information about the State and regional YABs. You can also check out the YAB website at www.independentlivingpa.org for more information about the YAB and your regional representatives.

Permanency Review Hearings: Court reviews of your case, which occur at least once every three to six months. You can and should be present at these hearings so you can tell the judge how you feel about your goals and your placement.

Private Provider Agency: Many county children and youth agencies enter into contracts with private agencies so they will provide placement and services to youth in the child welfare system. A private agency might provide foster family care for youth, group care, or SIL. The staff of the private agency provides you with more direct supervision than your county child welfare agency. Your county caseworker is still involved in the case, but the private agency works with you

day-to-day. The agency must follow certain state and federal laws in providing care to youth.

Solicitor for the County: The attorney who represents the county child welfare agency at permanency review hearings. This person represents your county children and youth care worker.

Supervised Independent Living (SIL) Placement: A placement in which a youth 16 years of age or older lives in an apartment and receives services from the county or private agency while the youth is still in the care of the county child welfare agency. These placements help prepare older youth for handling the responsibilities of being an adult. You can be placed in an SIL while you are still in care. In this guide, when we use the term SIL, we are talking about a placement type.

Termination of Parental Rights: Before a youth can be adopted, the county child welfare agency must ask that court to terminate the rights of the biological parents. If the court terminates the parent's rights, the child is free for adoption. Once a parent's rights are terminated they are no longer entitled to any information regarding the child. When a parent's rights are terminated they no longer have the right to make decisions about the youth's education or medical treatment. They also do not have the right to visit with the youth.

Transitional Living Placement (TLP): A placement in which youth 16 years of age and older live with no more than four other youth. In a TLP placement youth are given more responsibility and have less supervision. TLP programs are great for preparing youth for taking on the responsibilities of adults. Your county child welfare agency can provide these placements for you while you are still in care.

THE RIGHTS OF YOUTH IN CARE

RIGHTS are things that are guaranteed to you by the law. The rights of youth in care in Pennsylvania come from several sources of law. These include: the Adoption and Safe Families Act, The Foster Care Independence Act, the Juvenile Act, and state and federal regulations. Rights are things that can be enforced by a judge. Your rights are also tools to help you advocate for yourself.

As a youth in substitute care, you have the right:

- To be represented by a lawyer at all court proceedings
- To services that will help you stay with your family
- To the most family-like setting available, even if you cannot be placed with parents or relatives
- To be free of verbal abuse and derogatory remarks
- To be free from physical abuse
- To be free from discrimination based on race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, national origin, or gender
- To an appropriate placement that meets your needs and where you are **safe** and **protected**
- If you are a teen parent, to be placed with your own child unless a court has said that you cannot
- To stay in care until you are age 21 if you are in a program of treatment or instruction
- To be discharged from care with a discharge plan that provides for: **stable housing, a stable source of adequate income, health care and connections to supportive adults and community resources**

To be treated with fairness, dignity, and respect

Unless the judge says otherwise, when you are in a placement (group home, foster home), you have the right:

- To save any money you have earned and have it returned to you when you leave placement
- To talk on the phone (reasonable rules may apply)

- To visit with family (parents and/or siblings) at least once every two weeks
- To not have family visits used as a reward or punishment for your behavior
- To send mail
- To receive mail and not have it opened by the county child welfare agency or private provider staff unless they have reason to believe that you have been sent something that will be harmful or that you are not allowed to have (in that case, the mail must be opened in front of you)
- To communicate and visit privately with your lawyer and clergy
- To be free from unreasonable searches
- To appropriate medical, dental, and behavioral health care
- To be free from excessive medication
- To appropriate clothing and nutritious food
- To be free from corporal punishment (punishment that uses physical force), threats or abuse
- To file a grievance or complaint with the foster care or placement agency and the child welfare agency when you feel you have been mistreated or have a concern that is not being addressed
- **To independent living services** if you are age 16 or older **until you turn age 21**. These services may include:
 - Stipends (money)
 - Help with finding and paying for stable housing
 - Help to finish school and get your diploma
 - Help with entering college and training
 - Grants to help pay for college and training
 - Help getting a job
 - Help finding a mentor
- To stay in placement until age 21 if you are in a program of treatment or instruction. Treatment and instruction include a variety of programs, such as: high school, GED preparation, community or four-year college, vocational training, or mental health treatment

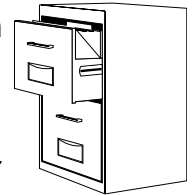
**To practice or
not practice any
religion**

Regarding medical care, you have the right:



- To prompt and appropriate medical care and mental health treatment
- To consent to your own medical, dental, and health care if you are age 18 or older
- To consent to all mental health treatment and medication if you are age 14 or older
- To consent to treatment for a substance abuse problem at any age
- To obtain contraception at any age
- To obtain testing and treatment for sexually transmitted diseases at any age
- To consent to testing and treatment of HIV at any age
- To consent to medical care related to pregnancy, except abortion (To obtain an abortion, a minor needs the consent of a parent or legal guardian, or a court order, called a “judicial bypass”)
- To consent to all medical care, except an abortion, if you are a minor and have been pregnant or have already graduated from high school

Regarding access to records, you have the right:



- To control the release of any mental health treatment records when you are age 14 and older
- To control the release of records of substance abuse treatment or treatment for a sexually transmitted disease
- To control the release of any HIV-related records
- To have access to your family case records if you are 14 years of age or older, unless county agency can show releasing information would be harmful to you
- To have access to your health care records, unless the doctor says it would be harmful for you to see them
- To permanent documents, such as birth certificate, immunization and health records, educational records and legal documents related to custody when you are discharged from care at age 18 or older

Regarding planning for your future, you have the right:

- To an Individual Service Plan (ISP) and Child Permanency Plan (CPP) that explain your goals and needs and what is being done to meet them. FSPs and ISPs define your responsibilities and goals and the county child welfare agency's responsibilities to you. They are like contracts. They should be revised every six months.
- To be present and participate in all the meetings where these Plans are written.
- To an Independent Living Plan if you are age 16 or older—sometimes this is made part of the CPP

In legal proceedings, you have the right:



- To attend all court hearings where your case is reviewed
- To meet with your lawyer before court hearings
- To tell your lawyer where you want to live and what services you think you need to meet your goals
- To have your lawyer do what is needed to help you get an appropriate placement and make sure your needs are met
- To have your lawyer call witnesses to testify for you or present evidence to the court
- To have your lawyer ask questions (cross examine) people who speak about you in court
- To tell the judge what you think about your placement and any needs that you have
- To have a judge determine if your needs are being met, if you are in an appropriate placement, and if you are receiving all the services you need to meet your goals
- To have the information shared in court be kept confidential and discussed only with people who need to know about it to provide you with care and service
- To ask the judge to appoint another lawyer for you if you do not think your lawyer is representing your interests and wishes or doing their job (the judge will then make the decision if a new lawyer is appointed)

If you think that your rights have been violated you should:

- Talk with your caseworker, and then the caseworker's supervisor if you get no response
- File a grievance or complaint with the private provider agency or the county child welfare agency. This can just be a short and simple letter explaining your complaint.
- Contact your lawyer by phone and letter
- Make sure you go to court for your review hearings so you can talk to the judge about your concerns



If you have questions about your rights or need help contacting your child advocate you can call **Juvenile Law Center** for help. You can reach JLC from anywhere in Pennsylvania by calling **1-800-875-8887**. You can also e-mail any questions to Jenny Pokempner at jpokempner@jlc.org. If you are in Allegheny County, you can call **KidsVoice** at **412-391-3100** or info@kidsvoice.org.

ENTERING AND EXITING THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM, AND BEING IN PLACEMENT

Entering the child welfare system can be scary. It is hard to be taken away from the place you call home and people you care about. Even though the goal of the system is to protect you and help you live safely with your family, being placed and going to court is upsetting, especially if no one explains to you what is going on. This section provides you information about how the child welfare system works and the court process.

ENTERING THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

What is substitute care?

The substitute care system provides youth a place to live when it is not safe for youth to live in their own home or there is no one able to take care of the youth. Only a juvenile court judge can give permission for a youth to be removed from his or her family and placed in the care of the county child welfare agency. The substitute care system includes emergency shelters, foster homes, kinship care homes, adoptive homes, group homes, and residential treatment facilities. It can also include Supervised Independent Living Placements (SILs) or Transitional Living Placements (TLPs).

Why am I in substitute care?

Youth are placed in the substitute care system when they cannot stay safely in their own homes. Youth are placed in substitute care to keep them safe and to make sure their needs are met. **Youth are not placed in substitute care as punishment.** Youth enter substitute care for many reasons. These reasons may include:

1. Parents are not able to keep them safe
2. They have been physically, sexually, or emotionally abused
3. Parents voluntarily place them
4. There is a crisis or conflict in the family that makes it hard to provide for them
5. Parents are not able to control the youth's behavior
6. They run away from home because they are scared or do not feel safe
7. They are truant from school

8. They will not listen to their parent's direction and the parents are not able to keep the youth safe

What help can the substitute care system offer youth and their families?

Once a youth is placed in substitute care, the county child welfare agency should provide services to the youth and his or her family so the youth can safely return home. The county child welfare agency should also see if there are any relatives who can care for the youth if their parents are not able to.

Who will explain to me why I am in care?

You should be told why you are in substitute care by your caseworker. You should also be given an explanation about what is going to happen to you as part of the child welfare system and where you are going to be placed. Things can get hectic when you are being placed so you may need to ask for things to be explained to you. Ask the caseworker or supervisor if you have questions.

When I get into a placement, should I be told my rights?

YES. When you are first placed in a foster home, group home, or residential treatment center, you should be informed of your rights and your right to file a grievance, which is a complaint. You should be given a **copy** of your rights and the process for filing a grievance. **Your lawyer should also explain your rights to you.**

What is a grievance and how do I file one?

A grievance is like a complaint. **The law requires that county child welfare agency and private agencies have a written policy for you to file a grievance if you feel something is wrong or you are being treated unfairly.** The child welfare agency and the private agency you are placed with should explain the grievance policy to you and give you a written copy of the policy as soon as you are placed. They should also explain that you cannot be punished for filing a grievance. Ask your lawyer if you have questions about filing a grievance.



VISITING YOUR FAMILY

How often can I visit with my parents?

You have a right to visit with your parents *at least* once every two weeks unless the judge says otherwise. A judge could limit visitation if you were being harmed by the visits. The county child welfare agency **must** help you and your parents get to the location where the visit can occur, and should help make visits convenient for you and your parents. **Make sure that there is a visitation schedule and that visitation is listed in the Child Permanency Plan and ISP.** Even when you are placed out of state, you still have the right to visit your parents. Scheduling these visits can be difficult, but they should still occur.

If you are not receiving your visits, contact your case-worker and lawyer

Visitation with your parents may decrease if your permanency goal is changed to adoption. Once your parents' rights are terminated, they no longer have any legal right to visit you. However, if your adoptive parents allow it, visits may still continue.

How often can I visit my siblings (sisters and brothers) if they are also in care?

The county child welfare agency should make every effort to place you with your siblings if all of you are in substitute care. If you are not placed with your siblings, visits should occur at least once every two weeks.

Is visitation the same thing as a home pass?

Visitation just means that you get to see your family. Visitation can occur at your placement, at the children and youth agency, or at a location in the community (like a restaurant or park). When you go to the home of your parents or relatives and get to sleep there, it is often called a "home pass" or an overnight visit.

How often can I visit my siblings (sisters and brothers) if they still live at home with my parents or they have been adopted?

If your siblings are still living with your parents, it is up to your parents to decide when and if you can see them. If your siblings have been adopted, it is up to their adoptive parents to decide when and if you can see them. Let your caseworker, your lawyer, and the judge in court know if you have questions about visiting with your siblings and want help to make these visits occur. They may be able to help you work things out.



Can visits be taken away from me as a punishment for my behavior?

NO. It is against the law to have your visits taken away from you as a punishment or given to you as a reward for your behavior. **YOUR VISITS CAN ONLY BE RESTRICTED BY A JUDGE'S COURT ORDER.**

Contact with your family is a right that cannot be taken away unless the court finds that there is a really good reason why visits are harmful to you.

In some cases, your placement can restrict *where* your visits occur. You may have to have your visits at your placement rather than being permitted to go home on what some call a “home pass.” You may also have to be supervised during your visits. If there are restrictions placed on your visits, you should be told the reason why. Please call your lawyer if you think your visits have been taken away as punishment or if you have not been receiving your visits for a reason that does not seem right.

Can I visit an aunt, godparent, mentor, or other adult?

In most cases, visits with extended family members and other adults who support you should be allowed. Your caseworker will need to check out the home before you can go for an overnight visit. If there are adults who you care about and you want to see them, let everyone know who they are and try to get visitation with them included in your Child Permanency Plan or court order. Be persistent and tell your lawyer if you are having problems getting these visits. If there are people who care about you and can provide you support, you should get help to maintain these relationships!

Can I refuse to visit with my family?

If visiting with your family upsets you, tell your caseworker and your lawyer. Visits are usually court ordered. If visiting is upsetting you or you are being hurt at the visits, you need to let people know. The visitation order can be changed. Make sure that you tell your lawyer right away if there is something upsetting you about visits even if your hearing is not coming up. Your lawyer can request a hearing at any time and ask the judge to change the visitation order.

Can I talk to my parents or family on the phone?

You have a right to communicate with your family by phone. The placement can set rules about the time and frequency of your telephone calls. You also are allowed to call your lawyer or caseworker.



PLACEMENTS AND RULES IN PLACEMENTS

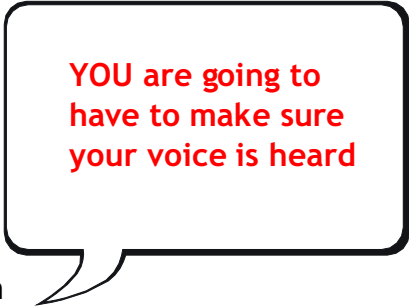
Where can I be placed when I am in substitute care?

All efforts should be made to help you return home to your parent. If you cannot return home, you are entitled to be placed in the least restrictive, most family-like setting available. This means that you should be placed with a family (your extended family, a foster family, or an adoptive family) and in a family-like home rather than a group home or institution. This also means that if you are placed in a group home or institution, the county child welfare agency should look for a placement for you that is more family-like for the future. The county child welfare agency should also help you to connect with adults who can provide support even if they cannot provide a home.

As you get older, you may be placed in a *Transitional Living Placement (TLP)* or a *Supervised Independent Living (SIL)* placement. In these placements you get more responsibility and freedom and a greater chance to practice your independent living skills. If you are 16 or older, you should ask your caseworker and your lawyer about these types of placements to see if they are right for you.

Do I get a say about where I am placed?

YES. You should always let your case worker, lawyer, judge, and anyone else involved in your case know where you want to be placed and what type of placement you think is best for you. You may know of a person--family members, a family friend, an old teacher, a pastor--who may be able to provide you a place to live. You should tell your case worker if you know a person who may be able to care for you. These people will need to get licensed as foster parents, if they are not already licensed, and the county children and youth agency can tell them how to do it.



YOU are going to have to make sure your voice is heard

Also, you may want a type of placement that others assume you do not want. For example, sometimes people assume older youth do not want to be adopted. This may not be correct in your case, so you need to let people know about your preferences. **Youth can be adopted at any age. You are never too old to be adopted.**

What can I do if I want my placement to change?

If you feel like the placement you are in is not right for you or that you are not being treated well, you should let someone know. Sometimes your placement can be changed. You should always be in the least restrictive, most family-like placement possible. For

example, if you are in a group home and feel that you are ready to be placed with a family, you should ask your caseworker and lawyer. As you get older, you may become eligible for a supervised independent living or transitional living placement. These placements help prepare you for being on your own once you leave care. You can check with your county caseworker and lawyer to see if these programs exist in your county and if you can be referred.

If you are being mistreated in your placement, you should let someone know immediately. Wherever you are placed, you should always be treated with respect and you should always feel safe. If you are not, you must let someone know so that things can change for the better.

What does it take to be a foster parent?

There are many requirements to be a foster parent. Here are some, but not all, of the basic requirements. To be a foster parent, a person must be at least age 21 and pass medical checks to show that they are physically able to care for youth. They must also have a child abuse and criminal background check done to show that they do not have a history of harming children or of committing specific crimes that may put a child at risk. The foster home must also meet requirements so that it is safe and clean.

Foster parents must be able to provide a caring and nurturing environment for youth. They must work with the county child welfare agency and private provider to make sure the youth's health, mental health, independent living, and educational needs are met. They also must provide supervision of the youth in their care. Foster parents are only permitted to use "passive physical restraint" to prevent immediate harm to the youth or others. "Passive physical restraint" is defined as the least amount of direct physical contact required to prevent immediate harm to the child or others.

Foster parents are licensed and then are re-evaluated each year. The re-evaluation includes a home inspection. Foster parents are required to attend at least six hours of training per year.



If foster parents get paid to take care of me, how come I do not get any of the money?

Foster parents are paid by the county child welfare agency to take care of children in their homes. How much they get paid depends on what part of the state you live in and depends on the needs of the foster child. For example, a foster family may receive more money if they are taking care of a child who has a lot of medical needs. The money that is paid to a foster family is to be used to take care of you -- it pays for your housing, food, clothes, and any activities you are involved in. Some of the money may also be used to pay allowance to you, but that is up to the county and the private provider.

Are there requirements for group homes, institutions, and transitional living facilities?

Yes. Group homes, institutions, and transitional living facilities must be licensed. To be licensed, these facilities need to have enough qualified staff to take care of you and provide supervision. Staff must meet some educational requirements and must have child abuse and criminal background checks completed. Group homes, institutions, and transitional living placements must also meet requirements about safety. These facilities are inspected once a year.

Staff at these facilities must work with the county child welfare agency and private provider to make sure the youth's health, mental health, independent living, and educational needs are met. They also must make sure the youth's rights are respected. Staff must be trained and must follow rules about how youth can be disciplined or punished. A youth can only be restrained in very limited circumstances--to prevent the youth from injuring himself or others. There are also rules about how a restraint can be performed and for how long.

GOOD WAYS TO HAVE YOUR OPINION HEARD ARE:

- **Attending your Family Service Plan meeting and expressing your point of view**
- **Attending your permanency review hearing and expressing your point of view**
- **Writing a letter to your caseworker, judge, and lawyer and letting them know what kind of placement you think would be best for you and why**

How much money should be spent on clothing for me when I am in placement?

The law says that youth in care are entitled to "seasonal clothing that is age and gender appropriate." The law does not set a dollar amount for how much should be spent on clothing. County child welfare agencies should have a policy on how much money should be spent for clothing and the process by which youth can get clothes. The county or private provider gives the foster family or group home a certain amount of money to take care of you. Sometimes, it is out of this amount of money that your clothing should be purchased. You should ask your case worker about the county's policy.

If you need clothes and no one is answering your questions about clothing allowances, you should contact your lawyer and raise this issue in court and at your Child Permanency Plan or ISP meeting.



What happens to my money when I am in placement?

Your money--money earned, given to you as a gift or as allowance--is your personal property. But the placement or foster parents can have reasonable rules about the amount of money that you can take out and use. You should be told what these rules are. When you leave the placement, all of your unspent money should be returned to you.

Can I be punished or disciplined in my placement?

Just like in any home, a foster home, group home or institution will have some rules and consequences if those rules are not followed. The law makes clear that you cannot be punished in some ways. See the red box for this information.

Please see above for information about the rules that placements must follow about restraining youth.

FOSTER PARENTS AND CARETAKERS CANNOT:

- ✗ Use physical punishment (no hitting, slapping, etc.)***
- ✗ Verbally abuse or use derogatory comments***
- ✗ Threaten to have you removed from placement***
- ✗ Deny meals, clothing or shelter***
- ✗ Deny visits or communication with your family***

Can I sleep over at friends' houses when I am in a foster home or group home?

The law is not clear on what kind of checks or authorizations need to occur so that you can sleep over at a friend's house. The law does not require that the county child welfare agency do criminal background checks on your friends and the people who live in their homes. Check with your caseworker to see what the county policy is on sleeping over at friend's houses. Like any good parent or caretaker, it is always a good idea for the people taking care of you to make sure the places you are going are safe and that you will have adult supervision.

Can I go on trips out of Pennsylvania with my foster family or with my school when I am in placement?

Yes. The county child welfare agency should be provided notice of this trip as well as your biological parents if their rights have not been terminated. Getting consent for emergency medical treatment should not be a barrier to an out-of-state trip because, under the law of most states, parental consent is not required to receive emergency medical care.



Can I go out on dates while I am in care?

When you are in placement, you should get many of the same opportunities that youth still living with their families do. You should ask your county child welfare agency if they have a policy on dating. If they do not, you should ask your caseworker. Also if you do not agree with the rules, you should talk with your regional and state YAB about how to get the county to change its policy.



Can I get my driver's license while I am in care?

There is no easy yes or no answer to this question. There is nothing in the law that prohibits you from getting a driver's license while you are in substitute care. Some counties do have rules about whether youth can get their license while in care. Some counties will address the question on a case-by-case basis so it is worth you asking your caseworker.

For anyone to get a license, you must meet the requirements that all youth must meet to get a license. There are three different stages that a new driver in Pennsylvania must go through:

1. **Learner's Permit:** To obtain a Learner's Permit you must be at least 16 years of age. To complete this process you are required to have a physical exam at a doctor's office, a vision screen that is completed at the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), and pass a written skills test. This test will evaluate your knowledge of street signs and Pennsylvania driving laws. A study guide for this test can be found at any DMV location or at www.dmv.state.pa.us/drivers_manual/index.shtml.

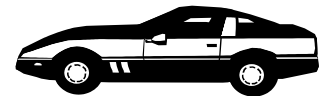
When going for the test, you must bring proof of your date of birth, proof of your identity and social security card (or proof of your social security number). The fee for the initial permit and four-year license must be paid at the time the permit is issued. The fee is \$31. If you are under 18 years of age, there

is a six-month period for skills building between obtaining the permit and taking the road test. In that time you must complete 50 hours of behind-the-wheel skills building. Your parent or guardian must certify that this has been completed. In most cases, the DMV will allow a case worker or adult with a driver's license who is working with you to make this certification. A licensed driver 21 years of age or older must accompany you when you have your learner's permit and are driving. You will not be able to operate a vehicle between the hours of 11:00 pm and 5:00 am.

2. **Junior License:** You will get a junior license once you have completed all the requirements of the Learner's Permit and have passed the road test. You still cannot drive after 11:00 p.m. unless you have documentation that you have employment, volunteer work, or a school-related activity during that time.
3. **Unrestricted License:** You are usually eligible for an unrestricted driver's license at age 18. It provides unlimited driving privileges. There are some situations where you can apply for an unrestricted license before turning age 18. This is possible if you have been crash and conviction free for 12 months and have completed an approved driver's education course.

More information on obtaining a driver's license in Pennsylvania is available at www.dmv.state.pa.us.

Can I own a car while I am in care?



There is nothing in the law that prohibits youth in care from owning cars. There are, however, obstacles to owning your own car while you are in care. First, cars are expensive and it may be hard to afford a reliable car while you are still in care. Second, you will need to find an adult who is willing to put you on their car insurance policy. Third, some placements or programs will not allow you to have a car. You should talk to your case worker, IL worker, and lawyer if you think that you have the ability and funds to have a car and car insurance.

How do I get car insurance?

State law requires that you have car insurance to drive a car. Minors cannot purchase car insurance on their own and need an adult to put them on their car insurance policy. (This is because you cannot sign a contract until you are age 18). Putting a youth on a family's car insurance policy can be expensive because young adults are among the most expensive drivers to insure. Many youth in care do not have someone who is willing or

able to put them on their car insurance policy. Without car insurance you cannot legally drive a car.

CONFIDENTIALITY OF RECORDS AND PROPERTY



Who can see my child welfare records?

Information in your family case record that is kept at the county child welfare agency can only be released to a few people. **Parents, the lawyers of children and parents, the court (the judge and court staff), county executives, and youth 14 years of age and older can request to see information in the family case file.** If you are 14 or older, and request to see your file, your request can only be refused when the county child welfare agency thinks it would be harmful to you to see the file. For anyone else to see information in your family case record a judge would have to order it. To request to see your family case record, you should contact your county child welfare agency. If you run into problems, you should let your lawyer know.

There are two other situations when your caseworker can release information from your family case record without your permission: (1) To a health care provider when this information is needed for your treatment and (2) To a foster parent when the foster parent needs to protect the youth's health and safety. *Even with these two situations, records of specific types of medical treatment that are in your file can only be released with your consent.* See the next section about medical records.

Who can see my medical records?

There are many laws that protect the confidentiality of medical records and medical information. It is important to ask your lawyer and anyone providing you treatment to you about the confidentiality of your records. There are some general principles about the confidentiality of medical records that you should know.

Youth can consent to some treatments no matter how old they are

If you are under age 18, generally it is your parent or guardian who must provide consent for anyone else to see your medical records. There is some treatment that a youth can consent to without a parent or guardian no matter what age they are. In these situations, **when the youth consents to the treatment, the youth controls who gets to see the medical records.**

The following are the types of treatment that a minor can consent to on their own:

1. Mental health treatment if you are 14 or older
2. Substance abuse treatment

3. Birth control
4. Treatment and testing for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)
5. Treatment and testing for HIV
6. Treatment related to pregnancy (except abortion)

If you are being told that you have to share any medical information you think is confidential, call your lawyer or Juvenile Law Center at 1-800-875-8887.

If I was adopted, can I see the adoption records?

Records related to an adoption are “sealed” and are very hard to see. If you were adopted and are under age 18, your adoptive parents can petition the court to see some parts of the adoption record. If you are age 18 or older, you can petition the court to see parts of the record. If you are requesting information about the identity or current location of your biological parents, the court will need to get their permission first to give that information to you. If you have questions about looking for your biological parents, you can call the Statewide Adoption Network warmline at 1-888-793-2512 x 5376. When you call this number you will have to leave a message, but they will call you back.

Is the mail I send and receive confidential?



Yes. You have a right to send and receive mail. The mail you send cannot be read or opened without your permission. The mail you receive is confidential and should not be opened. There is only one exception to this rule.

If the county children and youth agency has reason to believe that you are being sent something that is harmful to you or others or that you are being sent something that you are not allowed to have (contraband), they can open your mail in front of you. In this situation, you should be told why your mail is being opened. If you do not understand or agree with what is going on, let your caseworker and lawyer know.

Can my room and belongings be searched?

The law says that you have a right to be protected from “unreasonable search and seizure” when you are in a placement facility. This means that facilities can conduct searches when they have a concrete reason to suspect something harmful is in your room or belongings or that there is something in your room or belongings that you are not allowed to have (contraband). Searches of your room and belongings cannot occur for no reason at all. Every placement facility should have a search and seizure policy. You should ask to see that policy so you understand your rights.

INDEPENDENT LIVING SERVICES

What are Independent Living services?

Independent Living services--often referred to as **IL** services-- are the services you need to help you handle the responsibilities of being an adult. These services can include:

- instruction in daily living skills
- home management
- budgeting
- career planning and support
- educational planning
- support services to enter post-secondary education and training
- assistance in finding housing and/or financial assistance with rent
- mentoring

Most independent living programs provide money, called stipends, to youth who participate in IL classes or achieve certain goals. Sometimes IL services are provided in a class. Sometimes you may receive one-on-one instruction so you can really practice your skills. You should also be taught independent living skills in your placement whether it is a foster home, group home, or residential treatment center.

Your Independent Living services should be listed in an Independent Living Plan. Some counties include this in your Child Permanency Plan (CPP). Each county has an Independent Living Coordinator who can tell you who provides IL Services in your county. Please see the 411 section of the YAB website, www.independentlivingpa.org, to find a list of IL coordinators.

Is there a special IL Educational Grant to help pay for my post-secondary education or training?

YES. Pennsylvania offers an Education and Training Grant (ETG). You can apply for the grant if you are or were receiving IL services and are under 21 years of age. If you were receiving this grant before you turned 21, you may be able to receive it until age 23.

This grant provides a youth with up to \$5000 and is in addition to any federal and state financial aid. Please see the Getting an Education Section of this guide for more information about the ETG grant.

At what age should I begin receiving IL services?

You should begin receiving IL services when you reach age 16. Some counties will allow you to receive IL services when you are 14, so check with your IL Coordinator.

Who is eligible for IL services?

All youth who are 16 years of age and older and are connected with the child welfare system should receive services that prepare them for being an adult. If IL services will help you achieve your permanency goal or help keep you out of the system and with your family, you should receive these services.

Tell your lawyer if you are interested in receiving IL services.

There is a special law called the **Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA)**. This law provides money to Pennsylvania and the other states to provide IL services to youth who fall within one of the following eligibility categories:

- Youth who are age 16 or older and are in substitute care and are dependent or dependent and delinquent;
- Youth who are age 16 or older and have been adopted from substitute care and are under age 21; and
- Youth who were in substitute care at age 16 and has been discharged from care and are under age 21.

Check with your IL coordinator or caseworker to find out what IL services you may be able to receive.

Can I still get IL services if I move to another county?

YES. If you are still in care and move to another county, your home county children and youth agency is responsible for providing IL services. If you have left care and were

eligible for FCIA services, the county where you currently live must provide the aftercare IL services if you are under age 21. For example, if you were in care at age 16 in Delaware County and discharged from the system at age 19, and are now 20 years of age and living in Erie county, you can get IL services from Erie county.

Am I eligible for IL services if I have been discharged from care?

YES. If you are under age 21 you are still eligible for IL services.

GETTING OUT OF SUBSTITUTE CARE: YOUR PERMANENCY PLAN

The philosophy of the juvenile court is that a family, not a system, should raise a child. That means your stay in care should be temporary. All efforts should be made so you can safely go home with your family. If you cannot go home, all efforts should be made to place you with other family members, a permanent guardian, or an adoptive home. You should always let your caseworker, your lawyer, and the judge know where and with whom you want to live with so your voice can be taken into account when decisions are being made.

While you stay in substitute care, you should be placed in the most family-like and least restrictive setting. The placement should provide you with all the services you need to meet your needs. When you leave substitute care, it should be to a place where you are stable and safe, where all your needs are met, and where you are cared for, or have the skills and resources to take care of yourself. This is true even if you leave the system to live on your own as an adult.

Your plan for placement and services is called a ***permanency plan***. The following are the different permanency goals, and a description of each:

1. Return to Parents—Reunification

The first goal of juvenile court is to reunify each family. The county children and youth agency should provide your family with all the services that are needed so that you can safely return home. Such services could include: help getting appropriate housing, counseling for the parent, family, or child, parenting classes, and mental health or drug and alcohol treatment.

You should be informed of what needs to happen within your family before you can return. You should ask your caseworker or lawyer if you do not know. If the plan is reunification, you should be visiting with your parents frequently, usually more than every other week. Sometimes, however, reunification is not a possible option. This is often because it is not safe for you to return home to your family.

2. Placement with Relatives

If you are unable to return home to your family, the next permanency goal is placement with a relative. A relative, or kin, includes a sister or brother (over age 21) a godparent, a grandparent, an aunt, or an uncle. There are three ways you can be placed with a relative:

- **The relative can adopt you.** Your adoptive parent may be eligible for an adoption subsidy, which are funds that are paid to the adoptive parent to help take care of you. You will not have a caseworker or go to court anymore.
- The relative you are placed with can become a **kinship care provider**. A kinship care provider must meet the same qualifications as a foster parent. The county child welfare agency will do criminal background checks and home clearances. The kinship care provider will receive financial help from the county child welfare agency to help raise you, just like a foster parent would. You will continue to have a caseworker and go to court. The kinship care provider will receive financial help for you to stay in this placement until you turn age 21 if you are in a program of treatment or instruction.
- The relative can become your **permanent legal custodian**. In this case, you will be discharged from the system to the relative. The relative may be eligible to receive financial help (a subsidy) from the county child welfare agency to raise you. The subsidy will continue until you are age 18. You will not have a caseworker and will not go to court.

If there is a relative who you think would be a good placement resource for you, tell your case worker and lawyer, and the judge in your case.

3. Adoption

If the rights of your parents have been terminated, you can be adopted. When a court terminates your biological parents' rights that means they no longer have a right to see

you and do not have an obligation to provide you any support. When you are adopted, your case with county child welfare agency is closed and you are discharged to a family that will raise you and provide for you. Your adoptive parents have all the rights of a parent who gave birth to you. Sometimes teenagers think they are too old to be adopted. This is not true. **You can be adopted at any age.** If you are 12 years of age or older, you have to give consent to be adopted for the adoption to be finalized. If you want to be adopted let your caseworker, lawyer, and the judge know so that efforts can be made to find an adoptive family for you. You may have said you did not want to be adopted when you were younger. As you get older, you may change your mind. It is okay to change your mind, just let everyone know what you want!

When you are adopted, your adoptive family can receive financial help to help take care of you. This is called an *adoption assistance subsidy*. It can last until you are 18 years old. When you are adopted you can also receive medical assistance. If you are adopted at age 16 or older, you are also eligible for Independent Living services, including the Foster Care Independence Act Education and Training Grant (ETG).

4. Permanent Legal Custodianship—subsidized and unsubsidized

A permanent legal custodian (PLC) is someone who agrees to care for you and assume legal and physical custody of you until you become an adult. The PLC can be a foster parent, relative, or another person approved by the county child welfare agency. In this case, you would be discharged from the system to the PLC. **The rights of your biological parents do not need to be terminated for PLC to be granted. In most cases, a visitation plan with your parents can be agreed to when PLC is awarded.**

If the PLC meets the qualifications for financial help, the PLC will receive a subsidy to help take care of you. The qualifications to be a PLC are similar to those for licensed foster parents. The subsidy will continue until you are age 18. You will not have a caseworker and will not go to court once permanent legal custodianship has been given to that person.

PLC is a new permanency option and is just beginning to be put in place in all the counties. If you think PLC might work well for you, talk to your caseworker and GAL.

5. Emancipation/Independence

If the plan for you to live on your own when you leave care at age 18 or after, the permanency goal is Emancipation/Independence. Emancipation is the legal term when a youth under the age of 18 is discharged from care to live on their own. It is very difficult to get emancipated before you turn 18 because you must be able to prove that you can financially support yourself and that you are able to live on your own. **You can stay in substitute care until age 21 if you are in a program of treatment or instruction.**

If this is your permanency plan, you should be receiving independent living instruction in the following areas: budgeting, household management and maintenance, job readiness, job search skills, educational support (completion of high school and entrance into post secondary education or training programs), locating housing, accessing community resources, and health care. Independent living services can also include mentoring, particularly for those youth who do not have supportive relatives in their life.

You should only be discharged to independence or emancipated when you are able to live on your own and support yourself financially. Youth should not be discharged to homelessness.

STAYING IN CARE PAST AGE 18

How long can I stay in substitute care?

Make sure you have a stable place to go and a place you can afford before you leave.

Under the Juvenile Act, a Pennsylvania state law, a youth can stay in care until age 21 if he or she came into the system before age 18, and if he or she is in a program of treatment or instruction. If you stay in substitute care, the county child welfare agency can help you with placement (living arrangements). This could mean staying in your foster home or group home, or moving to a supervised independent living (SIL) or transitional living placement (TLP).

Many older teens want to leave the system as soon as possible. Just remember that you are entitled to receive help until age 21. You should take advantage of this option if you don't have another plan for living independently. **Once you leave care after turning 18, you cannot re-enter even if you are experiencing difficulties.**

What is a program of treatment or instruction?

A course of instruction can include high school, college, community college, training or vocational program, a GED preparation program, or any other educational program.

Treatment can include mental health or other treatment to meet your specific needs.

The terms instruction and treatment should be interpreted broadly to meet each individual youth's needs. If you are in a program and receiving training or instruction that you think will help you prepare for being on your own, it is probably a program of treatment or instruction that will allow you to stay in care.

What should I do if I want to stay in care past age 18 but am being told I have to leave because of my age?

You should talk to your lawyer and tell him/her that you would like to stay in care and why. You should also appear in court so you can make sure the judge in your case knows that you want to stay in care. **Ultimately, it is the judge's decision whether you can stay in care past age 18.**



Why would I want to stay in care past age 18?

If you stay in care, you can continue to receive placement and case management services through your county child welfare agency. For example, you could stay in your foster home, transition to a Supervised Independent Living Program (SIL), and have your placement paid for by the county child welfare agency. Sometimes staying in care past age 18 can give you the support you need so you can finish school or continue your education or training. If you are not financially ready to be on your own, or want to focus on your education and training, or treatment, you should consider this option. We asked members of the Pennsylvania Youth Advisory Board why a youth would want to stay in care past age 18. See the box on page 30 for YAB members' answers.

It is true that staying in care limits your freedom. Many youth look forward to turning 18 so they can sign themselves out of care. Just think about it before you leave and make sure you have a realistic plan – a place to live (that will last) and an income that will cover your expenses and medical insurance - before you sign yourself out. **Everyone wants to be on their own at age 18, but most people need some help to really be able to handle the responsibilities and expenses of being on their own as an adult.**

STAYING IN CARE PAST AGE 18 CAN PROVIDE:

- ✓ A free place to live
- ✓ Stability
- ✓ Support and guidance from staff
- ✓ Health insurance
- ✓ Access to supervised independent living and apartment programs
- ✓ Free food, clothes, and essentials
- ✓ An opportunity to finish high school, or other schooling, and get a better education
- ✓ Involvement of the court to make sure things are going OK

TEEN PARENTS IN CARE

Can I keep my baby if I am in substitute care?

Yes. As a parent, you have full rights to your child even when you are in care. **That means that your baby should remain in your physical and legal custody and you keep all rights to make educational and medical decisions for your child.** As a parent who is in care, you should be given the same chance to parent your child as any other parent would have.



Should I be placed with my baby?

All efforts must be made to place you with your child. This could be in a mother/baby foster or group home, or a mother/baby Supervised Independent Living (SIL) placement. You should let your lawyer know if you are not placed with your child.

Should the court find my baby dependent just because I am dependent (in care)?

NO. Young parents who are in care must be given the chance to parent. The Superior Court of Pennsylvania has ruled that a baby cannot be found dependent and placed in the county child welfare agency's legal custody just because the mother is in care.

If the county child welfare agency does file a petition to have your baby found dependent by the court, **as a parent, you are entitled to representation by an attorney to protect your rights as a parent.**

What types of services can my child and I receive?

You should receive services that meet your individual needs and help you reach your permanency goals. If you are a parent, services should be provided that meet your needs as a parent and include your child. Like any other youth, all efforts should be made to keep *you* with your family or place you in the most family-like setting. You should also receive any Independent Living (IL) services your county provides. Because you are now a parent, you should also receive parenting support, instruction, and assistance in getting child care.

How do I get child care?

While you are in substitute care, the county child welfare agency or private provider agency should help you apply for or provide child care for your child.



Many teen parents will qualify for subsidized child care. You apply for this through your county. To qualify for these services you must work at least 25 hours a week, make at least minimum wage or attend an educational program. If you are attending high school full time, there may be some exceptions to the work requirement. To determine if you are eligible, contact **1-877-4-PA-KIDS or 1-800-392-3131**. You can also apply for this child care subsidy when you leave care. You can find more information at <http://www.dpw.state.pa.us/child/childcare/003670483.htm>.

If you are out of care and receiving cash assistance (TANF), you may be eligible for child care assistance through your local welfare office. If you are receiving TANF and need assistance with child care, ask your welfare case worker.

What are my rights as a teen father?



Teen fathers in care have the same parental rights as teen mothers.

Teen fathers who are in care can:

- **Ask to be placed with their children**
- **Ask for parenting services and supports**
- **Have visitation with their child**

If you have questions about your rights to visitation and other parenting services, ask your case worker and attorney.

Sometimes teen fathers are forgotten. Don't let this happen to you!

What is child support and how do I apply for it?

Child support is money paid by the non-custodial parent (the parent who does not live with the child) to the custodial parent (the parent who lives with the child) to help support the needs of the child.

If you are out of care and receiving cash assistance (TANF), you may not receive the child support directly. It may go to the welfare department to pay them back for paying you the cash assistance. Sometimes, you will get what is called \$50 “passed through” to you if the child support payment is over a certain amount.

You can file for child support at your county's domestic relations court. Your caseworker, lawyer, or TANF caseworker can help you file for child support.

Can I be asked to pay child support when I am in care?

YES. A non-custodial parent, even one under age 18, in placement, and/or still in high school can be required by the court to pay child support. Just like teen parents have many of the rights of older parents, they also have some of the same responsibilities-like child support.

LAWYERS AND COURT



Do I have a lawyer?

YES. All youth in the dependency and delinquency systems have lawyers who are appointed to represent them in court at no cost. Sometimes your lawyer is called a Guardian *ad Litem* (GAL) or child advocate.

Your lawyer works for you. Your lawyer does not work for the county child welfare agency or for your parent(s). Your lawyer is focused on your needs and making sure you are safe and well cared for. The job of your lawyer is to find out what you need and try to make it happen.

Your lawyer may represent you in one of two ways. This depends on why you came into care. Your lawyer must always tell the court what you want to have happen. However, if you came into care because of something that your parents did--like abuse or neglect--then your lawyer must also tell the court what he/she feels is in your best interest. When your lawyer acts in this way, he/she is called your Guardian *ad Litem* (GAL). What the lawyer believes is in your best interest may not always be what you want.

If you came into care because of your actions, like not attending school, then your lawyer will only tell the judge what you want. In this case the recommendations that your lawyer makes in court are exactly what you ask for. If you are not sure how your lawyer represents you, call your lawyer and ask.

What is my lawyer supposed to do?

Your lawyer's job is to represent you and help you get what you need. **Ultimately, though, you are your own best advocate.** You should find out the name of your lawyer, his/her telephone number and address so you have a few ways to communicate with your lawyer. You should call your lawyer and make sure that he/she knows what is going on in your case, particularly if you are having problems. **You should also be prepared to speak for yourself in court so that you can make sure the judge understands how you feel about things and what you want.** You may choose to come to court with a written statement of what you want the judge to know. Your IL worker can help you prepare to talk to the judge.

Your lawyer should come and see you as soon as possible after he or she is appointed to be your lawyer and should continue to meet with you on a regular basis. Your lawyer should interview other people who are involved in your case and who may be witnesses in your case. Your lawyer should participate in any hearings in court that involve you. Your lawyer should also explain to you what is happening in court. When your lawyer is a GAL, she must tell the judge what she thinks is in your best interest *and* what you want.

What should I tell my lawyer?

Almost everything you tell your lawyer is confidential. Your lawyer will tell you when she cannot keep things confidential—like when she thinks you may hurt yourself or someone else. In Pennsylvania, some lawyers disagree on whether or not they are mandated reporters. Mandated reporters must call the child welfare agency if they think you are being abused. If you want to make sure any information you tell your GAL is absolutely confidential, you should ask them about their confidentiality policy when you first meet.

You should tell your lawyer how you are doing in your placement and what kind of placement you want for the future—if you want to go home, be placed with a relative, or be adopted. You should tell your lawyer how things are going for you, if things are going well in school, if you are in need of medical care or counseling, if you are visiting with you sibling and parents, and anything else that is important to you.

You should meet with your lawyer before court. You can also call your lawyer. You can also write letters to your lawyer to let him/her know how you are doing.

How do I find out who my lawyer is?

Ask your county child welfare agency case worker if you do not know who your child advocate is. If you are not able to find this information, you can call Juvenile Law Center at 1-800-875-8887. If you live in Allegheny County, you can call KidsVoice at 412-391-3100.

What do I do if I think my lawyer isn't doing his or her job?

If you do not think your lawyer is doing his or her job, you should contact his/her

supervisor or boss. You can also tell the judge when you go to court. You should let them know what you think your lawyer is doing wrong, such as if your lawyer is not returning your calls or talking to you, not telling the judge what you want. Then the supervisor or judge can decide what to do next to make sure your lawyer represents you adequately. **Your lawyer is appointed to help you and work for you. If you do not think your lawyer is doing his/her job, don't be afraid to let someone know.**

Why do I go to court every three to six months?

Because the child welfare agency is involved in your life and responsible for you, everyone goes to court every three to six months to make sure you are doing okay and that all your needs are being met. *These court hearings are called permanency review hearings.*

You go to court to make sure that everyone—the child welfare agency, the people caring for you, and your lawyer are doing everything they are supposed to do. You also go so that the court can check that the child welfare agency is making all efforts to help you go home to your family, to relatives, or to a place that is as family-like as possible.

You do not go to court because you are being punished. You go to make sure your needs are being met and all laws are being followed. **The judge has the power to order anyone in the court room to do things for you or your family, like making sure visits are happening, you are in a placement that meets your needs, and that you are getting the services that you need.**

Should I go to court for my permanency review hearings?

YES. Everyone is meeting at court to talk about you and how you are doing. If you are not there, things may be said that you do not agree with or important things about your situation may not be heard. If you are not there, you will not be able to give input or correct mistakes.

Court can be boring and you may have to wait for a long time for your case to be heard. Even so, it is important for you to go. Your views and your voice may not be heard if you are not there. Court only happens once every three to six months. **It is worth going to court to make sure you get what you need and so that decisions about you are not made without your involvement.**

Remember that the only person who can excuse you from attending court is your lawyer.

Your caseworker, parents, or anyone else involved in your case may not tell you not to go to court. If you want to make sure you are present for all hearings, contact your lawyer before the hearing. Your lawyer will be able to ask the court to order your placement to transport you to the hearing. The judge will make the ruling as to whether you should be transported or not.

What are some ways that I can advocate for myself?

The best way to advocate for yourself is to ask questions and speak up. Talk to the adults in your life who you feel that you can trust, including your caseworker, IL worker, lawyer, counselor, mentor, advocate, foster parent, friend, parent or teacher. You can also talk to the judge when you go to court. Sometimes you need to make many phone calls to accomplish your goal. For example, if your case worker is not calling you back, you should call her supervisor and try to get help. This is called going up the chain of command. Writing letters is also a good way to advocate for yourself. Putting your thoughts in writing is a good way to be heard. Concerns or requests that you put in writing are hard to ignore.

It is easy to feel helpless and out of control, but there are a few things which you can control. If you speak truthfully and straightforward, without using sarcasm, derogatory language, swearing, or name calling, you will be better able to get your point across. Most importantly if there is something you need, or something that you want others to know, don't give up. *See the Tips for Advocating for Yourself box for more ideas.*

TOP 4 REASONS TO GO TO YOUR PERMANENCY REVIEW HEARINGS

- 1. You have a right to be there and speak.**
- 2. The hearing is about *you*, so you want to make sure everyone gets information correct.**
- 3. It is a place where you are able to tell people about what is going well in your life or what is going wrong and what you want to change.**
- 4. The judge has the final word on what is going to happen in your case and can order people to do things.**

TIPS FOR ADVOCATING FOR YOURSELF

When something is wrong or you want something to change (like a placement or visitation schedule) you should:

- **Call your caseworker and IL worker.** Call your caseworker, IL worker, and his/her supervisors. Go up the chain of command and let them know what is wrong. Leave messages if they do not pick up their phone. You should keep a record of the calls you have made.
- **Call your GAL.** The job of your GAL is to help you get what you want and need. Your GAL works for you. They may not know something is wrong unless you tell them.
- **Write Letters.** It is always important to make a record of your complaints or what you want to achieve. Writing letters to your caseworker, GAL, and even the judge in your case shows you are serious and taking time to explain what is important to you. By writing a letter you also make a permanent record of your complaint or request that cannot be ignored.
- **Plan for Your Court Review Hearing and ATTEND it.** Court is one of the places you can go to make sure you are heard. The Judge has the final word on most of the things that happen in your case--he or she can order that you receive certain services, that you stay in care, or that you be placed somewhere. You can come with a statement or outline to read to the judge if that makes it easier. You can call your GAL to help you prepare. You should take the opportunity to let the judge know how you feel.
- **File a grievance/ complaint.** You can file a grievance, which is a complaint, with the private provider, the county child welfare agency, and the State Office of Children, Youth, and Families.
- **Start a Media Campaign.** If you think that youth in care are not treated right, or that the laws and regulations that govern the system are not benefitting youth, you can try to start a media campaign to affect citizens and state legislators. A Media Campaign uses the press, television, speaking engagements, and protests, for example, to let the general public know what problems youth in care deal with and what recommendations for change exist.
- **Know how to effectively get your message across.** To make your message effective, it is not just about what you say, but how you say it. As angry as you might be about your situation, you are more likely to be successful about getting your message across if you are calm and clear when you speak to your caseworker, supervisors, and the judge. The calm presentation of your complaint or request will help you show your maturity.
- **Join the Pennsylvania Youth Advisory Board.** The mission of the State Youth Advisory Board is to create positive change in the substitute care system by giving youth in care a voice, educating youth and adults about the system and the need for change, and proposing solutions for change. Youth who are in care or have been in care can become part of the YAB. You can join your regional and state YAB. Please see the YAB website at www.independentlivingpa.org for more information on contacts and meeting dates and times.

PLANNING FOR AFTER YOU LEAVE CARE

The goal is for you to stay in substitute care for only a short period of time. Hopefully, you can return home or go somewhere where you can be taken care of and provided with what you need to grow up. For many different reasons, some youth do stay in care until they are 18 or older. In these situation, older youth should be prepared to be able to live on their own and care for themselves. One of the most important skills youth need to acquire to live on their own is the ability to financially support themselves. The best way to acquire this skill is to get work experience, save money, and continue your education or vocational training past high school. The more education and training a person has increases their ability to get higher paying jobs.

You should only be discharged from care if you are able to live safely and support yourself, but in some cases, you may need some help to make ends meet. You may be eligible for some of the benefits and services below.

What cash assistance is available when I leave substitute care?



You are not able to receive cash assistance while you are in substitute care. Cash assistance programs are for people who fit in to a particular eligibility category and have a very low income. You can apply for cash assistance at your local county assistance office. There is a list of these offices on the 411 section of the YAB website, www.independentlivingpa.org. Eligibility for cash assistance is determined based on a number of factors including resources, income, citizenship, residency, and many others. TANF and General Assistance are the most common forms of cash assistance.

General Assistance (GA). Most GA recipients are individuals who have temporary or permanent disabilities that prevent their employment. If you are between 18 and 20 years of age and are still in high school, you may be eligible for GA. In addition, in some cases when you are in a residential drug treatment program, you may also be eligible for GA. When you receive GA, you will also receive MA.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). TANF provides money for dependent children and their parents (or other relatives with whom they live) and pregnant women. The TANF program has many rules, including work requirements, and has a five-year time limit. When you get TANF you will also get Medical Assistance (MA). You may also be eligible for child care assistance.

To apply for cash assistance, contact the local county assistance office, call 1-800-692-7462, or apply online at www.compass.state.pa.us. When you apply for cash assistance, you can also apply for Medical Assistance, Food Stamps, and Energy Assistance.



Are there other public benefits that help you make ends meet?

There are many reasons a person may not be eligible for cash assistance. You may still be eligible for other public assistance benefits that will help you meet your needs. These benefits include Food Stamps, Medical (MA) and Energy Assistance (LIHEAP), and child care subsidies.

More people are eligible for **food stamps** than actually apply. Food stamps are funds that you can use for food. They are issued on a card that looks like a credit card (an EBT card). This card can be used for food at most grocery stores and supermarkets.

For more information on **Medical Assistance** (MA) see the section on health insurance below.

If you need help paying your heating bills, you may be eligible for the **Low Income Home and Energy Assistance Program** (LIHEAP). You can also apply for emergency assistance if you are in danger of losing your utility services. Sometimes you can apply at the local county assistance office; some counties have separate energy assistance offices where you can make the application. Check with your local county assistance office to find out where you can apply for LIHEAP.

You can apply for food stamps, MA, and LIHEAP at your local welfare office or online at www.compass.state.pa.us.

If you have a child, you may be eligible for a **child care subsidy** even if you are not receiving cash assistance. You apply for this through your county. To qualify for a subsidy you must work at least 25 hours a week, make at least minimum wage or attend an educational program. If you are attending high school full time, there may be some exceptions to the work requirement. To determine if you are eligible, contact **1-877-4-PA-KIDS** or **1-800-392-3131**. You can also apply for this child care subsidy when you leave care. You can find more information at <http://www.dpw.state.pa.us/child/childcare/003670483.htm>.

What is Supplemental Security Income (SSI)?

SSI is a cash assistance benefit for children who are disabled and adults who have a disability that prevents them from working. You apply for SSI through the Social Security Administration. The process can take a long time. The Social Security office must review your medical or mental health records (depending on your disability) and get information on how you function. You can call 1-800-772-1213 to begin an application and find out the location of the closest Social Security office. You can also find out more about the process on the Social Security Administration's website at www.ssa.gov.

Will I receive SSI once I am out of care if I received it while in care?

Even if you receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) as a minor, you are not guaranteed to receive it as an adult when you leave care. Each youth who receives SSI must go through what is called "Age 18 Redetermination." The Social Security Administration reviews medical and/or mental health treatment information to determine if you meet the criteria of adult eligibility for SSI payments. If you are determined to be ineligible for SSI at this Redetermination and you do not agree with the decision you have to appeal the decision.

Individuals found ineligible during the redetermination process are able to continue to receive SSI benefits if they begin to receive state vocational rehabilitation agency services prior to their 18th birthday. (See information on the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation below). SSI benefits will continue as long as the adult is participating in an OVR program. **Youth who continue to attend high school and receive special education services through an Individual Education Plan (IEP) will also continue to receive SSI until they complete high school.**

If you receive SSI it is important to be prepared for the redetermination process. Talk to your GAL and caseworker as well as your school's Transition or Special Education Coordinator and any other teacher or counselor who knows about the redetermination process. Continuing or applying for SSI should be part of your discharge plan if you have a disability.

The American Bar Association will provide referrals to help children and youth who have disabilities through the redetermination and appeal process. Call 202-662-1000 for more information.

HEALTH CARE AND HEALTH INSURANCE



What medical insurance do I have while I am in substitute care?

Most youth in care are eligible for Medical Assistance (MA). This is comprehensive health insurance that covers all your physical health and mental health care needs. Any youth who is eligible for MA must be provided with all services that a doctor says are “medically necessary,” including behavioral health services. Depending on what part of the state you live in, you may be covered by a managed care program—Access Plus or Health Choices. When you join one of these programs, you will be enrolled in a health plan which is also known as a MCO. The health plan will help you find doctors and service providers who are covered under your plan.

What types of health insurance can I get once I am discharged from foster care?

When you are discharged from care, your MA case will be closed through the substitute care system so you will need to re-apply for medical assistance. You apply for medical assistance at your local county assistance office or apply online at www.compass.state.pa.us. Some youth will still be eligible for MA. Some will not be eligible because the income limits are very low (that means that even if you make a small amount of money from work, you may be over the income limits).

After you leave care, you may be eligible for MA if you are:

- receiving SSI when you leave care
- pregnant or have a child
- disabled, but can work, you may be eligible for Medical Assistance for Workers with Disabilities (MAWD).
- prescribed health-sustaining medications
- temporarily disabled and receiving General Assistance
- a victim of domestic violence

See www.dpw.state.pa.us/LowInc/MedAssistance/MAEligibility/003670296.htm for more information on MA eligibility

What is AdultBasic Health Insurance?

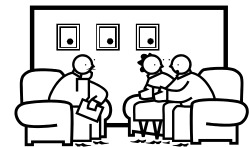
A youth may be able to purchase MA Adult Basic Coverage from the Department of Public Welfare. This program costs \$30 a month and does not cover prescriptions or mental health treatment. AdultBasic coverage is based on income guidelines. To determine if you are eligible and to apply call 1-800-GO-BASIC or go to www.insurance.state.pa.us. There is a waiting list for AdultBasic. It is still good to apply to get your name on the list.

What if I am not eligible for any of the above Medical Assistance programs? Are there any places that I can get free or low cost medical care?

Most counties have local health care centers. Please see the 411 section of the YAB website, www.independentlivingpa.org, for the location and addresses of free or low cost clinics in your area.

Can I receive confidential STD and HIV/AIDS testing and services?

YES. There are many places where you can get free and confidential STD and HIV/AIDS testing. Please see www.safeteens.org/clinics.aspx for locations and contact information for clinics in your area.



How can I get drug and alcohol treatment?

Medical assistance will cover drug and alcohol treatment. Most counties reserve some funding for drug and alcohol treatment for those who do not have health insurance. Please call your county office of mental health to find out what resources exist in your county. You can also find out about services in your area from the State Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services at: www.dpw.state.pa.us/General/AboutDPW/DPWOrganization/OMHSAS/003672365.htm.

Can I consent to mental health and substance abuse treatment on my own without an adult?

YES. You can consent to mental health treatment without the consent of a parent, guardian or custodian when you are age 14 or older. You can consent to substance abuse treatment on your own at any age.

What other health care can I get without adult permission while I'm a minor?

You can consent to testing and treatment related to sexual health and family planning (except abortion). This includes obtaining contraceptives, testing for pregnancy, STDs, and HIV, and counseling for pregnancy, STDs and HIV.

To obtain an abortion you must have the consent of your parent, guardian, or legal custodian. You may also get a judicial bypass, which is a court order that will allow you to proceed with an abortion without the consent of your parent, guardian, or legal custodian. For more information call the CHOICE hotline at 1-800-84-TEENS or the Women's Law Project at 215-928-9801.

If I need counseling about reproductive health and family planning where can I get help?

There are many hotlines and centers that provide counseling about reproductive health and family planning. You can start by calling Planned Parenthood of Pennsylvania at 1-800-230-PLAN. They will connect you to the Planned Parenthood that is close to where you live. Please see www.safeteens.org/clinics.aspx for locations and contact information for clinics in your area.

GETTING AN EDUCATION

Where do I go to school when I enter placement?

When you enter placement all efforts should be made to place you in a location where you can stay in your home community school. If your placement is in a new school district, you have a right to go to school in the district where your placement is located. If you are placed in a temporary shelter, you have a right to attend your home school-this is because you will be considered homeless under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. You should be placed in regular education unless you are receiving special education services and have an Individual Education Plan.



What is required for me to be enrolled in school?

To enroll in school you need the following documents:

- Proof of your date of birth
- Immunization record or assurance from former school district or doctor that immunizations are up to date and are being sent
- Proof of residency (this can be a letter from your caretaker or casemanager)
- Parent Registration Form (this form can be filled out by your casemanager)

The following documents ARE NOT REQUIRED for enrollment:

- Social security number
- Picture I.D
- Reason for youth's placement or placement history
- Visa or immigration documents
- Mental Health Evaluations

Does the school need to know that I am in placement and why?

NO. The school does not need to know that you are in care or why you are in care to enroll you in school.

If I have submitted all the documents listed above, how long should it take for me to be enrolled in school?

It should take no more than *five days*.

What do I do if I am having trouble with enrollment?

If you are have trouble enrolling in school contact your caseworker and lawyer. If they are not able to help you, you can file a complaint with the School Services Unit at the Pennsylvania Department of Education. You can call them at (717) 787-4869 and fax them your complaint at (717) 783-6802. You can also visit the Pennsylvania Department of Education online at www.pde.state.pa.us. You should also call the Education Law Center at 215-238-6970 or online at www.elc-pa.org. They can help you even if you do not live in Philadelphia.

You should use the informal hearing to tell your side of things and to explain what was going on in school that led to your being transferred.

Who is qualified for special education services?

Youth are eligible for special education if they have one of a list of identified disabilities *and*, as a result of the disability, require specially designed instruction. If you think you need special education services, you should request that the school evaluate you. If you are eligible for special education services, you will have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that describes the type of instruction you need and any other services that will allow you to receive a Free and Appropriate, Public Education (FAPE).

You should receive these services in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). This means that you should be placed in regular education classes to the greatest extent possible. If you are receiving special education services, you have special appeal rights and special rights within the discipline system. Please contact the Education Law Center at 215-238-6970 and on their website www.elc-pa.org for more information about your rights within the special education system.

How can students be placed in an alternative school?

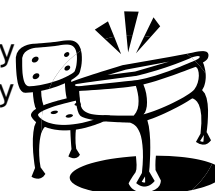
A school can request to send a "disruptive" student to an alternative school. The PA Department of Education defines disruptive students as students who pose a threat to the safety of the staff or other students, or whose behavior seriously interferes with the learning process. It also defines disruptive a student who is habitually truant.

The school must provide the youth with an informal hearing before the transfer can occur. The school must notify the parent or guardian of the youth in writing about the hearing. You can have your parents, your guardian, or anyone you want to speak on your behalf to attend the hearing. You should also inform your lawyer, as they may be able to attend.

If you end up being transferred to an alternative school, your progress should be reviewed at least every semester. Ask to be part of the review and advocate for yourself. If you think you have made progress and should be transferred back to your home school make sure the school knows you are making improvements and that your situation is being reviewed.

Do I have to go to school on the grounds of my placement if they have a school?

Not necessarily. Where you are placed by the county child welfare agency and where you go to school are two separate issues. To go to school at any school other than a regular public school where you live:



1. your IEP must say so, or
2. you must have gone through the process above to be transferred to an Alternative School, or
3. the court has ordered you to go to a specific school

Do I have any rights if I am expelled?

YES. An expulsion is when you are removed from school for 10 days or longer. The school must hold a formal hearing before an expulsion. You have a right to bring your own witnesses to the hearing and bring a lawyer if you want. If you are expelled, you can appeal the school's decision to the courts (the Court of Common Pleas).

There are special rules about expulsions that result from possessing a weapon on school grounds, at a school activity or even going to and from school. School law defines weapons very broadly (for example, it can include box cutters and pen knives.) There are also different rules about the expulsion of students who are in special educational classes. Please contact a lawyer at Education Law Center at 215-238-6970 if you have specific questions about an expulsion. The law is very complicated in this area and you should know your rights.

How do I get back in school if I dropped out for a period of time?

You have a right to enroll or re-enroll at the public school in your district until you are age 21 or you graduate from high school. If you are a high school dropout interested in receiving a high school diploma, or a high school student having difficulty with traditional education, there are some different options you have for non-traditional schooling. These options include getting a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) or attending an alternative high school program.

What is a General Equivalency Diploma (GED)?

The GED is a diploma that is viewed by post-secondary educators and employers as an equivalent to a high school diploma.

This diploma is obtained by taking a written test. The GED test is comprised of five sections:

1. Language Arts - Writing
2. Language Arts - Reading
3. Math
4. Social Studies
5. Science

To pass the GED test, you must receive a combined score of 2250 for all five sections. This means that you must average 450 points out of a total 800 points in each section. You also have to score a 410 or higher in each individual section. This means that you must answer between 60% and 65% of the questions correctly. There is also an essay section. In this section you must show that you can write a clear, convincing essay.

Passing the GED test is very difficult. Only 60% of the people who take the GED test pass it on their first try. It is very helpful to take a GED preparation class. In order to obtain a GED certificate, you must pass all 5 sections of the test. If you pass some sections but not all, you can take just those sections that you did not pass again.

How can I find out the location of GED preparation classes and GED testing sites?

Check out www.able.state.us/cwp/, the Pennsylvania Department of Education website, for information on GED preparation classes and testing sites.

What should I bring with me when I take the GED test?

If you are over 18 years of age you must provide all of the following:

- A driver's license or state issued ID card
- Proof of residency (utility bill, library card, letter from caseworker stating current residence, etc.)
- A fee (fees vary depending on testing site)

If you are under 18 you must **also** provide the following information:

- Withdrawal letter from your home school district
- Court order or letter of employment

If you take the GED before you are 18 or before your high school class graduates, you will not receive your official certificate. You will receive the certificate once you turn 18, or when your high school class graduates (which ever happens first). You can get your scores before you are 18 if you need to show someone that you passed.

Almost all colleges and universities accept the GED diploma as an equivalent to a traditional high school diploma for admissions purposes. Often times, colleges will accept GED scores instead of a detailed high school transcript when reviewing an application.

How can I get into post-secondary education?



Applying for post-secondary education is a long and detailed process. It is important to be in touch with your high school guidance counselor so that they can help walk you through all the steps of applying. Your IL worker can help with this.

Step One: Taking the SAT test

You should first look into the colleges and technical schools you are interested in attending to find out what, if any, standardized tests they require. Community colleges typically do not require that you take any standardized tests. Plan on taking any standardized tests between the end of your junior year of high school and the beginning of your senior year. This will give you enough time to receive your scores and retake the test if you wish. Most four year colleges require that applicants submit their SAT test scores.

To register for the SAT test there is a \$41.50 fee. You may not have to pay this fee if you meet income guidelines or are in substitute care--in that case, your fee would be waived. To determine if you are eligible for a fee waiver contact your school's guidance counselor or your caseworker. The fee waiver will also allow you to get application fees waived at participating colleges and universities. **You may also qualify for funding from the State Independent Living Program to pay for the test.** You can check with your IL worker and the Youth Advisory Board website at www.independentlivingpa.org for the application to apply for this funding.

The SAT test is given about six times a year. Your guidance counselor at high school can help you sign up for the test. If you are no longer in high school, you can still sign up to

take the SAT test. You should contact the guidance counselor at the last high school you attended to get information on how to sign up. You can also check www.collegeboard.com to find out how to sign up for the test, the testing schedule, and locations. You can also call 1-800-927-4302.

Some schools require that you take another standardized test called the ACT test. This test is similar to the SAT but has a different format and different scoring guidelines. Information on the ACT test is available at www.act.org.

There are review classes and study guides for the SAT and ACT tests. Check with your guidance counselor at school to find out if there are resources in your area.

Step Two: Completing Applications

Each college and university has a different application process. Some require an essay, standardized test scores, and letters of recommendation. Others do not.

All require that students submit their high school transcripts or GED scores. Once you complete the application, talk to your high school guidance counselor about obtaining your transcripts.

Many schools have an application fee. You may be able to get the application fees waived. Talk to your guidance counselor, and call the school's admissions office to find out how to apply for a fee waiver.

If you want, you can provide the school with documentation that you are or were in the substitute care system. This will allow the school to understand your background and your life experiences. It will also help explain to the admissions officers why you were transferred to different schools. It may also determine your eligibility for different scholarships and grants.

Make sure that you determine the application deadline, and send your application in before the deadline.



How do I pay for college or a training school?

The first step in applying for financial aid is to complete the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) form. Filling out this form will allow you to apply for all federal financial aid including both grants (money you do not have to pay back) and loans (money that you will have to pay back). Many colleges use the FAFSA to determine eligibility for their own scholarships and grants. The FAFSA can be completed on paper or online. You can get a paper copy of the FAFSA in your guidance counselor's office or at any college

admission or financial aid office. To apply online go to www.fafsa.ed.gov. If you need assistance filling out the application contact 1-800-4-FED-AID.

When you are filling out the FAFSA form, **be sure to answer YES to question 53. This question asks if you are or were a ward/dependent of the court.** By answering Yes to this question you can skip the section where you must report your parent's income. **In this situation only your own income and savings will be used to determine eligibility for federal student aid. In most cases, this means that you will be eligible for the maximum student aid available.** You will need to provide a letter from the county child welfare agency that shows that you are still in care or were in care. Contact your caseworker or your lawyer for this information if you do not have it.

While you are in college, you must resubmit a FAFSA form every year. If you completed your form over the Internet, you can sign on with your password to renew your FAFSA each year. If you completed a paper FAFSA, then a renewal FAFSA will be sent to you at the mailing address listed on the original. **Make sure you report any changes in your mailing address so that you do not miss any deadlines.**

The FAFSA is made available on January 1st for the school year beginning the next fall. Deadlines for completion vary depending on which schools you are applying to. Try to get your FAFSA in as soon as you can, so that you do not miss any deadlines.

Are there grants and scholarships for youth in care or who have been in care?

YES. There are some scholarships that are for youth who are, or have been in substitute care. Below is a list of some scholarships you may be eligible for.

Casey Family Scholarship

This scholarship is administered by the Orphan Foundation of America. It offers up to \$10,000 in scholarships to youth under age 25 who resided in foster care for at least 12 months and were not adopted. Scholarships are awarded to youth in pursuit of post-secondary education including college, career schools, and vocational training programs. In 2006, the application was posted at www.orphan.org/casey_scholarship.html. The online portion of the application was due March 31 and the written and supporting materials were due by April 15.

Chafee Education and Training Grant (ETG)

This grant is administered by the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Association (PHEAA).

To apply for the Chafee Grant, you must be eligible for services under the State's Chafee Foster Care Independence Program. That is, you must have been adopted after attaining age 16, or be a youth who is 16 or older and in care, or under 21 and you were in care at age 16 or above. Eligible youth can receive the grant up until turning age 21 (23 if you were receiving the ETG at age 21).

This grant provides up to \$5,000 per academic year to meet unmet costs for the post-secondary education and training.

To apply you must complete the FAFSA and the Pennsylvania Chafee Education and Training Grant Program Application. To obtain this application call 1-800-831-0797 or go online at www.pheaa.org or www.independentlivingpa.org.

In order to be awarded this grant you must be enrolled at least half time in an approved career school or college, and you must "maintain satisfactory academic progress."

Pennsylvania State Foster Parent Association Scholarship

This program offers scholarships to youth who are in substitute care in Pennsylvania and the children of foster families. Youth who are applying for college or post-secondary training may be eligible. The deadline for the application is usually in early March. You must submit an essay, three letters of reference, and your high school transcript. Check out the website for more information: www.psfpa.com.

National Foster Parent Association Youth Scholarship

This program offers scholarships to foster youth for college, vocational training schools, correspondence courses and even GED prep programs. They award five scholarships of \$1,000 each. Three are awarded to foster youth and two are awarded to birth or adoptive children residing in a foster home.

To apply you must complete the application, obtain two letters of recommendation, and write an essay. See <http://nfpainc.org/awards/youthScholarships.cfm?page=6> for more information.

The Taylor J. Ertel Foster Children Foundation Scholarship

This Foundation awards scholarships of no more than \$2,000 a year to any youth who has resided in a foster home for any amount of time. Scholarship payments are made directly to your school's business office. See www.tjefoundation.org for more information.

Many other scholarships are available to students based on their experiences in foster care as well as their gender, race, chosen course of study, or other distinguishing factors. To find information on different scholarship opportunities visit:

www.collegeboard.com College Board scholarship search asks detailed questions about the applicant and then matches them to scholarships for those in similar situations

www.independentlivingpa.org Lists scholarships available for youth in care

www.need.org Negro Education Emergency Drive offers scholarships to African Americans who are pursuing post-secondary education

www.pittsburghfoundation.org This contains a database of 190 individual scholarships to students.

www.thesalliemafund.org. The Sallie Mae Fund provides several scholarships that youth in care may be eligible for.

www.uncf.org United Negro College Fund provides scholarships to African American students who attend United Negro College Fund member colleges and non-member colleges. Search the database of UNCF and non-UNCF scholarships at the site.

Can I enroll in vocational training?

Vocational training can be a great opportunity. Learning a trade can help you get a good paying job. **BE CAREFUL!** Get advice before you enroll at a trade school that is very expensive, requires that you take out a lot of loans, and makes promises that seem too good to be true. Make sure the school you want to enroll in is accredited. If it is not, it may not accept any state or federal financial aid. If the school does not accept financial aid, you will have to pay for the school through scholarships and loans. Ask your IL worker, caseworker or guidance counselor for help in finding a program that meets your needs and does not put you in debt.

GETTING A JOB AND JOB TRAINING

In addition to furthering your education, getting work experience, building your resume, and saving money from work are among the best ways to prepare for independence and self-sufficiency after you leave care. You may also be interested in pursuing post-secondary vocational training. If you are interested in a specific trade or occupation that does not require a college degree but does require some specific training, this may be right for you. Also remember that many colleges and community colleges provide classes that will prepare you for a trade.

This section contains some basic information about getting a job and job training. Please check your county resource section for more programs in your area.

Who needs a work permit?

Anyone between the ages of 14 and 17 who has not graduated from high school or obtained a GED must have a work permit in order to be legally employed in Pennsylvania.

A youth under the age of 14 may not work legally in Pennsylvania. A youth 14 or 15 years old can obtain a work permit that is specific to one place of employment. A youth 16 or 17 years old may obtain a work permit that is valid until his/her 18th birthday. A 17 year old who has already graduated from high school or gotten a GED does not need a work permit.

How do I get a work permit?

Work permits are issued through the school district in which a student lives. To obtain a work permit, contact your school's guidance counselor for an application. Your parent or legal guardian will have to come to the school to sign the application in front of the school counselor. If your parents are not able to sign the application, your caseworker maybe able to sign the form. If you are having trouble finding someone to sign the form, contact your caseworker and lawyer. If you are under 16 you will also need to have the place of employment fill out a section on the application. Your guidance counselor will review that application and will issue your work permit. The application can usually be found on your school district's website.

What programs help prepare me to get a job?

There are many programs that can help you find a job and get job training. Below are some of the programs you may want to check out:

- **Careerlink** has offices throughout the state. They help individuals train for and obtain employment. They provide job search skills, and employment related training at their regional offices. They also offer an internet-based job search site that connects individuals with many jobs in their region. To find your local Careerlink Office check the Careerlink website at www.pacareerlink.state.pa.us
- **Job Corps** is a federally funded program that provides youth age 16-24 with the opportunity for educational advancement and vocational training. Job Corps has residential sites where you would live and also attend job training. Job Corps also has a few sites where you receive training during the day and are responsible for your own housing. Job Corps is free to all participants. It provides a monthly living allowance. Each center has different vocational and educational opportunities. Job Corps operates on a Zero Tolerance policy for violence and drug use. This means that any incidents involving drug use or violent actions will result in immediate removal from the program.

You can apply to go to Job Corps sites that are in other parts of the state if they have the training you are looking for. Find a list of the Job Corps sites in your county on the 411 Section of the YAB website-www.independentlivingpa.org. You should also check the national Job Corps website at <http://jobcorps.doleta.gov> or call (800) 733-JOBS or (800) 733-5627.

- **Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR)** offers services to help individuals with disabilities to prepare for, start, and maintain employment. The services provided are designed to meet each individual's personal needs. Often this includes Diagnostic Services used to understand fully the individual's disability, vocational evaluation used to determine his/her interests and abilities, counseling, training, and job placement assistance. OVR may provide additional support services based on the individual needs of each client. To find out the contact information for your local OVR Office see www.independentlivingpa.org.
- **Union apprentice programs** are a combination of job training and related classroom instruction in which workers learn the practical and theoretic aspects of a highly skilled occupation. These programs are offered through employers and unions. Most trades require a 4-5 year apprenticeship program. During this time, apprentices earn a wage, which increases as the participants advance

through the program. When the apprenticeship is complete, the students are tested. If they pass the test they are admitted into the union as Journeymen. Each union has different requirements for participation in the program, however all require a GED or high school diploma and that the applicant be of working age. Consult www.apprentice.org to find out more information about apprentice programs and look at your county appendix for contact names and phone numbers.

- **Armed Forces** If you are interested in joining the armed forces you can contact the local recruiting stations in your county. In most cases, you will receive training in a trade while you are enlisted in the armed forces. To find recruiters in your area, check out the following websites:

Army: www.goarmy.com/FindARecruiterContact.do

Airforce: <http://go.mappoint.net/airforce/PrxInput.aspx>

Navy: www.navy.com/findarecruiter/

Marines: www.marinesdirect.com/modules.php?name=Recruiting

FINDING A PLACE TO LIVE

When you leave care, one of the biggest challenges is finding a safe and affordable place to live. Unfortunately, there is a shortage of affordable housing in Pennsylvania and across the country. For example, in Philadelphia, the average rent for a one bedroom apartment is \$721.00. In York county, the average rent for a one bedroom apartment is \$474. This is hard to afford for someone starting out on their own.

Before you decide to leave care, you should look at apartments in your area and know how much the rent is. That way you can figure out how much you need to save and how much money you will need to make each month to be able to keep your housing and pay your other bills. If you are under age 21 and still in an education or treatment program you may want to stay in care so that you will be better prepared to afford housing.

What things should I be thinking of when I am looking for my own apartment?

- Can I realistically afford the rent and all my expenses? (like the security deposit, utilities, furniture, transportation, food, clothing, money for recreation, renters insurance . . . and more)
- Will I need a co-signer for my lease?
- Do I feel safe and secure in the area in the daytime and nighttime?
- Is it near public transportation?
- Is it near a grocery store?
- How long is the lease?
- Are the refrigerator and appliances included in the rent?
- Are utilities included in the rent?
- Do the plumbing and appliances work?
- Do the doors lock securely?
- Are there programs in your area that help pay security deposit or help with furniture?



Are there places I can live while I get an education or vocational training?

Yes. If you are going to college or a training school, check if your school has **on-campus housing**. Sometimes on-campus housing is dorms and sometimes it includes apartments that the college or school owns. Usually on-campus housing is easier to afford than renting your own place. In many cases, your financial aid package for school can include the cost of on-campus housing. Because campus housing is close to all your classes, on-campus housing can also help you save money on transportation.

Job Corps is an educational and vocational program that provides housing for its students. Having your housing provided for you while you attend Job Corps will help you save money for your future and will give you a safe place to stay. See the Getting A Job Section for more information on Job Corps.

Remember that you can stay in care until age 21 if you are in an educational program, like college or vocational training. You can go away to college and stay in care. Your case can remain open while you go away to school so that when you come back for holiday and summer breaks you can stay in a foster home or another placement. Some youth have found this option helpful so that they do not have to worry about where they are going to live when school is not in session.

Where do I go if I become homeless?

Every county has a shelter for the homeless. The shelter staff can provide you some help in getting back on your feet and finding a place to live. Please check the county resource pages on the 411 Section of the YAB website, www.independentlivingpa.org for contact information about shelters in your area.

What is public housing?

When people talk about public housing they usually mean two things: **project-based public housing** and the **Section 8 voucher program**.

1. In **project-based public housing**, the subsidy is tied to a particular apartment in a building or property. Residents usually pay no more than 30% of their income in rent. Utilities are usually included in the rent.
2. **Section 8** is a rental assistance that is tenant based. The rental subsidy belongs to the individual or family. It can be used to rent an apartment or home from a landlord who accepts section 8 vouchers. This means that once you are granted a Section 8 voucher, you may use it anywhere that accepts the voucher. An individual or family can take the rental subsidy with them to another unit even if they move to a different county or state. Renters pay between 30% and 40%

of their income in rent and the housing authority or agency pays the rest of the rent.

How easy is it to get into public housing?

Usually, it is not very easy to get into public housing. Eligibility for subsidized housing is based on income. **In most counties, there is a very, very long waiting list for project-based and Section 8 housing. In some counties, the waiting lists are closed. Because it is very hard to get into public housing, make sure this is not your only plan for housing!**

Usually, you apply for public housing at the local housing authority and/or the individual buildings where project based assistance is offered. It may differ by county. To find out where your local housing authority is located see the 411 section of the YAB website at www.independentlivingpa.org.

Are there other subsidized housing programs other than project-based public housing and Section 8?

Most counties do have some programs that offer subsidized housing. Subsidized housing is housing that is low cost in which a program of agency helps you pay your rent. Sometimes these programs are run by non-profit organizations. Sometimes these programs are offered through the county's homeless prevention program and are called **transitional or supportive housing**. Please see the 411 Section of the YAB website, www.independentlivingpa.org, to find out more information about housing options in your county.

What is room and board assistance?

Each county can use a portion of its Independent Living funds to provide youth assistance in paying for rent and other costs associated with housing. Counties can provide help with short-term housing crises and can also provide more long-term rental assistance. Each county has a **room and board policy** that explains the type of room and board assistance your county provides and what you need to do to request this assistance. If you are under age 21 and out of care, you should contact the IL coordinator for the county you are living in to find out about room and board assistance .

Are there any other resources to help in finding affordable housing?

The Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency has an affordable housing locator on their website: www.phfa.org/pal/. You can look for affordable housing in your area by using this locator. It is a great place to start when you are looking for housing.

IMMIGRATION ISSUES

What should I do if I am not a U.S. citizen or do not have valid immigration documents?

Making sure you have valid citizenship or alien status is one of the most important things a young adult can do before they leave substitute care. Without documentation of your immigration status, it will be hard for you to work, be eligible for financial aid, and apply for medical benefits.

You need to speak with your lawyer and caseworker immediately if you are not sure if you have valid immigration status or if you are not sure if your documents are expired.

If you are still in substitute care you may be eligible for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status. If you are eligible for this status, you will be able to get a green card, and eventually to apply for citizenship.

If you need help finding a lawyer who can help with immigration issues contact: HIAS and Council Migration Service of Philadelphia at 215-832-0900, or e-mail them at info@hiaspa.org

GETTING YOUR JUVENILE RECORD EXPUNGED

If you have been involved in the delinquency system, you should try to expunge (erase) your record before you leave care. Some people think that juvenile records are sealed. This is not exactly true. The good news is that in most cases, you can apply to erase (expunge) your juvenile record so it will not complicate your future and stand in the way of employment, educational grants and loans, or public benefits.

A Petition for Expungement of Juvenile Delinquency Records may be filed by:

- The child's attorney when the defendant is an active client in the dependency system, or
- By the defendant or his/her parent *pro se* (on their own), or
- A private attorney hired by the defendant or his/her parents

Some public juvenile defenders will file a petition for you. Call your county juvenile defender office to find out if you may be eligible for an expungement and if that office will file the petition for you.

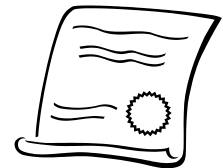
THINGS TO HAVE AND TO DO BEFORE YOU LEAVE CARE

Before you discharge from care, make sure you have a discharge plan that includes:

- A stable and safe place to live that you can afford
- A job
- Financial aid if you are continuing your education or training
- Health insurance
- Medical or mental health treatment providers if you need them
- Contact information for siblings who are still in care
- Phone numbers for people you can call in an emergency
- Your health and school records
- Information about what aftercare services you are eligible for

Before you leave care, you should also:

1. Register to Vote



In order to vote in any local, state, or national election, you must register 30 days prior to Election Day. However, you can register at any time after your 18th birthday. Registration requirements are that:

- You must be a citizen of the United States for one month prior to Election Day,
- You must be a resident of Pennsylvania and your election district for 30 days prior to the next election,
- You must be 18 years of age by Election Day.

Voter registration forms are available at libraries, post offices, state and local office buildings, party headquarters, and many other local businesses. You can also fill out a Voter Registration Form by calling 412-350-4510 or online at www.dos.state.pa.us/voting/cwp/view.asp?a=1192&Q=442984. Once you have registered, you will never need to do it again, *unless* you change your address or party affiliation.

2. Request a copy of your Birth Certificate

To receive a copy of your own birth certificate you must be 18 years of age or older. If you are younger, a family member (including siblings, parents, step-parents, and grandparents) or legal representative may request one for you. There is a \$10 fee that must accompany the completed application. You must include a valid government issued photo id of the person requesting the record, not the person whose certificate is being requested. Send completed application to:

Contact the Pennsylvania Office of the National Center for Health Statistics at:
Division of Vital Records
101 South Mercer Street Rm 401
P.O. Box 1528
New Castle, PA 16101

3. Get a state Identification Card (Non-driver photo identification card)

If you are 16 or 17 years of age, you will need to submit one form of identification (birth certificate, valid US passport, or Military Photo ID) and a Social Security Card.



If you are 18 or older you will need to submit one form of identification (same as above) two forms of proof of residency (utility bills, tax records, lease agreements, etc.) and your Social Security Card.

4. Obtain a Social Security Card

Complete an Application for a Social Security Card and present a recently issued document to show your identity. These documents can include a driver's license, passport, employer or school ID card, adoption record, military ID card, or other document that establishes your identity). You may bring your application with you in person, or send the application with identifying documents to your local social security office. There is no fee for obtaining a replacement social security card. To find social security office nearest you contact 1-800-772-1213.

LAST, BUT NOT LEAST,
MAKE SURE YOU UNDERSTAND THAT YOU CAN STAY IN CARE UNTIL AGE 21!
Go to your last court hearing!

Before you Leave Substitute Care, Have You . . .

- ☐ Considered if you want to continue in care until you are 21?
- ☐ Gotten a copy of your social security card?
- ☐ Gotten a copy of your birth certificate?
- ☐ Obtained a picture ID?
- ☐ Applied for Medicaid or other health insurance?
- ☐ Found out where your local health, mental health, and family planning clinic is located?
- ☐ Completed your FAFSA form and applied for any financial aid if you are going to college or a training school?
- ☐ Registered to vote?
- ☐ Registered for selective service (if you are a male)?
- ☐ Gotten contact information for your sisters and brothers if they are still in care?
- ☐ Located stable and affordable housing?
- ☐ Gotten a job or stable source of income?
- ☐ Gone to your last permanency review hearing?
- ☐ Found out what IL/aftercare services are available to you after you leave care?