

**Transitioning from State Care to Independent Adulthood:
Improving Outcomes for Girls Leaving Congregate Care
at Bethany Children's Home**

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We dedicate this work to all the Bethany youth, the staff and administrators, and the former Bethany residents who shared their lived experiences with us for this project.

Our hope is that this study will serve to improve the lives of other youth who enter Bethany Children's Home in the future. Your stories will live forever in our hearts.

- Daphne Klahr and Christina Perry

Vanderbilt University

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Abstract

Bethany Children's Home in Womelsdorf, Pennsylvania, is a congregate care facility providing shelter and care to youth who have been removed from their primary home. Bethany residents, as foster youth, face extraordinary challenges in their transition to adulthood compared to their peers: they are more likely to live below the poverty level, are less likely to enroll in or complete college, and are disproportionately affected by substance abuse, homelessness, and mental health disorders. This quality improvement project seeks to improve life outcomes for Bethany residents by examining the conditions that lead to success for youth aging out of care and recommending aftercare programming and interventions that ease transitions to adulthood. We used a mixed-method approach, interviewing current and former Bethany residents, administrators, and staff to understand residents' experiences in six areas: education, social connection, finances, housing, health, and justice involvement. We aligned interviewee responses with dimensions of positive identity development and triangulated our findings with records Bethany keeps on residents' time in care and outcomes at departure. We found that while residents receive tangible supports in the forms of housing, education, financial support, and work experience, they often lack intangible supports that promote self-esteem, sense of purpose, and social inclusion. Residents expressed feelings of stigmatization in the community, a desire for consistency and continuity in their housing and support network, and a lack of understanding of what healthy relationships look like. Many endured abusive relationships and faced housing instability after leaving care. Feelings of being a number in the system and having little control over their lives were common. We recommend several measures to develop youths' sense of agency and provide a supportive network for those leaving care: (1) evaluating and modifying housing and transportation practices that may be stigmatizing; (2) engaging youth in planning their care and transition to adulthood; (3) adopting mentoring programs or activities that build healthy relationships; (4) hiring a transition coordinator to guide youth and serve as a source of ongoing support; (5) increasing access to mental health care and performing mental health assessments; and (6) implementing intensive life skills training to raise youths' self-efficacy.

About Bethany Children's Home

Bethany Children's Home ("Bethany") in Womelsdorf, PA, is a congregate care home that provides shelter and care to youth in grades K-12. A congregate care home is a licensed or approved setting that provides 24-hour care for children in a group home (7-12 children) or an institution (12 or more children). These settings may include a childcare institution, a residential treatment facility or a maternity home (Brown, 2022). In addition to providing housing, Bethany offers individual and family counseling services, recreation programming, cultural services, and emotional support to kids who have experienced the loss of a parent(s) or were removed from their primary home for various reasons. Bethany employs a range of professional and semi-professional positions, including case managers, medical personnel, education programming specialists, house parents, safety officers, and youth workers.

Area of Inquiry

In the United States, over 400,000 children live in out-of-home placements (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022; Pennsylvania State Resource Family Association, 2021). Out-of-home placement (OoHP) includes youth placed in non-relative foster family homes, relative or kinship care, foster family homes, group or congregate care homes, institutions, pre-adoptive homes, runaway, supervised independent living, and trial home visit (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022). Youth ranging in ages from birth to 21 are placed in care due to abuse, neglect, or abandonment by their parents or guardians. In Pennsylvania (PA), between 13,000 – 15,000 children live in OoHP's (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022; Pennsylvania State Resource Family Association, 2021) including 1,631 in institutions or congregate care homes like Bethany Children's

Home. Each year, thousands of those kids "age out" of the system. "Aging out" in Pennsylvania refers to youth who at age 23 lose valuable government benefits such as housing and food security, transportation, and healthcare (LawInfo, 2021; Osgood et al., 2010). Only in recent years have those benefits been offered to young people up to 23 years old; prior to the July 1, 2020 change in policy by the Department of Health and Human Services, foster youth in Pennsylvania officially aged out on their 21st birthday (James, 2020).

Youth who reside in congregate care homes are considered foster youth, a group which faces extraordinary challenges compared to the general population. Research on the living conditions of vulnerable populations shows that former foster youth, homeless youth, and young adults involved in the juvenile justice system are likely to live below the poverty level, to have trouble paying bills and other expenses, and to depend on public assistance (Osgood et al., 2010). Research studies have reported that 1 in 4 foster youth will be arrested within three years of going through the system (Geenen & Powers, 2007). Less than 3% will graduate from a four-year college despite being guaranteed a free college education under current state regulations (Greeson, 2021). Further, foster youth are disproportionately affected by substance abuse, homelessness, and mental health disorders (Aud et al., 2011; Collins, 2001; Yi & Wildeman, 2018). The current body of knowledge recognizes the challenges that foster youth face, both in and out of the foster care system.

Not surprisingly, Bethany faces the same issues that plague the foster care system overall – youth who leave state care struggle to find jobs, obtain post-secondary education, and support themselves without traditional family support systems in place

(Youth.gov, 2010). One of the researchers of this project has worked directly with youth at Bethany Children's Home since 2015 and has witnessed the struggle and difficulties that kids encounter when leaving care without a robust support system in place. Important milestones that one might consider relatively easy to achieve – like learning to drive a car or applying to college – represent significant hurdles that are hard to overcome for foster children (Bornman et al., 2020).

In Pennsylvania, the foster care system is county-administered, and state supervised; policies originate from the youth's residential county of origin, creating disparities in opportunities within the state foster care system. Disparities that exist from county-to-county include housing and car allowances, employment requirements, and healthcare. There are even more significant disparities in foster care policies between states. Purview to make decisions regarding foster youth in Berks County, PA is the responsibility of Berks County Children and Youth, the agency that oversees policies at Bethany.

Care for foster children is mandated at the federal level, and the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) was established in 2008 (implemented in 2010) by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) as a data collection system by which the federal government could track and assess States' performance in operating their independent living programs that are funded through the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP). As part of that data collection, states collect information and outcomes about youth in care who are receiving independent living services through CFCIP, and additionally track the long-term outcomes and demographic information for certain youth in care to make future improvements to the

CFCIP. In Pennsylvania, individual counties are responsible for tracking outcomes for youth in care and reporting that data to the state. For an overview of the CFCIP law and reporting system, please refer to Table 1 below.

Table 1

Chafee Foster Care Independence Program reporting requirements

Name	Established	Purpose	Additional Notes
Administration for Children and Families (ACF)	April 15, 1991	The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) was created under the authority of section 6 of the Reorganization Plan No. 1 of 1953 to promote the economic and social well-being of families, children, individuals, and communities through a range of educational and supportive programs in partnership with states, tribes, and community organizations.	ACF also advises Secretary of Health and Human Services on issues pertaining to children, youth, and families. These issues include child support enforcement, child welfare, childcare, family assistance, Native American assistance, refugee resettlement, and more.
John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act (CFCIP)	December 1999	Public Law 106-169 established the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP) at section 477 of the Social Security Act, providing States with flexible funding to carry out programs that assist youth in making the transition from foster care to self-sufficiency.	The law also requires ACF to develop a data collection system to track the independent living services States provide to youth and develop outcome measures that may be used to assess States' performance in operating their independent living programs. The law requires ACF to impose a penalty of between one and five percent of the State's annual allotment on any State that fails to comply with the reporting requirements.
National Youth in. Transition Database (NYTD)	February 26, 2008	The ACF created the NYTD (in accordance with CFCIP mandates) in order for States to report to ACF the independent living services and supports they provide to all youth in eleven	States survey youth regarding six outcomes: financial self-sufficiency, experience with homelessness,

		<p>broad categories: independent living needs assessment; academic support; post-secondary educational support; career preparation; employment programs or vocational training; budget and financial management; housing education and home management training; health education and risk prevention; family support and healthy marriage education; mentoring; and supervised independent living. States will also report financial assistance they provide, including assistance for education, room and board and other aid.</p>	<p>educational attainment, positive connections with adults, high-risk behavior, and access to health insurance. States are to collect outcomes information by conducting a survey of youth in foster care on or around their 17th birthday, also referred to as the baseline population. States will track these youth as they age and conduct a new outcome survey on or around the youth's 19th birthday; and again, on or around the youth's 21st birthday referred to as the follow-up population. States will collect outcomes information on these older youth at ages 19 or 21 regardless of their foster care status or whether they are still receiving independent living services from the State. Depending on the size of the State's foster care youth population, some States may conduct a random sample of the baseline population of the 17-year-olds that participate in the outcomes survey so that they can follow a smaller group of youth as they age. All States will collect and report outcome information on a new baseline population cohort every three years.</p>
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Bethany Children's Home has made strides in addressing the many gaps within the foster system for aging out youth. As a recent example, the Executive Director and CEO of BCH, Dr. Joseph Birli, negotiated a contract with Alvernia University, in Reading, Pennsylvania, to provide college housing to any Bethany resident working or attending a post-secondary institution until the age of 23 or graduation. This agreement represents a solution to a problem that faces foster youth: lack of housing at age 18 or 23, depending on the circumstances of their leaving foster care. Even then, college students in the current system lose all housing and medical benefits the day they turn 21 (J. Birli, personal communication, January 27, 2022), which prevents some foster youth from finishing their degrees (US Department of Education, 2016). BCH also provides college counseling services but admits that they do not offer as much one-on-one help to youth as they might need.

Foster youth who have robust support systems and opportunities to succeed as adults are less likely to face the issues mentioned above of substance abuse, homelessness, and mental health disorders (Youth.gov, 2022). Ideally, foster youth aging out of the foster care system will have the same opportunities to succeed and thrive as their non-foster counterparts, including access to post-secondary education, food security, housing, transportation, and a robust support system. We seek to understand what resources may be provided through aftercare programs or interventions to promote positive identity development and social connectedness to ensure success for aged-out youth from Bethany.

Our preliminary conversations with Bethany Children's Home administrators and staff revealed crucial gaps in the support systems for foster youth living in children's

homes and after leaving care. These gaps include a lack of social connectedness to the community, a lack of staffing to help students navigate post-secondary options, a difficult-to-navigate system for students over 18, and high turnover of staff that prevents strong parental-type relationships from forming. The lack of meaningful relationships leaves foster kids at a significant disadvantage compared to their similarly aged non-foster peers (Ahrens et al., 2011). Foster youth do not have traditional familial-friend support systems to help them navigate life during their formative years. This lack of aftercare support becomes glaring once they leave the protective enclave of care and are forced to “figure things out” for themselves as adults (Lee & Berrick, 2014).

While the extant research examines policies and quantitative data surrounding life outcomes for youth in foster care, there are fewer qualitative studies that document the participants' voices and attempt to understand what has worked for them as they navigate the transition into adulthood and consider educational and employment opportunities. As we spoke to current and former foster care youth and Bethany administrators, we explored why some youth aging out of care from Bethany Children's Home had more positive life, educational, and occupational outcomes than other Bethany youth from similar environments and backgrounds. Further, what intangible resources, such as critical thinking skills, moral reasoning, and self-esteem, contribute to a foster youth's sense of agency and individualization? We examined how Bethany Children's Home defines success for its youth and how youth define success for themselves. Finally, how we examine how the lived experiences of current and former Bethany foster youth can inform better practices for aftercare programming and interventions aimed to improve transitions into adulthood.

We are cognizant of the biases that may exist, on our part, about this research project. Our line of inquiry stems from individual experiences and stories of Bethany youth who have struggled and felt let down by the system they were forced into through no fault of their own. Although we are pursuing this project with the idea that we can, and should, do better for foster youth, we acknowledge that many foster youth benefit from the system as it presently exists including aftercare supports by county children and youth agencies and 100% funded post-secondary education opportunities. Additionally, the extension of aftercare services to all Pennsylvania foster youth up until the age of 23 extends the support for state-care services that were previously (before July 1, 2020) only available up until the age of 21.

The key stakeholders for this research project include foster youth and their families, Bethany and Berks County Children and Youth administrators and staff, youth-care providers, social workers, juvenile court judges, and foster families. This research will help improve the programs that currently exist and/or identify what gaps may exist as identified by foster youth and staff.

Purpose of Capstone

This Quality Improvement Study seeks to understand what resources Bethany Children's Home can provide residents to promote social connectedness and improve outcomes for girls in its care. The research suggests that foster youth who can develop meaningful and lasting adult supportive relationships through aftercare initiatives will be more likely to succeed in their future, attain higher academic achievements and realize life and career goals like their non-foster care peers.

Bethany keeps metrics on youth in their care, including the reason for placement, academic performance, disciplinary measures are taken, foster youth placements with foster families, and plans once they leave Bethany (college, working, living with friends or family). In many cases, however, youth who leave Bethany after high school graduation or at the age of 18 fall off the radar, and Bethany has no way in which to monitor them as they navigate adulthood. Staff is discouraged from friending youth on social media, leaving few other ways to contact aged-out youth.

We hope that the findings from this Quality Improvement Project will help inform future program and aftercare decisions for Bethany Children's Home foster care youth.

Project Questions:

1. How does Bethany Children's Home define success for its youth and how do Bethany youth define success for themselves?
2. What conditions lead to success for youth transitioning out of care from Bethany Children's Home?
3. How do the answers to the first two questions inform best practices for aftercare programming and interventions to improve transitions into adulthood?

Research Synthesis

This Quality Improvement Project is aimed at helping Bethany Children's Home provide resources that promote positive identity development for its residents (youth who are part of the 13,000+ children in Pennsylvania living in out-of-home placements) and close the gap in life outcomes for foster youth compared to their peers growing up with their families. Positive identity formation is closely tied to social connectedness, the experience of belonging to a social relationship or network (Lee and Robbins, 1995; Kools, 1997).

Researchers in the theory of emerging adulthood have emphasized the roles of support networks in developing the agency and self-determination needed to achieve positive transitions to adulthood (Greeson et al., 2015; Avery, 2010), and we seek to understand the current sources of formal and informal support for Bethany residents. The literature points to potential obstacles to self-determination and identity formation inherent to the foster system; this review highlights some of those problems and allows us to identify common issues that arise for youth at Bethany and consider interventions that promote agency and purpose through social support and positive relationships.

Typical Transitions to Adulthood for Foster Youth

Both empirical and theoretical research focusing on foster youth and their transition to independent adult living demonstrate the risks facing foster youth: lower educational attainment, lower levels of employment, lower income, higher involvement with the legal system, and greater instances of homelessness, compared to their peers in the general population (Aud et al., 2011; Collins, 2001; Osgood et al., 2010; Yi & Wildeman, 2018). There are many factors contributing to these statistics, including lack

of coordination between systems and abrupt cessation of youth services upon aging out (Greeson et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2013; Piel, 2018; Osgood et al., 2010). The ability to exercise agency in their own lives is another challenge, and Geenen and Powers (2007) found in their interviews with foster youth alumni that there exists, “a frustrating paradox where they have little or no opportunity to practice skills of self-determination while in care but are expected to suddenly be able to control and direct their own lives once they are emancipated” (p. 1090). Collins (2001) writes that child welfare practice has viewed clients in terms of needs rather than strengths, and programs have generally failed to include youth in the decision making for their own future. A review of qualitative studies by Häggman-Laitila et al. (2018) confirms that youth leaving foster care often feel unprepared and unfocused, having a lack of meaningful interaction with staff and little opportunity to be heard. Exploring ways to improve a youth’s self-determination merits further study.

The College Experience for Foster Alumni

Geiger and Beltran (2017) found a lack of data about the number of foster care alumni who attend and/or graduate from college. It is estimated that up to 10% of foster care alumni enroll in 4-year institutions and 3-5% go on to graduate. Their research regarding foster care alumni’s experiences and outcomes in postsecondary education discovered that foster care alumni are twice as likely to drop out of college compared to low-income, first-generation students who have not been in foster care. They also graduate at slower rates than their non-foster-care peers even when they were succeeding academically in terms of grades and attendance, which the literature

suggests is tied to their lack of family support and need to work to provide for themselves financially (McGuire et al., 2021).

Some of the challenges identified as foster youth aspire to continue education after high school were identified by Piel (2018):

1. Placement instability
2. Inadequate academic preparation
3. Ongoing mental health issues
4. Inadequate financial support
5. Housing and employment challenges
6. Parenting and family responsibilities
7. Lack of social and emotional support

Loprest et al. (2019) emphasize that this is a systems problem: the behavior of young people reflects the institutions, environment, and culture in which they grow up. The college environment is not designed to support vulnerable populations, as it tends to assume the presence of family support and guidance and does not typically accommodate work and family responsibilities of students.

Tangible Supports that Improve Educational Attainment

Loprest et al. (2019) laud a three-prong community college reform initiative, which includes:

1. Financial assistance (for tuition and other expenses, like textbooks and transportation),
2. Structured pathways that make it easier to complete a program, including full-time enrollment and block scheduling to accommodate work schedules,

3. Ongoing tutoring and advising over a three-year period.

However, none of these tangible supports compensate for foster youths' lack of consistent, reliable support from their families. Geiger and Beltran (2017) suggest measures colleges can take to support foster care alumni: making sure independent living skills programs are housed on campus, creating a unified system with other college departments such as financial aid and admissions, and partnering with external agencies that provide funding and transitional housing. Indeed, the concept of streamlined, unified services rings throughout literature. Over the course of their adolescence, youth interact with multiple systems that don't communicate, resulting in confusion over roles, gaps in service, and in some cases, a duplication of efforts (Geenan & Powers, 2007). Moving from a set of independent systems to a single, integrated system, not only across service systems for young adults but also between youth and adult systems, would benefit many vulnerable populations (Osgood et al, 2010). However, this suggestion is not without its difficulties, as no such infrastructure currently exists that could combine state and federal programs into a cohesive experience for its participants.

Intangible Supports that Improve Life Outcomes for Foster Youth

Identity Capital Theory (Côté & Schwartz, 2002) examines the sociological and psychological context of identity formation and proposes a set of tangible and intangible resources that positively correlate with balanced thinking, mature interpersonal relationships, and selection of life courses based on active exploration of possibilities. Côté & Schwartz found that agency-related traits such as ego strength and purpose in

life were helpful in formulating a stronger sense of adult identity and a sense of acceptance in a stable community.

Agency, or lack thereof, is a recurring theme in discussions of foster youth (Côté & Schwartz, 2002; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014; Powers et al., 2018; Schwartz et al., 2005). One of the problems highlighted in research on the typical transitions from foster care to independent adulthood has been a sense of powerlessness of girls in the system, feeling like just a number to others (Kool, 1997). Research on emerging adulthood shows that agency is positively related to exploration, flexible commitment, and deliberate choice-making (Schwartz et al., 2005). Interventions that focus on youth empowerment and help young people develop supportive, ongoing relationships with adults are potentially beneficial (Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014; Powers et al., 2018). While independent living skills training (LST) provides some informational support, it lacks the emotional and affirmational types of support needed and was not shown to increase social support for foster children (Greeson et al., 2015). Having adults in their lives willing to step in where a parent would and systems that serve as havens were integral to these young people's success (Geiger & Beltran, 2017).

Looking at both independent living interventions and mentorship programs, Woodgate et al., (2017) found that mentorship resulted in more successful transitions to adulthood (higher rates of education completion, employment, and higher quality of life among youth in these programs) than traditional ILP services. In another study, having a mentor was a predictor of academic achievement: 73% of foster youth with a mentor completed high school or earned a GED, compared to only 47% of those without (Collins et al., 2010). Self-determination and reciprocity play a role in the success of

mentoring relationships. A qualitative study of foster youth participating in a youth-directed, experientially oriented coaching program found that positive outcomes hinge on a solid relationship between the youth and mentor. These relationships are based on nonjudgmental acceptance, trust, and respect; the informal sharing of humor, strengths, challenges, and common life experiences; and the use of experiential activities to learn skills together, rather than just talking (Powers et al., 2018).

Permanent Relationships and Sense of Belonging

Many foster youths yearn for normalcy and a sense of belonging, which is challenged by educational instability, changes in residential placement, and severed ties within their communities (Johnson et al., 2020). While studies show the positive influence of formal mentorship programs (Woodgate et al., 2017; Collins et al., 2010) or having supportive adults in their lives (Greeson et al., 2015), older foster youth can be reluctant to form a bond with a new adult since so many others have passed in and out of their lives (Geenen & Powers, 2007). One solution may be to harness existing social capital that foster youth have in existing relationships with fictive kin – a relationship with an individual who is not related by birth, adoption, or marriage to a child, but who has an emotionally significant relationship with the child (American Legislative Exchange Council, 2022), or other important adults in their lives (Avery, 2010). Rather than preparing foster youth for independent living, these types of relationships foster *interdependence*, or having someone to count on and help navigate life as an adult. Youth-initiated mentoring (YIM) programs, in which the young person identifies possible mentors who are recruited into a formal mentoring program, have been shown to

promote psychological well-being and assist youths with the social supports needed in emerging adulthood (Spencer et al, 2018).

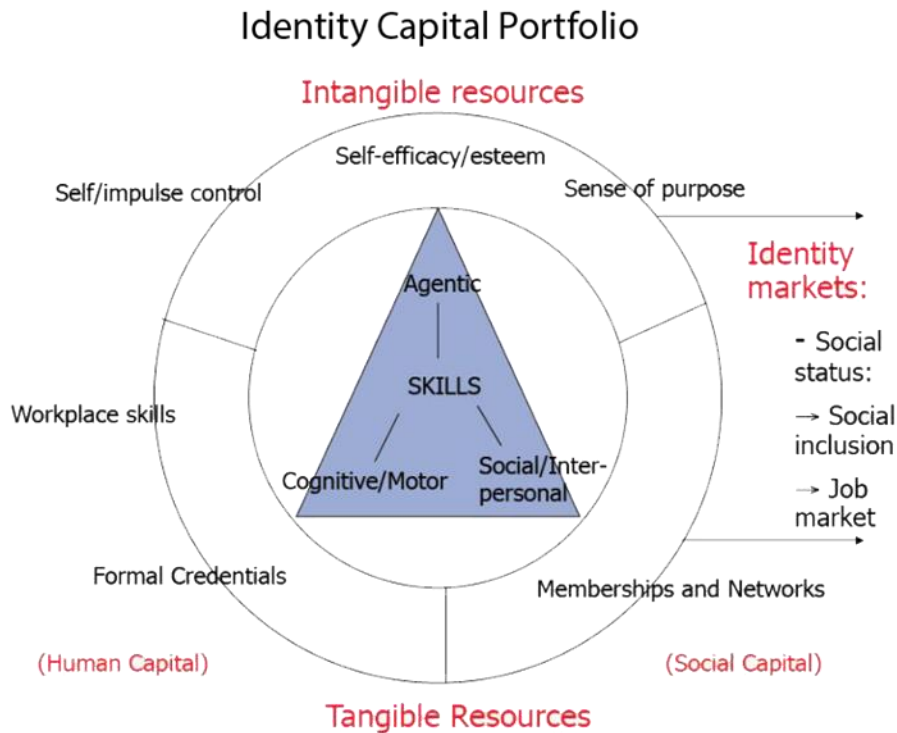
The literature review has defined the typical experience of foster youth transitioning to adulthood, including challenges to educational attainment. It summarizes some of the tangible resources that support success, but also examines the role of intangible resources such as emotional, social, and informational support and their impact on agency and identity for emerging adults. The focus on tangible and intangible supports available to residents of Bethany Children's Home will inform our research questions as we seek to improve outcomes for young women transitioning out of state care in Pennsylvania.

Conceptual Framework - Identity Capital Model and Individualization

This project is grounded in the Identity Capital Model (Côté & Schwartz, 2002) depicted in Figure 1, which emphasizes the sociological and psychological components of identity formation as youth transition to adulthood. The model proposes a portfolio of resources that positively correlate with balanced thinking, mature interpersonal relationships, and selection of life courses based on an active exploration of possibilities. Cote and Schwartz found that when youth receive not just tangible resources (such as education, housing, social memberships, and workplace skills), but also intangible resources (ongoing emotional support, guidance, and empowerment), they build important cognitive, interpersonal, and agentic skills. Those skills in turn help youth formulate a stronger sense of adult identity and a sense of acceptance in a stable community. Resources that promote development of those skills can improve a person's social standing, feelings of inclusion, and value on the job market.

Figure 1

Identity Capital Portfolio Model



Note: This model presents a spectrum of intangible and tangible resources that boost agentic, cognitive, and interpersonal skills and contribute to positive identity achievement.

A portfolio of resources, in aggregate called Identity Capital Acquisition, is essential when traditional, normative structures are absent and a person's adulthood passage is precarious or unwelcoming (Côté, 2016). Youth in congregate care, such as those at Bethany, rely on their caregivers for the tangible and intangible resources associated with positive identity formation and successful economic and social outcomes in adulthood.

In this study, we look at individualization processes experienced by residents at Bethany and examine what factors contribute to identity achievement, or the active

selection of life paths based on understanding of available options, versus those that contribute to identity diffusion, or the acceptance of a default road with little planning or action on the part of the youth. The process of individualization is the extent to which people are left by their culture to their own devices in terms of meeting their own survival needs, determining the directions their lives will take, and making myriad choices along the way (Côté & Schwartz, 2002). We ask what factors contribute to or inhibit the sense of agency and community integration in youth at Bethany.

Data Collection and Analysis

Using the Identity Capital Model as our base, our project goal is to understand both the resources that are provided to youth in congregate care at Bethany Children's Home as well as those that are perceived to be lacking, and to recommend interventions that will promote positive identity development to improve outcomes as youth leave state care. As a congregate care facility, Bethany Children's Home is a residential treatment center that provides 24-hour care, in highly structured setting, to youth who experienced the loss of a parent(s) or were removed from their primary home for various reasons. We examine the tangible and intangible resources that youth in Bethany receive while in care, and the extent to which their experiences help them develop the interpersonal, cognitive, and agentic skills that are predictive of successful transitions to adulthood.

To this end, we designed a mixed-methods study comprising interviews with administrators and residents and a document review of records Bethany keeps on youth entering and leaving their facility. The semi-structured interviews with current (7) and former residents (6), as well as administrators and staff at Bethany Children's Home (6)

(see Table 2) form the crux of the study. These interviews provide qualitative insights into residents’ experiences in six areas used to report on outcomes for youth in state care: education, social connection, finances, housing, health, and justice involvement. After codifying participant responses and aligning them to Identity Capital themes, we turn to a document review and triangulate our findings against the records Bethany keeps on residents’ time in care and outcomes at departure.

Table 2

Interview Participants

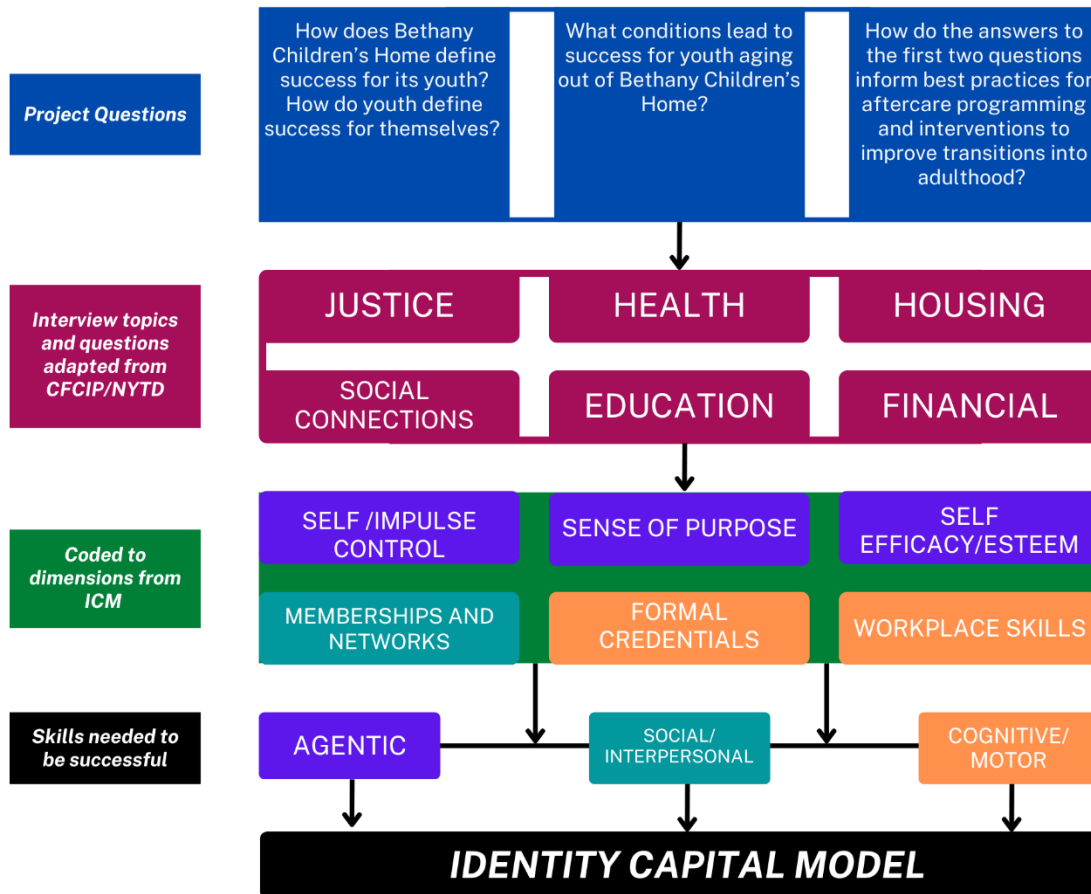
Participant Role	Age	Years at Bethany Children’s Home (BCH)
BCH Youth Resident	16	<2
BCH Youth Resident	16	<2
BCH Youth Resident	16	<2
BCH Youth Resident	16	3
BCH Youth Resident	17	3
BCH Youth Resident	17	4
BCH Youth Resident	20	6
Former BCH Resident	18	6
Former BCH Resident	19	3
Former BCH Resident	20	3
Former BCH Resident	20	6
Former BCH Resident	20	7
Former BCH Resident	22	3
Chief Executive Officer	53	3
Health Trainer	50	1
Compliance Director	44	unknown
Compliance Officer	36	8
Program Instructor	53	<1
Archivist/House Parent	52	7

Interviews

We prepared interview questions informed by the literature on Identity Capital resources and aligned with indicators tracked by the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD). Our interview questions were grouped by categories that align with state data collection parameters including education, social connections, financial resources, housing, health, and the justice system (Courtney et al., 2017). In addition to these six categories, we asked a final set of questions about how Bethany and the youth in their care define success and what recommendations might improve outcomes. See Appendix for a complete set of interview questions. Figure 2 depicts the relationship between our project questions, the six categories that the state uses to measure outcomes for youth in care, and the corresponding dimensions and codes that have been identified within the Identity Capital Model as being crucial to youth as they transition into adulthood.

Figure 2

Alignment of project questions with interview categories and conceptual framework.



We used the semi-structured interview process to allow the participants to describe the tangible and intangible supports they received during their time at Bethany and to expand on their answers with individual experiences that highlight challenges specific to growing up in an out-of-home placement. We were interested in learning what resources youth receive while in care and what might be lacking as they transition toward adulthood without familial support. We used variations of the same questions for

youth and administrators to help identify gaps in services provided to youth (see Table 3).

Table 3

Example of resident and administrator questions in categories Social Connection and Housing.

Category	Questions for Current and Former Residents	Questions for Administrators and Staff
Social Connection	a. What programs does Bethany offer that connect youth with members of the community?	What programs does Bethany offer that connect youth with members of the community?
	b. While in care, was there at least one adult in your life, other than your caseworker, who you talked to for advice or emotional support? Who was that person? Are they still a meaningful part of your life?	While in care, do you think youth have adults they can turn to for advice or emotional support? Who are those people? Do those relationships persist after they leave care?
	c. Describe your network of support (family/friends/co-workers/staff). How do you maintain your relationships with your network?	Describe the network of support (family/friends/co-workers/staff) available to youth at Bethany. How do youth maintain those relationships within their network?
Housing	a. What has been your experience with homelessness?	How does homelessness impact your youth, either before or after leaving Bethany?
	b. In your opinion, is the housing program at Bethany Children’s Home meeting the needs of youth from the residential level to the Independent Living level? Please tell us about your experience.	In your opinion, is the housing program at Bethany Children’s Home meeting the needs of youth from the residential level to the Independent Living level? Please tell us what you think is working well and what you might change.
	c. If applicable, how easy or hard was it to obtain housing once you aged out of the foster care system? What were your challenges? What helped you to get housing?	How do youth go about obtaining housing once they age out of the foster care system? What are the challenges? What supports do they have?

The interviews with current residents were held on the Bethany campus and conducted as group interviews with three-four girls participating in each one. We conducted interviews with former Bethany residents in home environments comfortable to the participants. Two interviews were with a single former resident, and the other two were with pairs of residents. As Daphne had already established relationships of trust with the participants, she made introductions while Christina conducted the interviews. This arrangement encouraged the participants to explain personal stories that Daphne might have already been aware of and addressed the potential for researcher bias.

The interviews for Bethany staff and current and former youth residents used the same protocol to understand better what programs Bethany and its administrators currently offer residents and the residents' understanding of what programs and services are available to them. By examining the gaps between provided and perceived services, we can provide Bethany with data-informed insights for communicating services and support available to youth in its care.

Document Analysis

The second part of our data collection involved collection and review of records that Bethany Children's Home keeps on youth entering and leaving care. We requested documentation of BHC's tracked data points over the past ten years, including gender, age at placement into Bethany Children's Home, length of stay, high school graduation rate, post-secondary education, homelessness, incarceration, and recidivism. The purpose of this request was to determine which variables might contribute to more positive or negative outcomes regarding education, employment, or criminal justice involvement. We hoped to understand which residents were at higher risk of future unemployment or homelessness and determine which supports and resources might improve outcomes for these vulnerable youth.

The records we were able to obtain did not, unfortunately, provide outcomes on an individual unit of analysis. We received a spreadsheet with aggregated information on the number of youths admitted into care over the past eight years. The data provided the following information on Bethany residents between the years of 2014-2022:

- Age entering care
- Gender

- Reason for admission
- Age leaving care
- Reason for discharge

With these records, we are able to gain a general understanding of the number of residents in care and the variety of outcomes experienced (placement, independent living, runaway, etc.). However, we are unable to determine how individual factors impact those outcomes, such as time in placement, academic achievement, or participation in various programs. We also lack information regarding post-care outcomes, as Bethany does not currently have a way to track outcomes (education, employment, arrests, homelessness, etc.) after youth leave their care.

Challenges in Data Collection

Despite planning and scheduling interviews in advance, many of our interview participants canceled or postponed the meetings at the last minute. The participants who went ahead with the scheduled interviews had the most stable outcomes after leaving care and were better able to handle obstacles that appeared in their path: one young woman is employed and has her apartment, car, health insurance, and savings; another is a full-time university student. The participants who had to cancel are the ones we needed to hear from most: those in crisis struggling to maintain housing and pay for hygiene items, groceries, and transportation.

One of the planned interviews was with a group of four siblings who had been in care. The youngest sibling recently dropped out of high school and provided childcare for one of her sisters. She feels obligated to be there for her family, so she will not avail herself of the free housing and services available to her at Bethany. Her older sister

dropped out of a nursing program when she became pregnant. Although she managed to get housing for her son and two siblings, she struggles to pay her younger sister a promised \$15/week for babysitting. A third sister suffers from depression and does not have the means to pay for car repairs on a car she has financed at \$700/month; she declined to be interviewed at this time, although she had expressed interest before. The oldest sister was 18 when her siblings were taken into care and was not afforded the same housing and education opportunities as her younger siblings. Over the years, she has suffered abusive relationships and experienced housing instability. The night before our initially scheduled interview, we learned that she was trying to find a place for her and her youngest sister to stay and could not participate in the interview as arranged.

The careful planning that we had done to collect data during the week began to unravel, and we realized we would have to adapt our strategy if we wanted to hear from those most in need. To this end, we rescheduled four interviews, provided transportation and a meal, and met in their homes where one of us could help take care of young children while the interview took place. This flexibility allowed us to glimpse what their lives are like, and we were grateful to be invited into their homes.

Another data collection challenge we faced was gathering the relevant records from Bethany Children's Home to understand the relationships between placement, academic achievement, and life outcomes. While Bethany does track some data - especially when youth enter care - the ultimate responsibility for tracking life outcomes falls on the county of origin for the youth and Bethany is not always privy to this data. We obtained annual data on age, gender, and reasons for admission and discharge from Bethany's Chief Compliance Officer. Administrators at Bethany have expressed

interest in maintaining contact with alumni and better tracking outcomes for their young people after they leave campus.

Analyzing the Interview Data

We recorded each interview using a Philips Voice Tracer recorder and transcribed them using Otter AI software. We exported the edited, raw transcripts into password-protected Word documents. After re-reading the full-length transcripts, we copied each participant's statements into an Excel spreadsheet organized by question category (Education, Housing, Social Connection, etc.). Once we compiled all participants' verbatim responses into the corresponding category, we added additional columns summarizing each statement and associating it with a dimension supported by literature on adolescent identity development in foster care (Kools, 1997, Côté, 2016).

Through multiple readings and a three-step coding process, we (1) transcribed our interviews to place relevant quotes and phrases into the interview questions and categories that they were answering; (2) distilled down long passages into summaries and key themes that captured the meaning of each answer/phrase/passage; and (3) used the summaries to correlate with identified resources within the Identity Capital Model (ICM) framework including sense of purpose, self-efficacy and self-esteem, social memberships, workplace skills, and formal credentials.

Current and Former Resident Interview Responses

The interviews with current and former Bethany residents yielded rich descriptions of their experiences with education, housing, finances, health, justice involvement, and social connection. In examining those transcripts, we coded responses to dimensions of the ICM framework and noted whether the comments were

positive or negative. We were then able to count the most common dimensions expressed in each category, and whether those experiences were predominantly positive or negative. The following section presents our analysis of resident responses in each of the interview question categories.

Education

The most prevalent identity capital resources that emerged in our discussions on educational goals and attainment were the intangible resources of self-efficacy/self-esteem and sense of purpose, and the tangible resources of memberships and networks and formal credentials. In general, youth felt they were not “normal” in high school; even those who do not attend an alternative high school are marked as different by riding the “Bethany bus” and having strict schedules to attend to.

Figure 3 shows the number of positive and negative factors mentioned for each dimension as it relates to education. Residents had mixed experiences with self-efficacy and self-esteem in education, with some participants feeling empowered to take control of their academic careers while others were unsure how to navigate college applications or social settings. However, their comments on memberships and networks were mostly negative and expressed a common feeling of feeling excluded, unwanted, and different. Table 4 provides a summary of their experiences as they relate to each resource.

Figure 3

Positive and Negative Identity Capital Factors in Education.

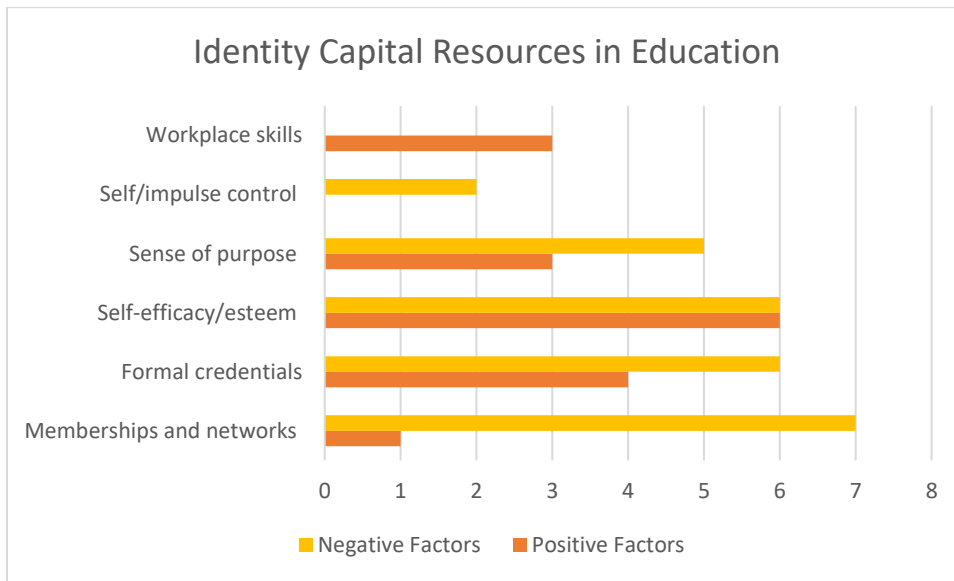


Table 4

Common ICM Dimensions across Education.

Education	
Self-efficacy/esteem	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Ability to take control of academic career in high school + Returned to school after dropping out and is starting college + Transitioned to university and is graduating soon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Placement lowered academic performance in high school - Doesn't know how to handle college applications - Unsure of self in social settings - Mental health impedes education
Sense of purpose	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Has a plan for college and career + Knows college can lift her out of poverty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Too many obstacles to pursue own goals - No one to advocate or encourage them past high school
Memberships and networks	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + College experience is important for many youth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Youth are part of an "out group" with regard to "normal" public education (Social identity theory)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Youth attending alternative high schools have limited access to certain programs - Youth without families don't have people to fall back on
Formal credentials	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Youth receive the support they need to finish high school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pregnancy and mental health caused multiple participants to drop out of college

Social Connections

Questions on social connections asked about youth’s support network, the presence of adults available for emotional support, and their ability to connect with members of the community while in care. The overarching theme for this category was memberships and networks, with appreciation for opportunities to participate in community activities but an acute sense of “other-ness” or being different and cut off from their peers. The second most prevalent theme was self-efficacy/esteem. Youth in placement seem to suffer from turbulent relationships with their bio families, lost connection with friends, and negative stereotypes associated with being a “Bethany kid.” Having caring adults who guide them while in placement and make them feel like a “normal kid” is so important to these youth.

Figure 4

Positive and Negative Identity Capital Factors in Social Connections.

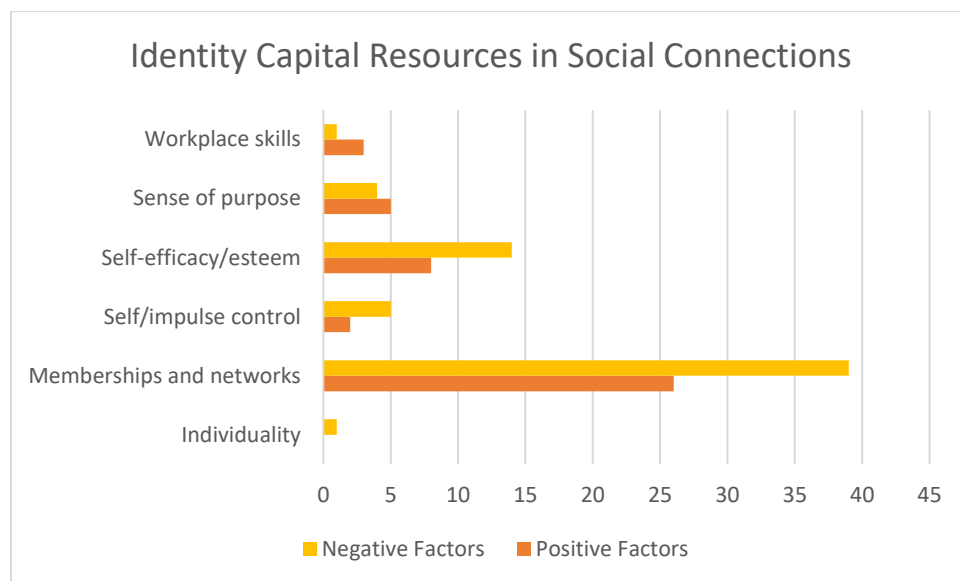


Table 5

Common ICM Dimensions across Social Connections.

Social Connections	
Memberships and networks	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Public school is one connection to others in the community. + Youth have opportunities to participate in community activities. + Bethany helps youth participate in school activities and sports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Having friends outside of Bethany is difficult and embarrassing - Residents must overcome the negative assumptions of Bethany youth - Suffering abuse isolates a person and makes them feel like an outsider in society.
Self-efficacy/esteem	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Having one specific caregiver who really connects is important. + Youth having access and encouragement for hobbies helps develop identity + Bethany house parents made girls feel normal again, with chores, traditions, outings, and life lessons. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Youth feel stigma attached to negative stereotypes - There is guilt and regret associated with getting put into placement. - Moving through multiple placements makes youth feel different and incapable of making friends.

Finances

Current and former residents answered questions about financial resources they received in care, their experience working and earning a paycheck, and the availability of apprentice programs or internships. The answers described workplace skills and the tangible resources of actual financial support, and the intangible resources of self-efficacy/esteem in the ways youth are taught to manage their money. The experience of working was positive for many participants when they had consistent schedules and transportation, but many youths said they wish they had been taught how to manage their money and invest their savings after leaving care.

Figure 5

Positive and Negative Identity Capital Factors in Finances.

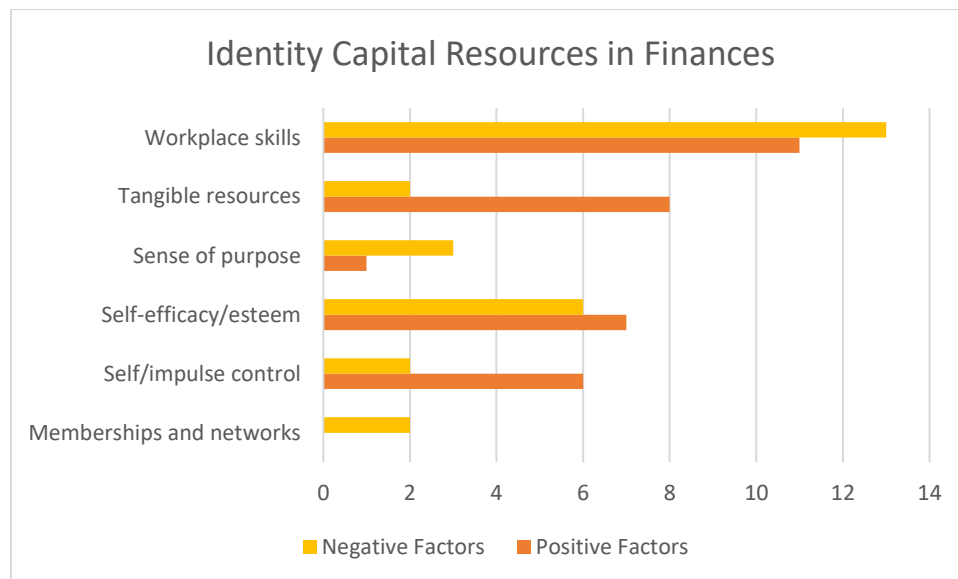


Table 6

Common ICM Dimensions across Finances.

Financial	
Workplace skills	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Some youth enjoy work and start earning as soon as they can + While in care, work was an opportunity to escape campus and avoid interaction with other residents + Youth have access to transportation for work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Staffing shortages at Bethany can mean youth in care are late being dropped off or picked up from work - Mostly employed in fast food or convenience stores near campus - Teens working with strange adults can be put in uncomfortable situations
Tangible resources	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Funds are provided for independent living + Stipends and reimbursements help the transition to adulthood 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Some counties provide more support than others - Tuition assistance is not enough to cover all the costs of college
Self-efficacy/esteem	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Youth choose how to spend their allotted funds + Youth in care can make their own purchases within guidelines. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Youth turn over their paychecks and don't really manage their money - Youth failed to learn money management to maintain her savings

Housing

Housing questions focused on experience with homelessness, experiences with different levels of housing at Bethany, and experience finding housing after leaving care. This category elicited a majority of negative responses, particularly in the intangible resources of self-efficacy/esteem and self/impulse control and the tangible resources of memberships and networks. Overall, youth feel that they are not given individualized care but treated as part of a system and are often pushed into the next level when they are not emotionally ready. The point system is a motivator to earn privileges, but youth voiced the desire to stay in a supportive environment rather than

moving cottages. Several youths left care without having a viable plan for housing and found themselves reliant on abusive relationships for housing. Those that did achieve their own house or apartment after leaving care are proud and protective of their homes after working so hard to get there.

Figure 6

Positive and Negative Identity Capital Factors in Housing.

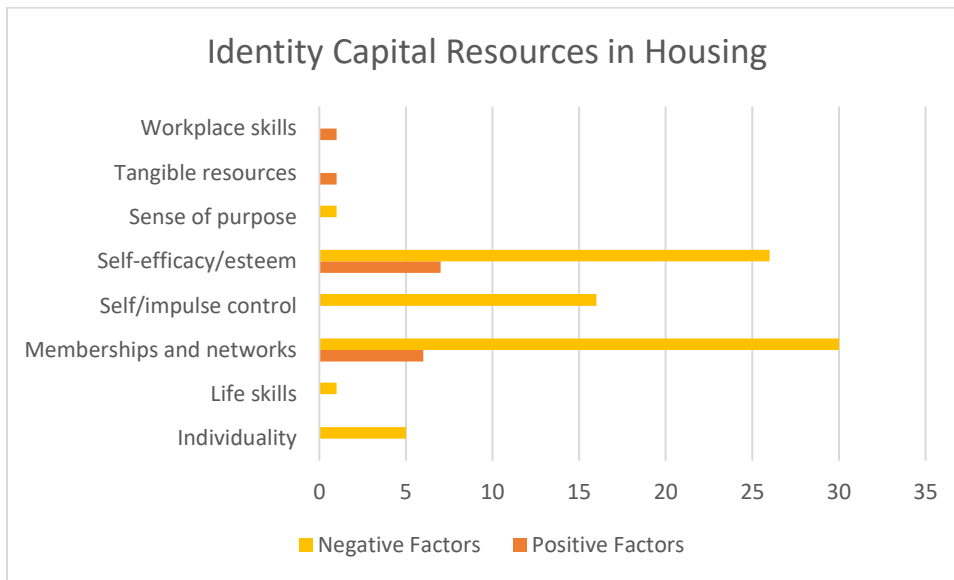


Table 7

Common ICM Dimensions across Housing.

Housing	
Memberships and networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Youth form bonds with their cottage and lose that support when they move up - Moving cottages severs ties for youth who need continuity - TLP is an isolating experience, not part of campus or the community - After Bethany, youth rely on their extended family, parent's partners, or own partners for housing

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Housing can be reliant on abusive relationships
Self-efficacy/esteem	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Former resident is proud and protective of her home after working so hard to get it. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Youth should have a say in when they move from residential to independent living - Youth wanted the privileges of independent living but did not have the knowledge and skills - Youth are presumed problematic and must earn privileges rather than vice versa
Self/impulse control	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Youth did not explore housing situation prior to moving out of BCH - Youth need protection and back-up when leaving care - Staff focus on enforcing rules and avoiding bad behavior more than on creating positive habits - Points system does not let kids be kids; they have to move up through the system.

Health

The interviews asked current and former residents to describe their experience with the healthcare system, substance abuse, parenthood, or any other health concerns they had. The youth described positive tangible resources including basic care, with many getting adequate medical and dental care for the first time in their lives when coming to Bethany. There were some negative comments on health care, including lack of nutritional counseling for eating disorders and digestive problems, a tendency to prescribe medication when youth would have preferred dietary solutions, a lack of awareness regarding reproductive health, and the unavailability of dual diagnosis

treatment for youth struggling with substance abuse and mental health. Finally, youth would like to have more information and options regarding their own treatment and be taught how to find providers and schedule appointments after leaving care.

Figure 7

Positive and Negative Identity Capital Factors in Health.

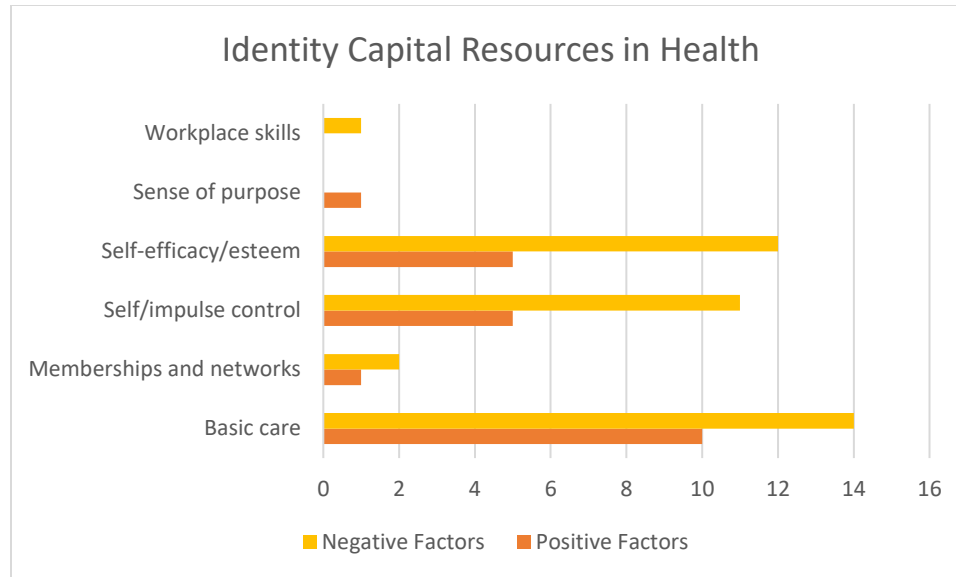


Table 8

Common ICM Dimensions across Health.

Health	
Basic care	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Youth in care have adequate access to medical care, including dentists and optometrists. + All youth are required to attend therapy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Youth in care do not learn about reproductive health or have Ob/Gyn appts. - Youth did not receive nutritional counseling or support for eating disorder - Youth in care have adequate access to medical care but do not know how to find providers or schedule appointments.
Self-efficacy/esteem	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Former resident is proud of being able to pay her medical bills through her health savings + As an adult she has learned how trauma impacts her life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mandatory therapy is ineffective if person is not ready - Youth want a say in their treatment - Agency: youth would have liked to meet with a nutritionist rather than being given medications to solve her problems
<p>Self/impulse control</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Realizing she had agency over her life and could wipe the slate clean led to lasting sobriety 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Drug experimentation is common - Drug use becomes a coping mechanism - Youth needed dual diagnosis treatment that was not available

Justice Involvement

When asked about their experiences with juvenile and adult justice systems, participants provided overwhelmingly negative feedback on the tangible resources of memberships and networks, and a variety of intangible, agentic themes: mistrust, devaluation, helplessness, self-esteem, and impulse control. Overall, youth felt they were not seen as individuals, not listened to, and felt a lack of humanity in the system. As a result, many felt bitter and resentful. Only four participants had a neutral attitude toward the justice system, accepting it as a necessary solution to a problem. Most participants felt they were immediately judged as criminals for being in the foster system.

Figure 8

Positive and Negative Identity Capital Factors in Justice Involvement.

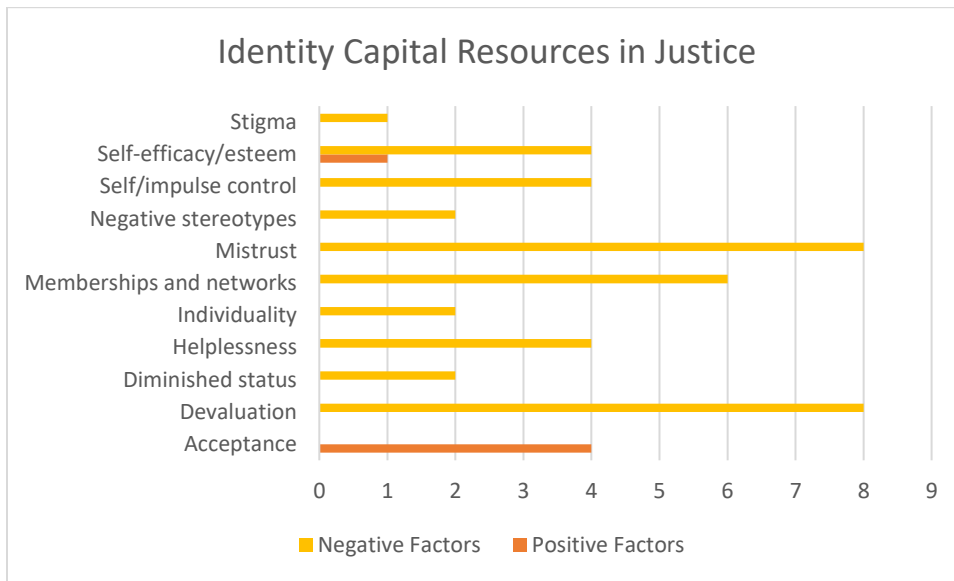


Table 9

Common ICM Dimensions across Justice Involvement.

Justice System	
Devaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Court, case workers, attorneys did not show any humanity toward her - Youth feel police use unnecessary force with foster children - Youth in the system are not people but just part of someone's job
Mistrust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Felt the system was actively working against reuniting the family - Youth in placement feel police are uncaring - Youth felt betrayed by own attorney's arguing against prison for her abuser
Helplessness	

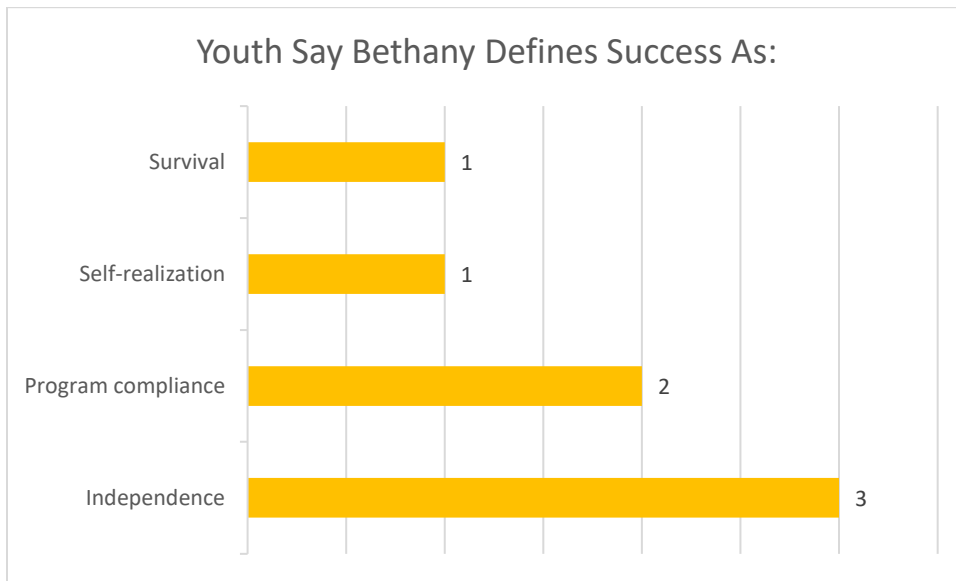
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Child taken from family does not understand the situation - Child forcibly removed from home without explanation or good-byes - Youth entering placement are sad and angry and do not feel it is fair at all
Self/impulse control	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Youth unable to control her emotions in court - Juvenile detention contributes to aggressive behavior rather than providing supportive care
Acceptance	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Recognition that court was necessary to end a bad situation + Status hearings with parents in court become a part of life 	

Success

Participants were asked a series of questions about success as a person transitions out of care at Bethany Children’s Home. The first was how they think Bethany defines success for its residents. Responses in Figure 9 show that youth in care do not feel the bar is set very high for their success: becoming independent is the main indicator of success, along with program compliance and making it out alive and not in jail.

Figure 9

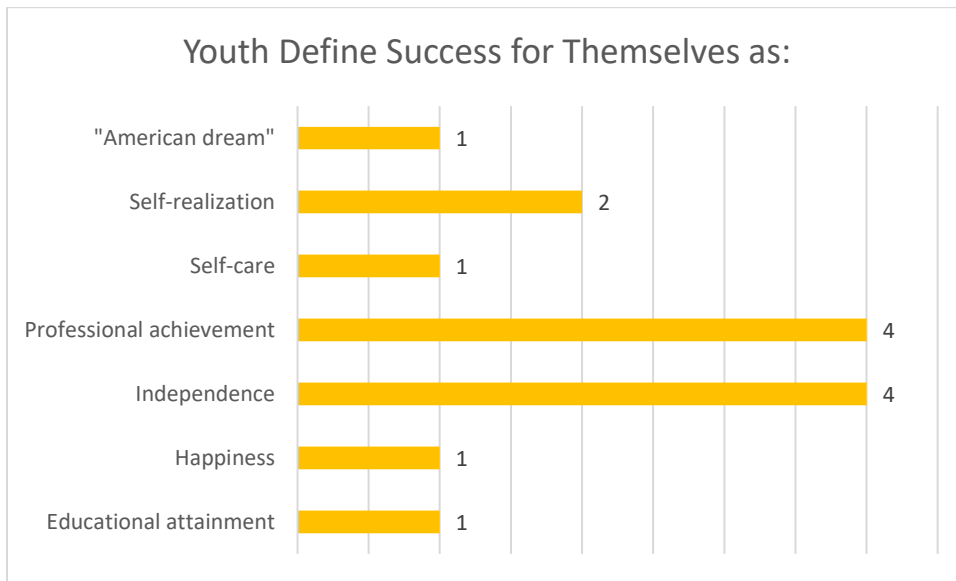
Youth Perceptions of Success for Bethany



When asked how they define success for themselves, youth had goals for higher education, careers, professional achievement, stable families, and happiness, in addition to independence (Figure 10). Merely being independent and making it through the program were not enough.

Figure 10

Youth Definitions of Success for Themselves



Finally, we asked current and former residents what Bethany could do to promote success for youth transitioning out of care. Their suggestions in Figure 11 covered many of the Identity Capital Model resources, including mitigating the stigma associated with growing up in care, promoting positive relationships and networks, teaching life and work skills, and providing individualized care that empowers and builds self-efficacy and esteem.

Figure 11

Youth Ideas for Promoting Successful Transitions.

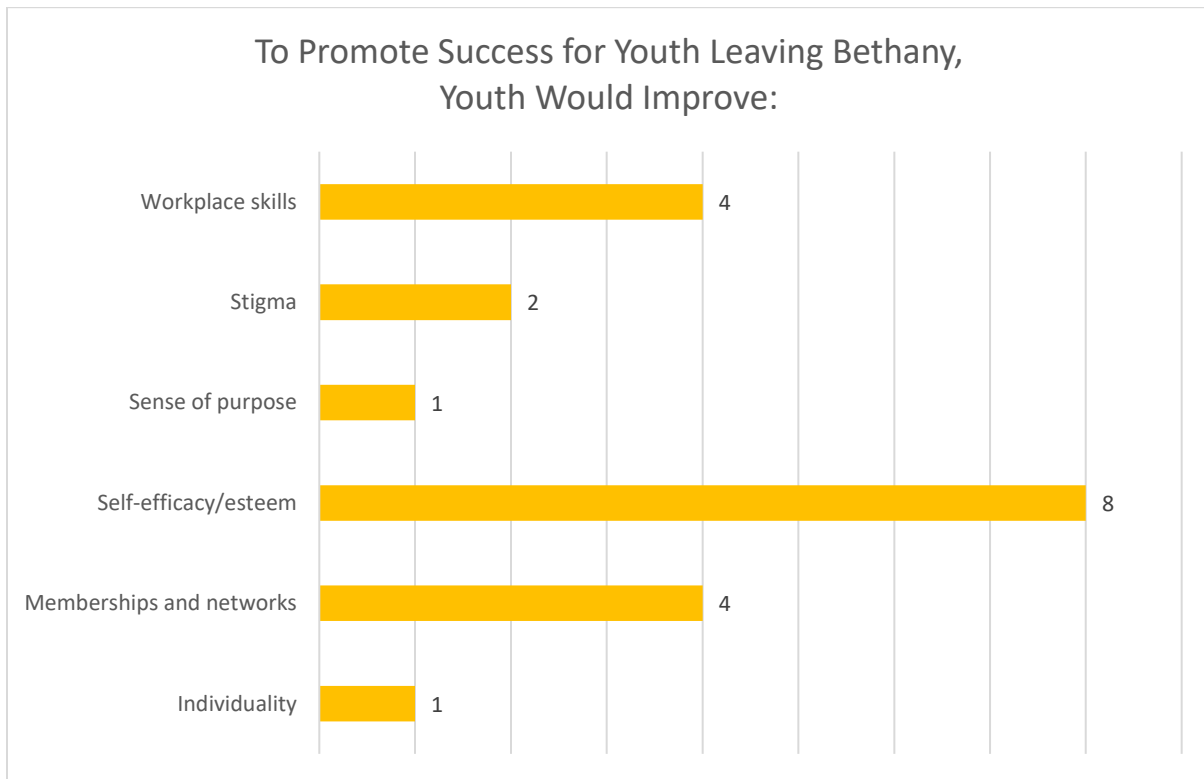


Table 10 presents specific suggestions from our participants to improve outcomes for youth leaving Bethany Children’s Home. These suggestions, directly from current and former residents, correspond to recommendations made by the administrators and staff to create a more supportive, less stigmatizing environment for youth entering care.

Table 10

Ideas to Improve Outcomes for Youth Leaving Bethany

Improving Outcomes for Bethany Youth	
Workplace/life skills	
+	Try to keep youth in care after 18 so they can benefit from resources
+	Have more support in the independent cottages to teach budgeting, shopping, cooking

+ Teach investing and what to do with savings to ensure long-term stability
Stigma
+ Allow Bethany youth to blend in with their peers instead of being separated.
Sense of purpose
+ Allow more opportunities to practice personal interests, on campus or off.
Self-efficacy/esteem
+ Listen to youth, explain things, and empower them to have a voice in their treatment plans.
+ Use empathy and explain things, teach instead of enforcing.
+ Treat residents with respect, give them some privacy, don't make them feel like charity cases.
+ Have a voluntary program for emotional support during the transition out of care.
+ Change the assumption that youth entering care are bad and have to prove themselves. Be an advocate.
Memberships and networks
+ Connect youth with people outside of campus to develop real relationships.
+ Promote healthy relationships between youth and teach what healthy friendships and relationships look like
+ Promote positive relationships and setting healthy boundaries. Allow people to interact.
+ Teach conflict resolution and ways to handle disputes to manage difficult situations.
Individuality
+ Listen to youth, especially the quiet ones, to find out what they need.

Document Analysis

Bethany Children's Home provided information in an Excel spreadsheet documenting the number of residents grouped by: age of youth upon entering BCH; gender; reason for admission; age upon leaving BCH; and reason for leaving. Here we examine the demographic information and the reasons for admission and departure.

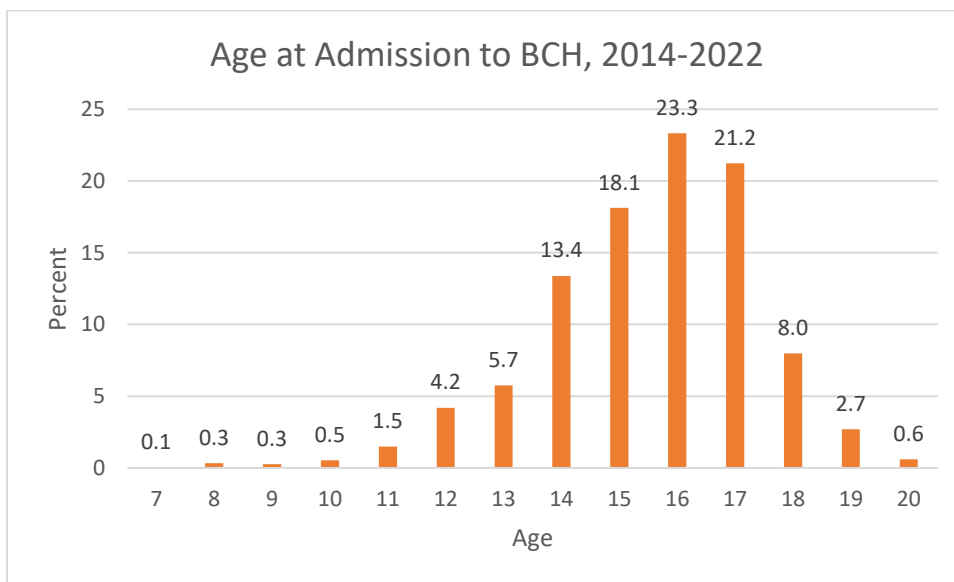
Age and Gender of Bethany Residents

Over the eight-year period beginning in 2014, Bethany Children’s Home admitted 1,479 children into its care. Admissions ranged from a low of 84 children in 2020-2021 to a high of 267 in 2016-2017, with an average of 185 children admitted each year.

Residents admitted ranged in age from 7 at the youngest to 20 at the eldest. The most common age for admission to BCH was 16 years old. Figure 12 presents the percentage of residents admitted at each age over the 8-year period.

Figure 12

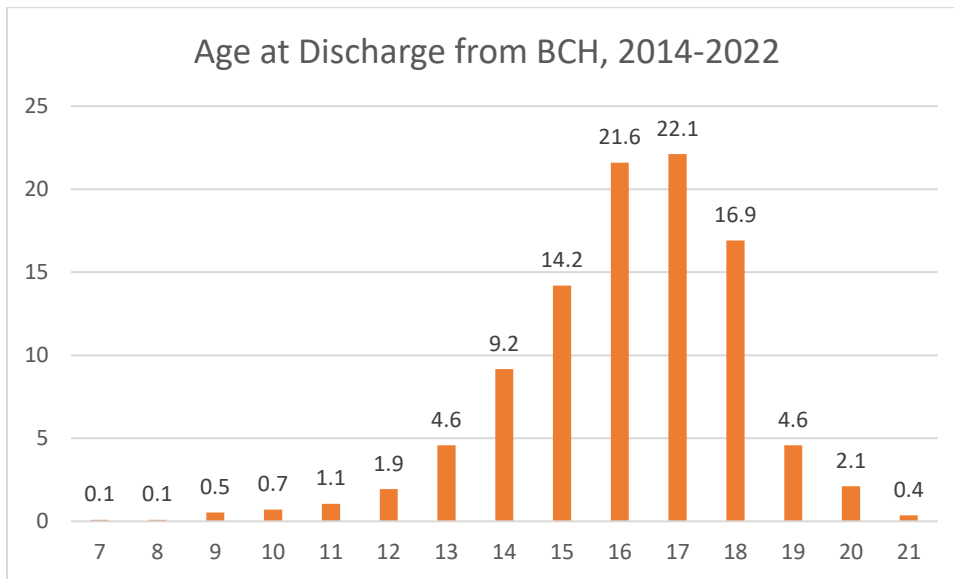
Age at Admission to Bethany Children’s Home between 2014 and 2022



During the same period, 1,135 residents were discharged from BCH. Youth aged 16 and 17 were the most commonly discharged. Figure 13 shows the percentage of residents discharged by age.

Figure 13

Age at Discharge from Bethany Children’s Home between 2014 and 2022



Most youth at Bethany, at both admission and discharge, fall in that 16–17-year-old age range. Regarding gender, most of Bethany’s residents are female (52.6%), with 47% male and less than 1% transgender or non-binary residents.

Reasons for Admission and Discharge

Children are admitted to Bethany Children’s Home under a variety of circumstances. BHC tracks the following reasons for admission:

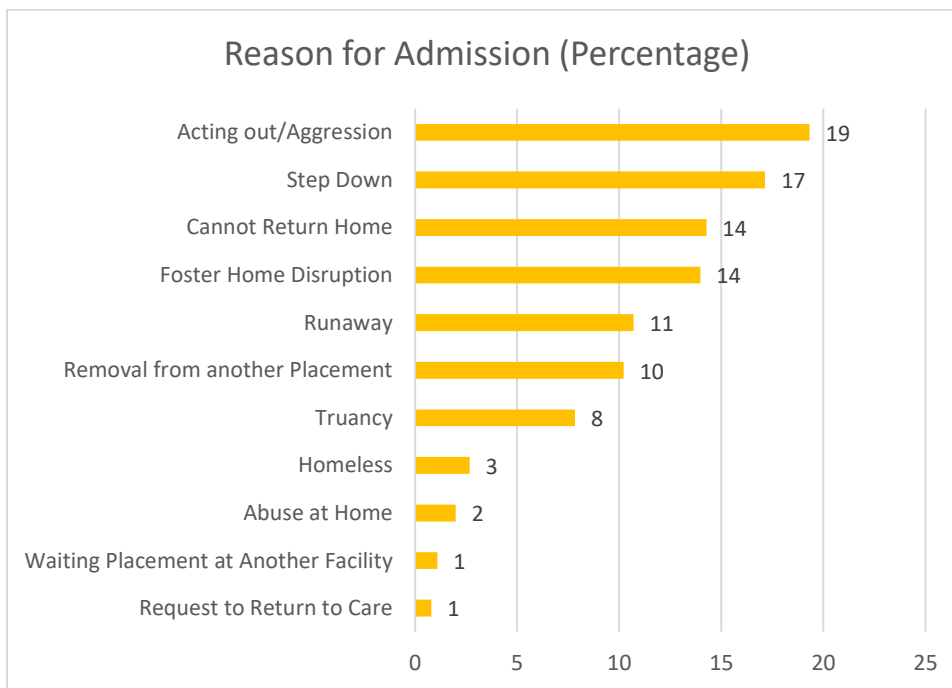
- Foster Home Disruption
- Abuse at Home
- Acting out/Aggression
- Step Down
- Waiting Placement at Another Facility
- Cannot Return Home
- Truancy

- Removal from another Placement
- Homeless
- Runaway
- Request to Return to Care

Of those reasons, the most common for residents admitted since 2015 is acting out or aggression. However, while 19% of residents were admitted for behavioral reasons, it is important to note that the majority of Bethany youth are admitted because of abuse, absent family, or other disruptions in their lives. The presumption of behavioral problems is one source of stigma that impacts the quality of relationships for youth in foster care (Kools, 1997).

Figure 14

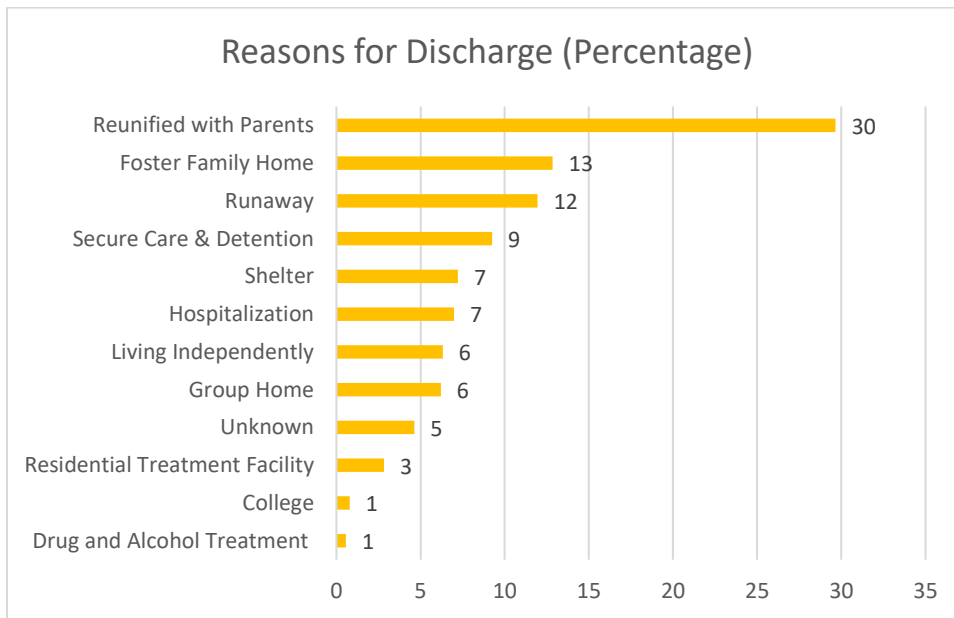
Reasons Youth Admitted to BCH, 2015-2022



As shown in Figure 13, not all youth leaving Bethany are aging out of care. The reasons given for discharge include placement elsewhere, reunification with family, transition to independent living, or, more tragically, detention, runaway, or just “unknown.” Figure 15 presents the reasons for discharge recorded since 2014.

Figure 15

Reasons Youth Discharged from BCH, 2014-2022



Almost 1/3 of youth in care at Bethany Children’s Home leave to be reunited with family, and another 13% join a foster family. However, 35% of youth leaving BCH are either runaways, are moved to a shelter or detention center, or are hospitalized.

Findings

“Youth need help with practical life skills development, personalized post-secondary/career readiness support, and assistance with road mapping, decision making, problem-solving, accessing resources, navigating complex systems. They also need stable relationships with trusted adults to whom they can go for counsel and encouragement. Youth need to continue to be part of a nurturing and accepting community as they make their tentative and often awkward steps into adulthood. In other words, youth should leave care with established healthy relationships with adults who are interested in their well-being, supportive of their success, and equipped with information and tools to be practical help.” -Bethany Staff Member.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with Bethany Children's Home staff, current youth residents, and former residents. These interviews provided a basis for understanding the feelings, thoughts, and beliefs surrounding the benefits and disadvantages of existing within the foster care system at Bethany and the challenges for foster youth as they transition into adulthood. We analyzed our qualitative interview responses to answer our research questions and help form our final recommendations for improvement. Recognizing that telling the stories of our foster youth is critical to our project, we supported each finding with direct quotes from our participants. The findings that emerged are congruent with our literature review, the Identity Capital Model framework, and our data analysis of foster youth and staff interviews. The first finding aligns with our first research question, which explores the differences in how Bethany Children's Home defines success for its youth and how Bethany youth defines success for themselves. Findings two through four address the second project question: What conditions lead to success for youth aging out of Bethany Children's Home? Our final, fifth finding focuses on the steps Bethany Children's Home can take to use best practices for aftercare programming and interventions to improve transitions into adulthood for youth in their care.

Finding #1 – Bethany's youth lack agency over the processes and decisions which affect them; the behavioral system is deficit-focused and fails to inspire and empower youth to achieve more than survival.

This finding points to deficits in the Identity Capital framework tied to intangible resources that support the self-efficacy, self-esteem, and sense of purpose necessary to build agentic skills, as well as the social capital resources necessary for social and interpersonal skills. Our interviews highlight the lack of agency or control that youth experience while in care. Not being able to do everyday activities like their non-foster peers, like sleeping over at a friend's house, going out to dinner, or attending a last-minute outing, were mentioned consistently by all youth interviewed. The following quotes illustrate the frustration residents experience at being denied opportunities to make their own decisions or explore social connections:

“Um, oh my God, they always make decisions for us. Like, I feel like they should try to understand where we're coming from. I feel that's what makes many kids want to act out because they feel like they're not being heard. And they feel like no matter whether they do good or bad, they'll still get treated the same.” – Current Bethany youth.

“It's tough for kids to do things...normal activities like sleepovers [with friends] or dyeing their hair. We must get county permission - kids can't just do those things. CYS dictates most of what kids can and cannot do here.” – Bethany staff member

“You can if approved by the county which usually takes about three weeks. I stayed over at a friend's house once. And I was literally done with it because it was so embarrassing - the whole process, and the fact that they [friend] had to give me the name, date, times, like all of it. And we had a certain time to be back. And every time you had to get this confirmation and information. And at that point, it was just, I'm 17. And I literally have to ask to go see some freaking lights with my friends – I, at that time was just tired of it, and I never did it again.” – Former Bethany youth

The lack of control over their own living space was another area of concern. A few residents lamented campus tours through occupied student cottages as violating their privacy and personal space. The administrators at Bethany are sensitive to the need to normalize the group home experience, and the following quote from a resident resulted in a change to campus tours in which visitors were limited to viewing unoccupied areas:

"This is where we live - like, would you want like paparazzi outside your house? No, that's what it feels like when random people show up for tours. Visitors show up and are like 'you're an orphan.' Oh my god. My case worker came to see me, and I had to sit on the porch with him at nine in the morning in the heat because they can't come in [to the cottage], but random people we don't know can tour. They don't even tell us until they are about to walk in the door." – Current Bethany youth.

Finally, the way success is defined for Bethany youth limits their agency in planning for their future. Bethany relies on a behavioral point system in which residents move up through the levels of the housing program, earning pre-determined privileges for compliance with expectations; youth are not consulted about their plans and do not provide input on incentives or rewards. This system is regarded by staff as necessary to control youth behavior, but is described by youth, former residents, and staff as being somewhat problematic as youth have no voice. A successful youth is one who follows rules, avoids negative behavior, and is successfully discharged. Interestingly, when youth were asked how they define success for themselves, they had higher expectations for education, career, and personal fulfillment, citing educational attainment, professional achievement, and self-realization as top markers for success.

These quotes from staff highlight problems with the depersonalized view of program success for residents:

“Success for youth here is, I believe, moving up through the level system. I don't entirely agree with it because I think the things that we allow them at certain levels really aren't teaching them anything. I believe that there should be more activity put into their lives. I mean, before you level up, you should be participating with Rec so many times a week and you know, completing certain tasks. So, yeah, I'm not totally in agreement with the system and the way that we do that.” – Bethany staff member.

“I think success is probably somebody who came in like a tyrant and leave manageable, right? They have self-regulation when they get upset, and they know how not to get so upset. That's success.” – Bethany staff member.

“Per the mission statement, youth is to develop in the following ways: ‘self-understanding, growth, and healing toward a brighter, healthier future.’ However, I need to find out how we formally define success for our youth and how that definition, if it exists, ties to our programming. We don't really document or track positive behaviors in the way we track negative youth behavior. Honestly, in practice, success at Bethany appears to be the absence of negative behaviors.” – Bethany staff member.

“Youth generally define success as getting out of Bethany to go home, to a foster home, or another facility. A very small fraction of youth I interact with see Bethany as a place where they can develop, grow, and reach goals by working through the level system.” – Bethany staff member.

Growing up in an institutional setting with constant rules and little opportunity for personal decision-making left many residents wanting nothing more than independence. Being free to control their own lives became the overarching goal for several of our youth participants, even if there was no plan beyond getting out:

“I just want to get through being at Bethany like, I want to be independent, because I already grew up having to take care of myself since I was like 10. So, me being here, it's like, there's so many rules. I'm not used to that. So, I just want to get out of here, but be stable when I get out of here. Because I know if I get out of here now like running or whatever, I'm not going to be stable. I'm going to be going from couch to couch, getting high all the time. Not being able to take care of myself. I'm not going to make a success out of myself. So, I want to be able to get out of here and be stable.” – current Bethany youth

Finding #2 – Being in foster care is stigmatizing to youths' sense of identity and self-esteem.

The second finding reflects deficits in the social capital resources of the Identity Capital model, in which youth in congregate care are excluded from networks and memberships necessary to develop social and interpersonal skills. Stigmatization was one of the common themes in both staff and youth interviews. All girls described feeling that there is a stigma attached to being one of the "Bethany kids," riding the Bethany bus to the public high school and always going out in the community as a group. Several participants felt judged by the actions of other residents and written off as problem kids by staff and outside community members. Staff members, for their part, recognized that kids from Bethany are often labeled as "bad kids" and not given the benefit of the doubt in situations at school, at work, or in the community.

In our quantitative data analysis, we noted that fewer than 1 in 5 Bethany residents is admitted for behavioral reasons; most youth residing at Bethany are admitted because of abuse, absent family, or other disruptions in their lives. The stereotype of foster youth as behavioral problems is a source of stigma that lowers self-esteem and can be difficult to overcome (Kools, 1997). The Executive Director shared this frustration with public perception of Bethany residents, describing a minor verbal disagreement involving Bethany's youth that disrupted an outing to the local pool. Local law enforcement escalated the situation unnecessarily to the point that the youth had to leave the pool, reinforcing negative stereotypes that plague youth in care.

These quotes from Bethany youth reflect their experience of feeling like an outsider:

"We're like a shunned little group at Bethany...the rejects of society that nobody wants. So, they just kind of throw us in a cornfield and say, stay there. Once people get to know us as an individual - at least in my instance, they're like, oh, you're not so bad, you know, for a Bethany kid." – Former Bethany youth.

“When it comes to foster youth, you're automatically a criminal. I feel like there's a stamp on your forehead that says foster kid and like foster kids are bad.” – Former Bethany youth.

“Bethany kids were on one bus. We had our own table at lunch. Everybody knew who we were. Everybody knew what bus number the Bethany kids were on. So, as you're walking off the bus, they're like, hey, that's a Bethany student, like people I never even told knew that I was from Bethany.” - Former Bethany resident.

“Saying that you're a Bethany kid almost feels like saying a bad word. Because when I tell people that I lived in Bethany they're like, oh my god, really? Like I would never think someone like you. It's almost like Bethany is associated with delinquents.” – Former Bethany resident.

“I went to school for my first day. And everyone was like, Are you a Bethany kid? I was like, yeah. And they were like, Oh, you're one of those and then walked away.” – Current Bethany resident.

Staff members agreed with these youth perceptions of being treated as outsiders, as expressed in multiple interviews:

“Bethany kids are unfairly stigmatized. There is a lack of understanding of the trauma that these kids have suffered.” – Bethany staff member.

“Foster kids are looked at differently because they are foster kids. There is a stigma to being in the system.” – Bethany staff member.

“Bethany kids are stigmatized - everywhere. From school to workplace, because some workplaces know that they got a Bethany kid. Oh, where are you from? Where do you live? Well, right away, you're a problem.” – Bethany staff member.

These statements align with literature on the effects of long-term foster care on youth identity, in which the institutional structure and diminished status that come with placement lead to low self-esteem, social isolation, and lack of future orientation (Kools, 1997). Our participants repeated these feelings of being unwanted, pre-judged as behavioral problems, and different from their peers. All expressed a desire to feel “normal” instead of rejected and isolated from friends and the community. This young

woman stated her desire that people would not pre-judge children in care, but treat them as individuals:

“Don’t assume kids are at Bethany because of behavioral issues. We start with the assumption we are problems and have to prove ourselves and earn privileges. It would be better to start with the assumption we are good people and have someone advocate for us, understanding where we come from.” -Former Bethany resident.

Finding #3 – Youth housing at Bethany subjects residents to additional stigma and disruption as they move through a series of cottages based on behavior.

This finding reflects deficits in the social/interpersonal and agentic skills of the Identity Capital model, as youth in care require greater support in developing impulse control, self-esteem, and social capital. Currently, the housing at Bethany consists of cottages where youth are grouped by behavior rather than age. This system was identified by several staff as being problematic as it stigmatizes youth who are in behaviorally challenged cottages and are labeled the "bad kids."

“It’s stigmatizing and labeling when you’ve got this house, that’s the bad house, right? We’ve got the two bad houses with the kids that nobody wants to work with. Kids in those houses....they’re not going to prove that they’re good. They’re going to show you why you put them in that house.” – Bethany staff member

“I don’t like my cottage that much. Because it’s like they put like a mixture of types of kids in there. So, it’s like some kids are like, good egg kids. And some kids just act out and do dumb stuff all the time, like I used to. And some kids, I feel, belong in intensive and some kids belong in Moyer. It doesn’t make sense to me how they move people up. And it kind of makes other kids fail when other kids are constantly acting out and we just have to sit there and hear it.” – Current Bethany youth

In addition to bearing labels associated with specific cottages, as youth move up through the system, they lose a source of social support. Many of the youth participants expressed a desire for consistency, wishing they could remain in cottages with friends

and supportive adults they have come to rely on, particularly when they have gone through so much upheaval in their lives. At Bethany, the program keeps residents moving up through the cottages, earning points and privileges, until they reach independent living. Many girls we spoke to felt pressure to move up to earn use of their phone, even when it meant losing important sources of support. These quotes highlight feelings of regret when youth move into a new cottage:

"I can't go back to Leinbach [cottage] to talk to staff there because I'm not allowed. I got along really well with those staff. So now staff have to come to me whenever I need to talk to them." – Current Bethany youth

"We went on outings with all of the kids, we would pile up into the car like go do things like go movies or something like that, that was nice. Going from there would be Moyer. After level four in Leinbach, there are no more levels; you literally move cottages to move up your level, which I think is kind of horrible, because I feel like if you're already moving around so much. You're moving through these systems of housing with different levels, packing your stuff up again, moving over, putting everything away packing up, moving. Yeah, and if you spent so many years already doing that, that definitely was a little rough." – Current Bethany youth

As youth keep moving in the system, they rarely feel they are at home. While the cottages are aesthetically pleasing on the exterior, they are plain on the inside; some described them as "institutional" and think Bethany could do much more to improve them for the youth. The youth that we spoke to felt that the cottages should be more homelike and that grouping youth by behavior places a label on them and negatively affects their self-esteem.

"The cottages are very institutionalized. They are supposed to be family-like, but they're not. They use gray, beige, boring colors. No brightness or happiness to it." – Bethany staff member

"Like, they make all these rules and at the end of the day, they are to go home to their family and lay on a comfortable bed in a nice home and we're here – stuck. Missing our families, wanting to go home, leave So many kids run away from placement. I ran away from placement three times from Bethany." – Former Bethany youth

The feelings about Bethany's new collegiate housing model were mixed between youth and staff. All the reasons for adopting the collegiate housing model – creating a college-like environment, fostering independence, eliminating house parents – were cited as both positive and negative attributes of the model. The youth, overwhelmingly, preferred to have individuals who can act as a parent-like surrogate, reinforcing the desire for establishing and maintaining caring and supportive relationships while at Bethany and after they leave.

As it currently exists, the housing system advances residents through a program aimed toward self-sustaining independence, a consequence of which is often the severing of contact with supportive staff members. One of the staff members spoke about how it is troubling that a youth's reward for achieving all the levels is that “you get to live by yourself, in isolation.”

Finding #4 – Youth at Bethany lack an understanding of healthy relationships.

This finding supports a need for social/interpersonal skills, one of the Identity Capital resources most lacking for youth in care. The desire for healthy relationships - and the understanding of what a healthy relationship looks like - was a recurrent theme in our interviews with all current and former youth. Unhealthy relationships, whether in the form of family, friends, or romantic partners, seem to take a toll on participants' mental health and ability to pursue their own lives with a sense of autonomy and agency. Many of the youth we interviewed detailed their past trauma and how those experiences have negatively impacted their ability to make good decisions about their

self-care needs. Several endured abusive relationships and housing instability after leaving Bethany.

These quotes from residents demonstrate the attitude toward relationships between youth at Bethany – relationships are forbidden, and boys and girls are separated from each other:

“So even though boys and girls are always separated on campus, there were like, obviously, still relationships happening. We were never taught, Okay, you guys are in a relationship together. Now this is like a healthy boundary. You know, we were never given like an education on how to have a safe and healthy relationship.” – Former Bethany youth

“It just seems like Bethany's way of like, regulating everything [including relationships] is to just prevent it altogether. But, I mean, we were all teenagers once, if you tell someone not to do it, they're going to do it, they're going to find a way to do it. And that's exactly what happens.” – former Bethany youth.

Youth wished for opportunities to learn about healthy relationships and practice conflict resolution, rather than being merely separated or punished:

“I think it would help a lot of people as far as relationships go, whether it's romantic friendship, you know, coworkers, like any kind of like relationship, there's no kind of like education on that. So like, you know, you got a campus, you got boys and girls on a campus, you know, but they're always separate from each other, and they're not allowed to interact at all.” – Former Bethany youth

“Girls [in the cottages] that were constantly butting heads and always fighting each other. There was no like education about getting along. Why don't you guys get along? What are you disagreeing about? Are you fighting because your two personalities clash? Or did this person do something that accidentally or intentionally hurt you or harmed you? There is no like conflict resolution of any sort.” – Current Bethany youth

Additionally, healthy relationships with adults were important to girls in care. All of the former residents we interviewed had developed emotional attachments to Bethany staff, but those relationships ceased once youth left Bethany. Many staff members expressed a desire to maintain contact with some former residents but recognized that it

is prohibited under current Bethany policies. Interestingly, no one we interviewed knew what the Bethany policy states about contact with youth after they leave care. Answers to the question 'how much time must elapse after a youth leaves care in order to have a relationship with them?' ranged from two years to seven years; a few people said that while relationships with youth after care are not allowed, they maintain contact anyway, feeling that it is in the best interest of that youth. While in care, girls said they did not have a consistent relationship with someone they could go to for support, a feeling that was acknowledged as true by several Bethany staff who cited staff turnover, changing job responsibilities, and appropriate boundary policies as being inhibitors to developing and maintaining positive relationships with youth.

Finding #5 – There is no designated transition coordinator to support current or former Bethany youth in making crucial life decisions.

This final finding also speaks to deficits in the agentic and social/interpersonal skills of the Identity Capital framework for youth transitioning out of care without the sense of purpose or memberships and networks necessary for positive life outcomes. Many of the youth we spoke to checked themselves out at the age of 18 with no plan for housing, education, or healthcare. This quotes from a former resident highlights the need for a guiding hand for older teens in care:

"My sister checked herself out of care at 18. Moved to an apartment where there were holes in the wall. There was mold and trash all over the place. She had no bed that she could sleep on. Kids don't just turn 18 and automatically know how to make the right choices. My sister was living in feces. And no one [from Bethany or the county] went out there to see where she was going, if she had a bed or if she had her own room, or if she had food to eat. Maybe if someone had gone with her, maybe to go see this place before even deciding, she wouldn't have left care." -Former Bethany youth.

Importantly, the need and desire to have a Bethany staff member in the role of providing support to youth as they transition out of care, and for that person to be someone youth could call for help in the future, was mentioned in some iteration by everyone we interviewed. This need is supported by our quantitative analysis, which shows that 35% of youth leaving Bethany are either runaways, are moved to a shelter or detention center, or are hospitalized. Only 6% of residents are noted as “living independently” at discharge. Although 30% of residents are reunified with family and another 13% move to a foster home, the majority of residents need support from Bethany to plan their future.

When asked what they would do to improve outcomes for youth leaving Bethany Children’s Home, both staff and former residents suggested having ongoing support in the planning and leave-taking process:

“I think that a program that kids can apply to and talk about transitioning out-of-care would be very beneficial. I think they should have a meeting with said child and kind of say like, Hey, I think you should work on this before this, like kind of something to kind of show them. Give them some of what they want, but also not completely go all in.” – Former Bethany youth.

“Having someone for the kids to call or ask questions. Like, we’re going to help with things because you lived here, because you were here, we’re going to help you basically throughout the rest of your life if you just need to talk to somebody or need guidance.” -Bethany Staff Member

“If there is no after care person then what are we doing even to set up youth up for success? Youth need that person who they can connect with – to go back to and ask questions or get guidance or help with something. We don't have that person. When kids leave here, it's like 'Good luck' and that's the end of our involvement with them.” – Bethany staff member

Many interviewees pointed to the fact that youth in care may need more assistance to accomplish goals or make decisions than their non-foster peers, which is

backed by literature (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Greeson et al., 2015; Geiger & Beltran, 2017). After speaking to Bethany youth, it became obvious that many of them were not aware of programs that are available to help them; one example was that of going to college. Although there is a program for youth to attend a state college for free (tuition and books), most of the girls we spoke to did not know about the program. The staff that we asked about it, had varying degrees of knowledge about what the program entailed or how to go about obtaining it. Having a person dedicated to addressing the needs of youth transitioning out of care is identified as a "critical need" and speaks to the overarching finding of youths' need for social capital to succeed.

"Kids, I think what probably happened is that they do slip through. Because there is not anybody in charge of the aftercare. There's not an appointed kind of spot, like what they're trying to do with the alumni stuff, right? The alumni now can call up and say, Hey, do you have old pictures of me or whatever. But you know, Jen's really working at that, like finding information, getting the alumni on campus, those things. I do not know if that is what the younger people need right now. They need help connecting to resources or who to call for help. But there is not someone that I know of [here] that they can go to." – Bethany staff member

Two Bethany staff members provided specific ideas for coordinating the transition alongside the young person leaving care and the need to provide support, or "check-in," a year or two after leaving care.

"I think we need to have someone here who's specifically going to contact each child through their process, setting up goals - age-appropriate goals to meet throughout their time here. And making those goals visuals so that they know - I've done this, I've attained this. Do I know that Bethany can help me get a job, get into college? Do I want to stay or am I going to move into one of the [Bethany] apartments, to continue that support while I am in my freshman year of college or industrial school? Or you know, am I going to work and let Bethany help me learn how to balance my checkbook? It's having goals, to be able to be independent a year from now, and having someone who helps these kids and who does that [job] specifically." – Bethany staff member

“It'd be nice if we had a person to check on a youth one or two years after they leave here to see how they're doing. Do they need anything? I really do believe that in that moment of transitioning from here to aftercare, some kids are just not going to listen to you. A lot of times, they're in a bad spot. I believe that a year later is a good center ground of like, oh, I've now got my feet dirty. And there is too much I'm involved with and now I need your help.” - Bethany staff member

In reviewing these five findings, we note that some responses shed light on problem spots that were already the focus of improvement initiatives at Bethany. One example was youth felt "on display" when the Bethany administration allowed visitors to tour their cottages. One girl stated, "I feel like they are trespassing in our home and looking at us like we're the poor orphan kids." After learning of this preliminary finding, the Executive Director immediately eliminated tours in occupied homes. Other issues that were previously a problem – like being unable to get a driver's license while in care – have been addressed. Within the last few years, Bethany has contracted with a driving school to help youth obtain their driving license. We recognize the ongoing efforts Bethany makes to improve experiences for youth in their care, and we provide the following recommendations as targeted solutions to bolster feelings of belonging, social connection, and self-efficacy as the youth transition to adulthood.

Recommendations

As a result of our findings, we offer six recommendations for Bethany Children's Home to consider as they make decisions about systemic processes and programming for youth. Table 11 sets forth each recommendation, aligned with the findings from our interview and the corresponding elements from the Identity Capital Model which form the conceptual framework for the project.

Table 11
Improvement Project Recommendations

Recommendation	Alignment to Findings	Alignment to Identity Capital Model Framework
#1: Evaluate systemic practices that may be stigmatizing to youth	<p>Finding #2 – Being in foster care is stigmatizing to youths’ sense of identity and self-esteem.</p> <p>Finding #3 – Youth housing at Bethany subjects residents to additional stigma and disruption as they progress through a series of cottages based on behavior.</p>	<p>Intangible Resources: Self esteem</p> <p>Tangible Resources: Memberships and networks</p>
#2: Engage youth in planning their care	Finding #1 – Bethany’s youth lack agency over the processes and decisions which affect them; the behavioral system is deficit-focused and fails to inspire and empower youth to achieve more than survival.	Intangible Resources: Self/impulse control, Self-efficacy/esteem
#3: Use mentoring to build healthy relationships	Finding #4 – Youth at Bethany lack an understanding of healthy relationships.	Tangible Resources: Social capital, Interpersonal skills
#4: Hire a transition coordinator	Finding #5 – There is no designated transition support coordinator to assist current or former Bethany youth in making crucial life decisions.	<p>Intangible Resources: Sense of purpose</p> <p>Tangible Resources: Memberships and networks</p>
#5: Increase access to mental health care and conduct mental health assessments	Finding #4 – Youth at Bethany lack an understanding of healthy relationships.	Intangible Resources: Self/impulse control, Self esteem
#6: Implement intensive life skills training	Finding #5 – There is no designated transition support coordinator to assist current or former Bethany youth in making crucial life decisions.	Tangible Resources: life & workplace skills

Three of our six recommendations are ones that, in our opinion, may be implemented in a timely manner at low cost. These include:

Recommendation #1: Evaluate systemic practices that may be stigmatizing to youth

Identified issues: The stigma attached to long-term, out-of-home placement has a negative effect on adolescent identity development and often leads to low self-esteem, social isolation, and a lack of future orientation (Kools, 1997). Staff and youth at Bethany recognized several stigmatizing practices that exist in the current foster care system.

Our recommendations to alleviate institutional stigma at Bethany includes evaluating its current housing model – which houses youth by assessed behavioral needs rather than age – for alternative solutions that will allow youth to remain in a consistent environment with their peers. Allowing youth to remain in stable housing environments with the ability to form and maintain consistent relationships, instead of constantly moving through housing levels to different cottages, will contribute to a sense of stability and investment in their housing environment. In their 2021 report, *Away from Home Youth Experiences of Institutional Placements in Foster Care*, researchers noted that the structure of institutional residential environments failed to provide “the parental role youth need, or providing meaningful, lasting relationships necessary for their social development and success in life” (Fathallah, et al., 2021).

Additionally, reevaluating practices like having a staff-accompanied Bethany bus to pick up kids from Conrad Weiser High School and engaging in group activities where Bethany kids are identified and isolated (such as the pool) are suggested ideas. Finally,

convening a community group that will foster positive relationships between foster youth and community members (such as business owners, law enforcement, and school officials) may help to reduce any existing biases that exist towards Bethany youth and promote the development of a stronger support network for youth. These suggestions are supported by Kool's (1997) work on developing positive identity through normalizing the group home, becoming a more integral part of the community through participation in activities with local youth-oriented organizations to minimize the feeling of being "different."

Recommendation #2: Engage youth in planning their care

Identified issues: Depersonalization, or the devaluation of one's identity that occurs when foster youth receive impersonal treatment without consideration or respect for individual needs, reduces their ability to develop the agentic skills needed to succeed as adults (Kools, 1997). Youth in the child welfare system have not traditionally been included in decision-making for their own future, which limits their ability to develop an agentic identity (Collins, 2001).

Former Bethany residents lamented that, while in care, they had little autonomy over decisions that directly affect them. The system as it exists is a punitive one where youth must earn privileges, such as use of a cell phone, and are punished as a group if one member within a cottage does something wrong. Kools (1997) stresses the importance of providing humanistic and individualistic care to counter the depersonalization that can come with living in an institutional setting. Allowing adolescent participation in treatment planning and program development, providing

limits and structures with flexibility and room for negotiation, and letting youth have some say in privileges, consequences, and responsibilities, can increase responsibility for their own actions.

Our recommendation is to meet with youth residents and allow them to help direct positive behavioral plans at Bethany with the understanding that all youth have a voice in directing their care and making life decisions. Additionally, allowing youth to plan social activities on campus and off-campus trips and activities should be a priority.

Recommendation #3: Use mentoring to build healthy relationships

Identified issues: Research supports the notion that the enduring presence of at least one caring, committed adult in the life of a young person can reduce the risk of adverse life outcomes (Avery, 2010; Greeson, 2013; Zimmerman et al., 2013), and there is wide consensus that the achievement of supportive, permanent adult relationships is beneficial for healthy youth development (Aquilino, 2006; Bowers et al., 2014; Haddad, Chen, & Greenberger, 2010). Having healthy relationships with peers, parents, and important non-parental adults is a critical piece of adolescent development (Bowers et al., 2014), yet the youth in our project struggle with understanding what a healthy relationship looks like.

Our recommendation is to explore mentoring programs and activities that will promote and teach this important life skill while youth are at Bethany. Developing healthy and positive relationships is critical for youth as they transition into adulthood. Two promising programs include the CORE (Creating Ongoing Relationships Effectively) now called [Family Alternatives](#) model that is heavily focused on youth

empowerment (Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014), and youth-initiated mentoring ([YIM](#)) approaches that use the youth's existing network to establish meaningful, interdependent connections (Spencer et al., 2018). Further, Bethany staff need to have a comprehensive understanding of what a healthy relationship is, and how to model that behavior for youth in their care.

Our final three recommendations will take more time, increased funding and cooperation from local, state, and federal departments including:

Recommendation #4: Hire a transition coordinator

Identified issues: Hiring a dedicated person to help youth develop their transition plan while in care and serve as an ongoing source of support after leaving care is our ***top recommendation for Bethany*** (contingent upon funding). Youth leaving Bethany often do not have a sustainable plan for independent living and lack ongoing support from Bethany to navigate challenges they face after departure. Although the [Fostering Connections Act](#) requires a transition plan be developed at least 90 days prior to youth exiting care (Courtney et al., 2017), youth we spoke to did not have a transition plan in place prior to leaving care. Per the Act, the transition plan must be developed under the direction of the youth and must address each of the following issues:

- educational stability
- housing
- health insurance and health care proxy
- local opportunities for mentors and continuing support services
- workforce supports and employment services

Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education developed a [Foster Care Transition Toolkit](#) to address the needs that youth in care have when it comes to navigating employment, housing, education, purchasing a car, or obtaining health care. A transition coordinator could help youth to understand their options, help them to make good choices and provide guidance to them in a time of need. Ideally, this position would be available for any youth who has ever resided at Bethany, to call upon for help at any time throughout their life.

The [United States Department of Veterans Affairs Transition Assistance Program](#) (TAP) is an example of a program that meets the needs of its members transitioning out of military life into civilian life by providing counseling, training for employment, emotional support, financial advice, skills training, and housing. While the TAP program is not specific to the foster care environment, there are striking similarities between the struggles that military personnel and foster youth face as they transition into new chapters of their lives.

Recommendation #5: Increase access to mental health care and conduct comprehensive mental health assessments

Identified issues: Several years ago, Bethany eliminated their clinicians and instead, contracted with an outside agency to provide therapeutic services. Many of the staff and most of the youth identified the lack of readily available mental health services as a major issue that severely impacts them. While we understand that hiring personnel is a costly budget item, having a person that youth can talk to in a timely way in a moment of crisis rather than once a week or bi-weekly, is a more responsive approach to mental health needs.

Given the extensive trauma history of many Bethany residents, it is possible that unmet social-emotional needs may hinder their ability to benefit from other interventions. We also recommend that Bethany, or the county of origin, consider conducting Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic and Treatment ([EPSDT](#)) screenings for all youth entering care. This recommendation is supported by the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry who recommended, as a best practice, that “the [foster] child's comprehensive health assessment must include the elements of the EPSDT screening and assessment, such as physical, dental, substance use, and mental health evaluations. It must also address issues of co-morbidity” (AACAP, 2002).

Finally, in an evaluation of foster care independence programs, it was found that greater attention to youths’ psychological and emotional health and well-being—including risks they have faced, their sources of resilience, and the impact of trauma they experience before, during, and after placement in foster care— can improve the effectiveness of independent living programs focused on increasing human and social capital (Courtney et al., 2017). If possible, a transition coordinator would ensure that residents have access to mental health services upon discharge as well, since social service agency leaders rank mental health services (including support for self-harm/suicidal thoughts, treatment for trauma, and medication management) as critically important for aftercare when youth depart group homes (Tyler et al., 2017).

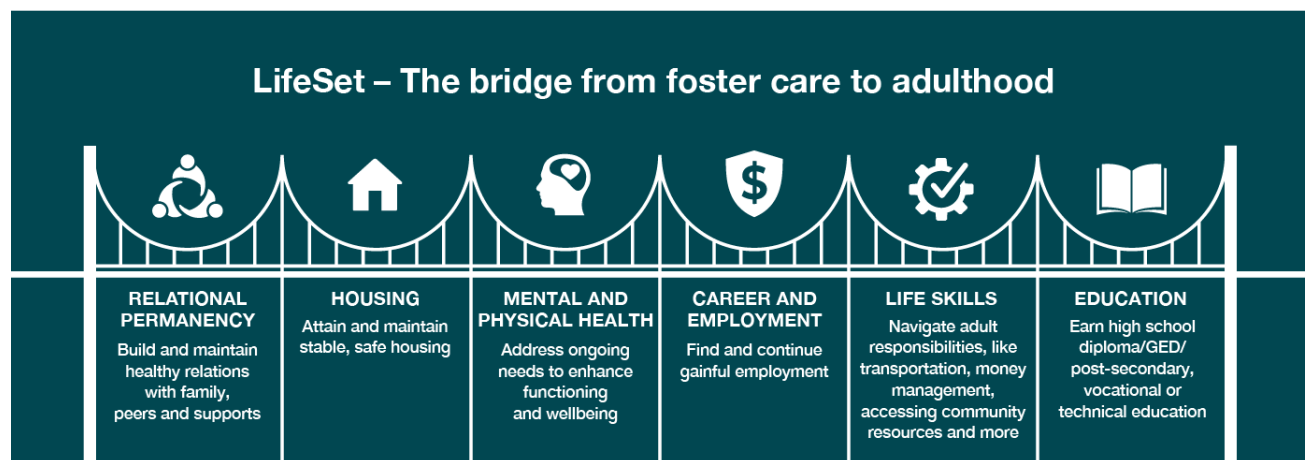
Recommendation #6: Implement intensive life skills training

Identified issues: Currently, there is a limited amount of life skills training at Bethany. Youth are given Daniel Memorial Living Skills Assessment “Daniel Memorials” packets

to complete, but we believe these to be insufficient for truly teaching youth vital life skills. Daniel Memorials assess a youth’s comprehension and knowledge of 16 different life skill areas (money management, food management, personal appearance, health, housekeeping, housing, transportation, educational planning, job-seeking, job-maintenance, emergency and safety skills, knowledge of community resources, interpersonal skills, legal skills, religion, and leisure) to determine mastery of those skills. Almost all the youth we spoke to said that Daniel Memorials were something they completed to gain privileges, and many acknowledged that they cheated on completing them and did not really learn anything in the process. We recommend exploring best practices and programs like the [LifeSet Program](#) (LifeSet, 2022), an evidenced-informed community-based program that focuses on helping foster youth build healthy relationships, obtain safe housing, education, and employment (see Figure 16) or the [My Life self-determination enhancement model](#) (Powers et al., 2018) as an alternative to Daniel Memorials.

Figure 16

Overview of the program goals for the LifeSet program from Youth Villages



Conclusion

Our research supports much of what youth, former youth, and staff mentioned as challenges for foster youth, including social connectedness, after-care programs, housing, education, and employment. Many of these outcomes are linked to mental health disorders, history of trauma, and lack of support for youth once they leave the system. We found that there has been less focus on the importance of relationship-centered solutions that may provide ongoing support from caring adults that could fill in the gaps of a young adult's support system once they age out of the system. Further, we contend that foster youth may provide the most valuable insight into what would direct them onto a more successful path in life. Several of our interviews with Bethany foster youth provided themes, including lack of knowledge about opportunities, the transiency of staff that leads to a dearth of meaningful relationships while in the system, and lack of financial support once they transition out. By listening to and recording the stories of current and former Bethany Children's Home residents and administrators, we gained valuable insight into how their lived experiences within the foster care system affected(ed) them. By speaking directly to foster youth about the system they exist(ed) within adds descriptive richness to the body of knowledge to understand better how we can ensure success for Pennsylvania youth transitioning into adulthood.



I'm happy with who I am as an individual.

I am my definition of success.

“ I'm finally happy and I'm safe. ”

I have good people in my life who care about me.

I've overcome everything that was kind of thrown in my direction.

I was able to find a job that pays me.

I'm able to take care of myself - physically, emotionally and mentally.

I don't have people constantly making decisions for me or telling me what to do.

I found my voice.

I finally feel like I am free.

-Sarah
former Bethany youth resident and
successful author of her own story

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Bethany Interview Questions – Current and Former Residents

1. Education

- a. Currently, are you enrolled in and attending high school, GED classes, post-high school vocational training or college?
- b. What programs or support services at Bethany or in the foster care system did you utilize to help advance your education?
- c. Is it important to you to continue your education after high school? What challenges do you anticipate in pursuing post-secondary education?

2. Social

- a. What programs does Bethany offer that connect youth with members of the community?
- b. While in care, was there at least one adult in your life, other than your caseworker, who you talked to for advice or emotional support? Who was that person? Are they still a meaningful part of your life?
- c. Describe your network of support (family/friends/co-workers/staff). How do you maintain your relationships with your network?

3. Financial

- a. What financial resources or support from another source, excluding paid employment, have you received?
- b. What is your experience working while in care or after leaving Bethany?
- c. Have you ever been involved in an apprenticeship program or internship? Please tell us about it.

4. Housing

- a. What has been your experience with homelessness?
- b. In your opinion, is the housing program at Bethany Children's Home meeting the needs of youth from the residential level to the Independent Living level? Please tell us about your experience.
- c. If applicable, how easy, or hard was it to obtain housing once you aged out of the foster care system? What were your challenges? What helped you to get housing?

5. Health

- a. Have you ever referred yourself or has someone else referred you for alcohol or drug abuse assessment or counseling? Please tell us about your experience.
- b. Have you ever given birth to a child or children? If yes, can you tell us about your relationship with the child's other parent?
- c. What has been your experience with the healthcare system?
- d. What types of health challenges have you faced?

6. Justice System

- a. What has been your experience in the juvenile justice system? What about as an adult, if applicable?
- b. Do you believe that law enforcement treat youth in foster care fairly?
- c. What do you think could be improved with the juvenile justice system as it relates to foster care youth?

Concluding Questions

- a. Finally, how do you think Bethany defines success for its residents; how do youth define success for themselves?
- b. What do you think Bethany could do to promote success for kids who are aging out of the system?
- c. What do you consider best practices for aftercare programming?

Bethany Interview Questions – Staff

Introductory: What inspired you to work with youth in foster care?

1. Social

- a. What programs does Bethany offer that connect youth with members of the community?
- b. While in care, do you think youth have adults they can turn to for advice or emotional support? Who are those people? Do those relationships persist after they leave care?
- c. Describe the network of support (family/friends/co-workers/staff) available to youth at Bethany. How do youth maintain those relationships within their network?

2. Education

- a. What programs or support services at Bethany can youth utilize to advance their education? Can you give examples?
- b. What challenges do you see youth facing in pursuing post-secondary education?

3. Financial

- a. What financial resources or support do youth receive, other than paid employment?
- b. Can you describe a typical experience for youth working while in care at Bethany?
- c. Do you know of any apprenticeship programs or internships available for youth at Bethany?

4. Housing

- a. How does homelessness impact your youth, either before or after leaving Bethany?
- b. In your opinion, is the housing program at Bethany Children's Home meeting the needs of youth from the residential level to the Independent Living level? Please tell us what you think is working well and what you might change.
- c. How do youth go about obtaining housing once they age out of the foster care system? What are the challenges? What supports do they have?

5. Health

- a. Have you ever referred youth for alcohol or drug abuse assessment or counseling? Please tell us about your experience.
- b. Have any of the youth in your care ever given birth to a child or children? If yes, can you tell us about the experience of helping them become a parent?
- c. What has been your experience navigating the healthcare system with foster youth? (Both physical and mental health)
- d. What types of health challenges have your youth faced?

6. Justice System

- a. What has been your experience navigating the juvenile justice system with foster youth?
- b. Do you believe that law enforcement treat youth in foster care fairly?
- c. What do you think could be improved with the juvenile justice system as it relates to foster care youth?

Overall Questions:

- i. How does Bethany Children's Home define success for its youth? How do youth define success for themselves?
- ii. What conditions lead to success for youth aging out of Bethany Children's Home?
- iii. What do you see as best practices for aftercare programming and interventions to improve transitions into adulthood?

Appendix B: Terminology

After care: Services and programs that are designed to help foster youth successfully transition from the foster care system to independent adulthood (Juvenile Law Center, 2022).

Congregate Care: A licensed or approved setting that provides 24 hour care for children in a group home (7-12 children) or an institution (12 or more children). These settings may include a child care institution, a residential treatment facility or a maternity home (Brown, 2022).

Department: The secretary for the Department of State Health Services or equivalent agency that governs the state Foster Care program.

Fictive kin: An individual who is not related by birth, adoption, or marriage to a child, but who has an emotionally significant relationship with the child (American Legislative Exchange Council, 2022).

Foster care: Foster care is a temporary service provided by States for children who cannot live with their families. Children in foster care may live with relatives or with unrelated foster parents. Foster care can also refer to placement settings such as group homes, congregate care homes, residential care facilities, emergency shelters, and supervised independent living (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022).

Foster family home: A private home in which children is placed for foster family care under supervision of the Department for child welfare or of a licensed child-placing agency (American Legislative Exchange Council, 2022).

Intangible resources: Resources might comprise psychosocial vitalities and capacities such as the exploration of commitments, ego strength, an internal locus of

control, self-monitoring, self-esteem, a sense of purpose in life, social perspective taking, critical thinking abilities, and moral reasoning abilities. The common feature of these attributes is that they should give individuals the wherewithal to understand and negotiate the various social, occupational, and personal obstacles and opportunities commonly encountered throughout (late-modern) adult life (Cote, 1997).

Kinship Care: The raising of children by grandparents, or other extended family members within the fourth degree of kinship (American Legislative Exchange Council, 2022).

Out-of-home placement (OoHP): A placement other than in the home of a parent, relative, or guardian, in a boarding home, clinical treatment facility, community-based facility, detention facility, emergency shelter, Fictive Kin home, Foster family home, hospital, non-secure facility, physically secure facility, residential treatment facility, or youth alternative center (American Legislative Exchange Council, 2022).

Tangible resources: Resources include financial resources (including parent's financial capital), educational credentials (academic capital), social rewarded competencies (human capital, fraternity/sorority, and club/association memberships, social capital, speech patterns, and parental social status (Cote, 1997).