A photograph of four diverse young adults (two women and two men) smiling and posing outdoors in front of green trees. The image is partially covered by a purple overlay at the bottom where the title is located.

# Investing to Improve the Well-Being of Vulnerable Youth and Young Adults

**Recommendations for Policy and Practice**





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## Recommendations for Policy and Practice

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# Introduction

**Older adolescence and emerging adulthood is a pivotal period of development.** During this time-frame, young people between the ages of 14 and 25 experience distinct developmental milestones on their way to becoming healthy, connected, and productive adults.<sup>1</sup> This developmental phase is rich with possibility and promise as young people develop a sense of identity, begin to make more independent decisions, create career goals, adopt a value system, and develop and deepen critical relationships. It is also during this time that young people transitioning to adulthood experience increased vulnerability and risk. They may become disconnected from family, school, or work. They may lack access to physical and mental health care and may engage in risky or unsafe behaviors. They may experience the child welfare or youth justice systems.<sup>2</sup>

During this period of possibility, exploration, vulnerability, and risk, **adolescents and young adults experience critical brain development.** Research clearly shows that maltreatment and exposure to trauma can have profound and long-term effects on brain development. However, it is also clear the brain continues to develop throughout adolescence and emerging adulthood, providing critical windows of opportunity to build resilience and develop new skills, habits, and attitudes. Moreover, chemical changes in the brain that prepare adolescents to take risks also present important opportunities for young people to learn from mistakes and acquire greater self-regulation, coping, and resiliency skills.<sup>3</sup> Access to developmentally appropriate activities and supports provides youth with a sense of normalcy and increases opportunities for even the most vulnerable young people to experience growth, successful transition to adult life, and overall well-being.

This significant developmental period — which can span more than a decade — has long-lasting implications for a person's well-being. For vulnerable youth and young adults — those disconnected from school or work and those who have experienced foster care or the youth justice system — navigating this developmental phase can be particularly challenging and fraught with barriers. Without healthy coping skillsets and mindsets, it can be hard to deal with challenges in a school environment, with a roommate, or in the workplace. Without strong family and social networks, it can be difficult to manage health, succeed in school, locate a place to live, and find and keep a job. Without opportunities to acquire new knowledge, develop and practice new skills, and safely fail, it can be incredibly challenging to succeed personally, socially, and economically. Without well-lit pathways to get back on track when bumps in the road arise, young people can get left behind. **The supports and opportunities young people have access to or lack, to what extent they are supported by nurturing families and communities, and how public system policies and practices are crafted significantly affect their well-being.**

## Introduction

**Today's young people are transitioning to adulthood during challenging times. The cost of inaction is great.** Our country is experiencing significant economic restructuring and new demands for a highly skilled workforce. Young adults who are not in school or working cost taxpayers an estimated \$93 billion annually and \$1.6 trillion over their lifetimes in lost revenues and increased social services.<sup>4</sup> With current rates of post-secondary completion, the nation will likely fall short by 5 million skilled workers needed for 55 million job openings by 2020.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, our country has been plagued with widening inequities, with young people of color experiencing disproportionately poor well-being outcomes. African-American, American Indian, and Latino youth continue to face systemic barriers in housing policies, educational opportunities, access to health and mental health care services, and child welfare and juvenile justice involvement. As a consequence, these young people experience negative outcomes at rates higher than national averages and face steep barriers to success. How public and private leaders craft policies and practices to support youth and young adults, particularly those who are the most vulnerable, can have **significant, lasting, and potentially transformative impacts for creating both a productive and equitable society.**

Continuing with business as usual will not yield better results. Narrow and uncoordinated approaches have historically not succeeded in significantly improving outcomes for the nation's most vulnerable young people. To truly improve the lives of young people, youth-serving system leaders, policymakers and public and private funders need a **common framework to guide initiatives aimed at supporting the healthy development of young people across a broad set of well-being domains.**

In recent years, there has been growing interest on the part of policymakers, funders, and practitioners to develop such frameworks to guide investments and support improved well-being outcomes for vulnerable young people, notably including the federal Administration on Children, Youth and Families' framework on social and emotional well-being<sup>6</sup> and current efforts underway within the Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention.<sup>7</sup> These efforts have resulted in important progress in defining well-being for older youth and young adults. While many public and private funders agree that comprehensive approaches are useful, and indeed necessary, the challenge of how to develop a common set of definitions and operationalize a well-being framework remains a significant barrier.

The Youth Transition Funders Group (YTFG) is a national network of foundations whose mission is to help all youth make a successful transition to adulthood by age 25. This investment agenda was developed by funders, leading researchers, policy leaders, and young adults to leverage and advance new and emerging interest within and outside the federal government and research and advocacy communities to better understand and support holistic approaches to improving the well-being of vulnerable youth and young adults. Refer to Page 2 for a full list of contributors to this document. Building upon



work underway in the fields of child welfare, youth justice, education, health, and mental health, YTFG proposes a common framework to describe well-being for vulnerable youth and young adults and take advantage of growing knowledge and understanding of youth who experience multiple systems.

This document begins by exploring the important role and responsibility of each youth-serving system in supporting well-being for youth and young adults. Next, it presents a new framework for well-being for young people, highlighting the various domains of well-being and the role of families, communities, and public systems in supporting well-being. Finally, this document includes a series of concrete and actionable recommendations for youth system leaders, policymakers, and public and private funders for improving policy and practice to support the well-being of youth who are transitioning to adulthood.



# Well-Being Across Youth-Serving Systems

**Comprehensive attention to the holistic and lifelong well-being needs of youth and young adults is everybody's job, yet nobody's job.** Systems serving children, youth, and families each have a particular focus, mission, and realm of responsibility, whether that is educating young people, supporting their physical or mental health, maintaining young people's safety, or ensuring community safety. No one system has responsibility for the whole young person across multiple life domains. While systems do place a value on overall well-being, the specific value and role of each particular system as it relates to achieving well-being is not often articulated. The fact that no one system specifically "owns," articulates, or identifies overall well-being as a critical and foundational value for the young people they serve demonstrates the challenge that funders, community leaders, and advocates face when seeking to engage these systems around the vital need for investments in improved well-being outcomes.

All young people interface with multiple systems, including health care and schools. For vulnerable youth who experience trauma, abuse, neglect, or behavioral difficulties, the number of systems each youth and family must interface with explodes exponentially. And with the introduction of each new system, hurdles and barriers to well-being arise. When multiple systems are involved in a young person's life, unintentional barriers to well-being are often created as a result of a lack or perceived lack of clarity around roles and jurisdictional issues, or a lack of communication and coordination between the various systems. When lack of clarity exists, accountability for well-being outcomes drops. Each system simply retreats to their own realm of responsibility, carrying out its own job duties and roles without a clear understanding of how or if these duties and roles relate to the larger question of well-being for the young person involved.

Every system that serves youth and young adults has a critical role and responsibility in supporting comprehensive, holistic, and lifelong well-being. Clearly articulating those roles and responsibilities benefits not only individual young people who are served, **but also the ability of each specific system to achieve its own goals and desired outcomes.**

## Well-Being in the Education System

Schools are critical places where young people learn, acquire and test new knowledge, skills, and attitudes, and develop social relationships. Attention to well-being by educational leaders provides several significant benefits including the following:

- Improvement of school climate;
- Positive impact on youth outcomes;
- Greater job satisfaction for teachers and staff;

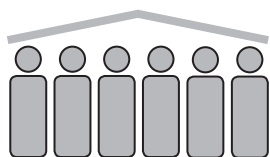


- Reduced use of costly and restrictive services; and
- Increased family and youth satisfaction with services.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, young people with greater levels of well-being are more successful academically, achieve higher grades, become more goal-oriented and engaged in their schooling, and reach higher standards of academic success. When students are engaged and achieving success, parents, teachers, and administrators also experience greater satisfaction, and school climate and safety for all students is improved.

## Well-Being in Employment

In this competitive labor market, young people have difficulty finding and keeping jobs even with educational credentials needed for success. Credentials signify completion of schooling which does not always represent competence. On the front end of the employment spectrum, potential workers who have more developed social and emotional skills present as more employable and are therefore more likely to be hired. Employees with strong social and emotional skills are able to negotiate and resolve conflict with co-workers. Research shows that employees with positive well-being not only are happier and less stressed, they also stay longer and contribute more to their companies and organizations.<sup>9</sup>



**1 in 7**

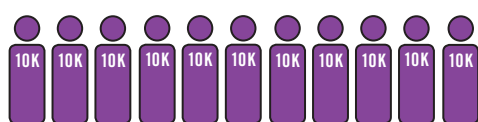
Or **5.7 million** young people ages 16 to 24 are not in school or working.<sup>10</sup>

**One out of five** high school students are not graduating on time. **One out of four** African-American and Latino high school students are not graduating on time.<sup>11</sup>

The youth unemployment rate is consistently **double** the national average.<sup>12</sup> **Sixteen percent** of young people are unemployed.<sup>13</sup>

## Well-Being in Child Welfare

In the child welfare system, well-being is closely tied to the achievement of critical system outcomes, including safety and permanency. For example, research has documented the critical interplay between placement stability and social and emotional well-being. Youth who experience fewer placement changes also generally experience fewer school changes, less trauma and distress, and fewer mental health and behavioral health problems. They also have an increased likelihood for academic achievement and having a lasting positive relationship with an adult.<sup>14</sup> Conversely, experiencing multiple placements has been associated with an increase in externalized behavior problems. There is a growing recognition that trauma-informed attention to social and emotional well-being provides a strong foundation for improved placement stability and leads to improvements in other child outcomes.<sup>15</sup>



**110,000<sup>+</sup>**

young people between the ages of  
14 and 20 are in foster care.<sup>16</sup>

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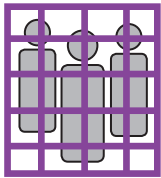
Over **22,000 young people age-out** of the foster care system each year without a permanent legal connection to a caring adult.<sup>17</sup>

**Twenty percent of youth** who age out of foster care do not have a high school diploma or a GED by age 25. Less than 8 percent graduate college.<sup>18</sup>

Up to **eighty percent of young people** in foster care have significant mental health issues.<sup>19</sup>  
Among young people in foster care, forty percent have behavior challenges.<sup>20</sup>

## Well-Being in Youth Justice

In some respects, the justice system has been slower to recognize the critical link between well-being and the pursuit of public safety. Yet, with a greater recognition of the impact of trauma on youth in the justice system, greater attention to the importance of well-being has emerged. Justice systems with an intentional focus on well-being find youth experience shorter stays in detention and similar restrictive, deep-end facilities and less recidivism upon discharge. Both youth and community safety outcomes improve. Youth with support for their well-being are also more productively engaged in school and employment both during their time in the justice system and after discharge. Families become more engaged and transition planning is more productive. Finally, youth justice staff report greater job satisfaction.<sup>21</sup>



**61,000** young people under the age of 18 are in correctional or residential facilities. These facilities are frequently dangerous, ineffective, and unnecessary.<sup>22</sup>

Although youth violent crime arrest rates are only marginally higher in the United States than in other nations, America detains and incarcerates young people at **nearly five times** the rates of other countries.<sup>23</sup>

**Forty percent of youth** commitments and detention are due to offenses that are not clear threats to public safety (e.g., violations of probation, public order offenses, status offenses).<sup>24</sup>

**Nearly half of all students** who enter residential youth justice facilities have an academic achievement level that is below the grade equivalent for their age.<sup>25</sup>

**Seventy percent of youth** involved with the youth justice system have a diagnosable mental health disorder and nearly **30 percent** of those experience severe mental health disorders.<sup>26</sup> Most youth in the system meet the criteria for or are diagnosed with more than one mental health disorder.<sup>27</sup>

**The well-being framework presented in this report is designed to be useful within and across systems.** The framework offers a clear, comprehensive, and measurable approach for youth system leaders, policymakers, and funders to intentionally embed policies and practice strategies designed to improve well-being outcomes, both within individual systems and across systems. The framework provides a mechanism for youth, families, advocates, youth-serving professionals, and concerned community members to initiate and sustain community-wide conversations centered on improving individual, system, and community outcomes.

# Principles Underlying the Well-Being Framework and Recommendations

The well-being framework and the recommendations included in this report are all founded on the following principles.

- **Young People are Valuable:** All young people are valuable, despite circumstances or actions that have caused them to come to the attention of public systems. Youth-serving professionals believe, expect, and speak the best about the young people they serve.
- **Equity:** Young people of color and other marginalized communities, including homeless, pregnant or parenting, immigrant, and LGBTQ youth, deserve equitable opportunities, experiences, and well-being outcomes. Policies and practices should demonstrate intentional efforts to effectively identify, address, and mitigate racial, cultural, linguistic, gender and other disparities among vulnerable youth.
- **Youth Voice and Self-Determination:** What young people think and feel matters. Young people should be supported in expressing dreams and goals, defining well-being for themselves, developing decision-making skills and, in developmentally appropriate ways, exercising control over their journey to adulthood.
- **Developmentally Appropriate:** All young people have a right to childhood and adolescence. Young people should be treated as young people, not adults. Science related to youth and adolescent development should drive practice and policy development.
- **Normalcy:** All young people deserve to have access to developmentally appropriate activities, experiences, and opportunities even when they experience out-of-home placement through the child welfare or youth justice systems.
- **A Focus on the Whole Person:** Well-being requires a focus on the whole young person (not a segment or part) and their relationship to communities where they live, work, and learn.
- **Family:** Every young person needs, and belongs in, a lifelong family to love and support them.
- **Fairness and Second Chances:** All young people deserve opportunities to heal from trauma. Policies and practices should be fundamentally fair. Balanced and restorative approaches to justice, which reduce or eliminate collateral consequences, should be the norm when systems respond to adolescent behaviors or needs. Use of harmful practices such as incarceration should be reduced and ultimately eliminated.
- **Youth Workers and Volunteers:** The people who serve youth and young adults are valuable, and they need adequate resources, training, and ongoing support to do their work effectively.
- **Science-Based:** Evidence generated from research, practice, communities, and experience should inform and improve implementation of this framework.
- **Communities:** Communities (and community safety) are improved when young people have opportunities to thrive and contribute as community members.





# Well-Being Framework for Vulnerable Youth and Young Adults

**Well-being is a satisfactory human condition, characterized by health, happiness and fulfillment.**

Well-being is not a state of being that one achieves and then lives in for a lifetime. Defining for oneself, moving toward, and achieving well-being is a continual developmental process beginning at infancy and continuing throughout the course of life. Indeed, a better term for the process may be “well-becoming.”<sup>28</sup>

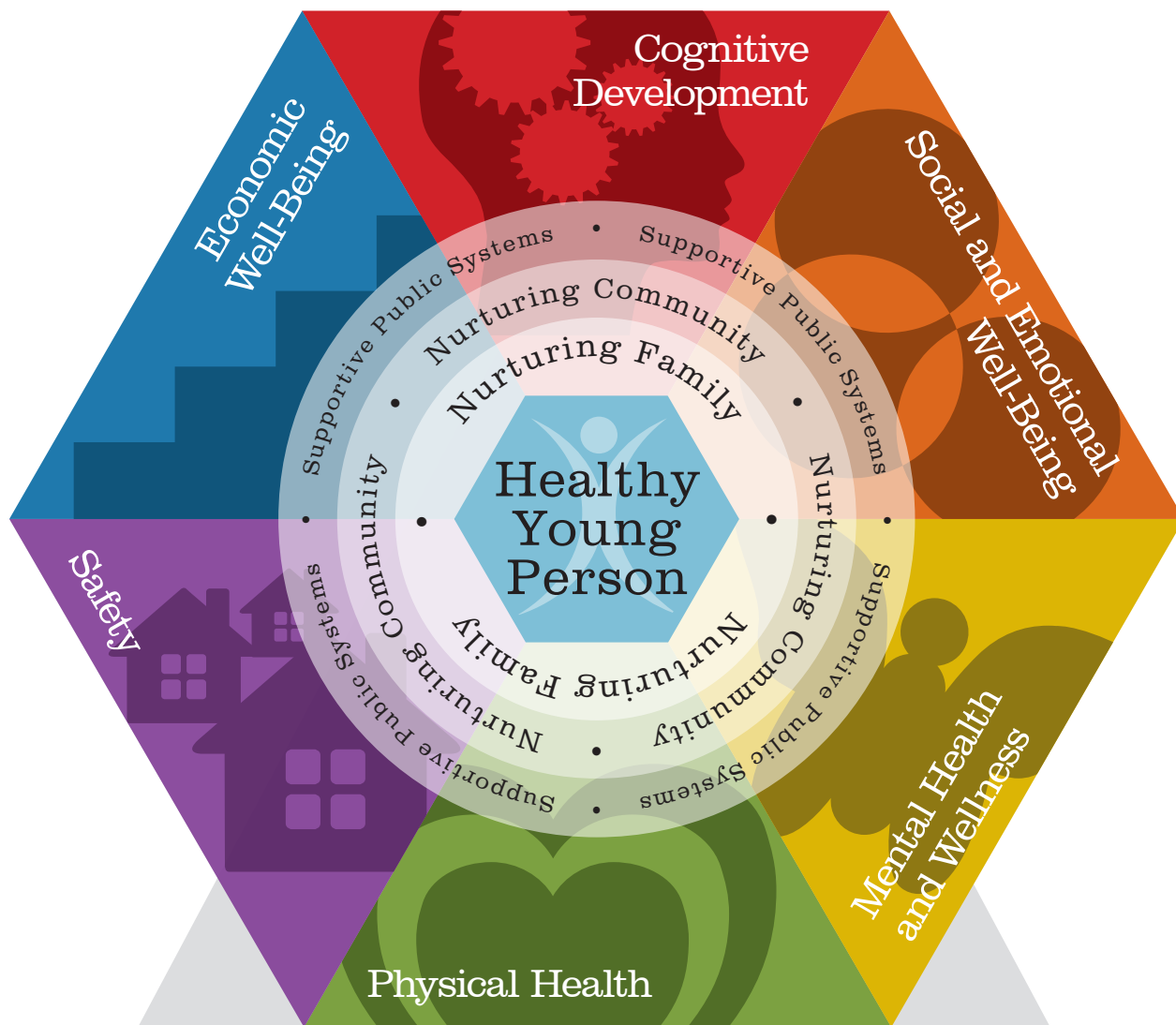
Through the process of “well-becoming,” youth and young adults need opportunities, supports and relationships to develop essential skillsets to navigate life’s ups and downs in a healthy and effective way, to deal with challenges, to see opportunity in the future and to realize success.

This document offers an ecological model for defining both the necessary elements for the process of “well-becoming” and descriptors of well-being outcomes for youth transitioning into adulthood across six life domains.<sup>29</sup> Equity and inclusion are essential aspects of well-being and principles of equity are infused into each domain. Genuine well-being cannot be achieved in the absence of full inclusion in a fair, just, and equitable society.

## ***The well-being life domains are as follows:***

1. **Cognitive Development:** *All young people should have the opportunity and supports — through family, community, and public systems — to maximize their individual growth and development.*
2. **Social and Emotional Well-Being:** *All young people should have the opportunity and social supports — from family, community, and public systems — to cultivate a strong and resilient self-identity as well as supportive and nurturing relationships.*
3. **Mental Health and Wellness:** *All young people should have the opportunity and supports — through family, community, and public systems — to manage their mental health and wellness.*
4. **Physical Health:** *All young people should have the opportunity and supports — through family, community, and public systems — to maximize physical health, strength, and functioning.*
5. **Safety:** *All young people should have the opportunity and supports — through family, community, and public systems — to be physically and psychologically safe and free from violence, abuse, and neglect.*
6. **Economic Well-Being:** *All young people should have the opportunity, necessary education, and supports — through families, community, and public systems — to obtain and retain steady employment that provides a living wage, a career path, and housing that is safe, stable, and affordable.*

## A Framework for Well-Being



EQUITY AND INCLUSION



## Environments and Settings for Development and Well-Being

Young people are at the center of this framework. Young people have both the desire and capacity to learn how express their questions, concerns, ideas, and opinions when critical decisions about their life course and future are being made. The framework supports the notion that youth must be central actors in defining and achieving well-being and must be given opportunities to exercise voice and choice. Yet, young people cannot and should not stand alone in this growth process. All people are both affected by and affect the external environments of family, community, and larger public systems.







A lifelong safe, nurturing family provides a foundation from which young people can explore the world and their place in it. For some young people, separation from family has occurred as a result of placement in public systems, including the child welfare and justice systems. When this is the case, the system has the added responsibility of ensuring that the parenting roles described in this framework are met, through their own action as well as their work in partnership with the young person's family. Nurturing hope and belief in the possibility of a future filled with purpose and meaning is also an important role for families and communities to play in the lives of young people. YTFG recognizes that there is a dynamic and complex inter-relatedness between the individual young person, their life experiences with trauma and/or other challenges, their family and cultural context, their community, and broader societal and political constructs. Attention to each domain by and on behalf of the youth, their families and caregivers, the public systems that serve them, and the community at large is necessary for young people to effectively make the transition to successful adulthood. Given the critical roles of families, communities, and public systems, the well-being framework proposes a description and recommendations for how each can provide the environment in which lifelong well-being can be kindled and nurtured, so that every young person can thrive, even the most vulnerable.

**Table 1 provides a detailed cross-walk** of well-being life domains by environments, describing the full range of intrinsic skills and capacities of individual young people, as well as opportunities and supports offered by families, communities, and public systems to promote young people's well-being.











**Table 1: Framework for Well-Being for Vulnerable Youth Transitioning to Adulthood  
Drill Down of Conditions and Capacities by Environment**

	 <b>Cognitive Development</b>	 <b>Social Support and Emotional Wellness</b>	 <b>Mental Health and Wellness</b>	 <b>Physical Health</b>	 <b>Safety</b>	 <b>Economic Well-Being</b>
	<b>YOUTH: All young people have the opportunity and supports to:</b>					
	<i>Maximize their intellectual growth and development</i>	<i>Cultivate a strong and resilient self-identity and supportive and nurturing relationships</i>	<i>Manage their mental health and wellness</i>	<i>Maximize physical health, strength, and functioning</i>	<i>Be physically and psychologically safe and free from violence, abuse and neglect</i>	<i>Obtain and retain steady employment that provides a living wage and career path and a means for safe, stable, and affordable housing</i>
<b>YOUTH</b>	<b>Have skills, capacities, and ongoing supports to:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Think critically, solve problems, plan, and make decisions</li> <li>Set and commit to realistic goals</li> <li>Apply learning in the real world to meet life demands</li> <li>Reflect and evaluate what they need and what they should do</li> <li>Achieve educational success to their fullest potential</li> <li>Feel safe and free from racial, ethnic, linguistic and gender-based bias and discrimination in educational settings</li> </ul>	<b>Have skills, capacities, and ongoing supports to:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop and maintain a strong sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem</li> <li>Positively experience living in, connecting with, and belonging to a family</li> <li>Make good decisions about and engage in physically and emotionally healthy relationships</li> <li>Persist through struggles and maintain hope</li> <li>Cultivate healthy and supportive social networks that help them achieve their goals</li> <li>Communicate effectively</li> <li>Use healthy coping skills, self-manage and regulate emotions</li> <li>Engage in positive social behavior</li> <li>Engage as desired in their own spiritual journey</li> <li>Feel safe and free from racial, ethnic, linguistic and gender-based bias and discrimination in relationships and social settings</li> </ul>	<b>Have skills, capacities, and ongoing supports to:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Manage mental distress in a healthy way</li> <li>Access resources to manage mental health diagnoses in a healthy way</li> <li>Seek and use information to make informed mental health-related decisions</li> <li>Fully participate in treatment decisions</li> <li>Feel safe and free from racial, ethnic, linguistic and gender-based bias and discrimination in relationships and therapeutic settings</li> </ul>	<b>Have skills, capacities, and ongoing supports to:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seek and use information to make informed health-related decisions</li> <li>Seek and use health services to effectively meet their needs, including their reproductive health</li> <li>Engage in healthy behaviors</li> <li>Live a full life with a physical challenge or limitation</li> <li>Feel safe and free from racial, ethnic, linguistic and gender-based bias and discrimination in health care and medical settings</li> </ul>	<b>Have skills, capacities, and ongoing supports to:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cope when feeling unsafe</li> <li>Make informed choices related to risky behavior</li> <li>Take reasonable precautions to avoid becoming victims of crime and/or violence</li> <li>Feel safe and free from racial, ethnic, linguistic and gender-based bias and discrimination in public and community settings</li> </ul>	<b>Have skills, capacities, and ongoing supports to:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gain work experience that matches interests and abilities</li> <li>Gain work experience that contributes to their skillset and sense of mastery</li> <li>Acquire education and training that enable them to attain marketable skills that lead to steady employment and career pathways</li> <li>Stay focused and succeed at work</li> <li>Obtain and sustain safe, stable, and affordable housing</li> <li>Feel safe and free from racial, ethnic, linguistic, and gender-based bias and discrimination in workplace and housing settings</li> </ul>

**Table 1: Framework for Well-Being for Vulnerable Youth Transitioning to Adulthood  
Drill Down of Conditions and Capacities by Environment**

	 Cognitive Development	 Social Support and Emotional Wellness	 Mental Health and Wellness	 Physical Health	 Safety	 Economic Well-Being
<b>FAMILY: All young people have a family to belong to for a lifetime that supports and nurtures their healthy growth and development. Families:</b>						
<b>FAMILY</b>	<b>Model, inspire, support, and ensure:</b>	<b>Provide and nurture:</b>	<b>Model, provide, ensure, and support:</b>	<b>Model, provide, support, and ensure:</b>	<b>Model, provide, support, and ensure:</b>	<b>Model, inspire, support, and ensure:</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Active participation in educational settings</li> <li>Opportunities to participate in activities that spark their interests</li> <li>Lifelong learning</li> <li>Pursuit of interests and skills and the education necessary to pursue them</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>At least one lifelong relationship with an adult</li> <li>A supportive network that a young person feels a sense of belonging to</li> <li>Support for their spiritual journey</li> <li>Diverse examples and forms of prosocial behavior while limiting influences and opportunities for problem behavior</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Access to mental health services and supports as needed</li> <li>Environments that support emotional health and minimize risk and exposure to toxic social and biological conditions or influences and opportunities for problem behaviors</li> <li>Diverse examples and forms of prosocial behavior</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Access to a spectrum of healthy activities that reflect their interests and capabilities</li> <li>Access to physical health care services and supports as needed</li> <li>Environments that promote health (including access to nutrition and exercise) and minimize risk and exposure to toxic social and biological conditions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Safe environments that minimize risk and exposure to toxic social and biological conditions</li> <li>Diverse forms of prosocial behavior</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exposure to the workforce and career options</li> <li>Opportunities to explore creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship</li> <li>Pursuit of interests and skills and the education necessary to pursue them</li> </ul>
<b>COMMUNITIES: All young people are supported by communities that nurture and provide opportunities for healthy growth and development. Communities:</b>						
<b>COMMUNITIES</b>						
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promote and richly reinforce diverse forms of prosocial behavior</li> <li>Support and/or create stimulating learning environments, including but not limited to schools</li> <li>Cultivate opportunities for civic engagement</li> <li>Ensure that all children can learn in environments that are safe and free from racial, ethnic, linguistic and gender-based bias and discrimination</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cultivate healthy, safe, and inclusive environments</li> <li>Promote and richly reinforce diverse forms of prosocial behavior</li> <li>Minimize risk, including toxic social conditions</li> <li>Cultivate opportunities that are culturally rich and vibrant</li> <li>Support healthy parenting and caregivers</li> <li>Provide family strengthening programs and services</li> <li>Create environments that are socially and culturally responsive</li> <li>Ensure that all children experience environments that are safe and free from racial, ethnic, linguistic and gender-based bias and discrimination</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cultivate healthy, safe, and inclusive environments</li> <li>Provide access to a broad array of mental health services and treatment options</li> <li>Promote and richly reinforce diverse forms of prosocial behavior</li> <li>Minimize risk, including toxic social conditions</li> <li>Ensure that all children are safe and free from racial, ethnic, linguistic and gender-based bias and discrimination</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cultivate healthy, safe, and inclusive environments that include a spectrum of healthy activities</li> <li>Provide access to a broad array of health care services</li> <li>Minimize risk, including toxic social conditions</li> <li>Ensure that all children are safe and free from racial, ethnic, linguistic and gender-based bias and discrimination</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cultivate healthy, safe, and inclusive environments</li> <li>Minimize risk, including toxic social conditions</li> <li>Ensure that all children are safe and free from racial, ethnic, linguistic, and gender-based bias and discrimination</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seek to grow resilient local economies that provide opportunities for work and work experience</li> <li>Promote and support opportunities to explore creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship</li> <li>Cultivate opportunities for civic engagement</li> <li>Provide mentors to support development</li> <li>Ensure that all children are safe and free from racial, ethnic, linguistic, and gender-based bias and discrimination</li> </ul>

**Table 1: Framework for Well-Being for Vulnerable Youth Transitioning to Adulthood  
Drill Down of Conditions and Capacities by Environment**

Cognitive Development		Social Support and Emotional Wellness		Mental Health and Wellness		Physical Health		Safety		Economic Well-Being	
PUBLIC SYSTEMS: All young people are supported by public systems that contribute to their well-being. These systems:											
PUBLIC SYSTEMS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Promote and richly reinforce diverse forms of prosocial behavior</li><li>• Provide learning environments that are stimulating, engaging, youth-centered, culturally relevant and responsive, challenging, and growth-oriented</li><li>• Ensure policies and practices address racial and ethnic bias and discrimination</li><li>• Cultivate opportunities for civic engagement</li><li>• Minimize risk, including toxic social conditions</li><li>• Address impact of trauma in policy and practice</li><li>• Provide access to education that matches interests and abilities, ignites passions, and inspires lifelong learning</li><li>• Create well-lit pathways back to education when they have fallen off track</li><li>• Ensure supports to remove barriers to educational success</li><li>• Help identify interests and skills and the education necessary to pursue them</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Promote and richly reinforce diverse forms of prosocial behavior</li><li>• Honor and support family</li><li>• Promote healthy parenting, kinship networks and family connections for all children and youth</li><li>• Minimize risk, including toxic social conditions</li><li>• Actively promote healthy relationships</li><li>• Address impact of trauma in policy and practice</li><li>• Ensure policies and practices address racial and ethnic bias and discrimination</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Promote and richly reinforce diverse forms of prosocial behavior</li><li>• Minimize risk, including toxic social conditions</li><li>• Address impact of trauma in policy and practice</li><li>• Ensure all young people have health insurance for mental health needs</li><li>• Support young people and their families in ensuring access to mental health services to meet needs, including access to non-pharmaceutical treatments</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Promote and richly reinforce diverse forms of prosocial behavior</li><li>• Minimize risk, including toxic social conditions</li><li>• Cultivate healthy, safe, and inclusive environments that include a spectrum of healthy activities</li><li>• Ensure all young people have health insurance for physical health needs</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Promote and richly reinforce diverse forms of prosocial behavior</li><li>• Minimize risk, including toxic social conditions</li><li>• Employ family-centered, culturally informed practices for responding to child safety concerns in the community, including allegations of neglect and abuse</li><li>• Address impact of trauma in policy and practice</li><li>• Ensure policies and practices address racial and ethnic bias and discrimination</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Create well-lit pathways back to employment and training when they have fallen off track</li><li>• Provide a variety of education and training options, including self-paced, competency-based, flexible schedule, and work-based programs</li><li>• Ensure policies and practices address racial and ethnic bias and discrimination</li><li>• Provide financial assistance necessary to support education and training</li><li>• Ensure supports to remove barriers to employment success</li><li>• Provide opportunities to explore creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship</li><li>• Ensure the availability and accessibility of affordable housing options</li></ul>					

## Well-Being Domains

The following is a brief description of each domain as it relates to the well-being of youth and young adults. To ensure that all young people have the opportunities and supports to achieve optimal development in each of these domains, key questions have been provided in each section below for youth, families, communities, and public systems to thoughtfully review when considering policy initiatives, funding, and program development.



1. **Cognitive Development:** *All young people should have the opportunity and supports — through family, community, and public systems — to maximize their individual growth and development.*

Maximizing intellectual ability begins by ensuring that each young person, regardless of background, ability, or disability is continuously immersed in rich and engaging learning environments — both inside and outside traditional educational venues such as schools. Young people need and deserve educational options and individualized remedial or special education assessments and plans (when necessary and appropriate) that are developmentally appropriate and socially and culturally responsive and include high expectations for all youth. In-home supports, placement settings, and community-based out-of-school enrichment programs should expose young people to the broadest possible array of pro-social behavior, creative expression, the arts, academic success, real-world problem-solving, civic-engagement, and lifelong learning. Beyond such exposure, youth should be supported in pursuing and participating in activities that spark their interest through both formal and informal channels.

Youth whose early life experiences have included exposure to violence, trauma, or other significant challenges need opportunities to heal that strengthen brain development and executive functioning, in order to emerge into adulthood with key skillsets, like critical thinking, problem-solving, goal-setting, planning, and decision-making. As a result, young people will develop the capacity to set, commit to, and work toward meaningful, personally rewarding, realistic, and productive goals while systems and communities work to ensure that youth are free from racial, ethnic, linguistic, and gender-based bias or discrimination.



Key Questions for Youth, Families, Communities, and Public Systems related to:  
**Cognitive Development**

- What opportunities and exposure do vulnerable young people in our community need in order to fully develop their intellectual abilities — both inside and outside traditional educational settings?
- What kinds of supports — both in the home or placement setting and in the community — nurture and support pro-social behavior, a lifelong love of learning, and civic-engagement?
- What particular areas of emphasis or support are most needed for optimal cognitive development for youth who have experienced trauma and/or have disabilities?
- Where there are gaps, how can we — as families, the community, and public systems — effectively address these gaps?
- In what ways do the laws, policies, programs, and opportunities provided in our family and community support the intellectual development of all youth, or do we need to make changes to mitigate the impact of implicit and explicit racial, linguistic, ethnic, or gender-based bias in our schools, after-school programs, and other educational venues?





2. **Social Support and Emotional Wellness:** *All young people should have the opportunity and social supports — from family, community, and public systems — to cultivate a strong and resilient self-identity as well as supportive and nurturing relationships.*

Social and emotional wellness require both a strong sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem as well as supportive, nurturing, and mutually satisfying relationships. This begins and is nurtured throughout life within the context of a lifelong family. Thus every young person needs the opportunity to have a meaningful and positive experience of living in, connecting with, and belonging to a family. Young people are best served when communities and public systems honor families and provide resources and supports for parents and caregivers.

Successful transition to adulthood relies on the young person's ability to recognize the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships, cultivate supportive relationships, and make good decisions about all the relationships they engage in — both physically and emotionally. Socially and emotionally healthy young people will be able to effectively communicate their wants and needs and persist through life's routine struggles while maintaining a sense of hope for the future. Families and communities can support young people by cultivating healthy, safe, and inclusive environments rich with a diverse array of opportunities while limiting exposure to risk and unhealthy influences. Youth who have experienced trauma, violence, or other vulnerabilities often have difficulty acknowledging, regulating, managing, and expressing their own emotions, as well as interpreting emotional signals communicated by those around them. Resilient youth will gain competence in emotional management and self-regulation and engage in positive social behaviors throughout life. Additionally, youth and young adults need to be supported in discovering and expressing their own cultural roots, spirituality, and sexual identity without facing racial, ethnic, linguistic, or gender-based bias.

**Key Questions for Youth, Families, Communities, and Public Systems related to:  
Social and Emotional Wellness**

- What opportunities and exposures do young people in our community need and have access to in order to develop strong self-esteem and capacity to form and sustain healthy relationships, manage emotions, and build resilience in response to early life trauma?
- Are there gaps or barriers that need to be addressed?
- In what ways does our community honor and support families, parents, and caregivers and ensure that every young person has the opportunity to live in, connect with, and belong to a family for a lifetime?
- How can and should the cultural heritage, gender and sexual identity, and spiritual well-being of youth in our community be best acknowledged and supported?
- In what ways can we better provide a diverse array of opportunities while limiting exposure to unhealthy influences, toxic environments, and dangerous risks for our young people?
- In what ways do laws, policies, and opportunities support the social and emotional wellness of all youth, or do we need to make changes to mitigate the impact of implicit and explicit racial, linguistic, ethnic, or gender-based bias in our community?



3. **Mental Health and Wellness:** *All young people should have the opportunity and supports — through family, community, and public systems — to manage their mental health and wellness.*

Mental health and wellness begins with ensuring all youth have the information, skillsets, and mindsets needed to manage the naturally occurring range of mental distresses they will face in adult life. Youth who have experienced trauma and/or live with one or more mental health diagnoses need information and resources to fully understand their diagnoses in order to be an active participant in making informed decisions about care and treatment options. Parents, caregivers, and service providers should support youth by providing access to information and guidance for navigating systems, modeling the use of helping systems and treatments (including non-pharmaceutical treatments) when needed, and providing environments that reduce exposure to trauma and risk.

Health insurance that provides mental health coverage and access to an array of trauma-informed services and resources (including non-pharmaceutical options) are essential elements in a young people's ability to successfully manage their mental health and wellness in ways that are non-stigmatizing, healthy, and conducive to stable adult living.

**Key Questions for Youth, Families, Communities, and Public Systems related to:  
Mental Health and Wellness**

- In what ways do our families, community, and public systems provide information and skillset and mindset development related to mental health and wellness for young people who are transitioning from public systems who may have experienced violence, trauma, or other vulnerabilities and who may enter adult life with one or more mental health diagnoses?
- What are the resources available (including access to insurance) and what barriers exist related to young people's access to an appropriate array of services (including non-pharmaceutical options) that will support their ability to successfully manage their mental health and wellness in ways that are non-stigmatizing, healthy, and conducive to adult living?
- Where there are gaps, how can we — as families, communities, and public systems — effectively address these gaps?
- In what ways do the laws, policies, programs, and opportunities provided in our family and community support the mental health and wellness of all young people, or do we need to make changes to mitigate the impact of implicit and explicit racial, linguistic, ethnic, or gender-based bias in our mental health system or other therapeutic resources within our community?



4. **Physical Health:** *All young people should have the opportunity and supports — through family, community, and public systems — to maximize physical health, strength, and functioning.*

Maximizing physical health begins early in life, as young people are exposed to and encouraged to participate in a wide range of healthy activities that reflect their interests and abilities. Communities should offer and families should provide access to a spectrum of such activities. As they grow and develop, young people need information about all aspects of physical health, including nutrition, exercise and fitness, disease prevention, and sexual and reproductive health. This knowledge increases the likelihood that youth and young adults will continue to engage in healthy behaviors well into adulthood, including regular exercise, and will be proactive in addressing and managing their own health care needs. This is particularly important for young people living with a physical challenge or medical condition. Youth thrive when families, communities, and systems provide them with information about their condition, legal rights, financial and other community supports available, and opportunities to maximize their independence for full participation in the community. Young people transitioning into adulthood from public systems need access to health insurance and medical providers who will respond to their concerns and meet their ongoing health care needs.

**Key Questions for Youth, Families, Communities, and Public Systems related to:  
Physical Health**

- What strategies, programs, and resources are available to young people and their families to ensure that they have the information they need about all aspects of physical health, including nutrition, exercise and fitness, disease prevention, living with disabilities (if applicable), and sexual and reproductive health?
- Where there are gaps, how can we — as families, communities, and public systems — effectively address these gaps?
- In what way do the laws, policies, programs, and opportunities provided in our family and community support the physical health and wellness of all young people, or do we need to make changes to mitigate the impact of implicit and explicit racial, linguistic, ethnic, or gender-based bias in the health care or disability support systems or resources within our community?
- Do young people transitioning into adulthood have access to affordable health insurance?





5. **Safety:** *All young people should have the opportunity and supports — through family, community, and public systems — to be physically and psychologically safe and free from violence, abuse, and neglect.*

When children are young, ensuring their safety is a community responsibility. Parents and caregivers must provide a safe and stable home environment. Schools, public health, community agencies, law enforcement, and other systems must ensure that children have the opportunity to grow up safe and free from violence, toxic environments, abuse, neglect, or other forms of harm. As youth approach their transition into adulthood, they increasingly assume responsibility for their own safety within the context of a family and community that minimizes risks and offers healthy, safe, and inclusive environments. To make this transition successfully, young people need to understand how to assess risks associated with various behaviors so they can make informed choices related to risky behaviors, and take reasonable and appropriate precautions to prevent or reduce their risk for injury, becoming a victim of a crime, experiencing other forms of mental, emotional, or physical harm, or becoming a perpetrator of a crime.

Families, communities, and public systems support this transition by ensuring that all young people are equipped with the information and skills needed to recognize the signs and trauma triggers in their lives that make them feel unsafe and to develop a set of tools to mitigate them. Local law enforcement must work to ensure the safety of all citizens, including young adults emerging from care in public systems, youth of color, those with disabilities, LGBTQ persons, and those with other vulnerabilities. Families, communities, and public systems should work together to ensure that young adults have access to safe environments in which to live, work, and socialize.

**Key Question for Youth, Families, Communities, and Public Systems related to:**  
**Safety**

- What specific supports and resources does our community need to support youth transitioning into adulthood that will strengthen their ability to effectively manage and maintain their own safety in adult life and make informed decisions related to risk-taking and lifestyle choices?
- Where there are gaps, how can we — as families, the community, and public systems — effectively address these gaps?
- Are there any youth and young adults in our community who face greater risks to personal safety based on their race, ethnicity, linguistic or religious background, gender, or sexual orientation? How are we as a community addressing these disparities?



6. **Economic Well-Being:** *All young people should have the opportunity, education, and supports — through families, community, and public systems — to obtain and retain steady employment that provides a living wage, a career path, and housing that is safe, stable, and affordable.*

Young people making the transition to adulthood, particularly those facing challenges related to abuse, neglect, community violence, or behavioral difficulties, need support to gain work experience as well as exposure to a range of career options. Adults in their lives, including parents, caregivers, and public and private providers, should offer information about a range of work and career options, soft-skills training, educational requirements, and financial aid resources available to help them achieve career goals. Youth fare best when afforded an opportunity to achieve a high school diploma and to gain work experience that matches their interests and abilities through part-time, after-school, and summer employment, including volunteer service, internships, work-study programs, and career exploration activities. These opportunities should be afforded to all young people regardless of ability level or behavioral health status. Youth also need opportunities to obtain all necessary documents required for entry and success in the workforce and to obtain financial management skills, including skillsets and mindsets that help them save and accumulate assets.

Public and private leaders should work together to ensure that young people have access to a broad range of post-secondary options, including two- and four-year colleges, apprenticeships, certificate programs, and other vocational, service, or interest-oriented post-secondary opportunities, as well as the financial and other supports needed to successfully complete such programs. Community leaders must always work to grow the employment base and the local economy, while exposing youth to entrepreneurship and self-employment options.

Young adults also need the support of family and community as they work to obtain and maintain safe and stable housing. Knowing one has a safe place to live is a critical element in staying focused on educational, employment, and life goals. Young people who have been involved with public systems may need particular help with obtaining sufficient funds for a down payment or deposit on housing and utilities and skills navigating the housing market, landlord relations, and related challenges.

Key Questions for Youth, Families, Communities, and Public Systems related to:  
**Economic Well-Being**

- What opportunities and resources are available in our community to provide youth and young adults with access to work opportunities and safe, affordable housing?
- Do young people in our community have access to mentors and financial aid to support their success in post-secondary education, vocational training, employment readiness, and employment?
- Are there gaps or barriers that need to be addressed?
- In what ways do laws, policies, and opportunities support the economic well-being of all young people, or do we need to make changes to mitigate the impact of implicit and explicit racial, linguistic, ethnic, or gender-based bias in our educational, employment, and/or housing systems?

# Recommendations to Improve the Well-Being of Vulnerable Youth and Young Adults

1. **Elevate youth and family voice. Support youth self-advocacy.** Ensure that young people and their families are central in planning and decision-making and empower them to advocate for themselves and promote improvements in policy and practice.

Meaningful youth and family engagement and partnership is paramount to the effective implementation of all recommendations following here. Definitions of who is included in the young person's family should be broad and inclusive. Investments in skill-development, including media and advocacy training, as well as ongoing leadership opportunities, such as youth leadership boards, result in important and lasting outcomes for young people. They also provide an effective cadre of advocates to advance policy and practice goals. Public and private leaders should invest to:

- **Develop a broad vision and effective infrastructure** for meaningful and ongoing youth and family engagement across all youth-serving systems. Ensure that youth and families have a continuum of opportunities to partner with agencies and communities, including but not limited to, self-advocacy. Develop intentional and financially sustainable opportunities to include youth and family members in all areas of agency and program operations from staff and professional development to governance, oversight, and continuous quality improvement (CQI).
- **Help young people and their families learn and use key readiness abilities** like solving problems, making decisions, planning skills, and being able to stay focused.
- When young people are in residential placement settings, **promote policies and practices that allow and support meaningful and ongoing family engagement** before, during, and after the placement period.
- **Provide guidance and assistance to encourage young people to explore and identify interests and make decisions about their future.** Promote connections or re-connections to family and provide supports that encourage effective engagement of the youth's entire family support system. Support young people in identifying their education and training needs and options as well as help them build skillsets and mindsets to navigate the world of education and employment. Ensure young people are supported in directing their transition and case-planning processes and are fully supported and represented in court proceedings.



## 2. Eliminate disparities in outcomes for young people of color.

Equity is central to well-being. Every young person has the right to be well and the opportunity to succeed, regardless of who they are, where they come from, or the circumstances into which they are born. Well-being cannot be achieved without efforts to reduce disparities in outcomes for young people of color. Public and private leaders should:

- Ensure all levels of public agencies **proactively develop prevention and intervention strategies that mitigate implicit and explicit racial bias and promote racial equity.**
- Provide **evidence-based training** and other strategies to youth workers, public agency staff, and leadership to **increase cultural awareness and capacity** and achieve racial equity within a diverse youth workforce.
- **Actively monitor and track disparities in opportunities and outcomes** for young people, including achievement gaps, skills gaps, and opportunity gaps. Promote comprehensive efforts by public agencies to collect and closely track data on the disproportionate representation of children of color across all levels of and decision points within the special education, child welfare, and juvenile justice continua.

## 3. Deconstruct harmful policies and practices that are inconsistent and incompatible with well-being.

Public and private leaders must stop policies and practices that, at best, do not support young people's well-being and, at worst, harm young people. Public and private leaders should work to:

- **Eliminate criminalization of school behavior.** Avoid collateral consequences of school discipline policies by eliminating "zero tolerance" suspension and expulsion policies and other official and unofficial practices that result in exclusion and create barriers to education or workforce supports. Limit the role of police in schools.
- **Remove policy barriers that make it difficult for system-involved youth to make steady academic progress or participate in employment.** This includes seat-time requirements, disjointed re-entry processes, and school boundary rules. Discontinue pushing youth out of school into academically weaker alternative programs.
- **Design budgeting practices to ensure that there is adequate opportunity for students who are over-age or under-credited to reenroll and graduate.** Discontinue limiting budgeting practices by state policy and districts that assume students will be dropping out.
- **Remove youth from the adult criminal justice system and raise the age of juvenile court jurisdiction to at least 18.** Restrict the transfer of youth to the adult system and ban the use of adult jails and prisons to house youth.
- **Eliminate detention, incarceration, and placement of youth, including placement in youth prisons or training schools, except for youth who clearly pose a significant risk to community safety.** Ban placement of youth in facilities for status offenses and technical violations. Use of detention, incarceration, and placement should be rare, fair, and beneficial.

- **Eliminate harmful practices within facilities.** Ban the use of isolation or solitary confinement. Avoid the shackling of youth. Refrain from using medication to control behavior.
- **Eliminate the use of psychotropic medication as a stand-alone intervention, and reduce the use of psychotropic medications as a first-line intervention,** through clear oversight policies and investments to assist states to expand access to and use of non-pharmaceutical therapies.
- **Reduce use of non-family permanency options for youth in the child welfare system** such as APPLA (“another planned permanent living arrangement”) and eliminate the option of allowing young people to age out of a group setting.

#### 4. Proactively improve policy to support well-being.

In addition to recommendations to deconstruct harmful practices, this recommendation focuses on concrete improvements to federal, state, and local policy and efforts to increase awareness of and support for the well-being of young people transitioning to adulthood. This requires the investment and promotion of policies and practices that:

- **Ensure seamless school re-enrollment** for youth after being in placement within the foster care or youth justice systems.
- Allow students to **earn credit based on demonstrated competency** and create transfer and articulation agreements between school districts and between secondary and postsecondary institutions.
- **Provide policy incentives for employers** to create and support employment pathways and ladders to careers for youth and young adults.
- **Promote a culture shift toward well-being** by transforming everyday language. For example, shift “accountability” to “shared responsibility,” “public” safety to “community” safety, and “juvenile,” “delinquent,” and “offender” to “youth.”
- **Require the most “family-like” and least restrictive placement possible** for all young people particularly those under age 18. Provide supportive housing for older youth (age 18 and older) who have no home.
- Encourage states to take up the option to **extend Title IV-E eligibility through age 21** across all Title IV-E programs, including foster care, adoption assistance, and guardianship assistance.
- Improve policies that **ensure effective transition planning**: planning should begin early, be led by the young person, be integrated into the overall case planning process, and take into account developing social and emotional skills and ensuring access to resources that support social, emotional, and physical health.
- **Ensure access to extended Medicaid coverage to age 26**, including ensuring that coverage is portable from state to state. Work to increase the health care provider community’s knowledge of and support for young people transitioning from foster care and youth justice systems.
- **Ensure access to physical and mental health services.** Broaden the definition of “medical necessity” for those who have experienced trauma, expand home-based and therapeutic services for older youth in foster care and justice systems, and establish minimum benefit levels under Medicaid coverage to ensure adequate coverage for physical and mental health services.



**5. Improve, expand, and sustain innovative and evidence-informed practice (including case management, planning, and oversight) to support well-being.**

The practices of public systems dramatically affect who enters a system, who receives supports and services and what those supports and services are. These recommendations seek to improve the practice of public systems in working with and supporting young people. Public and private leaders should make investments to:

- **Address trauma and exposure to violence**, recognizing that physical and emotional trauma often manifests as disruptive or delinquent behavior, and **design trauma-informed systems, policies, and procedures that do not exacerbate or re-traumatize youth.**
- **Incorporate positive behavioral interventions and utilize restorative justice practices** as effective tools for acknowledging and repairing harm to victims and communities while building youth skillsets and mindsets.
- **Support case management integration** through approaches that align expectations and requirements across systems. Ensure that case management focuses on well-being and provides adequate resources to fully implement case plans.
- Develop and implement **functional assessment tools to measure well-being** that not only provide a point-in-time snapshot of strengths and needs but also document progress (or lack thereof) over time.
- **Partner with public health** to build multi-sector, population-focused, multi-layer strategies that address well-being.
- **Support educational continuity and completion** by better serving students who fall off track, offering them a variety of well-lit pathways back to education.
- **Establish screening procedures** that connect youth to appropriate services during initial contact with the system, without expanding the number of young people placed in out-of-home care or other deep-end services. Improve identification and cross-system services for youth involved in multiple systems. Avoid over-policing in schools and communities, particularly aimed at youth of color.



- **Divert the majority of youth from formal system involvement** and design specific diversion strategies that promote adolescent development and well-being.
- **Support the development of research-informed court practices** and create judicial communities of practice, engaging judges as champions of court improvement.
- **Develop practice models that ensure a focus on well-being.** Practice models need to ensure well-being in a broad sense, including reflecting the critical interconnection between social, emotional, and physical well-being with permanency and safety. Such models would:
  - Value youth engagement and increase opportunities for youth to develop and practice (and safely fail) self-advocacy, problem-solving, and other skills needed for lifelong social, emotional, and physical well-being;
  - Strongly emphasize lifelong family connections and the role of family in supporting the well-being of older youth and young adults through the development of practice approaches to engage birth families in their children's lives; to effectively support kinship involvement in academic, health, mental health, social, and other settings; to strengthen sibling connections; and to provide for intensive family-search and family-finding efforts to ensure better linkages between the permanency and well-being outcomes for youth;
  - Understand and employ developmentally appropriate strategies that recognize the changing strengths, characteristics, and needs of adolescents and young adults; and
  - Utilize a team-planning and decision-making process with the inclusion of cross-discipline team members with expertise in areas of cognitive, social, emotional, and physical well-being.

**6. Identify vulnerable youth populations within youth-serving systems and engage in intentional and meaningful cross-systems alignment and coordination to build on their unique strengths and address their diverse needs.**

In addition to proactively developing prevention and interventions strategies that mitigate implicit and explicit racial bias, youth-serving agencies should embrace individualized approaches to serving all youth and their families. Adaptations of basic practice frameworks are needed to ensure that practice addresses the particular circumstances, strengths, challenges and vulnerabilities of specific vulnerable populations. In particular, investments are needed to develop, test, implement, scale, and sustain approaches to support the immediate and long-term well-being of vulnerable populations of youth and young adults:

- Who are immigrants or children of immigrants and English language learners;
- Who are across the spectrum of gender identity, expression, and sexual orientation (e.g., LGBTQ youth);
- Who are Native youth, including those living within and outside tribal communities, recognizing and honoring tribal sovereignty;
- Who are involved with multiple public systems;
- Who have disabilities (e.g., cognitive, mental health, physical, medical);
- Who are pregnant or parenting; and
- Who are victims of human and/or sex trafficking.

## 7. Support professional development for those who work with and care for youth.

A well-trained, well-supported, effectively supervised and stable workforce, together with caregivers who are equally well-trained, supported, and engaged, are all essential to supporting the well-being of young people. Investments that support enhanced and ongoing professional development of those working with older youth and young adults are urgently needed. Investments are needed to promote and sustain:

- **Competency-based training** for workers and supervisors, including the legal and justice workforce, around adolescent development, positive youth development, trauma, implicit racial bias, and effective interventions. Provide ongoing coaching and mentoring to develop expertise among the youth-serving workforce and caregivers. Create time and space for staff to understand structural and institutional racism and **increase their cultural awareness and capacity.**
- **Effective management practices**, including setting reasonable caseloads, utilizing implementation science, and using evidence-supported approaches such as reflective supervision.
- **Effective responses to secondary trauma** in the workforce and among caregivers.
- **Development of CQI benchmarks to ensure that youth workers are caring, respectful, and supportive** and incorporate youth development principles in their work, including restorative justice and positive approaches to school discipline.
- Sufficient supports — financial and otherwise — to ensure appropriate **supply of quality resource (foster, kin, and adoptive) families.**

## 8. Create developmentally appropriate community supports that promote well-being.

Public and private leaders should invest to expose young people to opportunities to express and nurture their interests, talents, and strengths. Investments should:

- **Provide community engagement and service opportunities.** Link young people to community organizations offering service, volunteer, and leadership development opportunities and provide training, skills, and capacity-building among community agencies as they recruit and support young people.
- Provide young people with the supports needed to **remove barriers to their educational and career success**, such as assistance with transportation and child care costs, tutoring, mental and physical health, substance abuse counseling, and housing.
- Provide young people with a **variety of employment training options**, including self-paced, competency-based, flexible schedule, and work-based programs that match young people's interests and abilities and offer early work experiences (e.g., job shadows, internships, paid employment) to ensure connection to the world of work.
- Provide youth with **opportunities to build their skillsets, demonstrate mastery, and earn industry-recognized credentials** through formal and informal systems.
- **Create centers or programs focused on re-engagement** of young people who have fallen off track.

- **Plan for and invest in a continuum of community-based alternatives to incarceration** that are informed by research, youth and family input, and community context.
- **Ensure access to opportunities for young people to build passions and participate in healthy social networks by removing child welfare system barriers.** The child welfare system itself often creates challenging barriers for youth to fully engage in healthy opportunities. Many states and localities are starting to recognize this as an issue and some are taking steps to address it through application of “Prudent Parent” or “Normalcy” standards. Investments should support similar standards and remove related barriers in other jurisdictions.
- **Provide support for foster parents and caseworkers to become aware of opportunities in the community and to actively support the pursuit of those opportunities.**
- **Provide assistance for foster parents and caseworkers to support the spirituality of young people.** At a minimum, caregivers and caseworkers must know the spiritual preferences of young people and respect those beliefs and traditions. In addition to supporting young people in attending religious services of their choosing, this support may include knowledge of important spiritual customs, rituals, or taboos in the home related to such things as exposure or access to particular foods, alcohol, music, or clothing.

## 9. Invest in systems coordination and alignment.

Moving the dial on broad well-being outcomes involves the active and coordinated commitment of many youth-serving systems that share the responsibility for supporting young people who are transitioning to adulthood. Accordingly, public and private leaders should focus on investment strategies that enhance cross-systems connections and collaboration to improve service delivery and quality. These strategies include investments to:

- **Develop planning infrastructure to support joint practice and policy development.** Investments in leadership and planning structures can ensure that good intentions and innovative ideas blossom into sustainable vehicles for producing good results.
- **Collaboratively align system outcomes with well-being outcomes.** There is great value in clearly articulating how the mandates and outcomes of each system intersect and contribute to a holistic approach. Efforts to align system outcomes with youth well-being outcomes help ensure a focus on well-being and provide support for coordination efforts.
- **Develop integrated data systems.** Data systems that are integrated, or which can easily communicate with one another, are essential for state and local leaders to ensure that young people’s needs are identified and met, gaps are planned for, and overlapping programs are minimized. Investments in these data systems — and, importantly, in the training and expertise needed to effectively harness the power such systems offer — is essential to support planning, service delivery, and sustainability of effective programs and initiatives.
- **Ensure family, youth, and community engagement.** Capacity is needed at the systems level to effectively engage families, young people, and community partners in the design, delivery, evaluation, and continuous improvement to services and supports aimed at improving the well-being of vulnerable youth and young adults.

## 10. Invest in research and evaluation.

Continuous improvement occurs when system and community leaders better understand the well-being needs of young people, build the base of evidence for what works, and design new programs and services to improve social, emotional, and physical well-being for young people transitioning to adulthood. Public and private leaders should invest to:

- **Expand capacity to measure well-being.** The framework and theory of change presented in this document provides a foundation for defining well-being in a comprehensive way. A critical set of investments is needed to operationalize these results and indicators into measurable constructs, review existing constructs related to well-being, test new constructs to create valid and reliable measures, and design effective data-collection tools and strategies. It is also important to provide investments in technical support for state and local education, child welfare and youth justice agencies and service providers for administering these data-collection tools, including guidance in incorporating well-being measures into agency assessments and evaluation efforts.
- **Prioritize data collection** and ongoing analysis so that systems can better understand and respond to the populations they serve. **Measure outcomes based on well-being indicators**, not just system outcomes (e.g. recidivism, costs). Similarly, measure student growth, not just student achievement.
- **Design new interventions that focus on social, emotional, and physical well-being.** Priorities for intervention design include: improving cognitive interventions, including those for young people with cognitive disabilities; designing and improving interventions that support relational and emotional wellness, including those that support building and sustaining healthy relationships; and designing interventions for young people at particular life stages or in particular settings.
- **Evaluate efforts to expand the evidence base of promising programs.** As new interventions are designed and tested, investments to ensure these interventions are rigorously evaluated are also important. Potential investments include support for rigorous evaluation design and to increase take-up of both new and existing programs or interventions with demonstrated effectiveness – as well as the de-scaling of programs that do not work — within agencies and providers through professional development and skill building.
- **Clarify what we need to know more about.** Investments into new areas of research related to well-being will help expand the knowledge base around well-being and target issues for additional support. Priority research areas include:
  - Further inquiry into **understanding the implications of trauma** and extending research into practice. While research on the effects of trauma has grown over the past decade, further inquiry into the implications of the layering of traumatic events for older youth and effective therapies for addressing and healing from complex trauma remains a critical area for investment. Additionally, investments into translating what is known about trauma into effective practice models are also warranted.
  - Support new research **that studies promising and effective practices to promote education and employment success** for vulnerable youth populations, including evaluating the effectiveness of student-centered learning, competency-based approaches, case management as



an intervention, high school equivalency plus models, and alternative discipline practices, as well as implications of these approaches for student outcomes.

- Support **new research to expand the knowledge base around effective youth justice practices**, including research that identifies effective public health strategies for violence prevention and justice reform; measures the effectiveness of restorative justice practices and community-based models for reducing reliance on detention and incarceration; identifies and evaluates effective services for serious offenders and for older adolescents and young adults up to age 25; studies how risk and needs assessment measures of a youth's strengths, deficits, and criminogenic risk are used for the allocation of public resources; and designs and documents justice reinvestment models that truly redirect funds from institutions and residential programs to effective local services that improve the well-being of youth in impacted communities. Additional research also is necessary to identify and evaluate effective approaches to addressing racial and ethnic disparities in decision-making and programming throughout the youth justice system.
- Support new **research to expand the knowledge base around effective practices for young people transitioning from foster care**, including assessing the long-term effects of psychotropic medication on brain health; exploring what types of therapies work best for older youth and how best to use interventions with strong evidence; assessing characteristics and attributes of placement settings and caregivers that work well with older youth and young adults; and exploring circumstances that create the “later front door” (entries into care for young teens ages 12 to 14 that tend to center around behavioral issues).



**11. Develop effective financing strategies to support implementation of well-being recommendations.**

Financing strategies and policies can support or hinder the implementation of well-being recommendations included here. Public and private leaders must focus on improvements to financing policies to ensure effective implementation of services and supports aimed at improving the well-being of vulnerable youth and young adults.

- **Allow flexibility** in the use of federal, state, and local funding streams to better meet the needs of vulnerable youth (e.g., the federal P3 pilot). Create greater flexibility in the use of per-pupil education funds to follow students to a variety of educational settings. Allow flexibility in the use of state and federal financial aid to allow students to get the postsecondary training they need. Encourage states to use waiver authority under Title IV-E and allow states to utilize Title IV-E for prevention and family support services.
- **Allow for blending funding** across categorical funding streams. For example, blending education and workforce programming and funds, blending funding across state and federal agencies, and offering financial incentives to jurisdictions that prioritize diversion and community supports over placement.
- **Advance a reinvestment strategy** that effectively shifts funding from deep-end treatment and remediation to front-end community-based prevention and early intervention. For example, support strategies that shift funding from corrections and institutions to communities to build systems of well-being, from costly residential placements into front-end family strengthening programs, and from academic remediation programs into early-intervention supports in schools.
- **Reconsider the level of federal, state, and local resources needed** to provide supports, including education and employment training, for vulnerable youth, especially those who have fallen off track.
- Ensure that funding streams **address and mitigate racial and ethnic disparities** within and across systems by providing financial support for system reforms needed to address both implicit and explicit bias as identified by data analysis and research efforts described throughout this document.



# Conclusion

Achieving well-being across multiple life domains is both a process (“well-becoming”) and a desired outcome for young people transitioning into adulthood. For this process to be successful, it must honor the agency of the young people themselves, providing opportunities for them to be the central actors in defining and developing their own sense of well-being. Yet the process and outcomes related to well-being also require the integrated and intentional support of families, broader communities, and the public systems that serve young people and their families.

Many older youth and young adults have experienced abuse, neglect, trauma, separation from caregivers, physical or mental health challenges, or behavioral difficulties. They may have fallen off track and are disconnected from schools and other pathways to successful adult life. Young people approaching and navigating adulthood while carrying the weight of these extra challenges need and deserve a broad range of opportunities and supports to help them form and strengthen connections and healthy relationships, learn to make informed and healthy decisions about life choices, build on their own strengths, and develop mechanisms to cope with and overcome stressors and other challenges. Without these opportunities and supports, young people face significant hurdles in managing their daily lives, achieving and sustaining lasting, healthy relationships, succeeding at school, and finding and keeping a job.

This document provides a robust framework for understanding well-being in an equitable, inclusive, and holistic context and offers a series of recommendations to build, strengthen, and support vibrant public systems and communities that nurture and enhance lifelong well-being for vulnerable young people as they make the transition into adulthood. These recommendations include significant and long-term policy and funding changes as well as practical, concrete strategies that individuals, families, and advocates can immediately begin to implement. When private and public leaders make investments in the areas described in this document, they can make a real and lasting difference in the well-being not only of vulnerable youth, but of all who live, work, and share their lives together.

# Endnotes

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- <sup>29</sup> This framework draws upon and is influenced by a diverse set of philosophies, approaches, and ideas, including the expertise of the group of researchers, content experts, and funders who contributed to this effort. A full list of contributors is included on page two. This framework was informed in particular by the ideas and concepts of the Readiness Project of the Forum for Youth Investment. This framework is intentionally aligned with tools and concepts of the Readiness Project and is intended to serve as a companion to those efforts.



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## **The Youth Transition Funders Group**

The Youth Transition Funders Group (YTFG) is a national network of funders that work together to support the well-being and economic success of vulnerable young people age 14 to 25. YTFG members seek to ensure that all young people have lifelong family, personal, and community connections and the opportunities and tools to succeed throughout adulthood. YTFG provides a vibrant and active community for national, regional, and community funders to learn from each other and other experts in the field, stay abreast of new research and key policy developments, inform and influence policy and practice, and foster collaborative approaches to grantmaking. YTFG supports peer networking and sharing, create key partnerships with leaders in the field, and provide strategic opportunities to leverage and extend the efforts of individual members.



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