MASSACHUSETTS
Office of the Child Advocate

In Their Own Words:

Young Adults' Perspectives on the Transition to Adulthood



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November 2026

mass.gov/oca/taybrief

Background

The transition to adulthood is a significant developmental period for all young people, marked by increasing independence, responsibility, and opportunities to shape the directions of their lives. For young people who have been involved with state systems, such as the child welfare or juvenile justice system, this transition can be particularly complex. They may be navigating changes in services and eligibility, new systems and responsibilities, and shifts in the people and organizations they rely on for support.

Based on a series of structured conversations between OCA staff and young adults who were involved with state systems, this brief shares young adults' perspectives on their experiences with state systems and highlights opportunities to strengthen policies and programs to better support them during the transition to adulthood.

Research demonstrates that young people with system involvement experience adverse outcomes across many areas of life, affecting their immediate wellbeing and longer-term outcomes.[1] Yet, these young people demonstrate significant resilience, with goals and a vision for the lives they want to build. With the right support, these young people can build the skills, confidence, and relationships they need to create the life they want. **Therefore, the way the Commonwealth supports young people during the transition to adulthood matters.**

Defining Transition Age Youth (TAY)

For the purposes of this brief, the OCA uses **transition age youth (TAY)** to refer to young people, generally ages 16-26, who are navigating involvement with state systems, services, and programs as they transition from adolescence to adulthood. This includes young people who are aging out of state systems and those transitioning from youth-serving to adult-serving systems.*

*Across federal and state programs, there is no singular definition of "transition age youth" (TAY), and different sectors use different age ranges based on their population served, responsibilities, and service models. This definition framed the OCA's conversations with TAY and is not intended to establish eligibility for any program or service.

TAY are experts in their own experience. To better understand how the Commonwealth can support TAY, the OCA spoke with young adults who were involved in state systems during their transition to adulthood. Understanding their experiences and perspectives is critical to ensuring that future initiatives, policies, and programs are responsive to their needs and vision of a good life. Elevating these voices is also fundamental to achieving the OCA's mission to ensure that TAY receive the services they need to succeed.

The OCA's commitment to improving services and supports for TAY is longstanding. The legislature has earmarked TAY funds within the OCA's budget, recognizing both the

[1] Tuyishime, P., Dworsky, A., & Chor, B. (2025). Advancing opportunities for young people in extended foster care: The role of independent living programs and supervised independent living placements. Chapin Hall. https://www.chapinhall.org/project/supporting-young-people-aging-out-of-foster-care-through-independent-living-programs-and-supervised-independent-living-placements/

importance of supporting TAY and the agency's unique role in this work (FY21-27 State Budget, Line Item 0930-0100).[2] Internally, the OCA's commitment to TAY is reinforced in the OCA's strategic plan, as well as through prior research and implementation efforts.[3]

Overview of Structured Conversations

The OCA's vision is to ensure that **TAY have access to the resources, relationships, and supports they need throughout the transition to adulthood to build stable, fulfilling, and independent lives.** To help advance this vision, from December 2025 through June 2026, OCA staff conducted structured conversations with 42 young adults who were involved with state services as they entered adulthood (i.e., when they turned 18 years old). Structured conversations explored young people's experiences during the transition to adulthood, identified potential challenges and gaps in available services and supports, and highlighted opportunities to strengthen outcomes for this population. The OCA spoke with young people who met the following criteria:[4]

- 18 – 30 years old at the time of participation,
- Had been involved with a state service (e.g., Department of Children and Families, Department of Youth Services, Department of Mental Health, Department of Developmental Services, Department of Public Health) around the time they turned 18 years old, and
- In charge of their own legal decision making.

Based on these conversations, this brief presents:

- A **description of the young adults** we spoke with, including their demographics and agency involvement;
- **Key learnings** on challenges they faced during the transition to adulthood, including opportunities to strengthen programs and supports; and
- **Next steps,** including information on the OCA's future work.

Key Learnings

Several consistent themes emerged from these conversations, highlighting both the challenges these young adults faced and opportunities to better support TAY in the future:

1) **System involvement complicates a young person's transition to adulthood** by shaping their experiences, the services and supports they need, and how they approach long-term stability.
2) **Many young adults with system involvement did not feel supported** or ready to transition to adulthood.
3) **Young adults identified unmet needs across life domains** and highlighted how state systems failed to adapt as those needs evolved.

[2] From FY21-FY23, appropriations were directed toward a housing pilot program. In FY24, the language broadened to support successful transitions for TAY leaving the care or custody of DCF and DYS.
[3] Prior OCA work can be found in Appendix A.
[4] Details on methodology can be found in Appendix B and Appendix C.

The Young Adults

The OCA conducted 42 one-on-one conversations with young adults. The young adults chose the conversation format in which they felt most comfortable and best able to express their experiences and perspectives:

- **26 virtual conversations** via Zoom,
- **15 in-person conversations** at provider agencies, and
- **1 written response** submitted via email.

Conversations averaged 60-90 minutes in length.

The OCA's Commitment to Equity

Use of Translation Services: Three conversations required translation services. The OCA met this need through a combination of an agency-procured vendor and trusted provider staff support.

Expanding Access: The OCA accepted responses in multiple formats. This approach accommodated young adults at varying levels of comfort and trust, including those who preferred anonymity.

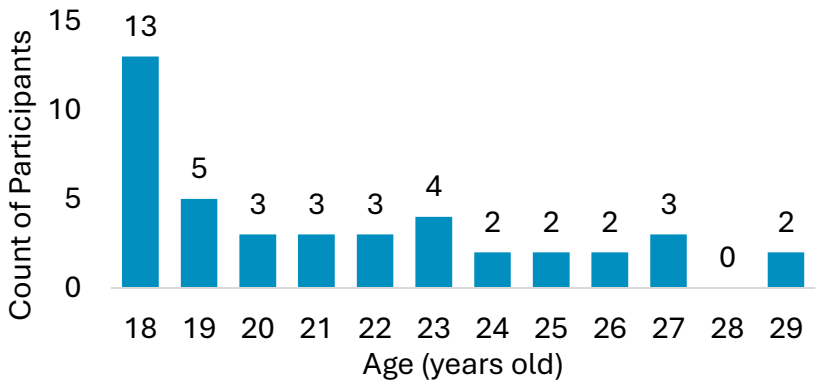
Demographics

To ensure that key learnings reflected a range of perspectives and pathways to adulthood, the OCA spoke with young adults with diverse ages, experiences across state systems, levels and duration of system involvement, identities, and lived experiences.

Age

The young adults ranged from 18 to 29 years old, and 43% were under 20 years old. The mean age of the young adults was 21.4 years old; the median age was 20.5 years old.

Figure 1:
Age of Participants (n=42)



Gender Identity

Among the young adults we spoke with, 22 (52%) self-identified as women, 17 (41%) as men, and 3 (7%) as nonbinary.

Lived Experience[5]

The young adults came from different backgrounds and life experiences. Common self-disclosed identities included:

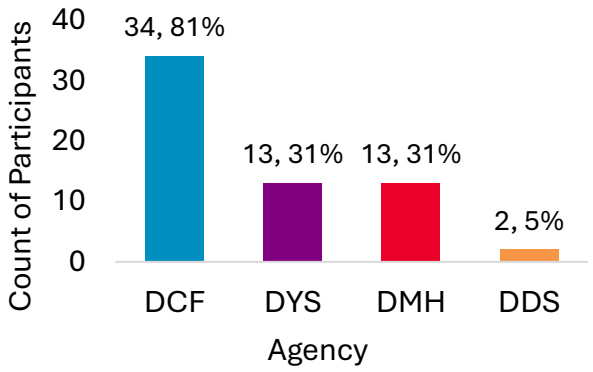
- Diverse races and ethnicities
- LGBTQ+ sexual orientations and gender identity
- Immigrants and newcomers
- Different learning needs, including neurodiversity
- A history of family-involvement with state systems

Agency Involvement

Young adults were asked to self-report any agency contact, regardless of the level or duration of involvement.[6]

Young adults engaged with a range of state systems prior to turning 18; findings reflect themes and experiences across multiple child-serving agencies**.**

Figure 2:
*Agency Contact Prior to Turning 18 (n=42)**



**The number of data points is greater than 42 because some young adults interacted with multiple systems.*

Table 1: Agency Contact Prior to Turning 18

Agency	Type of Service
DCF	Congregate Care
	Foster Care
	Community-Based Program
	Voluntary Placement Agreement
	Adoption
DYS	Congregate Care
	Community-Based Program
DMH	Hospital/Health Care
	Community-Based Program
	Congregate Care
DDS	Community-Based Program

Nearly half (48%, n=20) of young adults had contact with more than one state agency before turning 18.

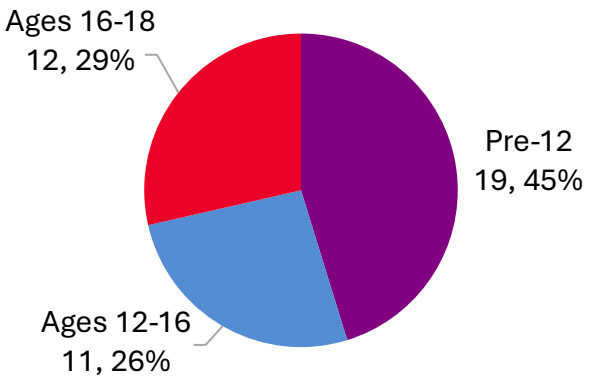
[5] Following each conversation, facilitators sent the young adult an optional demographic form to complete. Participation was voluntary, and response rates were low. We omitted this data to protect anonymity.

[6] Agency contact refers broadly to any interaction with or touchpoint with a state agency (e.g., detention at DYS, placed in DCF foster care, engaging with a DMH Access Center). Young adults may have received additional services or had contact with other agencies that they did not mention during structured conversations. As a result, this data represents a snapshot of self-disclosed agency involvement rather than a comprehensive account of all services received by or offered to young people during the transition to adulthood.

Young adults reported first coming into contact with state systems at different points in their lives, including during childhood, adolescence, and the transition from late adolescence into early adulthood.[7] **The duration and depth of system involvement also varied**, with some young adults describing relatively brief periods of engagement and others experiencing prolonged involvement across multiple stages of their development and transition to adulthood.

Figure 3:

Age of Self-Reported Initial System Contact (n=42)



In Their Own Words

When asked to describe themselves and share what they are proud of, the young adults spoke about who they are, what matters to them, and the accomplishments and qualities they value in themselves:

Young adults describe themselves as...



Young adults are proud of...



[7] Figure 3 groups age into categories to account for developmental stages and potential inaccuracies in the young adults' recollection.

Key Learnings: The Transition to Adulthood

The themes in this section reflect the perspectives of the young adults with whom we spoke. The OCA recognizes that policies, programs, services, and referral practices may have changed since the time these young adults were involved with state systems. Accordingly, these themes reflect how the young adults made sense of and experienced the information, guidance, and support they received. Their perspectives provide an important opportunity to understand TAY experiences on their own terms and to consider how state systems can continue to strengthen supports throughout the transition to adulthood.

Learning 1: System involvement complicates a young person's transition to adulthood by shaping their experiences, the services and supports they need, and how they approach long-term stability.

The transition to adulthood is a challenging process for any young person. Understanding how system involvement shapes young people's past experiences, current needs, and plans for the future is essential in understanding how to best support them during this crucial period.

A. System involvement shaped past experiences, well-being, and identity development.

> *"Because I disagreed with (what was happening to me), I was labeled as a 'difficult kid'."*

Young adults with state system involvement navigated a range of circumstances and factors that complicated their identity formation and sense of self, while also navigating the rapid developmental changes of adolescence:

- **Mental and behavioral health challenges, with reported histories of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and trauma:** The young adults often carried the effects of ACEs, trauma, or other mental and behavioral health challenges. These experiences impacted their well-being, relationships, decision-making, and the ability to navigate new responsibilities and systems as they were transitioning to adulthood.
- **Chronic transition:** Frequent changes in caseworkers, placements, schools, services, or other sources of support made it difficult for the young adults to establish consistency and continuity. Chronic instability required the young adults to continually adapt to new people, environments, and expectations while simultaneously taking on greater independence.
- **Difficulty building trust:** Prior experiences with state services and providers – including experiences that felt inconsistent, disappointing, or harmful – shaped how

the young adults approached relationships with the people and systems supporting them.

B. System involvement shaped the supports that young adults had or needed.

"For kids who grow up in state systems, we don't have families to fall back on."

Due to their system involvement, TAY may enter adulthood with fewer individualized supports and informal networks than their peers. As state systems plan to help young people transition to adulthood, they need to consider the availability and strength of support networks and resources that surround each young person. Young adults reported significant variation in:

- **Relationships with supportive and trusted adults:** Trusted adults modeled positive behavior and helped the young adults develop the knowledge, skills, and confidence to navigate adult roles and responsibilities.
- **Connections to family, friends, and community***:* Prosocial relationships created a broader ecosystem of support around young adults as they transitioned to adulthood. These connections fostered belonging and identity, provided emotional and practical support, and offered stability throughout the transition.
- **Resources and financial stability:** Access (or lack of access) to resources and financial supports – including stable housing, food, transportation, and other social safety nets – shaped young adults' choices and opportunities on their pathway to independence.

C. System involvement shaped long-term planning.

"I've just been in this survival mode where I can't even think of the years and path ahead."

Balancing state services in addition to everyday needs can make it hard to build an independent life:

- **Being in "survival mode" limited opportunities for identity development and long-term planning:** For many young adults, it was difficult to think beyond meeting basic needs to explore possibilities or develop plans for their futures.
- **Future goals and aspirations often competed with immediate needs:** While young adults have hopes, dreams, and ambitions for the future, the need to secure basic necessities often required that they prioritize short-term stability over long-term planning.

Learning 2: Many young adults with system involvement did not feel supported or ready to transition to adulthood.

The transition to adulthood is a gradual process that requires ongoing support. TAY benefit from trusted relationships and services that respond to their individual strengths, needs, and goals – yet the young adults described transition planning as highly variable.[8] Their experiences highlight how relationships with caseworkers and staff, the culture around transition planning, and the way policies and practices are implemented shape their experiences and ultimately their outcomes.

A. Relationships with caseworkers and providers shaped how prepared young adults felt to navigate the transition to adulthood.

"My caseworker mentioned that services would change, but nobody explained what that meant in real terms."

Variation in the knowledge, communication skills, and decision-making practices of caseworkers and provider staff affected young adults' access to services and outcomes. In some cases, young adults described interactions or gaps in support that added challenges or risk during an already significant period of change.

- **Staff had different levels of knowledge***:* Some staff knew more than others about available services and supports for young adults with particular identities (e.g., LGBTQ+ youth) or life goals (e.g., learning a trade instead of pursuing higher education), and how to work with other agencies in providing those services and supports. When staff lacked this knowledge or cross-system understanding, young adults felt that it weakened the continuity, coordination, and effectiveness of transition supports.
- **Steady and reliable support mattered:** Changes in caseworkers, how frequently staff stayed in contact, and whether staff followed through on commitments shaped young adults' sense of stability and preparedness. Clear, timely communication helped young people understand what to expect and make informed decisions, while gaps in communication left young people feeling unsure about where to turn or what steps to take.
- **Communication style mattered:** Young adults highlighted the importance of trauma-informed and developmentally appropriate communication. For many, caseworker and provider interactions felt transactional – as if they were a task to complete or a box to check rather than a person with goals, strengths, and aspirations.

[8] Transition planning refers to the process of creating and implementing a plan to assist individuals who are aging out of youth services and are either transferring into adult services/related service systems or who are transferring out of services completely.

B. Transition planning felt like a sudden change, not a gradual process.

"People talked about me turning 18 like it was a deadline, not a transition."

Young adults described an abrupt shift toward greater independence that failed to align with how they were developing and gradually gaining independence over time. Some young adults reported feeling a "cliff effect" at age 18, as expectations, services, and supports suddenly changed.

- **Young adults felt that systems did not allow room for growth, self-exploration, or learning through mistakes:** Testing boundaries, acting impulsively, and disengaging are common facets of adolescent development and identity formation, yet the young adults felt punished and stigmatized for these behaviors.[9] They felt that state systems didn't give them enough time and space to grow, learn from their mistakes, and figure out who they are.
- **Staff and providers mistook resilience for readiness:** Young adults often possess significant resilience and adaptive skills out of necessity, but getting through difficult circumstances did not mean they felt prepared or were ready to manage adult responsibilities without continued support.

C. Effective transition planning should be individualized, youth-driven, and include hands-on support.

"(I wish there was someone who) really sat down and helped me do stuff instead of handing me a brochure."

Young adults felt they would have better outcomes if transition planning:

- **Meaningfully included them in the process:** Young adults were involved in transition planning to varying degrees, impacting their sense of agency and ownership over their future. In some cases, young adults felt their wishes and perspectives were not reflected in transition plans.
- **Included more active support:** Young adults were often handed brochures, packets, or resource lists without guidance on how to translate information into action. They repeatedly expressed a need for more active support and coaching to model next steps.

[9] The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2017). *The Road to Adulthood: Aligning Child Welfare Practice with Adolescent Brain Development*. The Annie E. Casey Foundation. https://assets.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/aecf-theroadtoadulthood-2017.pdf

- **Included dedicated support for system navigation:** Young adults often interacted with multiple systems with different rules, eligibility requirements, enrollment processes, etc. System navigation is complex and overwhelming, and the young adults felt they would benefit from improved case management throughout the transition.

Learning 3: Young adults identified unmet needs across life domains and highlighted how state systems failed to adapt as those needs evolved.

The transition to adulthood involves gaining independence across multiple areas of life. Moreover, needs evolve throughout the transition to adulthood. For TAY, gaps in support in one area may affect stability and opportunities in other areas.

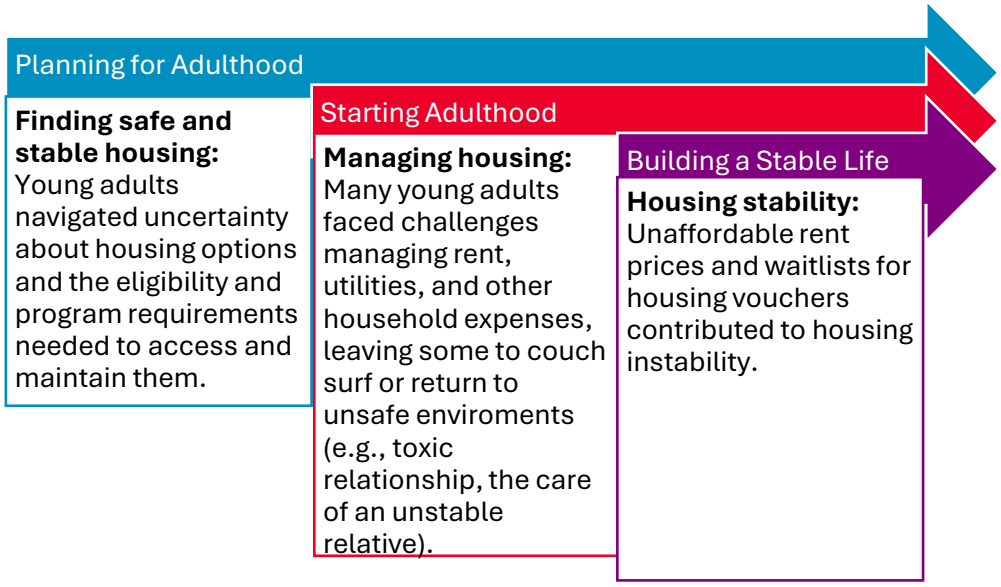
Young adults described a successful transition as a gradual process of achieving self-sufficiency through continued access to reliable services, supportive relationships, and resources that adapt to their changing needs across life domains. In their experience, however, systems did not always meet their changing needs.

The OCA used three transition phases– planning for adulthood, starting adulthood, and building a stable life – to organize the key themes we heard from young adults. Themes differed across these phases, illustrating how young adults' needs evolved over time and highlighting areas for additional investment.

A. Housing

A lack of stable and affordable housing options, as well as barriers to housing assistance, such as waitlists and strict eligibility rules, contributed to housing instability.

Figure 4:
Housing Needs



In Their Own Words

"(I found the housing unit) to be confining with too many rules since (I) was used to being in my own apartment."

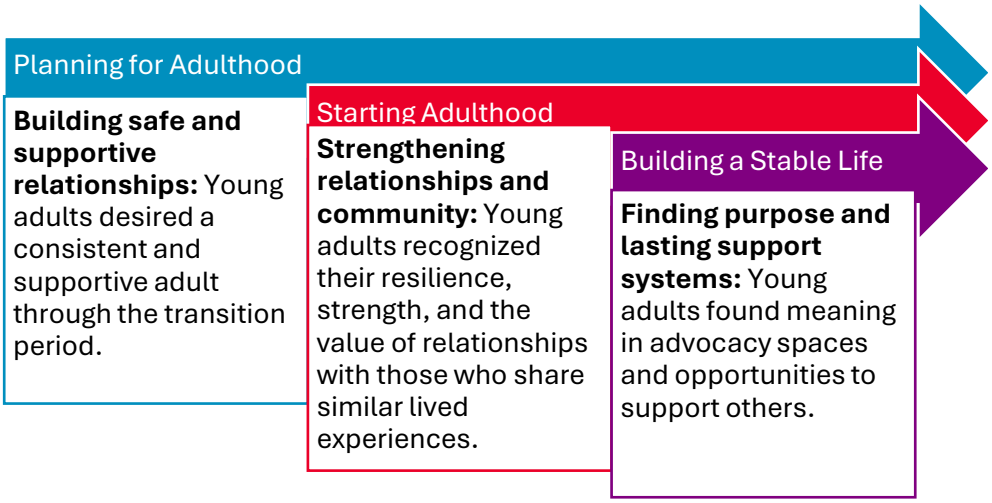
Young adults identified challenges with state-supported housing options:

- **Balancing multiple responsibilities** (e.g., work, school, mental health, and basic needs) can pose a challenge in meeting work or study requirements tied to housing assistance
- **Work and study requirements** may leave little room for transitional or grace periods between jobs, after completing school, etc.
- **Narrow definitions of "work" and "study"** did not always reflect young adults' goals or pathways
- **Strict housing requirements and rules** did not always fit young adults' prosocial needs and preferences

B. Relationships

Young adults sought supportive adults, mentors, and spaces around which to create community during this transitional period.

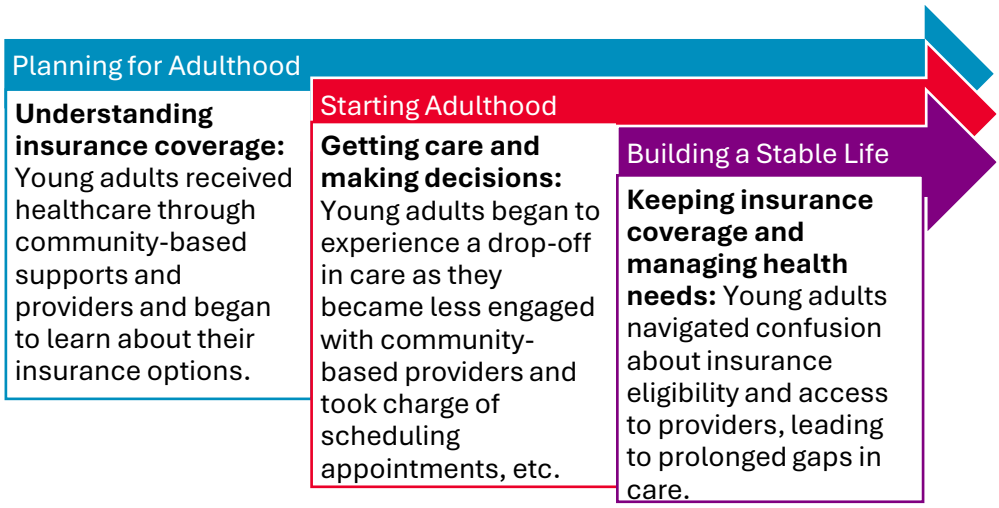
Figure 5:
Relationship Needs



C. Health

Young adults experienced disruptions in healthcare, particularly mental healthcare, as they aged out of state system services and became disconnected from the community-based supports and providers they had relied on.

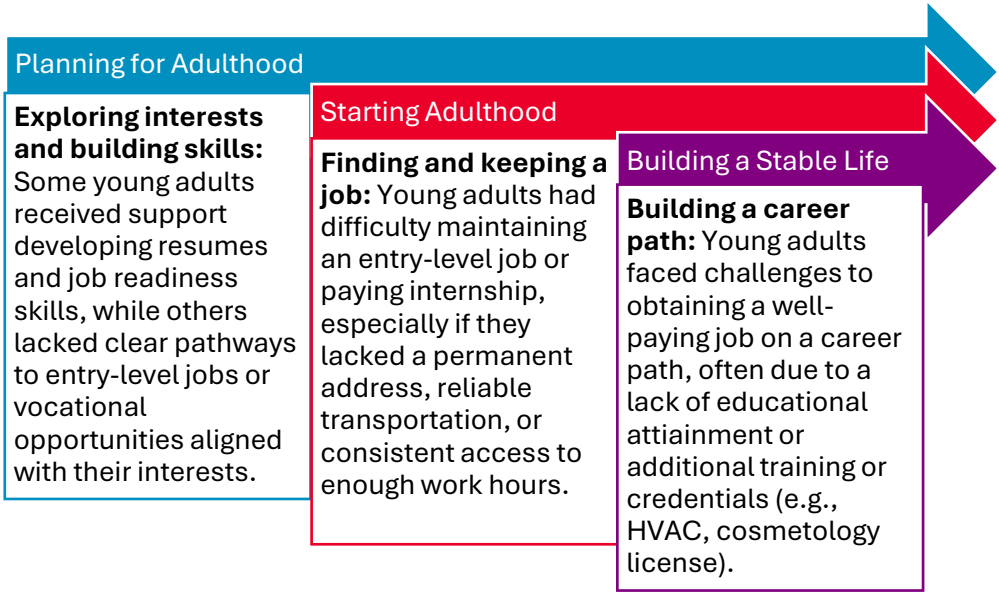
Figure 6:
Health Needs



D. Employment

Young adults faced barriers to finding meaningful employment, including job preparation and identifying pathways to stable, well-paying jobs on a career track.

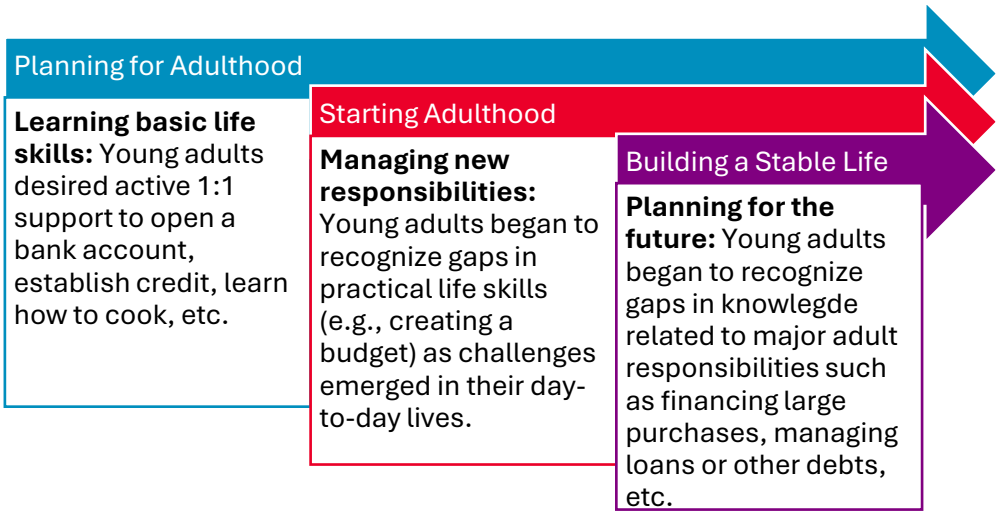
Figure 7:
Employment Needs



E. Life Skills

Young adults experienced a lack of training and resources related to practical life skills, financial education and management, and independent living skills.

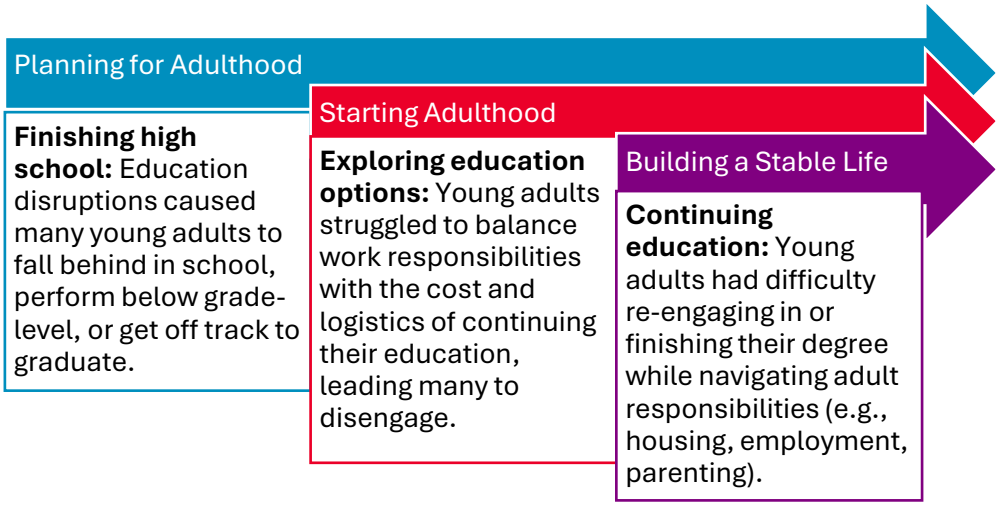
Figure 8:
Skill Needs



F. Education

Young adults experienced disrupted or delayed educational trajectories. Barriers such as cost, competing work responsibilities, and limited access to education posed challenges to pursuing advanced degrees.

Figure 9:
Educational Needs



Next Steps

The OCA works to ensure that young people receiving state services transition into adulthood with the support they need to succeed. Young adults' perspectives and experiences helped identify where current systems are working, where gaps remain, and where greater flexibility and support are needed. Common themes emerged across child-serving agencies, and **the OCA has heard loud and clear from young people that the Commonwealth needs to do better** to prepare youth for independent living**.**

As detailed in the OCA's Fiscal Year 2027 Strategic Plan, using a variety of levers – from policy research and advocacy to training and direct engagement with young people themselves – the OCA will work to improve the services and supports available to youth aging out of state services, with the goal of supporting TAY long-term stability and wellbeing.

While this work will evolve over the course of FY27 and beyond, key planned initiatives include:

- Expanding the OCA's **visibility to and direct contact with young people** through our Youth Engagement Program and an expanded social media presence resulting in increased calls to the OCA Complaint line, so that young people receiving state services know that the OCA is here for them.
- Developing and issuing targeted **policy recommendations for improving transition planning and services** for youth aging out of state services.
- Advocating to the Legislature to file and pass new legislation to **improve transition planning and expand access to housing, education, job training, and financial supports for TAY.**
- Partnering with state agencies to **ensure effective and equitable implementation** of **current programs for TAY**, such as Fostering Youth Independence (FYI) Vouchers and Young Adult Support Payments.
- Developing and implementing **cross-agency and agency specific trainings on best practices for engaging TAY** in a trauma-responsive, developmentally appropriate, and equity focused manner.
- Issuing policy recommendations in areas of importance to key groups of transition age youth, including **policy recommendations for improving educational outcomes for youth in foster care** and **preventing crossover from the child protective service system to the juvenile justice system.**

Appendix A: OCA's TAY Initiatives[10]

- **EOHHS Transition Planning Processes & Protocol Development:** In 2016, the Secretary of EOHHS directed agencies to convene and develop a set of protocols and standards related to transition planning for EOHHS consumers. A workgroup of EOHHS staff and provider organizations[11] drafted a report that outlined a set of guidelines, principles, and protocols for agencies to assume and implement as part of their transition planning processes. The OCA participated in the workgroup process. While agencies incorporated learning from the process, the report did not move beyond draft status, and a formal structure at EOHHS was not established.
- **OCA Research/Report on "Improving Outcomes for Transition Age Youth":** In 2019, the OCA contracted with forHealth Consulting at the UMass Chan Medical School to conduct research and make recommendations to improve outcomes for TAY. In their work, forHealth conducted 5 focus groups with youth ages 16-24 who transitioned from "state sponsored care" such as group homes, foster care, or kinship care and/or those involved with DCF or DMH.
- **Inter-Secretariat Working Group on TAY:** In early 2020, the OCA, in conjunction with EOHHS, convened an inter-secretariat working group consisting of staff from the Department of Children and Families (DCF), Department of Mental Health (DMH), the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA), the Department of Developmental Services (DDS), and the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), with the goal of revitalizing the conversation on cross-agency transition planning and supports. The working group was reviewing the UMass research when the COVID-19 pandemic began, and the group immediately pivoted to focus on the urgent needs of TAY at-risk of experiencing homelessness.
- **Launch of the Housing Stability & Support Program (HSSP) for TAY:** To address the housing needs of TAY during COVID-19, the OCA and EOHHS launched the HSSP in January of 2021. The HSSP provides judgment free case management, financial support, and connection to a range of services for youth aging out of DCF care. The pilot phase launched with two initial sites before expanding to 11 organizations in December of 2021.[12] As of FY25, EOHHS assumed full operation of the HSSP.
- **TAY Earmark:** In FY25 and FY26, the OCA transferred funding from the TAY earmark to DCF through an Interagency Service Agreement (ISA). These funds, known as the "TAY Bridge Fund", supported young adults transitioning to independent living, particularly those facing housing instability and financial challenges. TAY Bridge Fund activities focus on addressing immediate housing needs, encouraging long-term financial stability, and promoting self-sufficiency and independence.

[10] OCA activities support a range of initiatives designed to address the needs of specific cohorts of TAY, such as supporting young parents and initiatives focused on teen driver safety. For more information on these initiatives, see the Office of the Child Advocate FY25 Annual Report.

[11] The work group included 41 staff from 12 EOHHS agencies, 42 members of provider organizations, 7 members of professional advocacy organizations, and several family and youth representatives.

[12] The OCA commissioned several program evaluations, which are available on the OCA Special Projects page.

- **Youth Engagement Program:** In FY25, the OCA launched the Youth Engagement Program. The program serves as a resource for youth by educating them about their rights and facilitating access to supports, such as the OCA's Complaint Line. The program also includes a targeted initiative focused on youth in congregate care and other out-of-home placements, designed to increase engagement with this population and ensure their voices and experiences inform the agency's work.[13]

Appendix B: Structured Conversation Methodology

OCA staff worked in conjunction with the OCA legal team to establish policies and procedures for the structured conversations that encouraged authentic participation, collaboration, and wellbeing for participants and OCA facilitators. The approach was grounded in trauma-informed principles and informed consent. The OCA sought to create an environment in which young adults could participate openly, understand the purpose and parameters of the conversation, and contribute in ways that felt meaningful and appropriate to them.

The methodology was organized into three distinct phases:

- Phase 1 (Pre-conversation)
- Phase 2 (Structured conversation)
- Phase 3 (Post-conversation)

Phase 1: Pre-conversation

Prior to engaging with young adults, OCA developed the policies, procedures, and materials to support meaningful and informed participation. This preparation included:

- **Review of best practices** in participatory action research, Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), and conversational techniques – which informed the development of an internal Lived Experience Protocol, detailing ethical and practical considerations with speaking with individuals with lived experience.
- **Staff training**, including re-taking the OCA Mandated Reporter training and training on trauma-informed communication.
- **Establishing eligibility criteria and a consent process** centered on informed, voluntary participation and young adults' autonomy, including the ability to skip any questions.
- **Developing a conversation and compensation protocol** detailing the OCA's plan to identify, recognize, and compensate young adults for their time and expertise as well as forms and processes for collecting information from participants in a consistent and secure manner.[14]

[13] Per Acts of 2026, Chapter 179, §19 "*An Act Enhancing Child Welfare Protections*", the Youth Engagement Program is required to conduct four listening sessions per year in congregate care settings and produce an annual report summarizing findings and recommendations.
[14] Participants were compensated $60 for their time.

- **Developing a conversation guide and outreach materials**, including a recruitment flyer and an online interest form to provide young adults with information about the project and collect information from those interested in participating.[15]

Phase 2: Structured conversation

Each conversation followed the same core steps, including:

- **Scheduling the conversation and confirming eligibility** through the preferred method of communication the young adults indicated during the sign-up process – email, text, or phone call.
- **Providing a consent form in advance via Docusign** for review and signature, outlining the OCA's role, the purpose of the conversation, confidentiality considerations, and related information.
- **Welcoming the young adult and introducing staff** at the start of each conversation.[16]
- **Re-verifying eligibility and reviewing the consent form in detail**, providing an opportunity for questions and to confirm informed consent.
- **Conducting the conversation according to the structured conversation guide**, providing young adults the autonomy to skip questions, decline to answer, etc.
- **Closing the conversation and supporting continued engagement** by providing young adults with their compensation gift card, a packet of resources, and documenting whether they would like to receive a summary of the lessons learned from the structured conversations.[17]

Phase 3: Post-conversations

This phase included:

- **Sending a follow-up text or email** acknowledging the young adult's time and contributions, providing an optional demographic form for enhanced data collection, and sharing relevant resources when appropriate, such as referral to the OCA's Complaint Line for continued support.[18]
- **Identifying and analyzing themes** by coding conversations.[19]

[15] The OCA incorporated feedback on the flyer from key stakeholders, young adults, and other individuals with lived experience including the NextGen group at HopeWell and the Youth Engagement Panel through YouthVillages. The OCA distributed the flyer at the Children's League of MA's TAY Day at the State House and shared it for distribution through HopeWell, YouthVillages, Roca, Justice Resource Institute (JRI), MA Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Commission's Youth Advisory Council, More than Words, DMH Access Centers, the LGBTQ Youth Commission, and DMH's Statewide Young Adult Council (SYAC).
[16] Staff introduced themselves and their respective role in the conversation as either the facilitator or note-taker.
[17] All virtual gift cards were documented and distributed by the OCA's Chief Financial Officer (CFO) Facilitators obtained young adults' initials to confirm receipt of physical gift cards and recorded gift card numbers in a shared spreadsheet maintained with the CFO.
[18] For young adults who received compensation virtually, staff also confirmed receipt of the gift card.
[19] Staff anonymized young adults' information and removed identifying details from materials used for analysis and reporting to protect young adults' confidentiality.

- **Creating feedback loops with young adults** by developing a summary of what the OCA heard and learned from young adults and sharing it with participants who indicated an interest in receiving information on lessons learned.

Appendix C: Structured Conversation Guide

The structured conversation guide supported consistency across conversations while allowing young adults to share their experiences in their own words. The guide provided facilitators with a common framework and sequence of topics. The guide was intentionally conversational rather than a rigid questionnaire. Facilitators used follow-up prompts and probes, as appropriate, to better understand young adults' experiences and perspectives. Table 2 summarizes the primary topics addressed in structured conversations and examples of question prompts.

Table 2: Structured Conversation Guide

Topic	Question Prompts
Building Rapport and Common Ground	• *"Do you have a nickname or preferred name?"* • *"How would you describe yourself to someone who has never met you before?"* • *"What sort of activities or hobbies do you enjoy?"*
Understanding State Agency Involvement	• *"What state systems were you involved with prior to turning 18?"* • *"How long were you involved with state systems?"* • *"What was that experience like?"*
Preparing to Turn 18	• *"What did preparing for adulthood look like at 16/17 years old?"* • *"Did you have any conversations with a caseworker, therapist, trusted adult, etc. about what it might mean to turn 18?"* • *"Were you talking to anyone about the following topics: school, work, healthcare, housing, life skills, etc.?"* • *"What other supports or services may have made you feel prepared and supported to turn 18 and enter the adult world?"*
Life Since Turning 18	• *"Do you have any current state agency involvement?"* • *"Where do you currently live?"* • *"How do you stay connected to family and/or friends?"* • *"Are you talking to anyone about the following topics: school, work, healthcare, housing, life skills, etc.?"*
Reflecting on the Transition to Adulthood	• *"What are you proud of?"* • *"What kind of things have you been focused on or working towards lately?"* • *"What's something you learned after turning 18 that you would want to share with another young person preparing to enter adulthood?"*

Table 2: Structured Conversation Guide	
	• *"If you could speak to someone who makes the rules or runs programs for young people, what would you say to them or what would you want them to understand about your experience?"*

About the Office of the Child Advocate

The OCA is an independent executive branch state agency with oversight and ombudsperson responsibilities, established by the Massachusetts Legislature in 2008. The OCA's mission is to ensure that children receive timely, safe, and effective state services, with a particular focus on ensuring that children in the care and custody of the Commonwealth receive humane and dignified treatment at all times.

Through collaboration with public and private stakeholders, the OCA identifies gaps in state services, including inequities in service access or outcomes impacting children from marginalized groups, and recommends improvements in policy, practice, regulation, and/or law to drive systemic change. The OCA also serves as a resource for families who are receiving, or are eligible to receive, services from the Commonwealth.

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Acknowledgements
The Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) is grateful to the young adults who shared their time, experiences, and perspectives to strengthen the transition to adulthood for future generations. The OCA also thanks the community and agency partners who received our materials, provided feedback, and helped connect us with young adults.

This brief was produced by the OCA and represents the views and perspectives of the Office. We are grateful to all who contributed while acknowledging that the OCA bears ultimate responsibility for the analysis and recommendations presented herein.

The following OCA staff members provided support on this brief:

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