IN THEIR OWN WORDS

OCA MASSACHUSETTS
Office of the Child Advocate

Young Adults' Perspectives on the Transition to Adulthood

As young people grow up, they are expected to make more of their own choices about school, work, housing, and relationships. For young people who have been involved in state systems, there may be added challenges along the way. **With the right support, these young adults can build the skills, confidence, and relationships they need to create the life they want.**

YOUNG ADULTS WHO HAVE BEEN INVOLVED IN STATE SYSTEMS ARE IMPORTANT PARTNERS IN MAKING THOSE SYSTEMS BETTER

From December 2025 - June 2026, we listened to the experiences, ideas, and goals of 42 young adults who were:

- 18 to 30 years old,
- receiving state services around the time they turned 18, and
- able to make their own legal decisions.

The young adults chose the format for our talks that felt most comfortable to them – virtual, in-person, or written response.

Examples of state services included:

1. Placement in a group home managed by the Department of Children & Families (DCF)
2. Juvenile justice programming by the Department of Youth Services (DYS)
3. Mental health services from the Department of Mental Health (DMH)

"Turning 18 doesn't mean you magically know everything; it just means you're expected to."

WHAT DID WE TALK ABOUT?

We asked young adults about their experiences with state services throughout their lives. **This brief summarizes what they told us about becoming an adult and how our state can make stronger policies and programs to support them.**

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

1. System involvement affects the path to adulthood.
2. Young adults did not feel ready for adulthood.
3. Young adults did not always have the support they needed in key areas of their lives.
4. Young adults felt that the system did not meet their changing needs.

Getting to Know the Young Adults

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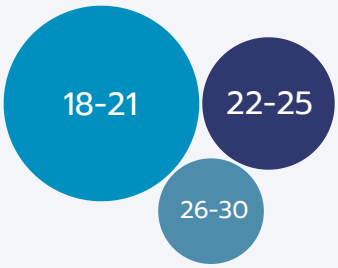
AGE

Average age of young adults:

21

Young adults were at **different stages of adulthood**:

- **24** young adults were 18 to 21 years old
- **11** young adults were 22 to 25 years old
- **7** young adults were 26 to 30 years old



Young adults came from **different backgrounds and with different identities and life experiences**:

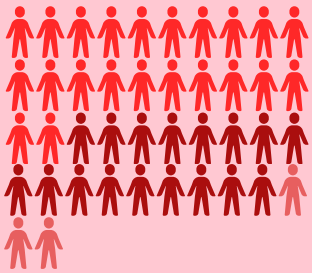
- Diverse races and ethnicities
- LGBTQ+ young adults
- Immigrants and newcomers
- Young adults with different learning needs, including neurodiversity
- Young adults whose families have a history with state systems

IDENTITIES AND BACKGROUNDS

22 Women

17 Men

3 Nonbinary



EXPERIENCE WITH STATE SYSTEMS

Young adults had **experiences with different state systems** before they turned 18 years old.

DCF: 34 YOUNG ADULTS	DMH: 13 YOUNG ADULTS
DYS: 13 YOUNG ADULTS	DDS: 2 YOUNG ADULTS

20 YOUNG ADULTS had contact with more than one state agency before turning 18.

WHO THEY ARE

Young adults describe themselves as...

Respectful *Observant* *Strong*
Resilient *A safe space for others* *An advocate*
Community-oriented *Independent* *Giving*

Young adults are proud of...

Maintaining a job *Personal growth* *Taking on each day*
Academic performance *Positive attitude* *Making good choices*
Living independently

#1: System involvement affects the path to adulthood.

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Becoming an adult can be hard for any young person. Being involved with state systems can make this time even harder by impacting a young person's experiences, the services and support they need, and their ability to build a stable future.

PAST EXPERIENCES

Young adults often experienced:

- **Mental and behavioral health challenges**, including the effects of trauma and other difficult experiences
- **Many changes and inconsistent support**, including changes in caseworkers, placements, and services
- **Difficulty building trust,** often because of past negative experiences with state services and staff

"I made some connections with peers, but it was challenging because (I) moved around so much."

"Every move comes with a new provider."

SERVICES & SUPPORTS

"If I mess up, there's nobody to catch me."

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

Young adults involved in state systems may have fewer people they can count on. As state systems plan to help young people become adults, they need to consider whether young adults have:

- **Supportive and trusted adults** who can help them, listen to them, and give them advice.
- **Ties to family, friends, and community** to build a strong support system and feel connected to others.
- **Resources and funds** to access housing, food, and other basic needs to live on their own

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Dealing with state services and everyday needs can make it hard to build an independent life. For many young adults:

- **Being in "survival mode" and focusing on getting through each day** can make it hard to think about the future
- **Future goals and dreams can be paused** when young adults need to focus on current needs

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

"(Once I had a safety net) I was able to think less about survival and more about progression."

#2: Young adults did not feel ready for adulthood.

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Becoming an adult takes time and ongoing support. Knowing what to do is only part of the process. Young adults need strong relationships and services that fit their needs.

"My caseworker mentioned that services would change, but nobody explained what that meant in real terms. I felt like I was expected to just figure it out on my own."

"Workers in (another area office) were more knowledgeable and helped me get money for schooling"

RELATIONSHIPS WITH CASEWORKERS & STAFF ARE IMPORTANT

- **Staff had different levels of knowledge.** Some staff knew more than others about available services, supports for different needs and goals, and how to work with other agencies.
- **Steady and reliable support mattered.** Changes in staff, how often staff stayed in touch, and whether staff gave the young person clear information impacted how supported a young adult felt.
- **How staff viewed the young adult mattered.** Young adults valued staff who understood their past experiences, treated them in ways that fit their age, and recognized their strengths and goals.

TRANSITION PLANNING FELT LIKE A SUDDEN CHANGE, NOT A GRADUAL PROCESS

Young adults said that turning 18 often brought sudden changes in what they were expected to do and in the services and support they received.

- **State systems may not give young people enough time and space to grow, learn from their mistakes, and figure out who they are.**
- **Being strong does not always mean being ready.** Young adults may learn to handle hard situations because they must. Getting through difficult experiences does not mean they feel ready to be on their own.

"Turning 18 doesn't mean you magically know everything; it just means you're expected to."

"Programs don't feel like real life. Young adults need real-world practice just doing things, having an actual experience and being allowed the chance to fail."

"Youth need to be more involved in their case planning and decision-making, regardless of their ability."

"I never knew if I was navigating services to the fullest."

TRANSITION PLANNING DID NOT PROVIDE ENOUGH SUPPORT

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

- **Included them in the process.** Plans should include what young adults want, need, and hope to do in the future.
- **Gave hands-on support.** Young adults were often handed brochures or lists of resources without enough help to know what to do next.
- **Gave help finding and using services.** Finding services can be hard and confusing, especially when each service has different rules and ways to sign up.

#3: Young adults did not always have the support they needed in key areas of their lives.

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Becoming an adult means taking on new responsibilities, making choices, and learning new skills. Young adults identified key areas where they needed more support:



Housing

A lack of safe and affordable housing, waitlists, and difficult rules made it hard for young adults to find and keep their housing.



Relationships

Young adults want supportive adults and mentors, and places where they can build strong connections with others.



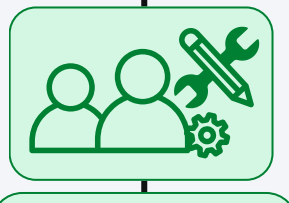
Health

Many young adults had breaks in their care, especially mental healthcare, as they got older and lost access to the care they had relied on when they were younger.



Employment

Young adults had trouble finding meaningful work, including getting ready for jobs and finding stable, well-paid jobs that can lead to a career.



Life skills

Young adults did not always get the tools and support they needed to manage money, live on their own, and handle everyday tasks.



Education

Young adults had delays or breaks in their education. The cost of school, work responsibilities, and limited access to education made it harder to stay in school and earn degrees.

#4: Young adults felt that the system did not meet their changing needs.

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As young people become adults, their needs and goals change. Many young adults felt that the support they received did not change with them. The chart below shows the types of support young adults need at different phases of becoming an adult.

	Planning for Adulthood	Starting Adulthood	Building a Stable Life
HOUSING	**Finding safe & stable housing:** • Explore housing options & see if you qualify • Learn how to apply	**Managing housing:** • Learn how to read a lease • Manage rent, utilities, & other payments	**Housing stability:** • Renew lease or find more affordable options
RELATIONSHIPS	**Building safe & supportive relationships:** • Find trusted adults & mentors • Find ways to meet new people	**Strengthening relationships & community:** • Find opportunities to connect with your community • Find peers with common interests & goals	**Finding purpose & lasting support systems:** • Serve as a mentor • Help others by sharing your experience & joining causes that matter to you
HEALTH	**Understanding insurance coverage:** • Learn about insurance options & terms, such as "co-pay" • Understand personal health history & needs	**Getting care & making decisions:** • Learn what your health insurance covers • Pick providers • Schedule appointments	**Keeping insurance coverage & managing health needs:** • Make smart decisions with your provider(s) • Talk about your healthcare needs
EMPLOYMENT	**Exploring interests & building skills:** • Identify your strengths & interests • Develop a resume • Practice interviewing	**Finding & keeping a job:** • Search for jobs • Identify employment support • Understand your benefits as an employee	**Building a career path:** • Learn ways to advance at work • Build connections at work • Set career goals
LIFE SKILLS	**Learning basic life skills:** • Open a bank account & credit card • Learn how to do laundry • Learn how to cook	**Managing new responsibilities:** • Pay taxes & bills • Establish credit • Develop a budget	**Planning for the future:** • Learn how to finance large purchases, especially unexpected or emergency expenses • Build credit
EDUCATION	**Finishing high school:** • Get a diploma or GED; recover credits • Graduate on time	**Exploring education options:** • Understand college & career training options • Apply to programs	**Continuing education:** • Balance education, training, & work

Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Office of the Child Advocate

The OCA thanks the young adults who shared their time, experiences, and ideas to make systems better. The OCA will share what we learned with others who can help create change. We will continue to include young adults in conversations about solutions. To learn more about what the OCA plans to do next, see the full project brief.

The OCA also thanks the community and agency partners who reviewed our materials, gave feedback, and helped connect us with young adults:

- *The Children's League of Massachusetts*
- *DMH Access Centers*
- *DMH, Statewide Young Adult Council (SYAC)*
- *HopeWell, Next Generation Leaders (Next Gen)*
- *Justice Resource Institute (JRI)*
- *The LGBTQ Youth Commission*
- *MA Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Commission, Youth Advisory Council*
- *More Than Words*
- *Roca, Inc.*
- *Youth Villages, Youth Engagement Panel*

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