

# **THE ANSWER BOOK**

**REVISED 2018**





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For copies of this publication, contact: [masscip@jud.state.ma.us](mailto:masscip@jud.state.ma.us).

For online copy see: <https://www.mass.gov/handbook/youth-in-state-care>

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### **DCF supervisor:**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Phone number \_\_\_\_\_

### **Lawyer:**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Phone number \_\_\_\_\_

### **Guardian Ad Litem:**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Phone number \_\_\_\_\_

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Name \_\_\_\_\_ Phone number \_\_\_\_\_

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Name \_\_\_\_\_ Phone number \_\_\_\_\_

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## 1. MAKING THE MOST OF DCF CUSTODY

### What is foster care?

Foster care places children into temporary or permanent care through foster homes, group homes, or kinship care until you can be reunited safely with your parents, or placed in adoption or guardianship. You may be in foster care because your parents can't take care of you right now, or because someone brought it to DCF's attention that you were not safe in your home, or the judge wants you placed outside the home for other reasons.

### What are my rights in foster care?

You have the right to be treated with respect by your social worker and lawyer and by everyone in your foster home. Everybody should be working to ensure that you are healthy, happy, and well taken care of. You should never be discriminated against, treated badly, or physically harmed for any reason, including for your race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, language, or your social or cultural background. Tell your lawyer immediately if you are being treated badly in any way by those you should be able to trust. SEE THE FOSTER CHILD BILL OF RIGHTS AT PAGE 46.

### What does my social worker do?

Your social worker makes sure you are safe and living in an environment where you can be happy, healthy, well cared for and getting the education and any medical care or mental health services you need. Your social worker will be calling you and visiting you in the place where you live at least once a month, to hear how you are doing. If you do not hear from your social worker or have a personal visit at least once a month, or if you need help with other matters, call your social worker and your lawyer and schedule a meeting or visit.

### Should I have a lawyer and what should my lawyer do?

If you are 17 years old or younger and living in DCF custody because of a court order or as a young adult (aged 18 to 22) who has signed a Voluntary Placement Agreement, the court will appoint a lawyer to represent you. The lawyer will meet with you regularly, return your calls and explain the court process to you. Your lawyer will talk to the judge and advocate for what you want. Your lawyer can help you get the services you need in school, for your health and for your legal case. If you do not know who your lawyer is, or if you have trouble contacting your lawyer, call the Children and Family Law Division (CAFL) at 617-482-6212. Your lawyer MUST represent you AND WHAT YOU WANT. Your lawyer CANNOT do what your lawyer thinks is best for you if you do not want it.

## Do I have the right to live with my family?

If you are in DCF custody through a Care and Protection case, Voluntary Placement Agreement or Child Requiring Assistance (CRA), you have the right to be placed with safe and available relatives after a home study is completed and approved by DCF. DCF will also try to place your brothers and sisters in the same home.

## Do I have the right to visit my family?

If it is safe for you to do so, you have the right to regular visitation with your brothers and sisters, your parents, and your grandparents; however, this should be done in consultation with your social worker.

**Sibling visits:** If you are not living with your brothers and sisters, ask your social worker to arrange for regular visits, phone calls, and letters. Regular visitation should be part of the action plan that DCF prepares with you and your family, provided such visitation will be safe and appropriate. SEE THE SIBLING BILL OF RIGHTS AT PAGE 48. DCF should try to help you participate in celebrations including birthdays, holidays, graduations and other special events. Talk to your foster parent, social worker or lawyer as soon as you know about a family event.

**Visits with your parents:** Unless contact with your parents has been determined to be unsafe for you, you should be given the opportunity to have telephone contact with your parent(s) within 24-48 hours of coming into placement and a face-to-face visit as soon as possible but no later than 5 working days after placement whether you are in a foster home or other type of placement. In general, you should be able to visit with your parent(s) at least once a week unless your circumstances require a different schedule.

## What should Foster Care be like?

If you are placed outside of your home, (in a place like a residential treatment facility, foster home, group home, or placements with relatives or family

friends) and you feel any of the following statements is **'FALSE' or not true**, talk with your social worker or lawyer.

- I have access to the same things as kids and youth who aren't involved with DCF, such as time with friends, sleepovers, a normal curfew, dates, or even a chance to earn allowance.
- I am consulted about mental health and medical decisions for me.
- I am allowed to participate in community activities such as sports, volunteer work, employment, school events, mentorships, summer camp, class field trips, and other rites of passage with my peers.
- I experience clear and fair consequences, and the rules and policies here are clear, fair, and can be flexible.
- I can use technology and social networking sites (with age appropriate monitoring).
- I am allowed to build relationships, make choices, and make mistakes in an informed, supportive, and judgment-free environment.
- If I have spiritual and/or religious beliefs, I am able to participate in activities related to those beliefs.
- I am able to listen to age appropriate music and watch age appropriate TV shows and movies.
- I have privacy, love and safety.
- I am learning money management skills through opening savings plans, bank accounts, and establishing monthly budgets.

## What is an Action Plan (or Service Plan)?

The action plan (which may also be called a case plan or service plan) is written by your social worker and sets out all the services that should be in place to help resolve some of the issues which led to your entering foster care. You should participate in the development and review of your action plan.

If you don't know what is in your action plan or if you would like to change or add something to your plan to help you or your family, let your social worker and lawyer know. Your lawyer should help you work with DCF or talk with DCF about what is in your action plan. If you are 14 or older your social worker should ask you to review and sign the action plan. The action plan tasks should be reviewed every six months to make sure they are effective.

## Who can I trust to keep my secrets?

Your lawyer is not allowed to talk about anything you say during your private conversations unless you say it is okay or UNLESS you plan to hurt yourself or somebody else or if you lie to the court. For more on confidentiality and information sharing, see: <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/massachusetts-court-improvement-program-masscip>.

A social worker's job is to speak to the judge, lawyers, and your service providers to make sure you are living in a safe, nurturing place and you are getting the services you need. This means that social workers cannot and will not always keep what you tell them a secret, even if you ask them to.

## Does DCF have programs, groups, or information for me?

The Youth Advisory Board is a group of kids in DCF custody or care ages 16-21 who meet four times a year to share ideas and make recommendations on issues you live with in foster care such as making visits with your relatives easier and more frequent, playing sports at school, getting a driver's license or having sleep-overs. The Youth Advisory Board helps plan the Youth Leadership Institute, a statewide conference for youth in care on topics youth select and co-lead. To get involved ask your social worker.

The Wave is the DCF youth newsletter written by and for youth in care. Published every three months, it has articles, poems, art, and information on activities such as Peer Support Groups, Higher Education Fairs, and Employment and Mentoring Programs. You can get a copy at your DCF office.

The Adolescent Outreach Program provides intensive, individualized life skills help to prepare you for living on your own as a young adult. Outreach age eligibility is 16-21. DCF Adolescent Outreach Workers help you plan for school, jobs, money management, and personal decision-making. Adolescent Outreach Workers can give you help applying to and finding money for college, a job-training program, or a certificate program as well as help finding internships and jobs. If you have an Adolescent Outreach Worker, s/he should meet with you EVERY WEEK while you are in care and will provide services to you for 6 months after you leave DCF. Outreach can serve youth who left care at age 18 up to age 21.

Preparing Adolescents for Young Adulthood (PAYA) is a DCF program that helps you develop skills needed to transition to young adulthood. You can even be paid for participating! By completing each of the five modules in the PAYA curriculum you may be eligible for a one-time payment of up to \$300 for driver's education or \$50 for independent living needs.





## 2. MAKING A PLAN

### How do I plan for my future?

When you are in DCF custody, there is a process called “permanency planning” that can help you make a plan for your future.

### What is permanency planning?

Permanency planning helps make sure that within a reasonable time, you have a safe and permanent home and the support you need to be safe and healthy and to reach your life goals. Permanency planning is also about helping you achieve physical, emotional and legal stability during and after you leave foster care. After you and your social worker, in conjunction with your lawyer and any other important people in your life, come up with a plan, the judge will review it and may have questions and suggestions for it at a Permanency Hearing.

### The most important part of permanency planning is:

YOU!!!

Your DCF social worker and the DCF lawyer

Your lawyer

The judge

Parent, guardian, foster parent, brother or sister



## What is the permanency planning process?

The basic steps of the formal permanency planning process include 1) you talk to your lawyer, social worker, caretaker, and other important people in your life about your goals and needs; 2) you take part in meetings and court hearings about you; 3) your social worker writes a permanency plan report with input from you and your lawyer and other important people in your life about your future plans and what you need to achieve your goals; and 4) the judge reviews your plan, discusses it with you, and determines whether to approve the goal.

## What is a permanency plan report?

The actual permanency plan report is written by your social worker based on conversations your social worker has with you, your lawyer, and other important people in your life. The report talks about what you want your goals to be and what kind of help DCF and others can give you so you can reach your goals. This report is what the judge will look at in court to make sure your plan is a good one. The judge will look carefully at your current needs and how they are being met in school, your home, and in your community. The judge will also look at your future goals and how you are preparing for a successful future.

## What is a permanency goal?

One of the sections in your permanency plan will talk about your permanency goal. This part of the plan talks about where you will live and who the adults are that will help support you in the future. Your goal could be either to return to your family (called reunification), be adopted, get a legal guardian, or have permanency through care with kin. If you are at least 16, your goal may be another placement until you are no longer in DCF custody or care.

## How do I take part in creating my plan?

1. Talk with your social worker and lawyer about your current needs and your plans for your future.
2. If you are 14 years of age or older, you may participate in your DCF 6 week Placement Review. The 6 week placement review meeting is an opportunity to review your family's and your own strengths and needs, in particular your needs for health, safety, well-being, permanence and continuing your significant relationships.
3. Actively participate in your DCF Foster Care Reviews. Foster Care Reviews are held every 6 months while you are placed outside of your home. The purpose is to review the action plan and goal
4. Go to your Permanency Hearing to talk to the Judge about your plan.

## How do I work with my social worker in creating the plan?

By the time you turn 14, your social worker should also start talking with you about your plans for your future. When you meet, tell your social worker what services you need to help you be interdependent in the future. Interdependence means you are self-sufficient or that you have the independent living tools to take care of your responsibilities in life. You can still reach out to your life-long caring adult for advice, networking connections, and emotional support. Finding that lifelong connection is important no matter how old you are in DCF care.

Talk to your lawyer as well about what you want for your future. Tell your lawyer what you want to do, where you want to live, and what your plans are. Your lawyer should talk to your DCF social worker about the plan for your future.

### Things to think about for your plan as part of permanency planning:

- What is my goal: reunification, adoption, or placement with kin?
- Who are some caring adults in my life who could be a life-long connection for me?
- What are my goals in school? How will I reach them? How will I get extra help if I need it?
- Can I stay in my school if DCF changes my placement?
- What resources are available to help me go to college or vocational school and be successful there?
- What services do I want or need from DCF?
- Do I want to keep getting services from DCF after I turn 18?
- How will I get my driver's license, if I want it?
- How will I get around if I don't have a car or a license?
- How can I get and keep a job or get money to support myself?
- Who can help me if I am not a US citizen?
- What teen parenting services could I use, if needed?
- Where will I live when I turn 18? How will I afford to live there?
- When I leave DCF, how will I get health insurance or health care?
- Where do I get important documents like my social security card?

## What if I am about to turn 18 or am thinking of leaving DCF Care as a young adult?

If you are age 17 years and 9 months or older or are a young adult, the permanency report your social worker writes for the court with your input will include a proposed transition plan in addition to all of the other information included in all permanency reports. Proposed transition plans should be designed by you, with assistance from your lawyer and social worker, be as detailed as you want, and include specific options on:

- (1) stable housing;
- (2) health insurance;
- (3) physical and mental health care including the designation of a health care proxy;
- (4) educational services;
- (5) long-term connections with mentors and caring adults;
- (6) continuing support services including state agencies;
- (7) workforce supports and employment services; and
- (8) maintaining contact with siblings still in DCF custody or care.

Work with your lawyer and social worker to make sure that you have options in all of these areas BEFORE you leave DCF care.

## What should I look for in a lifelong connection to a Caring adult?

There is plenty of room in your life for many supportive adults, like aunts, uncles, coaches and mentors. You have a right to include your birth family as part of your permanency circle of supportive adults. You can also add supportive adults to your life without taking the place of relationships you already have.

In order to determine if you already have lifelong supportive adults in your life, ask yourself if these statements are true for you.

1. The adults I live with now will care about me in the same way once I leave foster care.
2. I have an adult who I remember with a holiday card or some small birthday gift.

Ask yourself– Are there people in my life whom I trust that I already have a relationship with who could become my supportive adult? Talk with your social worker about how to include this person in your permanency planning. This person may be someone who is willing to create a permanency pact with you.

## What is a Permanency Pact?

Once a supportive adult is identified as a potential life-long connection, you may want to create a permanency pact with your supportive adult(s). You don't have to be formally adopted or have a guardian in order to create a permanency pact with a supportive adult. A permanency pact is a promise between a supportive adult and a young person. It is based on conversations you have with your supportive adult about the kind of positive supports you can receive from that adult once you leave foster care.

You might ask the supportive adults in your life if they can provide some or all of the following supports once you leave foster care:

Home for the holidays	Relationships/marriage advice
A place to do laundry	Transportation
Emergency place to stay	Assistance with medical appointments
Food/occasional meals	Talking through tough decisions
Care package at college	Storage
Employment opportunity	Motivation
Job search assistance	Spiritual support
Recreational activities	Legal troubles
Mentor	Cultural experience
Mental health support	

It is okay not to be able to find all of these kinds of support in one person. This is why it is so important for you and your social worker to build a permanency circle of multiple supportive adults by the time you leave foster care.

## What is the permanency hearing?

The permanency hearing is at the courthouse, where the judge is focused completely on YOU and YOUR FUTURE. The hearings happen at least once every 12 months, but can be every six months if you are 14 or older. After talking with you, your social worker will write down your plan in the permanency report and then ask a judge to review it in court. The judge will make sure the plan has what you need before agreeing to it. If you want to be there, you should tell your lawyer and your social worker. If you are 14 years of age or older, you are

expected to be present at your permanency hearings. The permanency hearing should be on a day and time that is good for you, after school if you prefer. Your lawyer will request a different day or time for the hearing if needed and will tell the judge if you don't like the plan or want it changed.

### What does my lawyer do at my permanency hearing?

Your lawyer should get a copy of your written permanency plan report from DCF 30 days before the permanency hearing. Your lawyer should meet with you before the hearing to talk with you about the plan and to hear what you think about it. If you want to change something in the plan, your lawyer can tell DCF and the judge in court what it is you want. If DCF doesn't agree, your lawyer can ask the judge to make orders to ensure that the plan is as you would like it. Your lawyer can make sure that you are brought to court for the hearing and can help you speak to the judge if you want to.

### What if my hearing conflicts with another appointment or event in my life?

Tell your lawyer and social worker if you have a major conflict with the court date. They may be able to ask the court to re-schedule the hearing after school or at another time more convenient for you.

### What clothes should I put on to go to court?

Most lawyers wear business suits to court. You do not have to put on a suit, but you may feel more confident if your clothes are clean and appropriate. If you follow the same dress code you have for school, you should be fine.

### What do I say in court?

Talk to your lawyer about what you want to say about your future and whether there is anything you are uncomfortable talking about. You may want to write down some ideas before court. You can call the Judge "Judge" or "Your Honor."



### 3. EDUCATION

#### Do I have the right to attend school?

- Yes! Your right to go to school lasts until your 22nd birthday or until you get a high school diploma, whichever comes first. You should be able to remain in your school even if you move to a different town. If you change schools, you have the right to enroll and start classes immediately.
- If someone tells you that you cannot go to school, or tells you that you must change schools, talk to your foster parent and/or contact your social worker, your lawyer or the Children’s Law Center of Massachusetts at 1-888-KIDLAW8. Talk to your social worker and lawyer about getting permission from DCF and your school to stay in your school and about how transportation can be arranged to get you safely to and from school.
- On the other hand, if you move towns and you want to change schools, you may be able to do that, too. Either way, be sure to speak up about where you want to go to school.

#### What if I am suspended or expelled?

If your school keeps you out of school for a day or more (suspends you) or tries to keep you out of school permanently (expels you), immediately contact your social worker, lawyer, or the Children’s Law Center (1-888-KIDLAW8). They may be able to work things out so you can stay at that school and not miss classes or important exams.

#### I’m worried I’m not going to graduate. Who can help me?

- Talk to your social worker, foster parent, teacher, lawyer, and guidance counselor. You may be able to get outside help or a tutor.
- Your teacher, parent, caregiver or social worker (or YOU if you are 18 or older) can request a special education evaluation. If the testing determines you have special learning needs, you will be able to have an Individual Education Program (IEP) written for you stating all the services you will receive to help you succeed in school.

## Who can help me prepare for MCAS?

MCAS stands for Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System. It is a test that all students take and must pass in order to graduate from high school. If you are worried that you are not going to pass MCAS, contact the school guidance counselor. Your school may be able to give you the extra help you need or your counselor may know about other ways to get help outside of the school. If you have not done well on the MCAS, the school is required to offer you help. Make sure your social worker assists you in getting this help if the school does not offer help to you.

If you passed all your high school course requirements, but have not passed the MCAS, you do NOT need to keep going to high school in order to get your diploma. You can simply retake the MCAS in order to meet that requirement for a high school diploma.

Contact your local One Stop Career Center to set up an appointment and learn about the options for MCAS tutoring. A list of the sites can be found at <http://www.mass.gov/massachusetts-one-stop-career-centers> Through these centers, you can be set up with tutoring at a local community college. After tutoring, you go back to your high school to take the test. The retake dates are usually in November and March. If you pass, you will be eligible to receive your diploma from your high school!

You can also look up MCAS information on the Internet at: [www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/testitems.html](http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/testitems.html). This website has practice tests, answer keys, student work examples, and information about the MCAS graduation requirements. – All Free!

## How Can I get my GED (now called HiSET)?

If you leave school without graduating and want to earn your GED, now called HiSET (High School Equivalency Test), you need to meet the requirements for taking the exams and then pass exams that cover 5 subject areas. Call the Massachusetts Adult Literacy Hotline at 1-800-447-8844 to find HiSET preparation programs near where you live, or visit: <http://www.getrealmass.info/hotline/ged.htm>.



For exam requirements, visit <http://www.doe.mass.edu/hse/preparation.html>  
For comparison of HISET and GED go to: [www.doe.mass.edu/hse/comparison.html](http://www.doe.mass.edu/hse/comparison.html).

## Can I go to college?

- Yes! As early as freshman year in high school, you can attend college fairs, career centers, and talk to your guidance counselor about what jobs interest you and what type of education you need for those jobs. Before attending a college, you must apply, get accepted and register to attend. Being in foster care is not a barrier to attending college.
- By the beginning of the 11th grade, you should be talking with your school guidance counselor about applying for college. Look at different schools and pick the colleges that you like best. You will also need to study and sign up for the SAT or ACT, tests you have to take for some colleges, but are not required at community colleges. Take the SAT or ACT. Fill out college applications with the help of your guidance counselor. Be sure to pay attention to the due dates on your college applications. Your guidance counselor can help you make a step-by-step plan to keep you organized through the process. An Adolescent Outreach Worker or your social worker can help you with college and vocational training questions.

## How do I get money to go to college?

You may be able to get money for college by filling out and submitting the Free Application for Federal Student Assistance (FAFSA). You can complete it online at [www.fafsa.ed.gov](http://www.fafsa.ed.gov). DCF may be able to provide you assistance through its Foster Child Grant Program and the Education and Training Voucher Program. You may also be eligible for a tuition waiver, which means you wouldn't have to pay tuition to attend a community college or state university in Massachusetts. See <http://www.mass.edu/osfa/programs/dcffoster.asp>. If you want to go out of state, explore alternate funding with your social worker and school guidance counselor. The William Warren Scholarship Program provides competitive scholarships for educational and vocational programs to any youth under age 25 who was in the care or custody of DCF for a minimum of one year.

If you are more interested in job training than college, you may qualify for financial aid paid by DCF until you turn 26 years old. See "Turning 18" at p. 14 .



**Tip: Contact DCF Adolescent Services Unit at 617-748-2232 and ask for their College Scholarship Guide. Contact the financial aid office at the colleges that interest you for more ideas on how to get scholarships or have fees waived.**



## 4. TURNING 18

Once I turn 18, can I still receive the DCF services that I had before I turned 18?

YES! DCF can continue working with you and providing services until you turn 22. Whether you choose to stay with the department or not, you can continue to receive health insurance (MassHealth), referrals for services such as counseling and job training and help applying and paying for college, a job training program, or a certificate program. If you choose to sign on with the department you will receive housing assistance.

What does “signing on” with DCF mean?

You may request to sign on with the department. If you are interested in signing on, you should discuss this with your social worker/adolescent outreach worker, and your lawyer who will help you with this request. Signing on means you stay in DCF care. You sign a Voluntary Placement Agreement that states you are voluntarily agreeing to get services from DCF. You have to agree to do some things (e.g., allowing the social worker in your home once a month and going to school or working) and DCF keeps providing you with help and financial support.

If you want to stay in DCF care and DCF agrees, you “sign on.” You are called a “young adult” instead of a “child.”

Do I have to stay in DCF care when I turn 18?

No, but you can decide to stay in care. If you decide to leave care, DCF has to help you create a transition plan 90 days before you leave care, and the Judge has to review it and will approve it if it looks okay. Talk to your social worker and lawyer about whether you should stay in DCF care.

If I am younger than 18, how do I sign on for services from

## DCF when I turn 18?

You can ask your lawyer or social worker to help you write a letter to DCF to explain what you want to do. **Plan ahead.** Don't wait until after your 18th birthday to talk to your lawyer and social worker about this. Your lawyer and you may need to negotiate with DCF about what you need to do to stay in DCF care and to keep getting services. It is best to start negotiating early on, well before you turn 18.

## If I sign back on with DCF, where will I live?

It depends on your situation. Usually your social worker decides what to offer you for housing, but will consider what you want. You could live in a foster home, a supervised apartment, a college dorm, your own apartment, a group home, a residential program, or an independent living program. If DCF offers you a housing situation that does not work for you, contact your lawyer.

## If I sign back on with DCF, how will I get money to live?

This also depends on your situation. DCF usually pays other people to care for you. DCF may:

- Pay your foster parents, guardians or adoptive parents a daily amount;
- Pay a group home, independent living program, or apartment so you can live there;
- Pay you money for housing if you have shown that you are responsible with your money. You can then use the money that DCF pays you for rent, food, and other things you need; or
- Help you with applying for financial aid so you can live in a college dorm.

If DCF is not providing money to you or the person with whom you live, contact your social worker and/or your lawyer.

## Am I eligible for services from DCF if I have already turned 18 and have not signed on yet?

Yes, until your 22nd birthday. You should contact the DCF area office where you live and say that you want to apply for services. You will work with a social worker to come up with a plan, and then a Young Adult Review Panel will determine whether you can sign on with the plan as presented, with a modified plan, or not at all. For a list of DCF offices see pages 42 - 45. If you are having trouble receiving services, ask for the Adolescent Outreach Worker at your DCF office or call the DCF Adolescent Services Program at 617-748- 2232. You can also call the Children's Law Center (1-888-KIDLAW8) or the Children and Family Law Division (CAFL) at 617-482-6212.

## Can my old lawyer help me if I want to sign back on with DCF after I already left?

Yes, your old lawyer can help you try to return to DCF to get help. You can ask to come back to DCF, even if you left after you turned 18. When you leave DCF, try to keep your lawyer's business card or phone number so that you can reach your lawyer if you change your mind and want to go back to DCF to get services. You can ask to come back up until your 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday. If you decide you want to come back, contact your lawyer and ask for help. If you do not know who your old lawyer was or how to reach your old lawyer, you can find out by calling CAFL at 617-482-6212 or email: [caflattorney@publiccounsel.net](mailto:caflattorney@publiccounsel.net). Someone from CAFL will call the court to find out who your lawyer was. Sometimes the court clerk will not give out this information over the phone and you may have to go into court yourself to find out who your lawyer was.

## What can I do if DCF tells me I can't sign back on?

Call your lawyer for help. If you don't have a lawyer anymore, you can always call your old lawyer or the Children's Law Center (1-888-KIDLAW8) for help. Your lawyer can help you negotiate with DCF and appeal through the Fair Hearing Process if DCF decides not to let you sign back on. To appeal, you or your lawyer can write a letter to the Fair Hearing unit at DCF to say that you want to sign back on and you want to appeal DCF's decision not to let you. There is a separate unit at DCF that looks at the letter and should give you a hearing, called a Fair Hearing. At the hearing, your lawyer and you can argue to an independent Fair Hearing officer that DCF should change its decision and let you come back. You can do this without a lawyer, but you should ask your old lawyer to help you.

## How long will DCF give me services if I "sign on" or was just adopted or placed in guardianship?

If you sign on, you may continue to receive DCF services until age 22. If you went into guardianship or were adopted in your late teens, your guardian or adoptive parent may receive support for you from DCF until you are 22.



## 5. GETTING AROUND

### How do I get to and from after school activities?

Your social worker can help you find a way to go to and from after school activities if your foster parents can't. If your social worker can't help, talk to your lawyer. Can you read a bus, subway or train schedule? In some places, public transportation is often cheaper and more convenient than a car.

### Am I allowed to get my learner's permit and a driver's license?

Yes! Kids in foster care can get their permit and license. You can get a learner's permit at age 16 and a driver's license at 16 1/2. To get your learner's permit you must pass a written multiple choice test. To get your driver's license you must pass a driving test. Get more information from the Registry of Motor Vehicles at <http://www.massrmv.com/> or you can call (617) 351-4500. Get a copy of the Driver's Manual at <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/drivers-manuals>.

### Who should I talk to about getting my permit and license?

Your social worker is the best person to talk to about getting permission to get your permit and license and explaining what you need to do. You can also talk to your lawyer about it. If you are in DCF custody because of a CRA case, your parents or guardian will decide.

### Who pays for getting my learner's permit, driving school and my driver's license?

Talk to your social worker, the Adolescent Outreach Worker at the DCF office near you (see pp. 42 - 45) and/or your lawyer about getting money to pay for your learner's permit, driving school and your license, and also to talk about whose car to use to practice and take your driving test. You may be able to earn money through participation in the DCF program, PAYA. For more information about PAYA, talk to your Intensive Foster Care Worker, your social worker or any Adolescent Outreach Worker.



## 6. WHAT ABOUT A JOB?

### Can I get a job if I am younger than 18 and in DCF custody?

Yes. If you are under 18 you can work but you have to first get a work permit just like kids who aren't in foster care. To get a permit you must fill out an application called Employment Permit Application for 14 through 17 Year Olds. You can download this application from <https://www.mass.gov/dos>, or get one from your school. All the steps for completing this application process can be found on the same website under the Massachusetts Guide for Working Teens, page 4. Talk to your school counselor about getting the work permit.

### Can I keep all the money I earn from my job while I am in DCF custody?

Yes. All the money you make is yours. As soon as you get a job, you should also talk to your social worker about opening your own bank account. Now is a good time to learn to budget your money. You can open a savings or checking account at a bank even if you are under 18.

### How can I look for a job?

Call your social worker or the Adolescent Outreach Worker in the DCF office near you. See pp. 42 - 45.

Talk to your friends who have jobs, or to neighbors, teachers, your guidance counselor etc.

Check out your high school electronic job board or other help at school for students looking for work.

Apply at your local grocery store or retail stores.

Go to the Career Center in your area. They have job listings, career counseling services, job search workshops, workforce readiness training, information about getting money for job training, and other employment-related services. Call the Division of Career Services for more information and to find the Career Center near you: 617-626-5300.

You can also look them up online at: [www.mass.gov/careercenters](http://www.mass.gov/careercenters).

Consider the following four programs to help you. Ask your social worker for more information or look these up online:

1. Foster Skills gives you information about participating in a workforce development program that measures your skills and helps you gain improved access to the workforce. It is exclusively focused on empowering foster youth to beat the odds, follow your dreams and become successful productive citizens by giving you the skills you need for gainful employment. For more detailed information see: <http://www.fosterskills.org/>.
2. Job Corps Program is a free career training and education program for young adults age 16 through 24. The goal of Job Corps is to teach job skills. Call 1-800-733-JOBS or 617-788-0186.
3. YouthBuild is an education, job training, housing, and community service program for young adults age 16 through 24. This program can help you get your high school diploma or GED while teaching you carpentry and other construction skills. Call 617-445-8887.
4. YouthWorks is a program for youth who are between the ages of 14 and 21. This program was developed to help youth who are court involved. See: <http://commcorp.org/programs/youthworks/>.

## Can I get money from the state if I lose my job?

If you were working and you lost your job and it wasn't your fault, you may be able to get money from the state called unemployment benefits. If you quit or were fired from your job for a good reason, you can't get money from the state. To get unemployment benefits, you must be looking for a job or be enrolled in job training. You can get more information at:

<https://www.mass.gov/how-to/file-for-unemployment-benefits>.



## 7. MONEY MATTERS

### Does DCF have to give me any money?

#### ...when I am under 18?

DCF usually does not give you money directly. Instead, DCF gives money to your foster family or residential program twice a month for daily expenses. It also gives your program, foster family, or guardian money to spend on you for your birthday, for holiday/Christmas, and four times per year for your clothes.

#### ...when I am over 18?

If you sign on to DCF after you turn 18 and continue with school or job training, you may receive Young Adult Support Payments (YASP) twice per month and/or some money for rent or college room and board up to age 22.

### Does my foster parent, guardian, or residential program have to give me any money?

Your foster parents, guardians or custodians do not have to give you cash, but they should be spending money on things for you. The money they get from DCF is meant for you and the things you need while you are living there.

### How do I pay for after school activities?

Speak with your social worker about whether DCF may be able to help with the fees or get you a scholarship (money from somebody else) for the activity. If DCF can't help, ask your lawyer for other ideas.

### Can DCF help me get a copy of my credit report?

Yes, DCF will arrange for youth or young adults age 16 and older who are in DCF care or custody to obtain a copy of their credit report, if one exists, once a year and arrange for assistance to help you understand the report.





**Tip: A good source of help for life skills is through the PAYA (Preparing Adolescents for Young Adulthood) program that DCF offers. The first topic presented is about MONEY. You can even earn money by participating! Contact your DCF social worker or an Adolescent Outreach Worker for more information.**

## How it works when you're NOT in DCF custody

### Is there any money I can get from the state?

If you are over 18 and not in DCF custody, you may be eligible to receive money from a program called Emergency Aid to Elders, Disabled, and Children (EAEDC). Call your local DTA (Department of Transitional Assistance) office for help.

### If I am on my own, how do I get food or money for food?

If you don't make much money, you might be eligible for food stamps also called the SNAP program. Call the Department of Transitional Assistance SNAP Benefits Hotline at 1-866-950-3663 for more information. Also, most communities give out free food through pantries. To find food pantries or free meals in your community, call the Project Bread Food Source Hotline at 1-800-645-8333.

### How do I get a bank account?

If you are under 18, you may be able to get an 18-65 account, which is a bank account that does not have fees. Choose a bank with an office near you and tell that bank that you are eligible for an 18-65 account.

If you are over age 18, ask for a basic banking account.

To get an account, the bank will ask for a photo ID, your Social Security number, and some money to put in your account (called a minimum deposit).

Don't be afraid to go into the bank, sit down with someone, and ask lots and lots of questions! It's your money!

### When do I have to pay taxes?

When you make a certain amount of money from working, you have to pay taxes to the federal government and the state government and file your tax return every year by April 15<sup>th</sup>.

Even if you don't make enough money to PAY taxes, you might be eligible to GET money back you paid in taxes every paycheck.

If you need help with taxes talk to an adult that you trust. There are a number of agencies or non-profits that will do your taxes for free if you don't make very much money.



## 8. HOUSING

### Where will I live after I turn 18 and sign myself back on with DCF?

It depends on your situation. DCF normally makes the decision about what to offer you, but your opinion matters! You could live in a foster home, a supervised apartment, a college dorm, your own apartment, a group home, a residential program, or an independent living program. If DCF is not giving you a place to live or money to support yourself, contact your lawyer.

### Does DCF have places I can live if I did not sign myself back on after I turned 18?

If you do not sign on with DCF after age 18, DCF has limited housing help for you:

- Family Unification Program (FUP) housing vouchers from the Dept. of Housing and Community Development. Youth who were in DCF custody/care until age 18 may qualify for these 18 month housing vouchers if they agree to work with a social worker or an Adolescent Outreach Worker toward their goals.
- The DCF “Safe Passage Program” has 3 beds at a transitional living program in Boston for former DCF foster youth who are male.
- The DCF Adolescent Outreach Program also manages a Discharge Support Program that may assist youth who left DCF between ages 18 and 21 with funds to assist with housing costs.
- An additional resource, The Bachand Residence for Girls in Lowell, run by the Sisters of Charity, provides housing for female students age 18 and older who are currently or formerly in the care of DCF and are continuing their education after graduation from high school.

For help finding a place to live or to talk about these programs contact your local DCF office and ask to speak with the Adolescent Outreach Worker or ask your social worker to connect you with an Adolescent Outreach Worker. The phone numbers for the local DCF offices are on pages 42 - 45.

## How much money do I need to move into an apartment?

Depending on the apartment and the landlord, you may need to pay for the following things when you first move into an apartment:

- First month's rent
- Last month's rent
- A security deposit. This usually costs up to one month's rent, but cannot be more than that. You get this back when you move out as long as there is no damage to your apartment while you live there.
- A new lock fee

## If I need legal help with my housing once I move out on my own, what can I do?

If there are problems with the condition of the apartment that you notice after you move in, take pictures and inform your landlord. If your landlord does not repair the problems then you should call your local board of health or inspection services.

All areas in Massachusetts have legal aid programs that have lawyers for people who don't earn much money and have issues with their housing. Find free legal help in Massachusetts at this website: [www.masslegalservices.org](http://www.masslegalservices.org).

## Where can I go if I become homeless?

There are shelters and transitional housing programs that provide emergency housing and support to young people who cannot live at home and need help. Some of these programs also offer counseling, education, or support programs. For help in finding a program or shelter near you, call the National Runaway Switchboard at 1-800-RUNAWAY. It is free to call.

If you are over 18, go to a local church or homeless shelter that can direct you to places where food, shelter, and other supports may be available. You can also contact an Adolescent Outreach Worker at 617-744-2231 who can help with transitional housing programs, affordable rental options, food pantries, food stamps, counseling and education. You may also sign back on to DCF care until age 22.

## Housing Checklist

- How much can I afford to pay in rent each month? (How much money do I have to pay for a security deposit, first and last month's rent, and each month for utilities, furniture, transportation, food, clothing, child care costs, entertainment, renter's insurance, health costs, etc.?)
- What utilities (water, gas, electric, cable, phone) are included in the rent? What utilities will I have to arrange and pay on my own? How much will they be?
- Will I need a roommate?
- Will I need a co-signor for my lease? This may be required if you don't have a strong credit history.
- Where do I want to live?
- Do I need to be near public transportation?
- Is the apartment near a grocery store?
- Is the apartment in an area where I feel safe?
- Are there appliances (refrigerator, dishwasher, laundry) in the apartment? If there is no laundry machine, am I near a Laundromat?
- Is the apartment itself clean and safe?
- Is there a working smoke detector and carbon monoxide alarm?
- Does the apartment have two exits in case of a fire?

### **Dial 211 for free confidential information on:**

- Shelter**
- Food**
- Rent assistance**
- Utility bill assistance**
- Counseling**
- After School Programs**



## 9. IMMIGRATION

### What are my options if I am in this country and I am an undocumented immigrant?

There are a few ways you can apply for documentation or permission to stay in the United States. You could apply for (1) asylum; (2) family reunification with family members who already have legal status or citizenship; (3) visas to protect victims of a crime or domestic violence in the U.S.; or (4) special immigrant juvenile classification.

It is important to talk to your lawyer and social worker to make sure you are referred to an experienced immigration lawyer who can determine whether you are eligible to apply for any of these immigration protections.

### How does someone become a citizen of the U.S.?

1. By being born in the United States, or
2. By having a parent who is a U.S. citizen at the time of a person's birth, or becomes a U.S. citizen before you turn 18.
3. By being adopted by a U.S. citizen before you turn 16; or
4. By applying to become a citizen after you turn 18.

If you don't fall into the first two categories above, you must first become a legal permanent resident (obtain a green card) before applying to become a citizen.

### What does Special Immigrant Juvenile (SIJ) mean?

Special Immigrant Juvenile (SIJ) refers to a classification or protection that our federal government gives to some immigrant youth under age 21 who have been abused, abandoned or neglected by a parent. Once you have SIJ protection, you are eligible to apply for a green card and obtain permanent legal residency.

## What do I have to do to become a SIJ?

**Step 1:** Your social worker and/or lawyer ask the Juvenile Court or a Probate and Family Court judge to issue an order that states the following:

1. You are not married
2. You are under the age of 21
3. You cannot return to live with at least one of your parents; and
4. You would be better off (it would be in your “best interests”) to stay in the United States rather than being sent back to your home country.



**Tip:** Usually the SIJ order from the Juvenile or Probate and Family Court should be made before you turn 18.

**Step 2:** An immigration lawyer can take the order from the Juvenile or Probate and Family Court and ask the U.S. Government (United States Citizenship & Immigration Service or USCIS) to classify you as a “Special Immigrant Juvenile.” This step must be done before you turn 21.

**Step 3:** If that request is approved then you can apply to become a Legal Permanent Resident of the United States, and if approved, you will obtain your green card.

It is important that you ask for help from your lawyer and social worker if you are thinking about applying for Special Immigrant Juvenile classification.



**Tip:** If you are facing deportation from the United States, and you are able to obtain classification as a Special Immigrant Juvenile, the Special Immigrant Juvenile classification may protect you from being deported.

## What are some reasons for being deported?

If you do not have immigration documentation, you can be required to attend Immigration Court hearings. At Immigration Court, a Judge decides whether you are allowed to stay in the United States or order that you be deported to your home country. A Judge may order that you be deported to your home country if you entered the United States without permission from the U.S. Government or you entered the country legally, but stayed longer than you were allowed to. Also, the Judge may order you deported if you have committed certain crimes in the United States. If you find yourself in any of these situations, it is important that you attend all court hearings until your cases are resolved. Deportation is a very serious matter and you should not try to handle it by

yourself. Get the help of an experienced immigration lawyer to figure out what to do.

### If I am undocumented, Can I still attend college?

There is no law that says only United States citizens can attend college. However, some schools have different acceptance requirements for undocumented immigrants. You should research these policies before applying to a college to find out if the school requires proof of citizenship or legal residency in order to attend. Also, some financial aid (especially from the federal government) that helps pay for college for some foster care youth cannot be used by students who don't have documentation to be in this country.

### If I am undocumented, Can I still get in-state tuition?

You are not able to receive in-state tuition at public universities if you are in Massachusetts without any immigration documentation. Because of this, you must pay out-of-state tuition at public universities in our state. In some instances, financial aid or scholarships to private colleges or universities may be available. Such information as well as costs of different colleges and universities can be found on their websites.

### What is Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)?

DACA is a program that was started by President Obama in 2012. But in 2017, President Trump said he wanted to end the program. As of August 2018, if you do not already have DACA, you can not apply for DACA. If you have DACA, your status is valid until the date of expiration on your work authorization card and you may apply to renew your DACA status. Whether or not the program will end is still being decided. So the DACA rules may change. To learn more, you should speak to an immigration attorney. If you live in Massachusetts and have DACA, you continue to be eligible for in-state tuition.

**Tip: For more information about immigration rules, go to:**  
<http://www.masslegalhelp.org/immigration>.





## 10. PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

### Do I have the right to receive medical care while I am in DCF custody?

You absolutely have the right to receive physical and mental health care while in DCF custody. You have the right to have regular checkups, such as eye exams, physicals and vaccinations, as well as to be seen by a medical professional if you have any medical problems, injuries or need dental care. Within 30 days of entering foster care you should expect:

- Complete physical exam
- Dental assessment
- Mental health assessment.

If you need treatment, DCF will arrange for follow-up care including a specialist if that is what you need. Talk to your social worker or foster parent if you want to go to the doctor. Your caregiver should take you to your appointments or make sure you have transportation. If the medical care you need is more serious such as a surgery or any procedure that requires putting you to sleep, then your worker will get permission from the court.

### Can I receive medical or mental health care while I am in DCF custody without DCF permission?

If you are under 18 and in DCF custody, you should be involved in decisions about your care especially when it comes to medication. You may want to read: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/makinghealthychoices/>.

If you are under 18, you usually cannot receive routine medical or mental health care without DCF permission unless you

1. Are a parent or think you might be pregnant



2. Are a member of the armed forces
3. Want to be treated for problems with alcohol or drugs
4. Think you may need treatment for a sexually transmitted disease (STD)
5. Your doctor determines that you are a "Mature Minor" which gives you the power to make your own medical decisions or
6. It is an emergency

If you have a medical emergency or feel suicidal, get help immediately WITHOUT waiting for permission!

## How do I find out about or get birth control?

You do NOT need permission from DCF to find out about or get birth control. **See Chapter 12 on Pregnancy and Parenting at page 33.**

## What if I am sick or feel depressed?

You have the right to receive health care services including dental, mental and vision care. If you are 18 or older you may go by yourself to the doctor or mental health professional. If you are younger, contact your social worker or foster parent to arrange an appointment. Your caregiver should take you to your appointments or make sure you have transportation.

## Why do I get meds for controlling how I feel?

Sometimes your feelings or behavior are causing you so many problems that you need help. Help can come from therapy or counseling. Medication may be able to help, but if you don't like the way the medicine makes you feel, tell your social worker and lawyer.

If you are 16 or older, you can admit yourself to a mental health treatment facility. If you are placed in a hospital and are at least 16, you can ask to leave and the hospital must go to court to keep you.

You can also ask to be treated as an outpatient so you can continue living in the community while receiving treatment. You have the right to receive all treatment that is medically necessary including mental health treatment.

## What if I use drugs or drink too much?

If you experience cravings for alcohol or drugs, or often use, think about, or try to get drugs or alcohol, talk to your social worker or lawyer or call the substance use helpline at 1-800-327-5050. To find help in MA, call 866-705-2807. For free and confidential help with finding the right youth service program in

Massachusetts, call Central Intake and Care Coordination at 617-661-3991 or toll free at 866-705-2807.

Consider seeking help if your life begins to revolve around getting and using, or you have some other symptoms of addiction:

- having to use more to feel the same "high",
- fever, sweating or general discomfort when withdrawing from using,
- using more than you planned,
- unsuccessful attempts to quit,
- not going to school or work,
- spending money on drugs or alcohol that you need for food or rent, or
- continuing to use even though you know it is a serious problem.

## Can I have my own Health Records?

After the age of 14 you have the right to review or have a copy of any of your medical, dental, visual, and mental health records. Ask for them at the doctor's office or through email or by phone. Before you leave the office, be sure you:

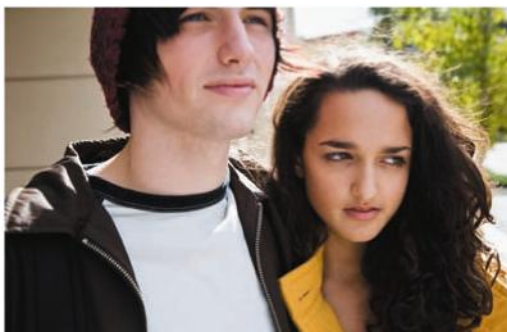
- Know the name and contact information for your doctor, dentist and counselor.
- Have a record of your medical history including your immunizations and any current prescriptions.
- Have a record of mental health assessments, treatments and prescriptions.

## What if I don't want anyone to see my health records?

In most cases you have the right to keep your health and mental health records private. You should talk to your lawyer before sharing your records with anyone. For more detailed information about confidentiality and sharing of health records see: <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/massachusetts-court-improvement-program-masscip>.

## What about health insurance with MassHealth?

All youth in DCF custody have MassHealth, health insurance that pays for your appointments. If you were in DCF custody when you turned 18, you should receive MassHealth until you turn 26 as long as you stay in Massachusetts. Be sure to give your social worker your new address when you leave DCF custody so MassHealth can mail you a new MassHealth card with a new number. Call MassHealth at 1-800-841-2900 for current information.



## 11. RELATIONSHIPS

### Should I still care about my birth family?

Just because you are in foster care does not mean that your parents do not love you or that they are bad people. When you were removed from your family, your parents may not have been emotionally, mentally, or otherwise stable enough to provide you with a home that provided for your safety and well-being. You have the right to see your parents and siblings unless it is not in your best interests. This includes in person, by phone or skype. See p. 2 for fuller discussion.

You can still love your parents and have affection, but you should also realize that your foster family also wants to provide you with love and care in the short- or long-term, which is why they opened up their home to you.

### What if I don't like my foster family?

It is important to let the foster family know how you are feeling and see if something can be worked out between you and your foster family. Also talk with your lawyer and social worker about possible options to resolve the situation.

### How do I create a better relationship with my foster family?

Respect them and talk to them about your thoughts and feelings. Relationships rely on respect and trust so improving these areas of your relationship with them is important. If you don't feel comfortable telling them directly how you feel, work with your social worker and/or lawyer to draft a letter detailing your feelings and expressing your thoughts.

### What is Domestic Violence?

The way you know if you are experiencing domestic violence is if your boyfriend, girlfriend, partner, or spouse has a pattern of:

- Trying to control your life
- Hitting or touching you in a bad way
- Making you have sex without you wanting to
- Breaking your stuff
- Telling you they are going to do something bad to you

## How do I know if I am in a healthy relationship?

Have fun in your relationship, but be SAFE! Be clear about what you want to avoid:

- mixed up thoughts,
- confused feelings, and
- bad outcomes

## What about sex?

Some teens choose not to have sex for religious, emotional or legal reasons. BE CLEAR! If you don't know someone well enough to talk about sex, you probably don't know the person well enough to have sex. Remember that the only guaranteed way to prevent having a baby is to NOT have sex.

## How can I feel better about myself?

Begin with your thoughts! Try to think positively about yourself and say kind words to yourself instead of negative ones. Instead of saying, "I can't do this" or "I am ugly," remind yourself, "I can do this!" and "I am beautiful!"

## TIPS TO FEEL BETTER ABOUT YOURSELF

- Do a good deed: Hold the door for someone or help someone in need.
- Boost your energy: Listen to good music or go for a little walk to get your energy flowing.
- Become an expert: Pick a random topic and research it on the web.
- Keep a resolution: Challenge yourself every morning to accomplish one thing by the end of the day.
- Make small gestures of kindness: Smile at strangers or ask someone how their day is going.
- Face a fear: Do something that you have put off or have been afraid to do.
- Make something by hand: Draw, paint, or express yourself creatively.



**Tip: Call 911 immediately if you don't feel safe. Tell your foster parent, guardian, social worker, lawyer, or counselor and work to create a safety plan. SafeLink Hotline is: 1-877-785-2020.**



## 12. PREGNANCY AND PARENTING

### How do I find out about or get birth control?

You can speak to your doctor, social worker, or go to a local family planning clinic. They can talk to you about abstinence or nonprescription and prescription birth control options. If you want someone to talk to about this you can call 1-800-230-PLAN. You do NOT need permission from DCF to find out about or get birth control, family planning, or pregnancy tests.

### What options do I have if I am pregnant?

If you are in DCF custody and believe you may be pregnant, are considering becoming pregnant, or are pregnant, you could think about: birth control, parenting, adoption or abortion. You have the right to make your own decisions about your own medical care and whether you want to become a parent or not. To find a family planning service provider or education and outreach program by zip code, go to: [www.plannedparenthood.org/teens](http://www.plannedparenthood.org/teens). If you ask for help getting services for a pregnancy, your social worker must provide you with information and if necessary, help you make arrangements and get to appointments.

## KEEPING THE BABY

### Do I need permission to keep the baby?

No. If you are pregnant, you do not need permission to parent the baby. You have the right to parent the baby even if you are under 18. You do not need

your parents' permission. You do not need permission from DCF.

### Does DCF offer any special services for pregnant and/or parenting teens?

Yes, DCF offers Teen Living Programs to girls aged 13 to 19 who are pregnant or have a child. For more information regarding the Teen Living Program call the Department of Children and Families (DCF) at (617) 748-2400.

### Can I be forced out of school if I am pregnant or parenting?

No, under the law the school cannot throw you out. You are able to stay in school whether you are pregnant or parenting.

## ADOPTION

### Do I need permission from my parent(s)/guardian(s) or DCF to put the baby up for adoption?

No. Your parent(s)/guardian(s) do not have to agree to the adoption; you don't even have to tell them. You do not need permission from DCF to put the baby up for adoption.

### Will DCF transfer me from my foster or group home if I am pregnant but planning to give up my child for adoption?

You will not have to move unless the place where you are staying cannot support you while you are pregnant or after you have a baby. Talk to your foster parents or social worker about how your pregnancy may or may not affect your living situation.

### Who can help me with adoption?

If you decide to have the baby adopted, you should discuss your options with your social worker, counselor, health care provider or a local family planning clinic, like Planned Parenthood, all of whom can provide you with information on adoption. You should talk to your lawyer or someone else you trust.

## ABORTION

### If I decide to get an abortion, and I am under the age of 18, what are my rights?

If you are **under** 18 and in DCF custody, you must go to a judge in Superior Court, not the judge on your Juvenile Court case, to get permission to have an

abortion. This website explains how to get a lawyer and the phone number to call: <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/planned-parenthood-massachusetts/online-health-center/judicial-bypass#attorney>.

If you are in DCF care because of a **voluntary placement agreement**, you can get permission from at least one parent or guardian. If you do not want to ask them or if they won't give permission, you can go to a judge for permission.

DCF can help you get information but **cannot** give you permission or represent you when asking the court to give you permission to have an abortion. You have the right to have a lawyer help you to get that permission.

### If I decide to get an abortion, and I am **over** the age of 18, what are my rights?

If you are **over** the age of 18, you do not need any permission to get an abortion despite being involved with DCF. You have the right to make your own medical decisions, including obtaining an abortion.

### Will my parent(s)/guardian(s) find out if I decide to have an abortion?

If you are under 18 and received a judge's permission to get an abortion, you can get the abortion without your parent(s)/guardian(s) being informed.

### How long can I wait until I get an abortion?

A pill can be used earlier in your pregnancy than an in-clinic abortion, usually up to 63 days (9 weeks). To learn more about abortion, visit Planned Parenthood at: <http://www.plannedparenthood.org/health-topics/abortion-4260.asp>.

### If my foster parents, biological parents, social worker or the biological father want me to get an abortion, do I have to?

**No!** The decision regarding how to handle your pregnancy is **YOURS**. You may choose to keep the baby or have an abortion. Nobody can take this choice away from you – not your parents, relatives, foster parents, your boyfriend or his family, or your social worker.

## FOR FATHERS

### If I think I may have made someone pregnant, do I have the right to know for sure?

Women have the right to keep this a secret. They can get an abortion without informing the father or suspected fathers. However, if a woman decides to give

birth to her child and you are legally found to be the father, you may have certain rights and responsibilities. You can file a paternity complaint after the baby is born if you want to be found to be the father.

## What can I do if I think I am the father of a child or a baby about to be born?

As long as you are the legal father—meaning, your name is on the birth certificate, you have the right to visit or live with your baby. You can also receive parenting services and support. The information provided below will help you understand your rights as a father while in DCF custody. However, if you have any questions, please talk to your social worker or your lawyer.

## PARENTING (for mothers and fathers)

### Will DCF transfer me from my foster or group home if I am pregnant and decide to parent my child?

You will not be forced to move unless the place where you are staying cannot support you while you are pregnant or when you have your baby. Talk to your foster parents or social worker about how your pregnancy could affect your living situation. If you have to move, you have the right to be placed with your baby.

### Can DCF take my baby away from me?

Your baby **does NOT** become a foster child just because you are in foster care. It depends on your ability to take care of your baby and keep your baby safe.

If you **abuse** or **neglect** your baby, or fail to take care of your baby (this could include running away, not getting the services you need to safely parent, or leaving your baby with someone who is not responsible), then DCF may take your baby out of your care. However, you and your lawyer can fight to get your baby back. Just keep in mind that, depending on your circumstances, you may not always be able to win back custody of your child.

Plans for safe care for you and your baby must be made in cases of infants who were exposed to drugs before birth or who are affected by Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. Plans developed with input from the parent and caregivers must ensure safety and well-being of the baby and provide referrals for appropriate services for the baby and parent.

### Can I be forced out of school if I am parenting?

No, under law the school cannot throw you out because you are parenting.



## Who will take care of my child while I'm in school?

There are programs that can help you with child care while you are in school. Talk to your social worker and your lawyer for help with child care.

## Is there any financial assistance available to teen parents?

If you are a teen parent, you may be eligible for **Transitional Assistance to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC)**, a program for families who don't earn enough to provide for the basic needs of their children.

TAFDC gives cash benefits to families with dependent children and to pregnant women in the last four months of pregnancy if they meet certain requirements.

**To find out if you are eligible for TAFDC, call 1-800-249-2007 or go to:**

<http://www.mass.gov/dta/assistance>.

## What is child support?

Child support is money paid by the parent who does not live with the child. The parent who lives with the child uses the money to take care of the child.

## How can I apply for child support?

If you are not receiving child support from the other parent of the baby, you can go the Department of Revenue and request child support. They will then file the complaint in court and do not charge for the service.

***If you are out of DCF care and receiving cash assistance (TAFDC), you may not receive the child support money directly. It will go to the welfare department to pay it back for the money it is paying you for cash assistance. That means, since you are getting money from the state (through TAFDC), the state will take the child support money in exchange. Usually, the money you get from the state is more than what you'd get from child support, so this is typically the better deal.***

## Can I be asked to pay child support?

Whether you are in DCF custody or not, you can be asked to pay child support if the baby doesn't live with you. It doesn't matter if you're under 18 years old and still in high school or whether you are the mother or the father of the baby.

## If I cannot pay child support, can I still see my child?

In Massachusetts, the order for child support is separate from the visitation order. Even if you have little or no income, you may still have visitation rights, although a judge may order you to increase your child support if you are able.

Talk to your social worker or lawyer about your options.



## 13. LEAVING DCF CARE

**If I do not sign on with DCF when I turn 18, do I have to do any of this planning stuff?**

Yes! When you are 18, you are a legal adult and can decide not to accept DCF services. However, it will only benefit you to participate in transition planning. You don't have to accept or follow the plan after your case closes, but it will benefit you to know what resources are available. For more information from a national resource on what should be in a transition plan, see the following:

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/foster-care/youth-transition-toolkit.pdf>.

If you tell your social worker you do not want to sign on with DCF when you turn 18, or if you're leaving DCF after turning 18, your social worker has to work with you to create a transition plan. Your plan must include where you will live and your plans to support yourself. Your lawyer can help you negotiate with DCF about what the transition plan includes. The judge must review and decide whether to agree to this transition plan.

**Will DCF still give me any services or help if I leave?**

DCF has the Discharge Support Program to help young people who plan to leave DCF care. DCF offices have an Adolescent Outreach Worker or Outreach Supervisor to help you find the services you need even if you do not plan to be in DCF care after you turn 18. As long as you were in DCF care when you turned 18, you can work with an Adolescent Outreach Worker until age 21. For more information on signing on with DCF, see the chapter, "TURNING 18" at p. 14.

**What can I get from the Discharge Support Program?**

In some cases, young adults can receive money for a security deposit, first and last month's rent, or initial utilities if you are leaving care and moving into an

apartment. The Discharge Support Program is run by the DCF Adolescent Outreach Workers.

## What can I get from the Adolescent Outreach Program?

The Adolescent Outreach Program consists of transition specialists known as Adolescent Outreach Workers and other staff. They are different from DCF caseworkers, but your social worker can connect you with an Adolescent Outreach Worker. DCF works with community partners to help you gain employment experience and can provide a stipend in support of internships in the community. DCF Outreach Workers can assist you in locating and keeping employment. You can receive:

- ✓ Help from an **Adolescent Outreach Worker or your social worker** to find a job, housing, health care, and other life skills training and services you may need
- ✓ Help applying and paying for college, a job training or certificate program
- ✓ Money to pay for things like t-passes, clothing, rent and furniture
- ✓ Help finding internships and jobs and keeping them.

## What are My Sources of Income on Leaving DCF Care?

- Working full time: \$\_\_\_\_\_
- Working Part-Time \$\_\_\_\_\_
- SSDA/SSI: \$\_\_\_\_\_
- TAFDC (welfare if parent) \$\_\_\_\_\_
- Food Stamps (SNAP) \$\_\_\_\_\_
- Inheritance/Trust \$\_\_\_\_\_
- Savings \$\_\_\_\_\_

## Checklist of things to do before leaving DCF

- Do you know when your final permanency planning hearing is?
- Have you discussed your transition plan with your lawyer and social worker?
- Have you located safe housing that you have enough money to pay for?
- Who are the adults you want to stay in touch with? Do you know how to reach them? Put phone numbers on 'My Contacts' at front of this book. Have you talked to your lawyer or social worker if you want a long-term mentor?
- Do you have contact information for any sisters or brothers that are in care?
- Do you have your important documents like your photo I.D., social security card, credit report, birth certificate, school records, medical records, prescriptions and medication information, immigration documents and record of being in DCF care?
- Do you have the name and phone for your lawyer, doctor, or other service provider?
- Have you updated your address for all of your bills (credit card, cell phone, etc.), MassHealth, and benefits (TANF, WIC, Social Security, and other state sources of money) AND given your social worker that address PLUS a backup address?
- Do you have health insurance through MassHealth, your job or your college and do you have your insurance card?
- Have you found out where the local health services clinics are?
- Are you enrolled in the school program that you want to be in or know how to look for or keep a job?
- Have you completed your FAFSA form and applied for financial aid if you are going to college or a training school? See: <http://www.fafsa.ed.gov>.
- Do you know what services /state benefits you can get after you leave DCF?
- If you have a disability, have you applied for adult Social Security Income (SSI) disability benefits, changed the payee for the benefits you already have for adult services from the Department of Mental Health (DMH), the Department of Developmental Services (DDS) or the Mass. Rehabilitation? See: <https://www.ssa.gov>.
- Do you have a bank account at a bank with offices or ATMs near where you live and do you understand how to use your account?
- Do you know where to get help if you have a problem with immigration?
- If you are a U.S. citizen, have you registered to vote? See: <https://www.sec.state.ma.us/ele/eleifv/howreg.htm>.
- If you are a male citizen or immigrant male, have you registered for the draft? See: <https://www.sss.gov/RegVer/wfRegistration.aspx>.
- Do you have the information needed to file taxes or know someone to help you?

## What is the Massachusetts Network of Foster Care Alumni?

Stay connected with other current/ former foster youth through the Massachusetts Network of Foster Care Alumni (MassNFCA)! You can never have too many connections on your road to success. Behind every success story, there stands at least one amazing person and several extraordinary opportunities.

The Perks:

- "I need to know I can make it." MassNFCA exists to show those who have experienced foster care that you're not alone.
- Creates opportunity for current and former foster youth in the areas of education, employment, service and leadership.

You're an alum of foster care if: You are 18 or older and have been in foster care for any period of time in your life in any U.S. state or country in the world. MassNFCA describes "foster care" as a process in which a government or a social service agency removes a person from the care of their biological parents or caregiver and places them in different settings. These can include foster homes and group care settings. "Kinship care" is placement with a relative or family member such as grandparents. "Foster care alumni" may also have been reunified which means a person returns to the home they were removed from after foster care. "Alumni" may also have been placed in a guardianship or adopted following time in "foster care" or continued with DCF after the age of 18.

MassNFCA members welcome foster care alumni and friends of foster care! Friends of foster care are people that care about people who have experienced foster care. Join alumni and friends of foster care in building a network of intergenerational support and opportunities for alumni of all ages. Go to [www.MassNFCA.org](http://www.MassNFCA.org).

## 14. CONTACT INFORMATION

### **Attorneys for Children/Young Adults:**

Committee for Public Counsel Services: 617- 482-6212

Children's Law Center of Massachusetts: 1-888-543-5298

### **Substance Use Helpline: 1-800-327-5050**

### **Planned Parenthood Hotline: 1-800-230-PLAN**

### **MA Network of Foster Care Alumni – [www.massnfca.org](http://www.massnfca.org)**

### **Domestic Violence Helpline: STATEWIDE**

Jane Doe, Inc.: Coalition Against DV: 877-785-2020

Spanish Domestic Violence Hotline: 800-223-5001

Mass. Victim Compensation & Assistance: 617-727-2200

Mass Office for Victim Assistance: 617-727-5200

Dept. of Corrections Victim Services Unit: 866-6-VICTIM

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## **Massachusetts Department of Children and Families**

### **DCF Central Office**

Linda Spears, Commissioner  
600 Washington Street  
Boston, MA 02111  
617-748-2000

### **DCF Teen Living Program**

617- 748-2400

### **Adolescent Outreach**

Michelle Banks, Program Supervisor  
617-748-2232

Website: [www.mass.gov/dcf](http://www.mass.gov/dcf)

### **DCF BOSTON REGION OFFICE**

451 Blue Hill Avenue, 2nd Floor

Dorchester, MA 02121

(617) 989-9200

fax (617) 989-9250

### **Dimock Street Area Office**

30 Dimock St.

Roxbury, MA 02119

(617) 989-2800

fax (617) 445-9147

### **Harbor Area Office**

80 Everett Avenue, Suite 100

Chelsea, MA 02150

(617) 660-3400

fax (617) 884-0215

### **Hyde Park Area Office**

1530 River St.

Hyde Park, MA 02136

(617) 363-5000

fax (617) 363-5175

### **Park Street Area Office**

The Esquire Building

50B Park St.

Dorchester, MA 02122

(617) 822-4700

fax (617) 282-1019

## **DCF SOUTHERN REGION**

### **Regional Office**

110 Mulberry Street  
Brockton, MA 02302  
(508) 894-3700  
fax (508) 559-7878

### **Arlington Area Office**

30 Mystic St.  
Arlington, MA 02474  
(781) 641-8500  
fax (781) 646-5172

### **Coastal Area Office**

220 Forbes Rd. Ste.117, Rear.  
Braintree, MA 02184  
(781) 794-4400  
fax (781) 794-4507 or 4510

### **Cape Cod and Islands Area Office**

500 Main St.  
Hyannis, MA 02601  
(508) 760-0200  
fax (508) 790-3006

### **Plymouth Area Office**

61 Industrial Park Road  
Plymouth, MA 02360  
(508) 732-6200  
fax (508) 747-1239

### **Fall River Area Office**

1561 North Main St.  
Fall River, MA 02720  
(508) 235-9800  
fax (508) 672-5404

### **New Bedford Area Office**

651 Orchard St.  
Suite 400  
New Bedford, MA 02744  
(508) 910-1000  
fax (508) 990-7321

### **Taunton/Attleboro Area Office**

1 Washington St., Suite 21  
Taunton, MA 02780  
(508) 821-7000  
fax (508) 822-1453

### **Brockton Area Office**

110 Mulberry St.  
Brockton, MA 02302  
(508) 894-3700  
fax (508) 559-7695

## DCF NORTHERN REGION

### Regional Office

280 Merrimack St.  
2nd Floor  
Lawrence, MA 01843  
(978) 557-2700  
fax (978) 557-9231

### Area Offices

#### Lowell Area Office

33 East Merrimack St.  
Lowell, MA 01852  
(978) 275-6800  
fax (978) 452-5896

#### Framingham Area Office

300 Howard St.  
Framingham, MA 01702  
(508) 424-0100  
fax (508) 872-8340

#### Haverhill Area Office:

3Ferry St.  
Bradford, MA 01835  
(978) 469-8800  
fax (978) 469-8990

#### Lawrence Area Office

280 Merrimack St,  
2nd Floor  
Lawrence, MA 01843  
(978) 557-2500  
fax (978) 683-7455

#### Cambridge Area Office

810Memorial Drive  
Cambridge, MA 02139  
(617) 520-8700  
fax (617) 354-0243

#### Malden Area Office

22 Pleasant St.  
Malden, MA 02148  
(781) 388-7100  
fax (781) 324-2209

#### Salem Area Office

45 Congress St., Building 4  
Salem, MA 01970  
(978) 825-3800  
fax (978) 825-9091

#### Lynn Area Office

330 Lynnway-Suite 201.  
Lynn, MA 01901  
(781) 477-1600  
fax (781) 592-3380



## **DCF WESTERN REGION**

### **Regional Office**

140 High St., 5th Floor  
Springfield, MA 01105  
(413) 452-3350  
fax (413) 781-4482

### **Area Offices :**

#### **Greenfield Area Office**

143 Munson St., Unit 4  
Greenfield, MA 01301  
(413) 775-5000  
fax (413) 773-5773

#### **Holyoke Area Office**

261 High Street  
Holyoke, MA 01040  
(413) 493-2600  
fax (413) 533-9355

#### **Springfield Area Office**

140 High St., 4th Floor  
Springfield, MA 01105  
(413) 452-3200  
fax (413) 739-5851

#### **Robert Van Wart Center**

112 Industry Avenue  
Springfield, MA 01104  
(413) 205-0500  
fax (413) 205-0650

#### **Pittsfield Area Office**

73 Eagle St., 2nd Floor  
Pittsfield, MA 01201  
(413) 236-1800  
fax (413) 445-4507

## **DCF CENTRAL REGION**

### **Regional Office**

13 Sudbury Street  
Worcester, MA 01609  
(508) 929-2130  
fax (508) 754-0420

### **Area Offices**

#### **Worcester West Area Office**

13 Sudbury Street.  
Worcester, MA 01609  
(508) 929-2000  
fax (508) 929-2161

#### **Worcester East Area Office**

151 West Boylston Drive  
Worcester, MA 01606  
(508) 793-8000  
fax (508) 754-9803

#### **South Central Area Office**

185 Church St.  
Whitinsville, MA 01588  
(508) 929-1000  
fax (508) 929-1100

#### **North Central Area Office**

690 Mechanic St., Suite 100  
Leominster, MA 01453  
(978) 353-3600  
fax (978) 353-3800

## 15. FOSTER CHILD BILL OF RIGHTS

**Preamble:** The Department of Children and Families recognizes the following rights of children and youth in foster care. These rights are intended to guide the Department and its providers in the delivery of care and services to foster youth with the commitment to permanency, safety and well-being. This Bill of Rights was developed by the Department's Youth Advisory Board.

### Every Foster Child:

- Shall be treated with respect by DCF staff, foster parents and providers without regard to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion and/or disability.
- Shall have family and relatives explored first as potential placement providers.
- Shall have reasonable access to a caseworker who makes case plan decisions. Reasonable access shall include the social worker and supervisor's office telephone numbers and email addresses as well as, a minimum, monthly visits by social worker.
- Shall participate in the development and review of the service plan and have input into changes to the plan that affect permanence, safety, stability or well-being. Youth age 14 and older should also be presented with the service plan for their review and signature.
- Shall be informed in a manner appropriate to age and level of understanding of the reason(s) the Department of Children and Families became involved with his/her family and why he/she is in care.
- Shall be included in the Foster Care Review meeting, Permanency Hearing and Lead Agency Team meeting if age 14 and older, unless documented by court order or service plan that participation would be detrimental to the youth. If the youth is unable to attend in person, he/she shall have the right to submit a written statement to be considered at the meeting.
- Shall be provided with information about a foster family or program and, whenever possible, Shall have an opportunity to meet the foster parent or program staff before placement occurs.
- Shall live with a family and in placement settings that provide a safe and nurturing environment while supporting permanency, and well-being, including encouraging youth's goals, interests, social and school activities.

- Shall have involvement as appropriate with family members and siblings and should participate in the development of visitation plans.
- Shall receive support from social worker, foster family/provider in maintaining positive contact with significant people (relatives, teachers, friends and community supports) including assistance with contact information and visitation.
- Shall be treated as a family member and, whenever possible, be included in a foster family's activities, holidays and rituals and be able to freely discuss reason(s) with social worker and foster family if choosing to not participate.
- Shall have access to medical, dental, vision, mental and behavioral health services regularly and more often as needed.
- Shall have access to information contained in medical, dental, and educational records held by DCF as well as personal documents such as social security card, birth certificate, green card, etc. When youth leave DCF, they shall be given copies of medical, dental and educational records held by DCF and original social security card, birth certificate, and green card.
- Shall have the opportunity to have private conversations with social worker on a regular basis. Foster youth should also be made aware of the process for contacting the supervisor and attorney regarding any questions or concerns.
- Shall be informed of the names and phone numbers of assigned attorneys and be aware that they can contact their attorneys and that there is a process to request a change of attorneys.
- Shall have access to personal possessions, personal space and privacy with allowance for safety.
- Shall receive assistance in acquiring life skills, education, training and career guidance to accomplish personal goals and prepare for the future and be informed of the post-secondary educational and employment supports available to youth in care through the Department.
- Shall be informed that DCF provides clothing, birthday and holiday payments to foster parents and placement providers for youth in placement.

## 16. SIBLING BILL OF RIGHTS

**Preamble:** The Massachusetts Department of Children and Families recognizes the importance and value of sibling relationships. These rights are intended to guide the Department and our providers in the delivery of care and services to foster youth with the commitment to permanency, safety and well-being. This Bill of Rights was developed by the New England Youth Coalition with the support of this the New England Association of Child Welfare Commissioners and Directors.

**Whereas:** the importance of sibling relationships are recognized and respected;

**Whereas:** sibling relationships provide needed continuity and stability during a child's placement;

**Whereas:** the sibling bond is unique and separate from the parent-child bond, and may include relations with people not linked by blood;

**Whereas:** siblings share similar history, heritage, culture and often biology that must be preserved;

**Whereas:** sibling separation is a significant and distinct loss that must be repaired by frequent and regular contact;

**Whereas:** every foster child deserves the right to know and be actively involved in his/her siblings' lives absent extraordinary circumstances.

### Every Foster Child:

1. Shall be placed with siblings.
2. Shall be in close proximity to siblings if unable to be in same setting to facilitate frequent and meaningful contact.
3. Shall be afforded contact with siblings regardless of geographic barriers. The methods for contact should be outlined in the child's service plan.
4. Shall be actively involved in his/her siblings' lives and share celebrations including birthdays, holidays, graduations, and meaningful milestones.
5. Shall maintain consistent and regular contact that will be included in service planning.

6. Shall be included in permanency planning decisions relative to his/her siblings. Foster children should know what the expectations are for continued contact when a sibling is adopted or guardianed.
7. Shall be notified by the Child Welfare agency or its agents regarding a sibling's change of placement.
8. Shall be informed when a sibling is discharged from foster care. Alumni shall be allowed to maintain contact with a sibling who remains in state care.
9. Shall be supported by the Child Welfare agency in his/her efforts to maintain relationships with siblings who are not in care or have been adopted or guardianed. The Department shall facilitate such contact as appropriate.
10. Shall have predictable, regular contact with siblings that shall not be withheld as a behavioral consequence absent safety concerns.

## 17. IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS YOU SHOULD HAVE

**Birth certificate:** When you are in DCF custody, you should be able to get your original or a copy of your birth certificate from your social worker. Once you are out of DCF custody, DCF should give you the original birth certificate.

**Social security card:** If you are in DCF custody and have a social security card already, DCF should give you the original or a copy when you need it. If you never had a card or cannot find your card, you can apply for an original or a replacement card. Ask your DCF social worker for help before you turn 18 or go to: [http:// www.ssa.gov/ss5doc/](http://www.ssa.gov/ss5doc/).

**MassHealth card:** If DCF does not have a MassHealth card for you, you can get a replacement by calling MassHealth Enrollment Center at **1-888-665-9993**.

**Medical records:** If DCF does not have copies of your medical records, call your latest doctor or the doctor with the medical information you want to find out how you can get copies from them. You have a right to all of your medical records but will probably have to request them in writing.

**DCF records:** You have a right to all of your DCF records. DCF should provide you with all of your records if you give/send/fax a request in writing to the attention of the Director of Areas where your social worker works.

**School records:** You will want your high school diploma or GED certificate or the record of the classes you took and passed. Ask your latest school for this or ask your lawyer or social worker for help getting these records.

**Green card, work permit or other documents from immigration:** If you are not a citizen of the US, be sure to obtain your Green Card, work permit or other documents from immigration and keep these in a safe place. If you lose your green card you can apply for a replacement. Ask your DCF social worker for help or go to <http://www.uscis.gov/i-90>.



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