Pregnant and Parenting Youth in Foster Care
Introduction: Improving Services and Supports to Young Parents and their Children
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Adolescent parents face multiple obstacles balancing their own transition to adulthood with raising a child. For young people in the foster care system and those who have recently “aged out” of care, the challenges are great and the resources available to help are frequently scarce. To bring attention to the needs of pregnant and parenting youth in foster care, the Center for the Study of Social Policy, with funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, explored policies and practices states currently have in place with the goal of assessing their adequacy and developing a more comprehensive approach for effectively serving these youth and their young children.

While we know that youth in foster care have high rates of pregnancy compared to young persons not in care, there is limited information available on the exact extent of pregnancy among foster youth. The Chapin Hall Midwest Study, a longitudinal study of young people transitioning out of foster care in Wisconsin, Iowa and Illinois, was among the first research studies to highlight the prevalence of pregnancy within the foster care. The evaluation determined that by age 17 or 18, young women in foster care in those states were more than twice as likely to have ever been pregnant in comparison to their peers (33 percent versus 14 percent). By age 19, young women in the Midwest Study were 2.5 times more likely than their peers were to have ever been pregnant (51 percent versus 20 percent). Moreover, nearly half of the young women in the Midwest Study who had been pregnant by age 19 had been pregnant more than once. As a consequence of their early childbearing, far too many of the young women in the Midwest Study were raising children as single parents without the ability to support themselves financially. The evaluation also revealed that by age 21, 49 percent of young men in foster care had gotten a female pregnant, in comparison to 19 percent of their peers.

The reasons why young women in care are more likely to become pregnant in comparison to youth not in care are not surprising. For many, the lack of stability and connectedness with family and caring individuals leave them looking to create a much desired bond with others. According to the study conducted by the Uhlich Children’s Advantage Network (UCAN) and the National Campaign to Prevent Pregnancy, for some youth having a child is an opportunity to create the family they did not have or to fill an emotional void. For others, the combination of a lack of knowledge, the inability to access sexual and reproductive health services, and a higher rate of sex at a young age contributes to the elevated rate of pregnancy.

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1 By age 19, some of the young women were no longer in foster care.
4 Love LT et al., Fostering Hope: Preventing Teen Pregnancy Among Youth in Foster Care, Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2005.
Regardless of the circumstances surrounding the pregnancy, many adolescent parents, especially those in foster care, are ill prepared and, as a result, have less successful outcomes than their peers who postpone parenthood until they are older. Researchers at Chapin Hall found that only 44 percent of the pregnant and parenting foster youth in Illinois had a high school diploma or GED when they exited care. Moreover, having more than one child was a significant barrier to educational attainment; each additional child reduced the odds of having a high school diploma or GED by 45 percent. This study also found that the children of youth in foster care are an especially vulnerable population. Twenty-two percent of the young mothers were investigated for child abuse or neglect and 11 percent had a child placed in foster care. 5 With this information, CSSP has identified desired results and indicators for youth in foster care, and their children to drive policy change and an improved service delivery model.

Young Mothers and Fathers in Foster Care and their Children are:

Healthy
- Young parents are free of substance abuse or addiction.
- Babies are born full-term and without drug exposure.
- Youth and their children meet appropriate developmental milestones.
- Youth and their children have positive peer relationships.
- Youth who are already parents do not experience a subsequent birth while in care.

Successful in School
- Youth are performing at grade level.
- Youth do not drop out of high school.
- Youth complete high school or an alternative equivalency program.
- Youth enter and complete college.
- Youth obtain a secondary credential and have access to employment.
- Children are enrolled in a preschool or early care and education program.
- Children meet educational milestones.

Safe in Their Families and Communities
- Young parents are placed with their children.
- Children, youth, and families are free of abuse or neglect.
- Youth and their children have stable placements while in care and are safely reunified or placed with permanent families.
- Youth and their children are connected to safe, stable, and affordable housing.
- Youth are connected to a family or other permanent caring adult.

The challenges to improving these outcomes are as multi-faceted as the needs of the population. Adolescent parents in foster care must secure a permanent home for themselves and their baby and find guidance and supports to successfully parent their child. Like all young parents, they also struggle to find high quality childcare to pursue educational and job opportunities and attain the skills needed for financial security. Securing resources and establishing this stability requires that adolescent parents have stable homes and relationships and are helped to build resiliency and protective capacities to offset the risks of poverty, abuse and neglect, homelessness and poor outcomes for themselves and their children.

In response to these challenges, CSSP has begun to assemble background information which can be used by federal, state and local partners and the philanthropic community to devise and begin to implement effective strategies. CSSP’s purpose in assembling these materials is to provide preliminary recommendations and a beginning set of tools for states interested in assessing their current policies and programs and developing new or additional approaches to serving this especially vulnerable population. The recommendations grow out of a year-long effort to examine and evaluate what states and localities are currently doing to serve this population. Equally importantly, the recommendations build on conversations and interviews with national, state and local experts. Coupled with a review of the research, this year-long effort helped to identify gaps in service delivery that must be remedied to adequately help these young parents and their children.

CSSP intends to partner with selected states, jurisdictions and/or tribes over the next two years through the creation of a Pregnant and Parenting Youth National Peer Network. By partnering with jurisdictions there is the opportunity to explore the feasibility of these recommendations, identify additional ones, eliminate any that seem impractical, and sharpen a final list of program and policy recommendations for the field. The compendium of resources that CSSP has developed thus far has two components:

- **Part I: A Guide To Service Improvements for Pregnant and Parenting Youth in Foster Care**

  The purpose of this guide is to provide policy and program recommendations for state and local administrators and practitioners. It is divided into five domains: State Infrastructure for Service Delivery, Financing, Monitoring and Accountability; Legal Rights, Placement and Permanency; Physical, Socio-Emotional Health and Well-being; Education and Self-sufficiency; and Engagement of Fathers. In addition to the recommendations, each section of the guide includes spotlights on programs and resources that exemplify best practice, and highlights current, progressive State policy. Finally, each section includes a self-assessment checklist that States and localities can use to assess their current policy and practice and make choices for future action. In the coming year, CSSP intends to use the guide to stimulate work in several states to develop a more comprehensive set of policies and strategies to address the needs of pregnant and parenting youth in foster care. Implementing the recommendations cannot be
accomplished by the child welfare system in isolation but will require the creation of strategic partnerships with other public agencies, the courts, youth, resource parents, foster care alumni, community based agencies and the employment and business community. More work is also needed to collect accurate current data on the number of pregnant and parenting youth in foster care by state and nationally and to use this data to drive outcome-based practices for serving this population.

- **Part II: A Guide on Effective Programs, Curricula and Other Resources**

This document is an organized and annotated list of best practices, evidence-based and informed programs and training curricula for serving pregnant and parenting youth and their children. Because there are so few evidence-based programs specifically geared toward pregnant and parenting youth in foster care, the resource guide includes information on effective programs that could be adapted to meet the needs of this population. The purpose of this guide is to equip practitioners and administrators with a user-friendly, useful summary of existing resources and programs so that they may begin implementing the recommendations found in Part I: A Guide to Service Improvements for Pregnant and Parenting Youth.

It is clear that in spite of the multiple service delivery challenges, improving outcomes for this population is a critical agenda with significant potential benefits. Recent research on brain development and infant, child, and youth well-being highlights that this is a critical juncture for young parents in foster care as well as their newborn children. If these young parents and families can be supported to be successful, they can achieve their own goals of connectedness, independence and self-sufficiency. In addition, whether the child is born healthy, experiences normal brain development, is able to form a strong attachment with his or her parents, or is exposed to maltreatment at an early age, will have a life-long impact on the child.

All youth in foster care, including those that are pregnant or parenting, possess the strengths and capacities to overcome complex trauma and to be successful individuals and parents. Child welfare systems, therefore, have a special responsibility to properly equip them with developmentally appropriate supports that enable them to do so. Focusing on the twin sets of needs—of the young parent and of their children—will not only benefit the individuals being served, but will likely affect the child welfare system and society at large. Investing in young families, and specifically targeting those in foster care, means reaching those individuals that are most disadvantaged. Educated foster youth can become active, self-sufficient citizens and prepared employees. Young parents and their children who experience well-being will reinvest their knowledge and income back into their families and communities. The rationale for taking a multigenerational approach to meet the needs of the young adults in foster care who are about to become, or are already parents, and their children is clear; helping youth to achieve stability, to become connected to caring adults, and to achieve educational and economic success becomes the platform for supporting their desires to become caring, supportive and effective parents for their children, thereby creating healthy families for the future.