

SPOTLIGHT

New Illinois Law Allows Foster Youth to Reenter Care; Chapin Hall Research Informs Legislation

On August 25, Illinois Governor Patrick Quinn signed into law the [Foster Child Successful Transition to Adulthood Act](#), which will allow young people who leave foster care before their 21st birthday to reenter the child welfare system or to access services and supports without reentering.

Chapin Hall Senior Researcher Amy Dworsky, who has been conducting research on the outcomes of young people aging out of foster care for much of the past decade, was a member of the committee that helped to draft the legislation. Speaking at the signing ceremony, she referenced findings from Chapin Hall research:

“Illinois is widely regarded as a leader among states when it comes to foster youth aging out of care. Indeed, it is one of the few jurisdictions in which young people who are in foster care on their 18th birthday have been able to remain in foster care until age 21. However, whether they do so in practice largely depends on where in the state they live. In Cook County, guardians *ad litem* routinely petition for foster youth to remain in care until they are 21 years old and judges tend to extend wardship as a matter of course. This is not the norm in other parts of the state, so many young people find themselves struggling at age 18 to make it on their own.”

Dworsky is lead author of a Chapin Hall study that reviewed [policies and programs designed to support young people transitioning out of foster care in all 50 states and the District of Columbia](#). This study found that while nearly half of the states permit reentry in some situations, there was wide variation in the conditions that must be met: In some states, youths sign a voluntary care agreement. In others, a determination of “best interest” must be made by the court. Some states limit the amount of time that can elapse between discharge and reentry. Others allow young people to reenter care for specific reasons, such as pursuing their education or avoiding homelessness. The Illinois law, which puts no time limit or other conditions on reentry, other than that the youth not yet be 21 years old, specifies that youth who encounter “significant hardship” can reengage with the Department of Children and Family Services and the Juvenile Court, to receive essential supports and services that will help them learn to live independently.

The transition to adulthood among young people aging out of foster care has long been a focus of Chapin Hall research. This research includes a [benefit-cost analysis of extending foster care to age 21](#), an examination of campus support programs designed to help [former foster youth graduate from college](#), and an [evaluation of federally funded independent living skills programs](#).

Chapin Hall is also known for its [Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth](#), a longitudinal study led by former Chapin Hall director Mark E. Courtney, which has been following more than 700 young people from Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa as they age out of foster care and transition to adulthood.

“It is encouraging to see how Illinois is reexamining its obligations to foster youth aging out of the system,” says Dworsky, “and to know that Chapin Hall’s research contributed to legislation that will give these young people a second chance to receive supports that their peers not in foster care routinely get. And in the wake of recent federal legislation—the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008—a number of other states are considering following Illinois’ lead by extending foster care to age 21