

Wisconsin's Independent Living Program: 2016 – 2019 Summary Report

Fall 2020



“Youth are served in a way that builds on strengths, creates self-efficacy, and moves them toward the goals that they have chosen for themselves. This includes celebrating the unique interests and talents of each individual, and encouraging connections to caring adults. The opportunity to thrive includes meaningful work and is accessible in the context of safe relationships, community, and home environments.”

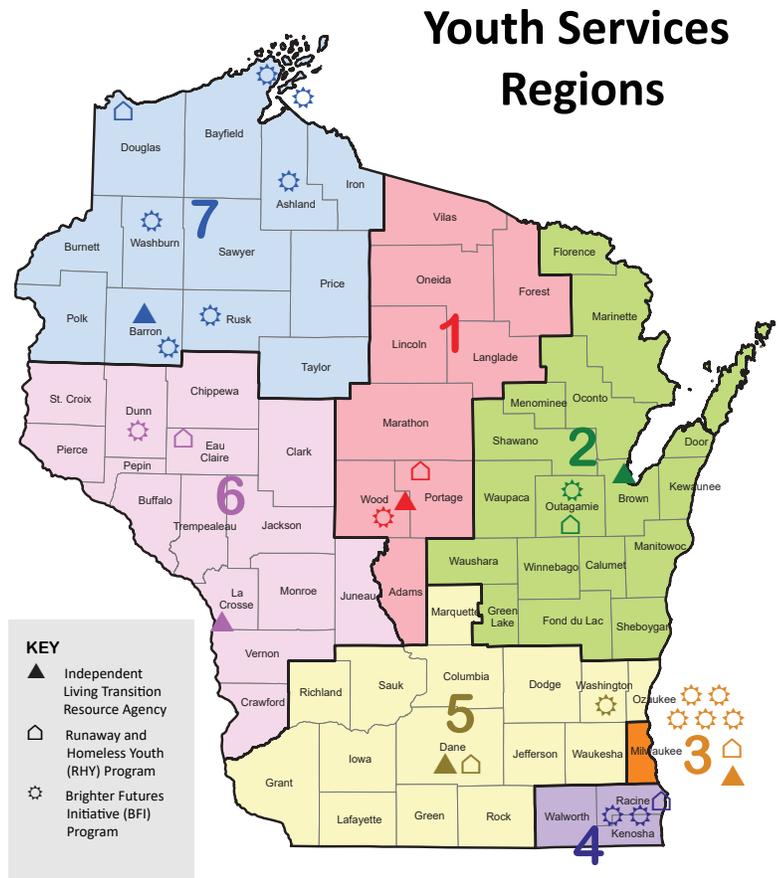
– Youth Services
Framework



Wisconsin Department of
Children and Families

Background

DCF regionalized independent living (IL) services as of 2016 in order to provide a community-based voluntary extension of services to young adults transitioning from out-of-home care. Counties remain responsible for IL service provision throughout a youth's time in care, and the Transition Resource Agencies (TRAs) in each of the seven regions are responsible for coordinating funds and services for youth eligible for IL after exiting care. Tribes can also apply to receive IL funds to serve their populations. Currently, five tribes receive IL funds.



DCF utilized a phased implementation approach with TRAs, with regions rolling out in successive years between 2016 and 2019. This report includes cumulative outcomes data and information collected since regionalization began.



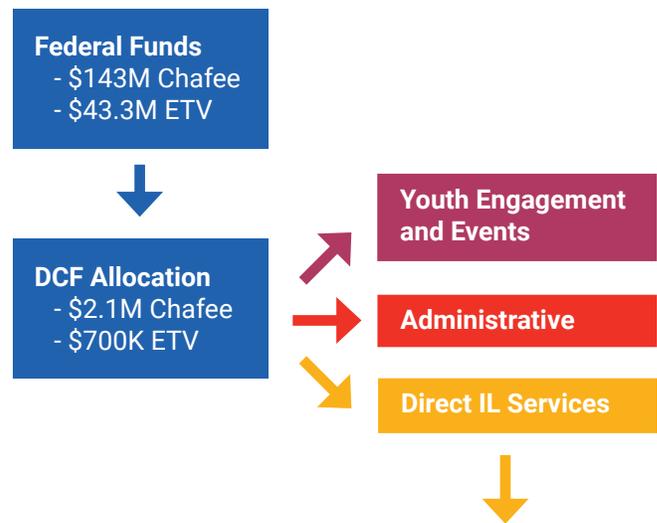
For more information on the IL program and providers, visit <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/independentliving>.

Funding

Funding Amounts

Wisconsin’s independent living program is entirely funded with federal dollars provided via the **John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (“Chafee”) program**. Annual funding includes approximately \$2.1 million in Chafee funds and approximately \$700,000 in Education and Training Voucher (ETV) funds. ETV funds specifically support young people eligible for IL services who are pursuing postsecondary programs. Until 2019, DCF consistently carried over or returned unexpended Chafee funds.

Wisconsin primarily uses Chafee dollars to support direct services through regional and/or tribal IL programs, with funding also used for youth engagement efforts and events and a small amount reserved for program administration. In 2018-2019, DCF also used funds to finance four innovation grants—with three counties and one tribe each focusing on a significant IL need area (see page 11).



CY	No. of Providers receiving Chafee Funds			Providers’ Chafee Expenditures	Providers’ ETV Expenditures
	Counties	Regions	Tribes		
2016	40	2	3	\$1,455,983	\$387,478
2017	3	5	3	\$1,607,365	\$469,780
2018	3	6	5	\$2,173,689	\$573,828
2019	0	7	5	\$2,541,158	\$523,779

Notes:

1. Expenditures in 2018 and 2019 were higher than the annual Chafee allocation amount as a result of DCF efforts to address historical underspending in the IL program.
2. Until 2020, the Wisconsin Division of Juvenile Corrections also received a small amount of IL funding.

Before 2019, Wisconsin administered some of its ETV funds via providers and some via the DCF Scholarship. In 2018 and 2019, DCF staff rebranded and restructured the program; funds were renamed “Brighter Star,” and TRAs assumed responsibility for allocation. This was done to streamline processes, improve accuracy and timeliness, avoid duplication and mistakes, and maximize support for eligible young people.

More information on Brighter Star can be found at <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/youthservices/college>.

Population Served

IL services are targeted supports for individuals who experience out-of-home care as adolescents (age 14 or older). In Wisconsin, a young person may be eligible for IL supports until age 21 (age 23 for Brighter Star). To be eligible while in care, a young person must be in a qualifying court-ordered out-of-home care placement for at least six months after the age of 14. The six months do not have to be consecutive. County- and tribal-level child welfare agencies are responsible for providing IL services to IL-eligible youth as long as they are in care.

Whether a youth who is IL-eligible while in care remains eligible for IL services via a TRA once they exit care depends on the type of care they were in and when and how they exit. Broadly, the criteria for continued eligibility are:

- Adoption after the age of 16;
- Chapter 48 guardianship after the age of 16; or
- Exit from a court-ordered qualifying placement type at age 18 or older.

IL supports are a required component of an IL-eligible youth's time in care; they are interwoven with other case management expectations. However, youth uptake on regional services for which they qualify is voluntary. More information about Wisconsin's IL program eligibility is available at <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/cwportal/il/pdf/il-eligibility.pdf>. Since 2016, the number of youth who meet the criteria for TRA services has remained fairly consistent.

CY	Adoption ≥ Age 16	Guardianship ≥ Age 16	Discharge ≥ Age 18
2016	14	73	289
2017	13	77	303
2018	19	71	295

Did You Know?

- May through August are the most common months in which youth exit care at age 18 or older.
- Youth who are missing from care or in a court-ordered trial reunification when they turn 18 continue to be eligible for regional independent living services; it is essential that their placement is kept open through their 18th birthday.
- Youth whose only out-of-home placement is in detention are not IL-eligible; however, those who were held in detention at the time of aging out after becoming IL-eligible in a qualifying placement setting may be eligible for regional IL services.

Services Provided



Though IL supports broadly relate to education, employment, housing, health and wellbeing, and permanent connections, the provision of independent living services is personalized to each youth's needs and goals. For more information, visit <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/cwportal/ys/pdf/ys-framework.pdf> and <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/cwportal/il/pdf/il-roadmap.pdf>.

Though every individual's experience with IL is different, the Independent Living Transition to Discharge (ILTD) plan is at the core of each young person's transition from care to adulthood. This plan, which is required for youth in care at 17.5 and likely to exit from care at age 18 or older, builds upon the IL skills and supports they received while in care and looks ahead to their future needs and goals. **In each quarter since the beginning of 2018 (the start of DCF data collection), county and regional agencies partnered alongside youth for a total of more than 100 transitions.** While tribes are not required to complete an ILTD, they do complete similar transition planning with young people exiting care.

In 2019, county, tribal, and transition resource agencies collectively provided **more than 5,800 unique IL and ETV services** to eligible young people. TRAs identified the following areas as primary needs for those they serve:

- Housing resources
- Job skill development
- Identifying supportive adults not involved in the system

Specific to education, ETV funds are a valuable asset for those who qualify. **From 2016-2019, eligible youth received about \$2.8 million in ETV support.** In 2019, the number of awards was especially high, with over 150 youth receiving a combined total of more than \$520,000.

Program Outcomes

DCF tracks outcomes related to independent living in two primary ways: TRAs' biannual outcome reporting and National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) survey results. NYTD is discussed on the following page.

Biannual Outcome Reporting

In 2018, DCF implemented the requirement that all TRAs submit qualitative and quantitative information twice annually for metrics in each of the five independent living domains. Outcome tracking has continued to improve since TRAs became fully regionalized in 2019. Key takeaways from 2018 and 2019 include:

- **Youth engagement is not linear:** Not all youth who qualify for TRA services choose to participate right after exiting care. Some of them decline services initially but reach out to the provider after some time has passed or when a specific need arises. Other youth may choose to participate for a time and then disengage for a while.
- **Youth needs vary:** A subset of youth who qualify for TRA services access services through another provider type, most often adult services or mental health providers that offer supports beyond the TRA's expertise. In the first and second half of 2018, TRAs identified 66 and 46 IL-eligible youth, respectively, who primarily received services elsewhere; in 2019, TRAs reported 44 in the first half and 30 in the second half of the year.
- **Youth participation continues to grow:** The number of youth engaged with regional services has increased over time. In each half of 2018 and 2019, regions collectively served more than 450 and 530 youth, respectively.
- **It takes a village:** Each TRA builds a "pro-youth network" to work alongside community partners with whom youth can be connected and referred according to their IL wants and needs. TRAs' key partners include housing agencies and coalitions, local employers and employment service providers, food banks and donation centers, postsecondary institutions, and free or low-cost healthcare providers.
- **Youth employability is high:** Because TRAs work with youth to help them overcome barriers to their employment, very few youth involved in regional services are unable to work. Overall, most TRAs report that a small proportion of youth engaged with their programs neither work nor attend school.
- **Success is measured in different ways:** Some of the outcomes TRAs track in addition to the required metrics include information on youths' hourly wages, legal needs, co-enrollment in other programs, and military involvement.

Program Outcomes

National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD)

Since 2010, DCF has tracked youth outcomes via NYTD surveys. NYTD is a federal requirement and states must survey a sample of youth who are in a qualifying out-of-home care placement at the age of 17 or any of the 45 days that follow. Those youth surveyed must be surveyed again at ages 19 and 21 to help states and the federal government gauge how young adults with experience as an adolescent in care fare as they age. Since the beginning, Wisconsin has elected to survey all 17-year-olds who meet the requirements to complete the survey and, per federal direction, survey them again as 19- and 21-year-olds. DCF partners with the UW Survey Center to coordinate survey administration and results tracking. Visit <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/cwportal/ys/nytd> for more information on NYTD and youth eligibility, and resources related to the effort.

The NYTD survey results include a bevy of information primarily related to employment, school, housing, and finances. Key metrics are included on the following page. It is important to note that while many 19- and 21-year-old NYTD respondents may be IL-eligible after leaving care, not all exited care in a way that qualifies them for supports and the IL program is voluntary for those who are eligible. Still, NYTD results are a helpful barometer for the primary areas in which recent alumna of foster care struggle or thrive.

Brighter Future Initiatives (BFI) and Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY) Programs

In addition to the TRAs, Bureau of Youth Services staff oversee 17 Brighter Future Initiatives (BFI) and seven Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY) programs. While IL programming covers all 72 counties, BFI and RHY programs are currently active in 12 of those counties and have the potential to expand in the future. BYS staff continue to establish and refine data collection and reporting expectations for BFI and RHY grantees. These will include metrics specific to the program areas and the populations they serve, as well as eight common metrics reported across IL, BFI, and RHY. BYS will include data from these partners in future outcome reporting.

For more information on BFI and RHY, visit <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/brighterfutures> and <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/rhy>.

Program Outcomes

National Youth in Transition Database continued...

The following table includes valuable takeaways from NYTD as they relate to some of the primary IL domains.

		19-year old cohort			21-year old cohort		
		FFY2016	FFY2019	% diff	FFY2016	FFY2019	% diff
Number of respondents		216	224		116	188	
Employment	Working full time	45 (20.8%)	57 (25.4%)	4.6%	33 (28.4%)	82 (43.6%)	15.2%
	Working part time	57 (26.4%)	60 (26.8%)	0.4%	24 (20.7%)	38 (20.2%)	-0.5%
	Not working at all	112 (51.9%)	105 (46.9%)	-5.0%	58 (50.0%)	68 (36.2%)	-13.8%
Education	Enrolled in school	98 (45.4%)	86 (38.4%)	-7.0%	35 (30.2%)	43 (22.9%)	-7.3%
	Enrolled in vocational program	5 (2.3%)	3 (1.3%)	-1.0%	1 (0.9%)	4 (2.1%)	1.3%
	Enrolled in community college or two-year program	16 (7.4%)	21 (9.4%)	2.0%	16 (13.8%)	15 (8.0%)	-5.8%
	Enrolled in four year school	20 (9.3%)	13 (5.8%)	-3.5%	8 (6.9%)	11 (5.9%)	-1.0%
Housing	Homeless at some point within the last two years	55 (25.5%)	67 (29.9%)	4.4%	41 (35.3%)	84 (44.7%)	9.3%
	Moved from house to house over the last two	96 (44.4%)	103 (46.0%)	1.5%	54 (46.6%)	98 (52.1%)	5.6%
Insurance	Have Medicaid insurance	117 (54.2%)	122 (54.5%)	0.3%	70 (60.3%)	85 (45.2%)	-15.1%
	Has other insurance type	63 (29.2%)	50 (22.3%)	-6.8%	26 (22.4%)	38 (20.2%)	-2.2%
Incarceration	Incarcerated at some point within the last two years	62 (28.7%)	56 (25.0%)	-3.7%	32 (27.6%)	53 (28.2%)	0.6%
Connections	Current living situation	Most often living with friends or roommates			Most often living with biological, foster, or adoptive parents		
	Closest and most supportive relationships	Cite biological relatives; most often includes siblings, birth parents, and grandparents			Cite biological relatives; most often includes siblings, birth parents, and grandparents		

It is important to consider these statistics in the context of both the foster youth population and traditional trends as youth age. For example:

- The lower rate of school enrollment and the higher rate of employment among 21-year-olds compared to 19-year-olds is indicative, in part, of a **natural progression as young people transition from school to employment as they get older.**
- Results reflect current resource availability and limitations. Notably, **the lack of affordable and accessible housing near employment hubs is a barrier** across the state, as is the lack of access to affordable healthcare services.
- As young adults move around for school, relationships, and/or to establish their own roots, **some amount of transience is common.**
- Nationally, foster care alumni are **underrepresented in postsecondary programs.**

Overall, Wisconsin statistics largely align with national figures. National NYTD data can be found via <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/research-data-technology/reporting-systems/nytd>.

Youth Voice and Engagement

DCF is committed to actively engaging individuals with lived experience and including their voices in conversations and decisions about the systems and communities of which they are a part. Specifically, youth input is crucial to understanding and learning about the individual and unique insights of young people who have foster care experience while also informing the independent living program, the population it serves, and the needs it addresses. The agency has dedicated itself in recent years to making sure youth voices are not lost. This is done through a collection of efforts wholly or partially funded via the independent living program.

Youth Advisory Councils

Most notably, youth voice and advocacy are elevated within Wisconsin's Youth Advisory Councils (YAC). DCF has sponsored a statewide YAC since 2005 and all regions are required to facilitate a regional YAC. The YACs' shared mission is "to inspire positive change by providing education, advocacy, support, training, and awareness to governmental systems and the general public to help them better understand the foster care system. To ensure that those with lived experience have a seat at the table when stakeholders are making programming and policy decisions that impact all youth involved in the foster care system in Wisconsin."

The ways in which YAC members, adult supporters, and DCF staff work together towards these goals are varied and include, but are not limited to:



Advocacy

- Congressional testimonials, specific to issues such as extended out of home care and tuition remission for youth with foster care experience
- Annual Hands Around the Capitol event during Foster Care Awareness Month
- Participation in neighborhood events and on local councils
- Attendance and participation on panels at statewide and national conferences
- Participation on panels and in facilitated discussions with community, state agency, and university groups



Resource Development

- Healthy relationships booklet for youth in care
- DCF Program Improvement Plan standing member
- Family First input gathering



Leadership Development or Skill Building

- Attendance and participation at state and national conferences such as the Daniel Memorial Independent Living Conference
- Statewide initiative to provide strategic sharing training to all local and state YAC members
- Microaggressions training
- Participation in FosterClub Internships

Youth Voice and Engagement

TRA Program Evaluations

In addition to supporting the regional and statewide YACs and their efforts, DCF staff also prioritize youth voice as part of their evaluation of the TRAs. In 2019, youth were invited to provide their feedback directly to DCF. This was done either via one-on-one conversations or group discussions. DCF staff intend to continue this type of input gathering moving forward. Some of the primary takeaways from IL program participants' initial input include:

“Focus on making the information and the people who know it comfortable for youth.”

“Make sure everybody has somebody.”

“While in care, IL isn't really talked about. It's 'whisper' talk.”

“It is better to know about the program before being in crisis.”

“Help youth prepare for the outside world.”

“We don't know what we don't know. Workers are here to help, but sometimes youth need a mentor or a peer they can ask, with whom they feel comfortable and safe.”

“Let the person fall on their face. Let them fail on their own. Let them fail safely.”

IL Innovation Grants

In 2018, BYS provided an IL innovation grant opportunity to Wisconsin's counties and tribes. Applicants were asked to propose a program or initiative focused on one of four independent living areas of focus that prove to be particularly challenging: transportation, permanent connections, employment for younger youth, and agency system improvements. Serendipitously, the four successful grantees each focused on one of the prioritized areas; they were:

- Lac Courte Oreilles Tribe – driving and transportation
- Dane County – permanent connections
- Waukesha County – employment
- Waupaca County – system improvements

From July 1, 2018 to December 31, 2019, BYS worked closely with these tribal and county partners as they developed, implemented, tracked, and grew their IL innovation grant projects. This included facilitating regular phone calls with grantees, conducting fiscal oversight, collecting and reviewing biannual and final data collection, and providing technical assistance as needed. As a result of this unique funding opportunity and their commitment to their projects, grantees expanded their toolbox when working with young IL-eligible youth. Some of the key successes from the innovation grant projects included:

- Increasing youth access to driver's license requirements, such as driving school – including classroom instruction and road practice – and insurance
- Establishing community partnerships to identify, recruit, and compensate mentors for youth and refining the initiative to incorporate youth feedback on how best to connect with supportive adults
- Identifying barriers youth in foster care face when pursuing employment and developing tools and resources to name and alleviate those barriers
- Investing in trainings and resources to support staff's work with youth in foster care, including curricula related to trauma-informed care and innovative approaches to case management for youth whose circumstances are especially complex, and incorporating those resources and lessons learned in staff onboarding and ongoing professional development.

Each grantee noted that the innovation grant provided them with a unique opportunity to evaluate their IL service provision and target and problem-solve particularly challenging areas in order to better support youth. They all reported that they plan to carry key elements of their work forward beyond the grant period!

Resources

In addition to the resources listed throughout this report, the following links include helpful information about independent living and related programming in Wisconsin:

IL Worker Portal (policies, resources, and trainings): <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/cwportal/il>

Older Youth Outcomes Dashboard (for older youth in care):
<https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/dashboard/ageout>

Youth Leadership Opportunities: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/youthservices/leadership>

Wisconsin Youth Advisory Council: <https://www.facebook.com/wiyac2005/>

County IL Contacts: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/map/il>

Regional IL Contacts: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/map/il-r>

If you have questions or comments about DCF's Independent Living Program, contact:

DCF IL Coordinator: DCFILCoordinator@Wisconsin.gov

DMCPS IL Coordinator: DCFDMCPSIndependentLiving@Wisconsin.gov