



For Virginia's
Children

Fostering Connection Transition Program FAQs

What is this Fostering Connections program, anyway?

The Fostering Connections to Success & Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 amends the Social Security Act in various ways to support permanency for youth in foster care: educational stability, use of kinship care, support for youth in tribal foster care, among other mandated topics.

The Act also contains an option for states to draw down additional federal IV-E funding for expanding the breadth and depth of transition services for 18-21 year olds who have aged out of foster care, and extending adoption assistance for youth adopted out of foster care at age 16 or older. If states amend their IV-E plans to meet certain federal requirements, they can draw down the 50/50 state-federal match dollars for foster care maintenance expenses for 18-21 year olds.

What kind of program does the Act require states to implement in order to draw down the funds?

1. States must extend both foster care services *and* adoption assistance if they offer both programs for the under-18 population. (States must also extend their guardianship programs to age 21 if they offer one—Virginia does not, so this does not apply to us.)
2. Within this program, states must demonstrate certain attributes in that extended program:
 - States must provide a full continuum of possible “placements,” with an emphasis on making sure there are foster family homes available—not just supervised IL, etc.
 - IV-E funding cannot be used for group home or residential placements.
 - Certain code “tweaks” must be made to satisfy federal law (definition of “child” in this context, etc.)
 - A “placement” in the 18-21 context does not have the same stringent requirements as placements for under-18 youth. Essentially, if an LDSS qualifies a living situation as a placement, it is one for Fostering Connections purposes. (Caveat: if there are under-18 youth in the placement as well, those licensing requirements still apply.)

How will the LDSS/youth agreement work?

Youth still must “qualify” for the program similarly to the way they qualify for the current IL program.

- Youth must meet one of the eligibility categories: in an education program, working at least 80 hours a month, participating in workforce development program, or medically incapable of doing any of those activities.
- The agreement is strictly voluntary. The foster care case still closes, and then the LDSS and the youth will design and implement a voluntary support agreement together. This will allow IV-E eligibility to be determined strictly on the youth's attributes (income, etc.). The youth still leaves LDSS custody upon their 18th birthday.

What about youth who do not decide right at age 18 to enter the program, or who leave during the program and want to return?

Virginia's proposed legislation would allow a youth to leave and/or re-enter the program at any point, and any number of times, between the ages of 18-21, so long as they qualify. In other words, this would eliminate the "60-day opt back in window" and make the full duration of the program its own window.

How will the program's budget function within our state budget?

Currently, our IL program is funded through CSA and local dollars. CSA, of course, is composed of a local-state match. Some localities also dedicate their own funding on top of any CSA draw-downs.

This Fostering Connections program would move a portion of the CSA budget currently used for 18-21 year olds into the state DSS budget. A small amount of GF dollars would be added on top of that transfer, and that total amount would be used to draw down federal IV-E funding to fully support the program.

The small amount of funding needed to add to the current CSA dollars that would be transferred over is mainly why this program is under consideration by the legislature, and why it is still an issue there.

Why is there a bill and a budget amendment, and what does that mean?

The budget amendment is necessary to transfer the CSA funding over to DSS, and to add the GF dollars necessary to fully fund the program.

The bill is needed to make the few code tweaks the feds require of us.

Caveat: Our state budget supersedes the code. Anything that can be done in code can also be done in budget language. This is important to understand when thinking about the history of this effort, and how "the bill died" in the past. The bill was voted down in the past, but that is mainly strategic on the part of legislators, as the decision truly hinges on the budget amendment being approved, and that generally does not happen until the very end of session.

Main takeaway: do not panic if "the bill dies." It does not mean the program is "dead."

How will the program be implemented?

The budget language provides for youth who will turn 18 on July 1, 2016 or later to opt in to the program. Current youth who are otherwise eligible for the state-local “Independent Living” program for 18-21 year olds will continue to have access to that program. The Fostering Futures program, as such, will end up functionally “phasing in” youth by age, beginning with those who turn 18 July 1, 2016.