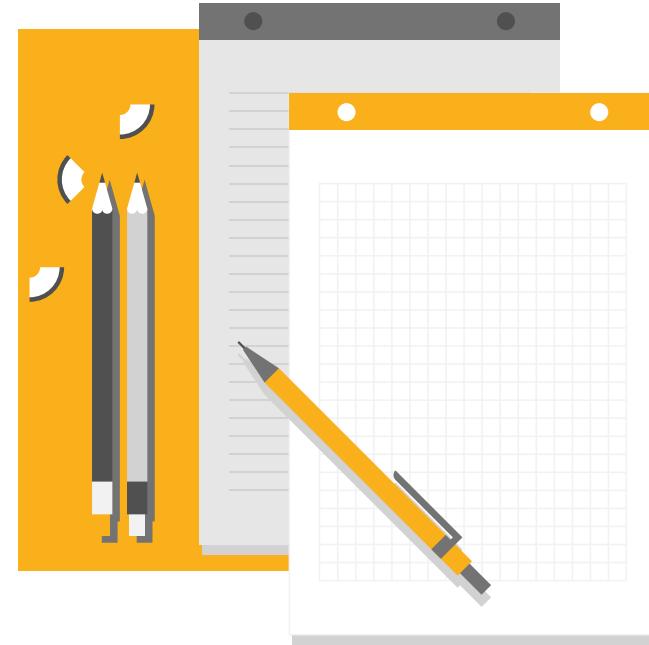




A Guide for Youth in Out-of-Home Care Placements in Wisconsin

For youth ages 14 and older placed in court-ordered relative placements, foster homes, group homes, residential care centers, or Supervised Independent Living placements



* Do what you need to do to make this guide, and your out-of-home care experience, work for you! Doodling, highlighting, underlining, dog-earing the pages and taking notes in the margins are highly encouraged!



Wisconsin Department of
Children and Families

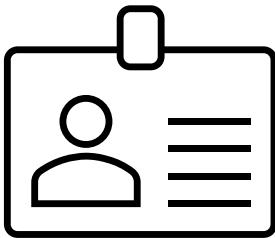


Purpose

This guide is for teens and young adults placed in court-ordered relative placements, foster homes, group homes, residential care centers, or Supervised Independent Living placements in Wisconsin. The goal is that it answers questions you have, helps you better understand your rights and what to expect, teaches you about different parts of the process and people involved, and makes you aware of resources available to you.

This guide includes a lot of information – but not everything! While it is meant to answer frequently asked questions about being in out-of-home care and provide an overview of what you can expect, even in the best of circumstances we know out-of-home care can be confusing - and information can change. Your county child welfare professional is required to provide this guide to you and should review it with you to make sure you understand. You can ask them, your guardian ad litem (GAL), out-of-home care (OHC) provider, or another trusted adult to help explain what's in this guide and what choices and rights you have. Don't be afraid to ask questions or request more information! You know your own needs, strengths, hopes, and goals better than anyone else and we encourage you to use your voice to share and advocate on behalf of yourself and others.

Nothing in this guide constitutes legal advice; when you are making decisions regarding your case and situation, seek and consult your own legal counsel as appropriate.



Contacts

Use this section to write down the names and phone number or email address for key people involved in your case:

County Child Welfare Professional

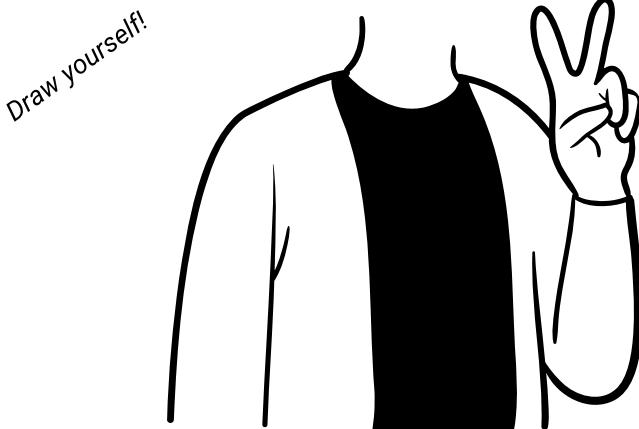
Tribal Child Welfare Professional (if applicable)

Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) (if applicable)

Guardian ad Litem (GAL) (if applicable)

Attorney

Other Supportive Adult(s)



From The Heart



DCF-P-405 (R. 01/2026)

Darlene Sittman

Introduction

I advocated as much as I could for myself before and after I was in foster care. It was a scary process because of how much negativity I had to put myself through before I was heard. I didn't know my rights or if anyone would listen to my words. But I kept fighting for myself, no matter what the outcome was.

My experience going into foster care is something I wouldn't want any other foster youth to go through. Which is why I want to convey to you how strong each and every one of you are; this isn't the easy path to have but, remember – it's your path. If there is something you need, want, or deserve, say it as loud as you can and as many times as you need. Just know that there are foster youth who stand with you and always will.

Jen P., Foster Care Alumna

"From the Heart," by D.S.

About this Guide

This is a guide for youth living in out-of-home care in Wisconsin. Out-of-home care is the temporary removal and placement of youth outside of their family or caregiver's home. Another name for out-of-home care is foster care. There are different reasons a youth is in out-of-home care and there are different out-of-home care placements (see Section 1: The Basics – in maroon – for more information on both).

If you are in an out-of-home care placement, this guide is for you. While in out-of-home care, you deserve to not only be safe and cared for, but to have people in your corner who support you and help you access tools and resources to create the life you want. This guide is broken into three main parts:

- 1 The basics and background information about your legal case, key considerations when entering care, types of out-of-home care placements, key people involved with your case, and more;
- 2 What to expect while entering and being in an out-of-home care placement; and
- 3 Key considerations when leaving out-of-home care.

The guide also provides you with tips on how to advocate for yourself so that you can get what you need and achieve your goals for the future. It also includes additional information related to the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) and Wisconsin Indian Child Welfare Act (WICWA), which pertains to Indian children and youth in care, and links to resources to help you. As a youth in care, you know better than anyone else what you need, and you deserve to feel heard. There will be hard times and things that are difficult to make sense of, but don't lose hope.

This guide was created alongside one of Wisconsin's FosterClub All-Stars. All-Stars are individuals who apply to and participate in FosterClub's comprehensive internship with others who have foster care experience. FosterClub is a national nonprofit working to include the voices of those with lived experience in out-of-home care at all levels of child welfare policy and practice. All-Stars exemplify that there is life after foster care and encourages young adults with system involvement to "dream big" for their futures. Many All-Stars complete projects and trainings with FosterClub and/or their state child welfare system after their internship.



When you see the word **"agency,"** this means your county human services agency and when you see the term **"child welfare professional,"** it means the agency's caseworker or social worker who works with you. Some young people are also – or instead – served by a tribal human service agency; these agencies are referenced as appropriate throughout this guide



Remember, it is **your decision** on how much information you share with friends and other people about your situation. This means you do not need to tell anyone you are or were living in out-of-home care... unless you want to! It is okay to talk to your care provider about how you're most comfortable being referred to in public, and vice-versa.

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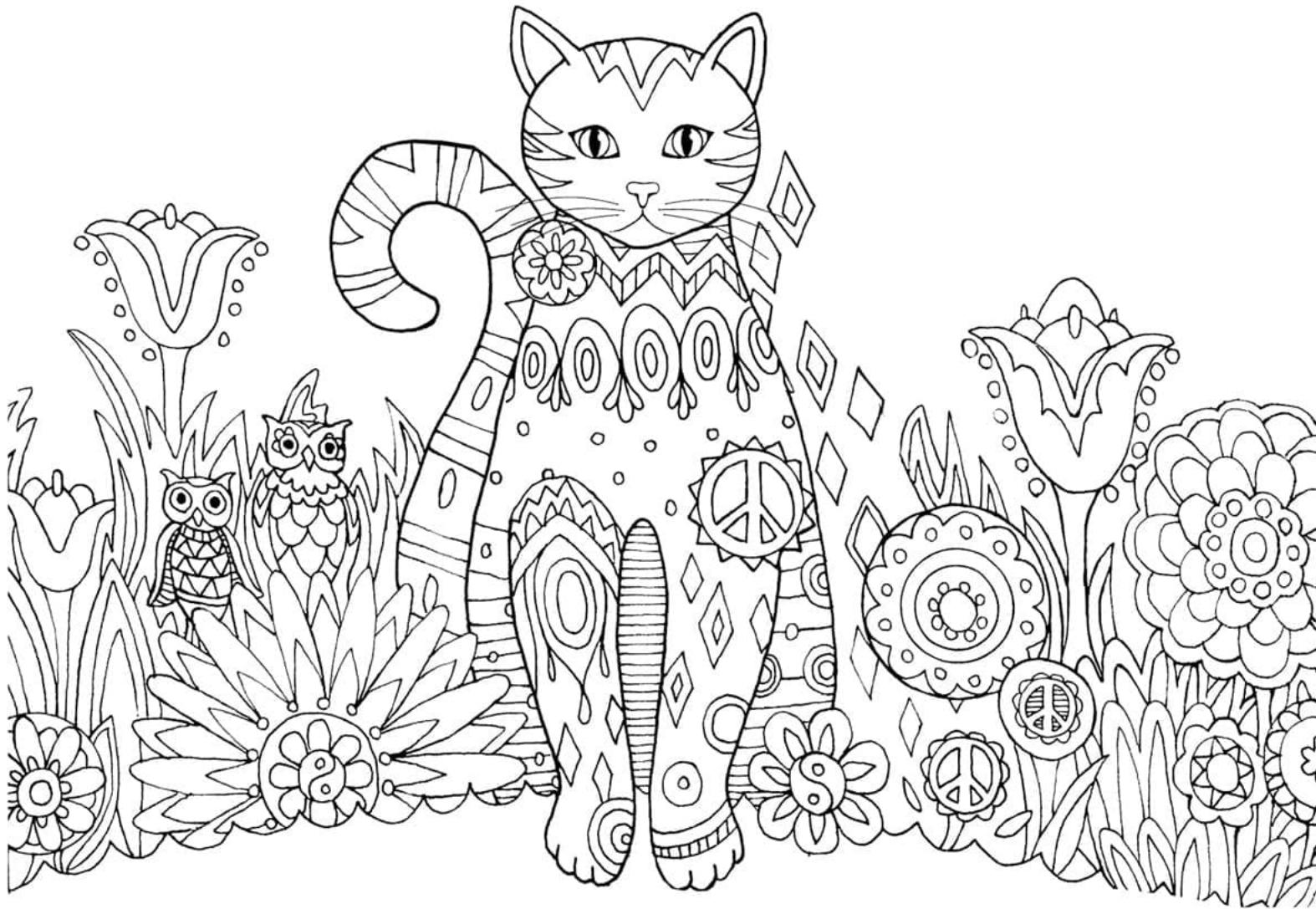
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The Basics

Youth Quotes

One thing I wish I had known when I entered foster care was:

That they can help kids dealing with abandonment and they could get help with group homes or foster homes. You learned that I could get a home after turning 18 I learned this from my mom.

The baggage that comes with it. The environment, with it being new and having to deal with different personalities every day and the group home rules.

That I would realize the upmost help that I could imagine, if I would have known it was so much help for me, I would have been more attentive.

How hard it would be mentally, just to keep going. What kept me going was knowing I was all I had. I would have to start all over. When I was with my momma and her living in her car and house hoping, knowing I didn't want to end up like that it helped keep me going.

I thought I had the support and resources but then realized that was not the case.

As the way I came in, I was raised in a certain way. I learned a lot of skills later in life. I didn't have role models to help me strive. **The will to keep on pushing through certain things.**

Your Legal Case

It is your right to participate in and understand court hearings and meetings regarding your case. Your voice is the most powerful tool to help the people involved in your case make the best decisions for you. If you do not want to or cannot attend hearings or meetings in person, ask your attorney or Guardian ad Litem (GAL) if there are other ways you can participate – like over the phone or via video, having your attorney or GAL speak on your behalf, or writing something down for them to share.

There are many parts of the process while you have a court case and are in out-of-home care. Some will happen at your child welfare professional's office; others will take place where you are living, school, or someplace else. In general, there are key members of your team who are invited to meetings and hearings that take place (see later in The Basics section for more info on key people). Some of the most common parts of the process for your case include...

Meetings

There are lots of meetings that happen during your case – you will be in many, but not all. These may include:

| Meeting type | What's it about? | Who | How often |
|-----------------------------|--|---|---|
| Permanency planning | Discuss the progress made towards your identified permanency goals | You! Your county and/or tribal child welfare professional, your GAL or CASA (if you have one), and other supportive adults you identify | Ongoing discussions with you and your parents |
| Administrative/case reviews | Track case progress | Your county and/or tribal child welfare professional and their supervisor | On a regular basis |
| Team | Discuss your placement or any potential change in placement | You! And other people involved in your case, like family members, family friends, supportive adults, care providers, therapists, county and tribal child welfare professionals, and others | At least monthly |

Your Legal Case

| Meeting type | What's it about? | Who | How often |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Treatment team | <p>Discuss treatment you receive via therapy, residential treatment, or something else. Includes discussion about treatment goals and progress</p> <p>During this meeting, you and your treatment care provider(s) will talk about your treatment goals and progress.</p> | <p>You!</p> <p>Your treatment team</p> | <p>At least monthly (can be done at the same time as the team meeting)</p> |
| Family Permanency Team Meeting | <p>Specific to being placed at a QRTP.</p> <p>Discuss the progress made towards your identified permanency goals and whether the QRTP placement is the most appropriate setting to meet your needs.</p> | <p>You!</p> <p>Your county and/or tribal child welfare professional, your GAL or CASA (if you have one), and other supportive adults you identify</p> | <p>First meeting is within 30 days before or after) your placement at the QRTP, with the team determining when other meetings should happen</p> |
| Transition planning | <p>Discuss independent living (IL) needs, goals, services, and skills to prepare you for transition from care</p> <p>See Section 2: What to Expect – in green – for more information on IL.</p> | <p>You!</p> <p>Supportive adults you identify, your child welfare professional, IL service provider, and potentially others involved in your case</p> | <p>First meeting is close to age 17.5 and other meetings take place as often as needed leading up to your transition from care to prepare you</p> |
| Mediation | <p>When there is a disagreement about something in your case. It may be something you disagree with or someone else disagrees with. The goal of the meeting is to see if everyone can agree on a solution.</p> | <p>Other people involved in your case, such as family members, family friends, supportive adults, care providers, therapists, county and/or tribal child welfare professional, and others</p> | <p>As needed</p> |

Your Legal Case

Court Hearings

Court hearings are an opportunity for you to be heard and for people involved in your case to update the judge on how things are going. If you feel comfortable expressing to the judge what you want or need, be sure to do so during the hearing (you can always write and share a letter if you don't want to speak out loud). If you would rather tell your attorney, GAL, or Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) something and have them mention it to the judge, that is okay, too!

The meetings and hearings about your case include important conversations and important decisions about your life. The case is about you, and you should be an active participant in what happens! Even if you're not in every meeting or hearing, your opinion matters! Find opportunities to let your child welfare professional and others know what is important to you!

Lots of important things happen between court hearings; your child welfare professional will update plans and communicate expectations, your family will also work on building a safe environment for you to return to and ensure they have necessary supports, and you'll be doing your part to stay healthy and grow.

The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) and Wisconsin Indian Child Welfare Act (WICWA) apply to cases involving children or young adults who fall within the definition of "Indian child" under those laws. See Section 4: ICWA & WICWA and Self-Advocacy – in blue – for more information on ICWA and WICWA.



Reminder: There is a **Glossary of Acronyms and Terms** at the end of this guide that you can reference/highlight/and turn to at any point!



Your Legal Case

Rights

In addition to what you need to know about court hearings, **you have other rights related to your case**. Some of these include:

- **To have an attorney appointed for you**, if you are 12 years old or older and you are the subject of a contested proceeding, or if certain other criteria apply. Even if the law does not require an attorney to be appointed for you, the court always has the option to appoint an attorney for you.
- **To be heard in your court case** and to be able to object when an action is proposed that you disagree with, such as a change of placement.
- **To be able to attend your permanency hearings in court** if you would like to.
- **To have your agency records be complete, accurate, and up to date.** Your agency must give you, your parent/guardian, and your attorney a copy of your records unless doing so would cause danger to someone. It must also keep your records for a certain amount of time after your case closes; the amount of time depends on which agency serves you.
 - Note that you must be 14 or older to request a copy of your own records.
- **To receive the following documents at the time of discharge** from out-of-home care, if you leave care at age 18 or older (and if you've been placed in out-of-home care for six months or longer):
 - a certified copy of your birth certificate,
 - a copy of your Social Security card,
 - a copy of your health care records,
 - information on maintaining healthcare coverage, and
 - either a driver's license or state-issued ID.



“ **Kinship Care
Alumni Quote**

No matter how tough the odds, a leader has to **have the courage to do what's right.**"

— US Senator Tammy Baldwin

What to Know When You Enter an Out-of-Home Care Placement

Always remember that being in an out-of-home care placement is not your fault! And it is nothing to be ashamed of!

There are many different reasons why youth are in out-of-home care. These include:

- Parent(s)/caregivers need supports to create a safe environment for you.
- Family crisis or conflicts between the youth and parent(s)/caregiver(s) or siblings.
- Physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, or neglect.
- Parent(s)/caregivers voluntarily place youth in out-of-home care as they may not be able to meet their youth's needs.
- Youth is removed from home due to delinquency and after failure to comply with conditions provided to them while still at home.
- A judge decides that a youth needs to be placed in out-of-home care to give a family time to build a safe environment for a youth's return home.

Entering out-of-home care can be confusing, overwhelming, and scary. If you are new to out-of-home care, know that the goal of the system is to keep you safe, and to help the adults you know meet your needs and make sure you are okay. It's normal to have a lot of feelings; you may have not had a lot of time to get your things, you may miss your family, feel relieved, wish you had a chance to tell your friends, or need more time to process this change. All of these emotions are totally understandable. Adults get stressed when they move, even when they have months and months to plan! There are no wrong feelings to have right now.

There will be some questions only your child welfare professional can answer, like when can I see my mom, or can someone send me pictures of my pets, can I sleep over at a friend's house, etc. In the meantime, this guide tries to answer some of the more common questions not specific to your unique case. You will get a lot of information when you enter out-of-home care and it's okay if you can't take all of it in right away. Give yourself permission to not have it all figured, and only take on what you can handle. Some people may use words specific to out-of-home care that you aren't familiar with.

Remember – ask whatever questions you need to understand what's happening! We've also included a glossary in the back of this guide that defines some of the commonly used terms and acronyms related to your court case and during your time in out-of-home care.

Types of Out-of-Home Care Placements

There are different out-of-home care (OHC) placements based on what you need, and who can help. OHC is also sometimes called foster care, but types of care include more than just foster homes. The different types of out-of-home care placements include:

Foster Home

Treatment Foster Home

Group Home or Residential Care Center

Relative Care



See details on next page

Respite care

Supervised Independent Living

Trial Reunification



Reminder: There is a **Glossary of Acronyms and Terms** at the end of this guide that you can reference/highlight/and turn to at any point!

Types of Out-of-Home Care Placements

Foster Home: A foster home offers a safe place to live for now, with adults to care for you and provide you the things kids need like clothes, food, and things to do. Some people may refer to those adults as a foster parent, but it is your choice what you are most comfortable calling them. Some foster homes may have pets, or other children who may or may not be in foster care. It can take a while to adjust to the way a foster home differs from where you grew up. It's okay to ask for things that will help make you more comfortable, like your favorite snacks, a soft blanket, or time to talk with friends. Your county or tribe or a private agency monitors foster homes, which means the agency checks in on the foster home to make sure your needs are met. Foster parents can be a relative or someone who is new to you. In Wisconsin, a foster home is the most common placement type.

Treatment Foster Home: All youth in foster care have experienced trauma. Trauma means something difficult happened, and you may need additional help processing it. It doesn't mean anything is wrong with you. Treatment foster homes are like other foster homes, but they have additional training and resources to help youth heal and thrive.

Group Home or Residential Care Center: Licensed group homes

or residential care centers are places where staff are paid to supervise and meet the needs of youth. Youth may be there for various reasons; some may not be in out-of-home care or may be in "respite" care. Each group home and residential care center has a licensor that helps make sure the youth there will be safe, that the program has enough staff, and that there aren't too many youth there at the same time. While there are rules for every group home and residential care center, they may also set their own rules of what they expect youth to do during their time there. So you know, residential care centers are often called "RCCs."

Relative Care: Relative care means that a relative is responsible for providing for your basic needs. Relatives may choose to become licensed as foster parents or they can continue to care for you as a relative provider, meaning they care for you without becoming a foster parent. Relatives can also care for you if they are unlicensed and unpaid. Some relative care providers are in the Kinship Care program, but not all.



Did you know?

Some RCCs and Group Homes are also certified as a Qualified Residential Treatment Program, also known as a "QRTP." To be a QRTP, the placement must meet specific requirements related to things like medical care and treatment models.

A QRTP can only be used as a time-limited placement when a young person needs extra mental or behavioral health supports that cannot be provided in a different setting. A QRTP must also provide family-based aftercare support to you when you discharge. You can learn more about QRTPs at <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/family-first/qrtp>.

Types of Out-of-Home Care Placements

Respite care: Short-term care given by another provider.

Supervised Independent Living: Supervised Independent Living is a placement type only available to youth aged 17 and older and is meant to be a steppingstone for you before transitioning to independence. Youth in this placement have support like someone checking in multiple times a week and someone they can call anytime, but also have a high level of independence. They may have their own apartment or rent a room in a house.

Trial Reunification: This occurs when a youth has been in an OHC placement but returns to their parents or caregiver for a specific period to determine whether reunification with that parent/caregiver is appropriate. When in a trial reunification, a young person is still considered to be in care. A young person may transition to official reunification after a trial reunification or may return to their OHC placement.

If trial reunification is something you're interested in learning more about, discuss it with your child welfare professional!



Remember!

There may be other young people in the same placement as you. Some will have backgrounds like you, but others will be different. You don't need to compare yourself with others, but you may find you have things in common that make you feel less alone or even lead to friendships.

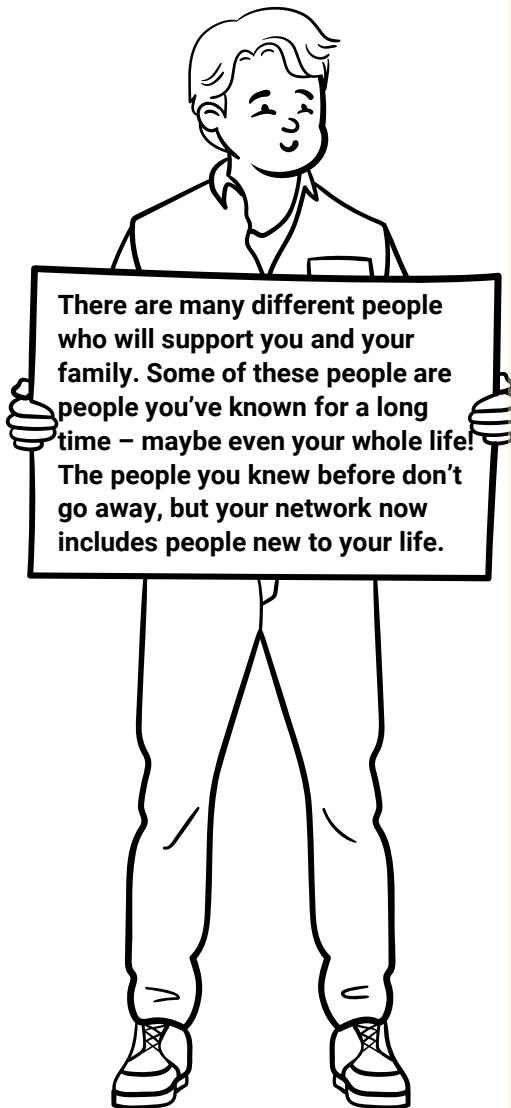
The same need for confidentiality and respect that applies to you also applies to them. It is their right to share what they want about their story when and how they want to.

If you have a conflict with another person in your placement, tell your care provider. If the issue continues to be a problem, discuss it with your child welfare professional.



Reminder: There is a **Glossary of Acronyms and Terms** at the end of this guide that you can reference/highlight/and turn to at any point!

Roles and Definitions



Care Provider

- Youth in out-of-home care are placed in a variety of different settings based on what they need, and who can help. No matter if you are placed with a family member, or in a group care setting (like a group home), there will be adults there to support you. While some may be professionals, they still may not always know the right things to do or say. Ask for what you need and make your feelings and preferences clear.

Child Welfare Professional/Social worker

- May work with a county, tribe, or state agency.
- Will be assigned to you and your family. In some cases, you might also have one or more other workers assigned to you, like an independent living coordinator, treatment foster care worker, or a residential treatment child welfare professional.
- Interacts with you, your parent(s), your caregiver, and other individuals in your life.
- Has the professional training to make decisions for your protection and safety.
- Has private, monthly in-person meetings with you to discuss how you are doing, any concerns you have, case progress, and to share and provide you with information. Sometimes, it may be necessary to complete forms with them.
- Is available to you by phone and in person. You can always call or email your child welfare professional! Your child welfare professional should give you their phone number and email when you enter care, and you can even write it in this guide to help keep track of it. If you need your child welfare professional's phone number or email and you can't find it, another option is to ask someone you trust to help you – or do an online search for your county's human services office. From there you should be able to speak to someone who can direct your call to your child welfare professional.
- Contacts your foster parent or provider at least every month. This gives them a chance to hear how day-to-day activities like school and extracurriculars are going and helps with long-term planning.
- Arranges contact between you and your family, including your siblings (when safe and appropriate). Contact may be in-person or by phone calls, letters, and/or video calls.
- Connects you with services to help meet your needs.
- Provides fair treatment, whatever your gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religion, national origin, disability, or medical needs.

Roles and Definitions



Court-Appointed Special Advocate and Guardian ad Litem

- In addition to an attorney, you may also have a Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) and/or a Guardian ad Litem (GAL). A judge may appoint a CASA or GAL to ensure that a child, youth, or family's needs and best interests are fully represented during a court case.

Friends

- Peers from school, or your neighborhood may have talked you through tough times in your life before. Those friends will continue to care about you no matter where you live. Talk with your child welfare professional and provider to see how visits with friends you care about can continue to happen.

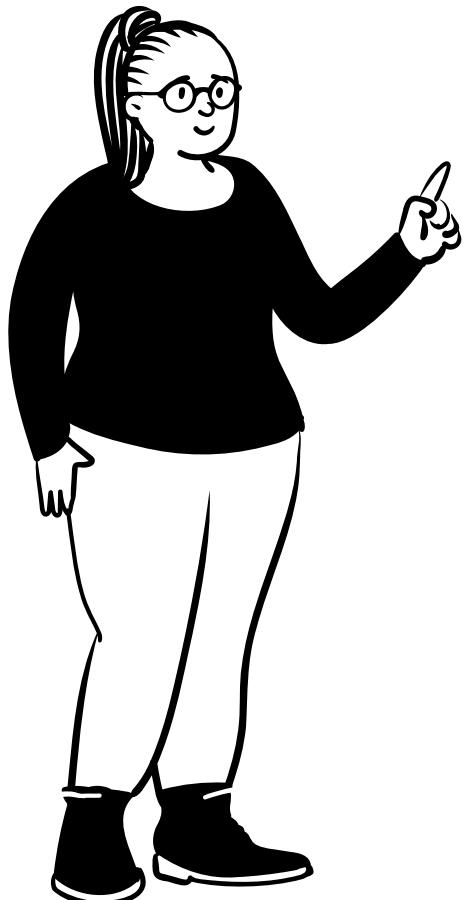
Judge and Attorney

- Both your judge and attorney will be involved in your case for a long time. You will see both on a regular basis as decisions are made about your case, your placements, and any necessary planning.

Members of your community

- In some cases, these connections can serve as a potential placement option, meaning you may be able to live with them temporarily. Your child welfare professional will make this decision, but you can share information about which people feel safe and familiar to you.
- While some of these people may not be willing or able to serve as a placement option/place for you to live, there are many other meaningful supports they can give. Don't be afraid to reach out and ask family friends and others in your community for things like taking you to dinner, cheering you on at sporting events, or helping you learn how to save money.
- Other people who support and care about your family may also continue to be part of your life after you enter out-of-home care. This includes people from school, church, teams, community groups, and more. These connections are especially important when you are going through big changes like being in care and living somewhere new.

Roles and Definitions



Members of your family and your extended family

- While there are reasons you are unable to live with some members of your family right now, often there are people in your family that have been and will continue to be safe and helpful to rely on no matter where you live.
- There may be aunts, uncles, or other extended family who want to help if they know about your situation. Some may know what's going on and some may not. If this is something you want to explore, be sure to talk to your child welfare professional. Sometimes if you don't have a person's phone number or contact information, your child welfare professional can help track it down.

Mental health professional (if you choose)

- Talking to a therapist, psychiatrist, or psychologist does not mean anything is "wrong" with you. Being a teenager is hard even for youth not in out-of-home care, and you deserve to have someone safe to talk to and process these changes with.
- Remember that if a therapist or mental health professional doesn't seem like the right fit for you, it is okay to ask your care provider if you can switch until you find the right match.
- It is also okay to say "not right now" to therapy or mental health support, and to change your mind later.

Respite care provider

- Sometimes you will stay with another provider for a short time. This provider may be someone you know already and have a relationship with, or it may be someone you don't know in a new location.

Filing a Complaint

If you have an issue with someone involved in your case (child welfare professional, attorney, etc.), there is a complaint process. **If you have immediate concerns about your safety or there are concerns that either you or someone else is being abused or neglected by a care provider, skip the steps listed below and go directly to an adult you trust to report the issue. You can make a Child Protective Services (CPS) report with the county in which you reside.**

Before you do anything official, try to reach out to the person directly – only if you feel like you can safely do so. Below are a few steps you can take.

- Share your concerns with the person in writing – in a text, email, or letter. Explain exactly what the issue is
- If you'd like, follow up with a phone call to the person; if they don't answer, leave a voicemail with your name and contact information

If you have concerns with your County child welfare professional

Each County child welfare agency is required to have a complaint process; it may vary from agency to agency.

- You can learn more about the complaint process at <https://DCF.WI.GOV/About-Us/Complaint/Child-Welfare>
- The list of county contacts you can contact about your complaint is available at <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/areaadmin/hsd-programs.htm>

If you complete the county complaint process but still have a concern, you can request the Department of Children and Families' Bureau of Regional Operations to review your case.

- To file a complaint with the staff, call 608-422-6886 or email DCF BROCW Complaints@wisconsin.gov

If you have concerns with your caregiver (foster parent or unlicensed relative)

Foster parents can be licensed by either a county, a tribe, or a private child placing agency. Your child welfare professional will be able to tell you the agency that licenses the home and contact information for the licensor. If you have concerns about the care being provided, you can explain your concerns to your child welfare professional, the licensor for the foster home, and/or your attorney.

If the caregiver is not licensed, discuss your concerns with your child welfare professional and/or attorney. If you believe that the child welfare professionals and/or licensors have not addressed your concerns appropriately, please file a complaint using the steps under "If you have concerns with your child welfare professional."

Filing a Complaint

If you have concerns with your group care provider (group home, RCC)

Each group care provider has its own complaint process, which they should explain to you when you arrive. They should also explain your rights as a resident and provide you a copy of a residents' rights document. These rights must also be posted somewhere that is visible to all residents.

If the group care provider does not make you aware of your rights and of their complaint process, or you believe they've violated the rights you have as a resident, talk to your attorney or child welfare professional.

If you have concerns with your GAL or CASA

If you cannot resolve your concerns with your GAL or CASA directly, discuss them with your attorney or child welfare professional.

If you have concerns with your attorney

If you cannot resolve your concerns with your attorney directly, discuss them with your Guardian ad Litem or child welfare professional. Even if they cannot help you resolve the issue, they can help you decide next steps.

If you have concerns with someone else involved with your case (counselor, etc.)

If you cannot resolve the issue with the person directly, talk to your attorney, GAL, CASA, child welfare professional, or other trusted adult.



Heads up!

Depending on your county, age, and stage of your case, you may have a GAL, CASA, and/or attorney.



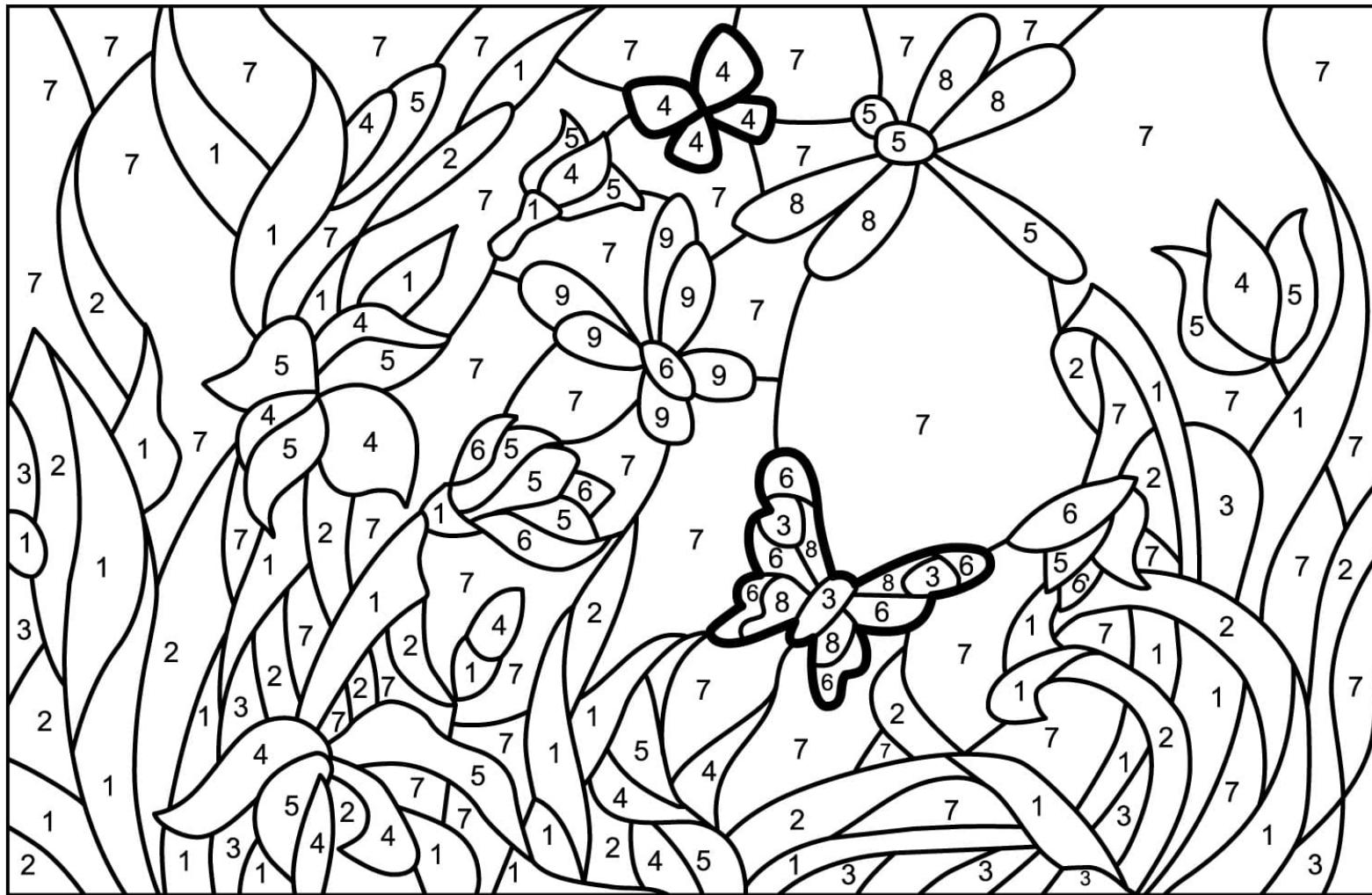
Note

If you cannot resolve your concerns after talking to your attorney, child welfare professional, or others involved with your case, you can also let the judge in your case know.



Reminder: There is a **Glossary of Acronyms and Terms** at the end of this guide that you can reference/highlight/and turn to at any point!

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What to Expect

Rights & Expectations While in an Out-of-Home Care Placement

Your Rights

When you enter out-of-home care, you will be placed in one of the placements listed in Section 1: The Basics – in maroon. It is possible you will be placed in more than one type during your life. No matter what type of placement you enter, you have rights. Below are some specific to being in out-of-home care.

- ✓ **To be placed with your siblings**, when it is safe and appropriate, and if not, to have visits or contact with them (unless there is a determination that it is not safe).
- ✓ **To have contact with your family** (such as your parent(s) or guardian(s)), when it is safe and appropriate.
- ✓ **To live in a placement that is safe** and where you will be free from physical or verbal punishment, intimidation, or any type of abuse.
- ✓ **To be unharmed and unexploited.**
- ✓ **To receive appropriate and timely medical, mental health, and dental care**, both routine and when you are sick or have a health issue.
- ✓ **To be enrolled in school**, and to remain in the school that you went to before you entered out-of-home care, unless it is not in your best interest.
- ✓ **To have a permanency plan prepared for you** and updated every six months and, if you are 14 years old or older, to be consulted on the preparation of the plan and any updates.

Rights & Expectations While in an Out-of-Home Care Placement

What to Expect from the Child Welfare Agency continued...

While you may not see your child welfare professional every day, know that “behind the scenes” they are often coordinating lots of supports and meetings having to do with making sure your needs are met. In addition to the rights you have while in a placement (see prior page), here are the things you can expect your child welfare professional and their agency to do for and with you while you’re in out-of-home care:



Live in a safe place that is:

- Appropriate for you and where you will be respected.
- Understanding and where you will not get into trouble for telling people that your rights or needs are not being protected or that you do not feel safe.
- Responsive to your personal needs, giving you clothing, housing, food, and transportation.



Live with a provider who:

- Keeps you safe and is respectful of your thoughts and feelings.
- Makes sure you get the necessary medical, mental health, and dental care, including confidential family planning and reproductive health services, if desired.
- Helps you remain connected to your family, culture, and heritage.
- Respects and supports your participation in cultural activities.
- Knows and understands your personal history and your needs.
- Respects your wishes and preferences surrounding religious practices, activities, and services, without negative consequences.
 - This includes providing you with opportunities for religious expression, if that is important to you, and not requiring religious activity if religion is not important to you!
- Cares and wants to be informed of your likes and dislikes and takes your feelings into consideration when making decisions.
- Helps you keep your family circumstances and reasons for being in care private and confidential.

Continued on next page

Rights & Expectations While in an Out-of-Home Care Placement

What to Expect from the Child Welfare Agency continued...



Have your property protected:

- Your property (clothes, music, books, and other things you own) generally should be with you where you live, and you should be able to bring it with you if you move.
 - *Exception: if any of your property is inappropriate or poses a safety risk, a provider may restrict your access to it.*
 - *Note: your access to things like electronics may be limited.*
- Freedom to send and receive mail without anyone reading it.
 - *Exception: unless it is court-ordered that someone else can open your mail to protect your safety.*
- Freedom to make phone calls in private.
 - *Exception: unless your child welfare professional or a court order says you cannot.*



Be informed of placement changes:

- If your placement will change, your child welfare professional must explain to you ahead of time why it is necessary for you to move, unless emergency circumstances prevent this.
 - You will receive placement change paperwork explaining the move.
- You have a right to object in court to a change of placement.
- In an emergency, your placement may need to quickly change. This would be done to protect your safety and you may not know about the move in advance.
 - Even with emergency moves, you can object to the placement change when you receive your copy of the placement change paperwork.



Do things other kids do:

- Focus on your schoolwork by having a quiet place to study and do your homework.
- Participate in age-appropriate school and community activities, events, and extracurricular or recreational opportunities that you enjoy and provide good experiences.
- Have the opportunity to obtain safe and age-appropriate employment.

Continued on next page

Rights & Expectations While in an Out-of-Home Care Placement

What to Expect from the Child Welfare Agency continued...



Create a case plan to meet your and your family's needs:

- A plan will address concerns raised by you, your family, foster family, and the agency. It factors in your culture, identity, and ethnicity.
- Your child welfare professional must get the opinions of all involved, including yours and supportive adults of your choice.
- Your child welfare professional must explain your plan to you – including all the services involved.



The agency will help you be heard in court and at meetings:

- You or your attorney and/or GAL will receive a notice when there is a court hearing about your case.
- The agency child welfare professional and care provider will help you get to any court and team meetings that you are permitted and able to attend.
- If there is something you want to share with your judge or during a hearing, let your attorney know and they will let you know the best way to do so. This may include speaking up in court, writing a letter, or some other form of sharing.
- You may not always be able to speak directly with the judge. If you have something you want to share with the judge or other people making decisions, your worker/agency, attorney, or GAL can help you.



Do I have a right to confidentiality?

You always have a right to confidentiality! This means information about you and your family is not disclosed to others except as permitted by law.

Your child welfare professional and others cannot talk about your private information without your permission or your family's permission except as permitted by law (such as to your placement provider, the court, etc.).

Exception: in some circumstances your child welfare professional may have to share information to keep you safe.

In many cases, your child welfare professional/agency must notify your school district when you are placed in out-of-home care to make sure you continue to have access to education and can stay at your original school.



Reminder: There is a **Glossary of Acronyms and Terms** at the end of this guide that you can reference/highlight/and turn to at any point!

Family & Relationships While in an Out-of-Home Care Placement

The relationships you had with others in your family, neighborhood, school, and other places before entering out-of-home care continue to be important. Below are some things about your connection to your family that are important to keep in mind while you are in care:



Your parent(s) can:

- Have in-person or virtual visits with you, with additional contact with you by email, mail, or phone.
- Attend medical appointments, school meetings, and any other meetings with or about you.
- Talk with you about why you are in out-of-home care.
- *Exception: unless your child welfare professional or the court says your parents cannot do one or more of these things due to safety, treatment, or security concerns.*



To work towards a permanency goal:

- For some youth in out-of-home care, returning home is the goal. In those situations, the agency and child welfare professional will work with the youth and their family to have the youth go home when it is safe and appropriate. Once home, the youth's case may remain open for up to one year and the child welfare professional will make monthly visits during that time.
- Sometimes it is not safe for a young person to return home. When that happens, the child welfare professional will make sure the youth understands why and discuss options.
- Regardless of whether returning home or another form of permanence (like, adoption or guardianship) is the goal, your child welfare professional will work with you on permanency goal planning.



Education While in an Out-of-Home Care Placement

Being in an out-of-home care placement does not take away your educational rights and requirements. In fact, there are several considerations specific to education that remain while you are in care. These include:



To attend the school most appropriate for your needs. Having you remain in your current school is the priority, but it may be necessary to attend a different school due to distance or other factors.

- See <https://dpi.wi.gov/foster-care/school-origin>



To attend school with few disruptions by your child welfare professional and others involved with your case.



To have an educational evaluation and/or additional educational services if you need them. For example, an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504 Plan.



To have education as part of your case planning and goal setting.



To have your school records shared with your child welfare professional.

- Federal and state laws allow your child welfare professional to get school records to make sure you are making progress and your needs are being met.



To receive assistance with planning for a career and going to college, if that is what you want to do.

- If discharge from out-of-home care to adoption on/after age 16 or to Chapter 48.977 guardianship, Chapter 48.9795 guardianship, or a guardianship under a substantially similar tribal law on/after age 16, or discharge from out-of-home care at or after age 18, you likely qualify for Wisconsin's Brighter Star funding, which is \$5,000 per academic year!

See more at

<https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/youthservices/pdf/bs-funding-guidelines.pdf>



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Services While in an Out-of-Home Care Placement

While you are in an out-of-home care placement, there will likely be some (or even many) services offered to you to help meet your everyday and even longer-term needs and goals. Many of these will be related to your case and any treatment plans but others are specific to making sure your basic needs are met! Some of the primary services include:



Services to meet your physical and emotional needs:

- You can expect to see trained care or service providers (doctors, eye doctors, dentists, counselors, and mental health professionals) to ensure that you are healthy and assist you if you are having any health issues. If you do not feel well, tell someone!
- You can talk to a professional to help you better understand or cope with your thoughts and feelings about current and past experiences.
- You have the right to request a change in provider if you do not feel safe or comfortable with them – or simply do not feel like they are a good fit. Your child welfare professional should make best efforts to find a different provider.



Insurance and benefits:

- Your county child welfare professional will ensure you receive the state and federal benefits for which you are eligible.
 - For example, Medicaid/BadgerCare+ is guaranteed while you are in an out-of-home care placement.
 - Some of these benefits are specific to while you are in out-of-home care, and some continue even after you leave care. Often, there are steps to complete to continue or start benefits after discharging from care. Your county child welfare professional and/or Transition Resource Agency can help you with this! See Section 3: Transition from Care – in red.

If you identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or gender expansive, queer and/or questioning, intersex, asexual, and two-spirit (LGBTQIA2S+), you are not alone!



Fact: A study out of California found that LGBTQIA2S+ youth are 1.5-2 times as likely to be living in out-of-home care.

The federal agency Administration for Children and Families, who develops child welfare policy states must follow, says child welfare agencies “must consider and address the needs of children and youth in their care as part of their case plan. This includes placing them in safe, permanent placements that support the whole of each child and youth’s well-being. This also should include addressing needs that a child or youth may have as a result of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.”

In short, **every child and youth who is unable to live with their parents should be provided a safe, loving, and affirming out-of-home care placement, regardless of the young person’s sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.**

Services While in an Out-of-Home Care Placement



Supports and services to help you transition from out-of-home care:

- No matter how or when you discharge from out-of-home care (whether at age 18 or earlier, whether you reunite with your family or not), there are skills you need to have as an adult.
- These skills relate to things like budgeting, finding and keeping a job, attending and completing school or a training program, finding and maintaining stable housing, and more.
- Your child welfare professional and provider will help you work on these skills and needs during your time in care.
- For young kids in out-of-home care, working on these skills is about keeping them safe and thinking ahead. For older youth in care (ages 14 and over), it is about keeping them safe but also about building a “toolbox” of skills and resources you can use to have a good life after leaving care.
- Section 2: What to Expect – in green – for more information about specific independent living requirements for youth in out-of-home care who are ages 14 and older and Section 3: Transition from Care – in red – for a checklist that can help if you will leave care at age 18 or older.



National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) survey

- NYTD is a federal survey that collects input directly from young people in an out-of-home care placement at age 17 and again at ages 19 and 21 (both youth in and discharged from care) to learn how they are doing in care and in the few years after leaving care.
- Young people in care at age 17 are asked to complete a survey about their current employment, education, housing, social, and financial situation. The survey does not identify you by name and does not ask for details about why you are in care.
- You receive money if you complete the survey!
- DCF and the federal government use the survey results to know how youth are doing in care and the few years after leaving care. The results are important for making changes and help future youth!
- You can learn more about NYTD at <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/ys/nytd> and <https://youtu.be/0rtu2wW67fo>.



Note

You'll sometimes have to sign forms or other documents to access services and benefits. Do not sign any documents you do not understand or have not read – anyone who asks you to fill out or sign a paper should explain it to you first, so you understand what you are signing and why you are being asked to sign it. If you need help reading or completing anything, let the person know and they should help you!



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Independent Living

Some people who spend time in out-of-home care, especially as teenagers, are eligible for independent living (IL) supports and services. IL is meant to help you develop skills and get experiences related to school, work, housing, healthy relationships and connections, and staying healthy and well. In all, it is meant to help you be a successful adult!

IL eligibility is explained in the DCF eligibility guide (<https://DCF.Wisconsin.gov/files/cwportal/il/pdf/il-eligibility.pdf>) and depends on when a person was in care and what type of care.

In care

To qualify for IL while in care, you either need to

- Be at least 14 years old and be in care for six or more months

OR

- Be at least 17.5 years old

Once IL-eligible while in care, you remain eligible as long as you remain in a qualifying placement. If you are eligible for independent living while in care, your child welfare professional is responsible for helping you identify needs, goals, and assets for your future and develop skills to be a self-sufficient young adult after you leave care. Your county child welfare professional must:

- Work with you to complete a life skills/independent living assessment that identifies your strengths and needs. This assessment should be done more than once to determine what things have changed!
- Use that assessment to work with you to develop a life skills/independent living plan. As part of this plan, you will identify and develop goals for the future and the activities, skills, and support systems/people to help you get there. You and your county child welfare professional should update this plan as needed – when you re-do the assessment, when goals change, as part of permanency planning, etc.
- Help you develop an Independent Living Transition to Discharge (ILTD) Plan if you are likely to remain in care until age 18. See Section 3: Transition from Care – in red – for more info on the ILTD process.



A note on Tribal IL

Tribes are sovereign nations, meaning they have their own policies and procedures that are sometimes different than the counties. Tribes that offer independent living services may not complete the exact steps or plans talked about in this guide but have similar ones that best serve their IL-eligible youth and IL program.

Continued on next page

Independent Living

After Discharge

You may also qualify for IL after leaving care. The possible ways to do so are:

- Being adopted after age 16 after being in out-of-home care

OR

- Entering Chapter 48.977 guardianship, Chapter 48.9795 guardianship, or a guardianship under a substantially similar tribal law on/after age 16 after being in out-of-home care

OR

- Discharging from care at age 18 or older ("age out")

Not all youth who were in care will qualify for IL after they leave care. If you are eligible for IL after leaving care, keep these things in mind:

- IL services are voluntary once you're out of care, meaning you choose what supports you want to receive, in what way, and how frequently. Programs do their best to fulfill your requests.
- You remain eligible for IL services up to age 23. If you completed high school and choose to attend more school or training program, you may also qualify for additional financial support.
 - Youth who qualify for IL after leaving care and are going on to college also qualify for a specific support called Brighter Star funding. This funding can help you with costs for school. See <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/youthservices/pdf/bs-funding-guidelines.pdf> for more information. The same agencies that provide IL services after you've left care also provide Brighter Star supports.

“

Some things Independent Living has helped me with are:

Not being on the street.
Helped me pursue my dreams.

Moving out of a tragic mental space. I was in a group home, and it was had to deal with different personalities. I was able to engage with an old worker that has been **very helpful with moving and getting things in line.**

Continued on next page

Independent Living

After Discharge continued...

- While your child welfare professional and care provider provided IL services during your time in care, different contracted agencies called Transition Resource Agencies (TRAs) are responsible for IL once you are out of care.
 - There are seven programs across the state; you can see their service areas here:
<https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/publications/pdf/5725.pdf>. You can find their contact information, by county or region, here: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/map/il-r>.
- Your TRA wants to hear from you! Their ability to serve you depends on you answering questions and communications the best you can, completing necessary paperwork, being honest about your needs, and being an active participant in your case planning.
- Many IL services are specific to Wisconsin. If you already live or move outside of Wisconsin, still reach out the TRA that serves the Wisconsin county you used to live in to determine what services you may benefit from. You may also be eligible for some IL services in the state you live in; note that they may call these services something different (e.g., “transition to adulthood services”).
- If you are not sure which TRA to contact, that's ok! Connect with your county child welfare professional and they should be able to point you in the right direction!
- It is important to keep your TRA updated on changes to things like school enrollment, employment status, address, or phone number, etc.

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“ Some things Independent Living has help me with are:

Coping with being on my own.

Preparing me for adulthood.

They **helped me with my housing, school, they showed me how to budget**. She helped me find a therapist when I needed one. Also, helped me when I got pregnant and guided me with that.

Budgeting, the understanding of credit. How to interact with people, the way the world works.

Being a **stable adult**.

Independent Living

If you are under the jurisdiction of certain tribal courts in Wisconsin and qualify for independent living, you may be able to access IL supports via your tribe in addition to the TRA. It depends on which tribal jurisdiction you're a part of, since not all tribes have an IL program. If you have questions, ask your tribal child welfare professional!

Even if you do not qualify for independent living after leaving care, there are other things for which you may qualify. Check out the Resources linked at the end of this guide for more information.

“ Foster Care Alumni Quotes

Never let others define who you are because most are still trying to figure out who they are.”

— Rodney Walker

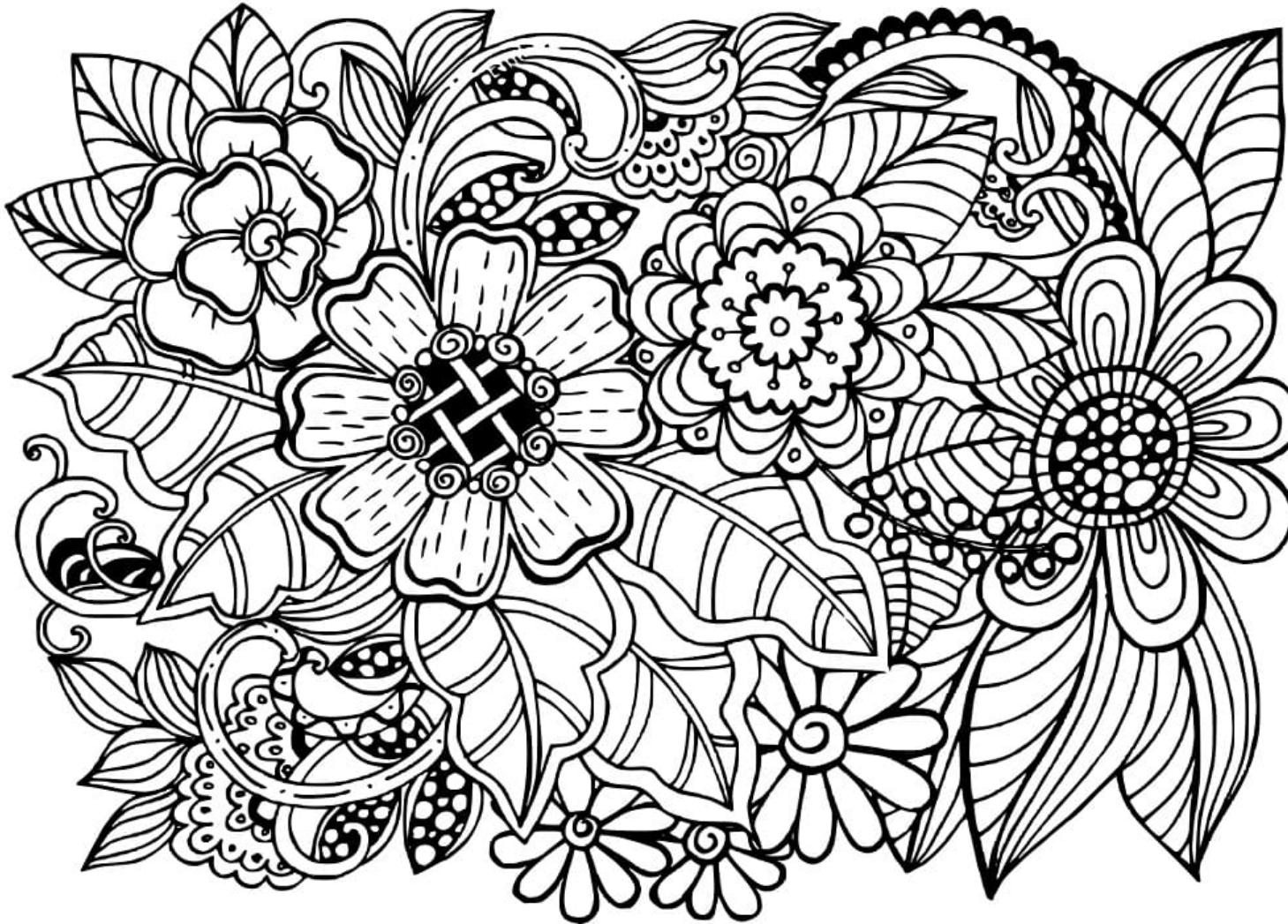
It is important for people to know that no matter what lies in their past, they can overcome the dark side and **press on to a brighter world**. Even in its darkest passages, **the heart is unconquerable**. It is important that the body survives, but it is **more meaningful that the human spirit prevails**.

— Dave Pelzer



Photo by J.C.

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3

Transition from Care

Leaving Out-of-Home Care

Just as there are different ways people enter out-of-home care, there are different ways people exit from it. Some of these include:

Adoption

Adult Guardianship

Discharging at age 18 or older

Guardianship

Permanent Placement with Fit and Willing Relative

Reunification

See details on next page



Note

If you will discharge from care on or after your 18th birthday, you may hear the term Other Planned Permanent Living Arrangement, also called OPPLA, in meetings or in court. This is a type of permanency goal.

Leaving Out-of-Home Care

Adoption: When someone other than your birth parents become your legal parents. Your case is closed when your adoption is final.

If you are adopted after age 16 following time in OHC, you will be eligible for independent living services. See Section 2: What to Expect – in green – for more information on IL.

It is possible to be adopted at any age – even after you’re off an order and out of care. Your biological parents/caregivers prior to you entering out-of-home care do not need to agree to adoption once you’re 18 or older. Talk to your county child welfare professional if you have questions about adult adoption.

Adult Guardianship: This guardianship is different than the one described below and is specific to situations where you need help making life decisions, managing your money, making healthcare choices, and more. This type of guardianship requires a separate court case with a new judge and attorney (most likely). The court will appoint an adult guardian.

Discharging at age 18 or older: Also called “aging out,” this means you are in care up to, including, and possibly beyond turning 18 years old. See the next page for more information about turning 18 while in OHC.

If you are in a court-ordered out-of-home care placement type (see Section 1: The Basics – in maroon) on or after your 18th birthday, you will be eligible for independent living services.

Guardianship: This is different than adoption but does mean that someone other than your birth parents has most of the rights and responsibilities of caring for you that a parent would. Your parent retains any rights not transferred to a guardian. Your case is generally closed when your guardianship is final. A guardianship ends at age 18. If you want to learn more about guardianship and whether it is the best option for you, including how it is different from or like adoption, talk to your child welfare professional.

If you enter Chapter 48.977 or Chapter 48.9795 guardianship, or a guardianship under a substantially similar tribal law, on/after age 16 following time in OHC, you will be eligible for IL services. See Section 2: What to Expect – in green – for more information on IL.

Permanent Placement with Fit and Willing Relative: You may be permanently placed with a relative who is able and willing to take care of you. Your case may or may not be closed until you reach age 18.

Reunification: When you are returned to your family or caregiver and your case is dismissed. You may be on a trial reunification for some time before the case is closed to make sure reunification is the right fit. See Section 1: The Basics – in maroon – for more information.

Turning 18 While in Out-of-Home Care



If you turn 18 while in out-of-home care, you have two paths available to you:

- Discharge from care at age 18 or soon thereafter (sometimes age 19 or at high school graduation, whichever comes first)
- Extend or re-enter out-of-home care (not applicable to everyone) up to age 21.

OR



Note

If your child welfare order remains in effect past age 18 or you are eligible for extended care beyond age 18, you may be in care past your 18th birthday. Once you turn 18, you are legally an adult. Being an adult means you have additional rights – but also additional responsibilities. Talk to your placement provider or child welfare professional if you have questions.



In either case, if you turn 17.5 while in out-of-home care, you must work with your child welfare professional to complete an Independent Living Transition to Discharge (ILTD) plan (or similar plan, if served by a tribal IL program). Your child welfare professional is required to complete this plan with you and to include other supportive adults you trust. It is the roadmap for what comes next after you discharge from care – including what needs and goals you have, who will help you achieve those, and important timeframes. The ILTD should be done in-person (unless there is a good reason not to) and is often completed during more than one conversation. Important parts of the ILTD include things like employment, education, financial, social, and housing goals.



If you discharge from out-of-home care at age 18 or older, you qualify for independent living supports after discharge. Your regional independent living service provider should be part of your overall transition from care, including development of your ILTD plan. These IL supports are available until age 23 – you can choose to access them right after discharge or any time before age 23. Contact information for the regional providers is here: <https://DCF.Wisconsin.gov/Map/IL-R> and you can also ask your child welfare professional. See Section 2: What to Expect – in green – for more information on IL.



If you discharge from out-of-home care at age 18 or older, you are eligible for state Medicaid until your 26th birthday regardless of your income. In Wisconsin, this is BadgerCare Plus. Medicaid has a different name in every state. **If you move across state lines, Medicaid does not automatically move with you – but you are still eligible!** Be sure to disenroll from Medicaid in the state you are moving from and re-apply in the state you are moving to.



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Turning 18 While in Out-of-Home Care

Staying in care until age 19 or high school graduation



It is possible that your existing court order extends beyond your 18th birthday – or could be extended. When this happens, it is most commonly until your high school or high school equivalency (like GED or HSED) graduation or your 19th birthday, whichever comes first. Talk to your child welfare professional if you have questions about when your court order is set to expire.



Sometimes youth discharging from out-of-home care at 18 or older who recently graduated need temporary housing before they transition to residence halls or other planned housing connected to postsecondary education. Your ILTD meeting is a good time to brainstorm with those in your network about short-term options for housing both the summer (prior to starting school and breaks in between school years) and during the holidays. Many, but not all, postsecondary campuses in Wisconsin offer summer housing and/or housing over holiday breaks for students with many different circumstances (e.g. international students, students who have experienced out-of-home care). If your child welfare professional or care provider is not sure of short-term housing options, consider reaching out to someone at your future campus. Your school's Dean of Students and Student Support Services Offices are often good places to start.

Go to work regardless of what is going on, please go to work. It is okay that you came this far. **Choose happiness, choose peace.**

Chase your dreams, not the satisfaction of others or their approval.

“

If I could say one thing to someone else exiting foster care, it would be:

Start working before you have to pay bills and **save your money**.

To **get as much help as you can** with whatever you need.

Don't get ready, **stay ready**.

Extended Out of Home Care

If you are still enrolled in high school (or an equivalent) full-time and have an active Individualized Education Plan (IEP), you can stay in or return to out-of-home care until age 21. This can be either via a court order or a Voluntary Transition to Independent Living (VTILA) agreement.

You can choose to leave extended care at any time. You can also re-enter extended care if you continue to meet the eligibility criteria. Talk to your child welfare professional about your options. You can learn more at <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/publications/pdf/5627.pdf>.

Am I Eligible?

You may be able to remain in care or return to care if you meet **all** of the following criteria:

- You have (or will) age out of care on or after your 18th birthday;
- You are under age 21;
- You have not yet graduated from high school;
- You are attending high school or its vocational or technical equivalent on a full-time basis; and
- You have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

Where Will I Live?

If you remain in care or re-enter care, you can live in any of the following placements:

- The home of a relative;
- A kinship care provider;
- A foster home;
- A group home;
- A residential care center;
- At home under a trial reunification; or
- A supervised independent living program.



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What if I Decide to Remain in Care?

Your current placement may continue until you are no longer eligible (you graduate from high school, turn 21 years of age, you no longer have an IEP, you are missing from care, or you are not attending school).

Continued on next page

Extended Out of Home Care

How Do I Re-enter Care if I Left?

If you aged out of care, you may re-enter care at any time before your 21st birthday, as long as you have not graduated from high school, you are a full-time student and you have an IEP. Here are the steps:

Step 1: If you are not attending school, re-enroll in school. Talk to your guardian or Independent Living Coordinator about your plans. They can assist you with re-enrolling in school.

Step 2: Submit a written request to the agency in the county you live or the agency in the county where you aged out of care, with proof that you are enrolled in school and have an IEP.

Step 3: Once you submit your request, the agency will determine your eligibility and respond to you within five days.

Step 4: If you eligible to re-enter care, you will need to sign and be in agreement with the conditions of a Voluntary-Transition-to-Independent-Living Agreement (VTILA) or a court order with the agency.

Step 5: If housing is not immediately available, the agency will obtain temporary housing for you and find you a long-term placement within 10 days.

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When I entered foster care, I was _____.

When I exited foster care, I was _____, now I am _____.

When I entered foster care, I was 14/15 **I was stressed**. It was not a fun experience. When I exited foster care, I was 19 and was able to meet some good people. **Now I am learning from good people and growing as a person**, and it helps everyone is chilling.

When I entered foster care, I was in sixth grade. **Going through depression**, my darkest time. When I exited foster care, **I have understanding. Now I am at peace and healed**.

Extended Out of Home Care

What is a Voluntary Transition to Independent Living Agreement?

A Voluntary-Transition-to-Independent-Living Agreement (VTILA) is an agreement between you and the agency which allows you to be placed in out-of-home care with limited court involvement.

With a VTILA, what do I need to agree to?

- ✓ Participate in activities to prepare you for independent living, such as practicing skills needed for transitioning to independence;
- ✓ Go to school full-time;
- ✓ Inform the provider and/or child welfare professional if you expect to be gone for a period of time; and
- ✓ Inform your agency if there is any change in your education that would affect your eligibility to stay in care (for example, graduating from high school or discontinuing your education).

Can the VTILA be terminated?

Yes, if you no longer qualify to stay in care or you do not follow your Voluntary-Transition-to-Independent-Living-Agreement, you or your agency may terminate the agreement.

If you are having difficulty, the agency should work with you to resolve issues and create a plan so you can follow your agreement and stay in care.

Can I Appeal a Decision?

If your request for extended care is denied or your Voluntary Transition to Independent Living Agreement is terminated, you have the right to appeal that decision. To appeal, you must send a written request to appeal to the director (or their designee) of the agency that made the decision within 10 days after the date of the agency's notice of denial or termination. If you do not request an appeal within 10 days after the date of the agency's notice of denial or termination, the denial or termination becomes final. A care provider, guardian ad litem, or CASA could help you appeal a decision to deny or terminate your Voluntary Transition to Independent Living Agreement. Sending communication via e-mail and copying relevant people on that same email to ensure there is a record of the appeal is highly recommended.



Checklist for Leaving Care at Age 18+

The following is a list of some important things to know, complete, or have on hand as you turn 18 and look ahead to discharging from out-of-home care. If you are not familiar with a thing listed below or are unsure of how to complete the recommended task, talk to your child welfare professional. They can help!

General

- Make a list of important points of contact, including contact information like email, phone, and address. This list should include friends, family members, doctor, dentist, counselors, etc.
 - FosterClub's Permanency Pact provides conversation starters about what supports those who care about you may be willing and able to provide: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/cwportal/permanency/prt/pdf/youthpact.pdf>.
- Set a budget. This is something you can develop with a care provider, CASA, child welfare professional, or another supportive adult.
 - When it comes to budgeting, University of Wisconsin Extension has some great tools to get you started: <https://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/moneymatters/budgeting>.
- Actively participate in transition planning – including creation of your Independent Living Transition to Discharge (ILTD) Plan.
- Know whether you will qualify for IL after leaving care (your child welfare professional can help with this!). If so, have the contact information for the agency that will serve you following your discharge: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/map/il-r>.
- Create an email address you feel comfortable using for work and school purposes. Try to avoid anything too long, complicated, inappropriate, or confusing.
- Get a letter from your child welfare professional verifying you were in out-of-home care. This can be used to confirm your eligibility for different things – like financial aid for school, FoodShare benefits, health care, and more.
- Provide updated address information to your tribal enrollment's office (if applicable).

Checklist for Leaving Care at Age 18+

Documents

- Obtain a picture ID (state-issued ID or driver's license).
 - Visit the Wisconsin DMV website to learn more about getting a driver's license or state ID:
<https://wisconsindot.gov/Pages/online-srvcs/external/bds-landing.aspx>
- Obtain a tribal ID (if applicable, contact your tribe).
- Get your Social Security Card, original Birth Certificate, and other important documents from your child welfare professional.
- Get a copy of your most recent credit report or credit check verification letter from your child welfare professional.
- Register for the Selective Service (if you are male).
- Register to vote.

Space for notes on your progress, or room to add your own checkboxes



Note

You can find more information about the Selective Service at
<https://www.sss.gov/register>.

You can register to vote in many places, including at
<https://myvote.wi.gov/en-us/Register-To-Vote>.

Checklist for Leaving Care at Age 18+

Health and Benefits

- Have a plan in case of mental health crisis. You can call, text, or chat with trained counselors by calling or texting 988 or chatting online via <https://988lifeline.org>.
- Know where to go for medical care, who your provider is, and how to make an appointment.
- Complete the application to have health insurance lined up following discharge – either BadgerCare+ for individuals formerly in out-of-home care or an alternate kind of insurance.
- Know who you want to make healthcare decisions for you if you are unable to do so – make sure that person knows you've chosen them and that you have a completed Power Attorney for Health Care form. Make sure a copy of the form is with your doctor and also located in a spot where it can be found if needed.
 - You can learn more about Power of Attorney for Health Care at <https://www.kidsmatterinc.org/for-youth/medical-power-of-attorney/>.
- Get copies of your healthcare records from your child welfare professional.
- If you are a member of a tribal nation or have a certificate of degree of Indian blood (CDIB) you may be eligible for medical care through an Indian Health Services clinic.
 - More information about Indian Health Services is available at <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/lh-depts/tribal.htm>.
- Talk to your child welfare professional about your eligibility for social security or other disability services.
 - Often, this requires a determination or redetermination of eligibility; work with your child welfare professional to start that process.

Did you know?

ACCESS allows you to apply for your Wisconsin state benefits and programs like FoodShare, childcare assistance, BadgerCare Plus, and more. They even have an app! Find out more information and apply for benefits at <https://access.wi.gov/>.

Heads up!

If you leave out-of-home care at age 18+, you will be eligible for Medicaid until age 26, regardless of your income. In Wisconsin, Medicaid is called BadgerCare Plus. It has a different name in every state, but you are eligible anywhere in the United States.

Checklist for Leaving Care at Age 18+

Education

- If you're finishing high school, develop a plan to complete your courses or register for a GED or HSED course.
 - Your local technical college is a great place to start, as most offer GED and HSED courses. You can learn more at <https://www.wtcsystem.edu/>.
- Get copies of your school records from your child welfare professional.
- If you plan to attend school after high school, look into different financial resources for school!
 - Complete your Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) by April 1 of your senior year; be sure to visit <https://studentaid.gov/h/apply-for-aid/fafsa>.
 - Search for scholarships and grants that align with your educational needs and goals, as well as experiences
 - If you qualify for independent living services, you also qualify for Brighter Star funding. Talk to your child welfare professional and the contracted regional agency that handles funding to figure out next steps.

Did you know?

Some tribes may have higher education funding available. If you have a tribal case worker, you can ask them for more information, or search for more information on the tribal government's website. Visit at <http://witrebes.wi.gov> for information on tribes in Wisconsin and <https://www.bia.gov/service/tribal-leaders-directory> for information on tribes across the country.

Did you know?

People in out-of-home care for at least one day after age 13 are eligible for independent student status on the FAFSA! That means more financial aid for school!

Checklist for Leaving Care at Age 18+

Employment

- Work with your child welfare professional, school counselor, or another adult supporter to develop a resume and/or do a mock interview. There are lots of good ideas for mock interview questions and resume templates available online!
- Know where your local Job Center is. These agencies often receive funding specifically to connect youth who were in out-of-home care with employment, so consider disclosing your out-of-home care history when meeting with program staff. All of Wisconsin's Job Centers are listed at <https://wisconsinjobcenter.org/directory>.
- Identify 1-2 people who can serve as a professional reference (speak to your job experience) or a personal reference.
- If you have a documented disability, know what work accommodations and supports are available to you.
 - DVR is an employment program that assists people with disabilities that may be able to help. You can learn more at <https://dwd.wisconsin.gov/dvr>.
 - If you are an enrolled member of a tribe and have a documented disability you may also qualify for employment programs through Vocational Rehabilitation for Native Americans (VRNA). You can learn more at <https://www.glitc.org/programs/vocational-rehabilitation/vocational-rehabilitation-for-native-americans/vrna-eligibility/>.

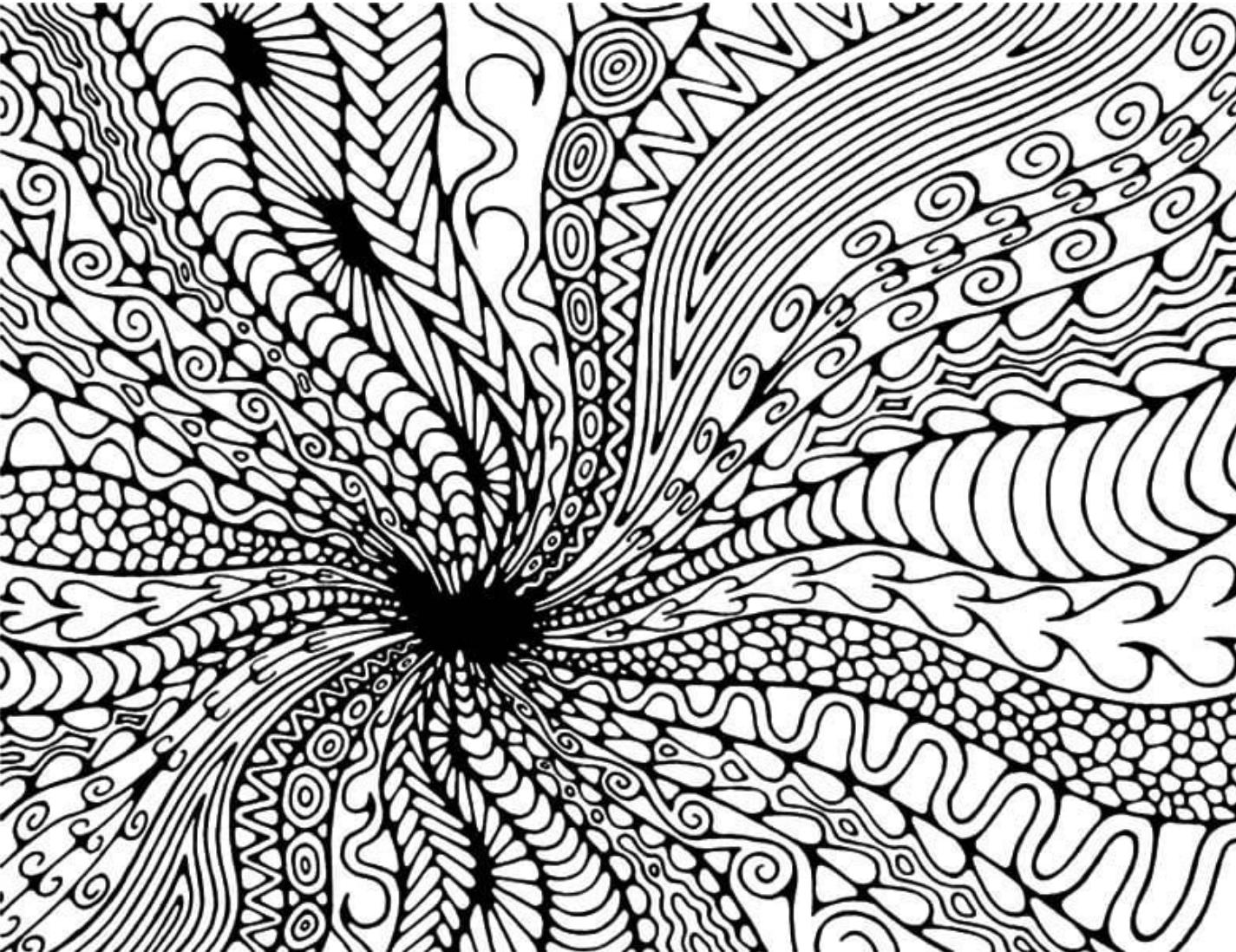
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Checklist for Leaving Care at Age 18+

Housing

- The National Runaway Safeline serves young adults 12-21 who are in crisis. Call or text 1-800-RUNAWAY if you're experiencing homelessness, or if you have run away and need support.
- Work with your child welfare professional to identify next steps to secure safe and secure housing; have a specific plan for housing after leaving care.
 - If you are nervous about being a first-time renter, consider attending a Rent Smart course in person or online so you can be a well-informed tenant. Visit <https://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/rentsmart> for more information.
 - If you are concerned about eviction or your rights as a renter, Legal Action of Wisconsin may be able to help. Find more information at <https://www.legalaction.org>.
 - If you plan to rent, consider getting rental insurance to protect yourself in case of theft, natural disaster, etc.
- Work with your child welfare professional to learn more about housing vouchers you may qualify for after discharging from care.
 - These may include supports like the Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) voucher or the Family Unification Program (FUP) voucher. You can learn more at https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/public_indian_housing/programs/hcv/fyi and https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/public_indian_housing/programs/hcv/family.
- If you qualify for FYI or FUP and want to pursue that support, work with your child welfare professional to start the housing voucher process prior to leaving care.

Space for notes on your progress, or room to add your own checkboxes



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ICWA & WICWA and Self-Advocacy

ICWA & WICWA

The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) and the Wisconsin Indian Child Welfare Act (WICWA) apply to child welfare proceedings involving an Indian child, as defined by these laws. ICWA and WICWA can apply to some youth justice situations but does not apply to youth justice delinquency cases. Both Acts are intended to “protect the best interest of Indian children and to promote the stability and security of Indian tribes and families.” (25 U.S.C. § 1902)

ICWA and WICWA place certain requirements on local child welfare agencies, including but not limited to, placement preferences. If you are not placed with a relative, you can help your Child Welfare Professional identify potential placement providers by sharing information about any extended family members with them.

“
*When I entered foster care, I was _____.
When I exited foster care, I was _____, now I am _____.*

When I entered foster care, I was 12 years old. **I was a young adult learning.** When I exited foster care, I was 21 years old. I became a woman on my own. I was able to pay my bills. **Now I am better than I was before.**

When I entered foster care, I was 16 years old, me and my sister got removed. I was **lacking a lot of things** outside of the house. Youth rival family center got me back in school. I had never attended high school. When I exited foster, **I graduated** in 2021 and I **had my own crib**. I was working toward my school and **going to college for Arts**. Now I am 22 years old.

“ Foster Care Alumni Quote

I'm now understanding that **I come from a rich cultural background** and I need to embrace it and share with other people and other youth that are American Indian, that are my tribe, that **it's OK to be Native.**

— Daryl
Conquering Bear

How to Advocate for Yourself

While you're in out-of-home care, decisions are often made for you. Understanding when, how, for what purpose, and with what tools to advocate is important both while you're in care and as you approach discharge from care. Advocating for yourself is something you'll do even as an adult, and, like anything else, it takes practice.



Self-advocacy is defined as “the action of representing oneself or one’s views or interests,” whereas **advocacy** is defined as “public support for or recommendation of a particular cause or policy.”

There's no better time to start stretching your advocacy muscles than practicing self-advocacy now! Advocating for yourself can look like sharing what you prefer to eat in a new placement or organizing community members to provide holiday gifts or care packages for foster youth or other young adult populations.

There is no “right” way to be or become an advocate, and often the small opportunities you take to advocate for your or your family’s best interests help prepare you for bigger opportunities later.

Take some time to consider the questions posed on the following pages...



How to Advocate for Yourself



On a scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high), how comfortable do you feel asking for what you need and want?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



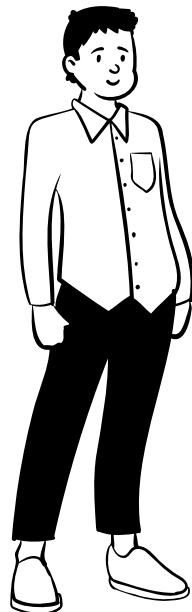
How to Advocate for Yourself



Reflect on these questions and feel free to write your thoughts down.

In what ways do you feel most comfortable communicating your feelings and thoughts (like, written word, art, verbally)?

How can you use your favorite form – or forms – of communication to try to better your situation and/or the situation of those in communities you belong to or ally with (like, LGBTQIA2S+, youth in out-of-home care, BIPOC)? Some examples include: talking to people one-on-one; talking to small groups of people; giving speeches; writing stories, songs, poems, articles and opinion pieces; creating visual art or music; movement or dance; and more!



How to Advocate for Yourself



What makes you feel heard, and how much can you take on right now? There are no wrong answers.

The level of effort needed for each of the example goals [on the next page](#) will vary based on your interests, level of involvement, personality, available free time, support network, community resources and opportunities, and more. **Trust yourself to find the right fit!** It's okay (and good!) to challenge yourself but be careful not to overcommit your time or energy – or agree to something that makes you uncomfortable. Big, loud, frequent advocacy is not for everyone; it's best to know what form of advocacy is important and doable for you. Plus, **changes to the child welfare system benefit from different people doing different things!** Don't be surprised if your preferences change over time. And don't feel bad if you don't have the time or desire to participate in advocacy right now – just know that it doesn't look any one way and doesn't have to be a big, public thing.

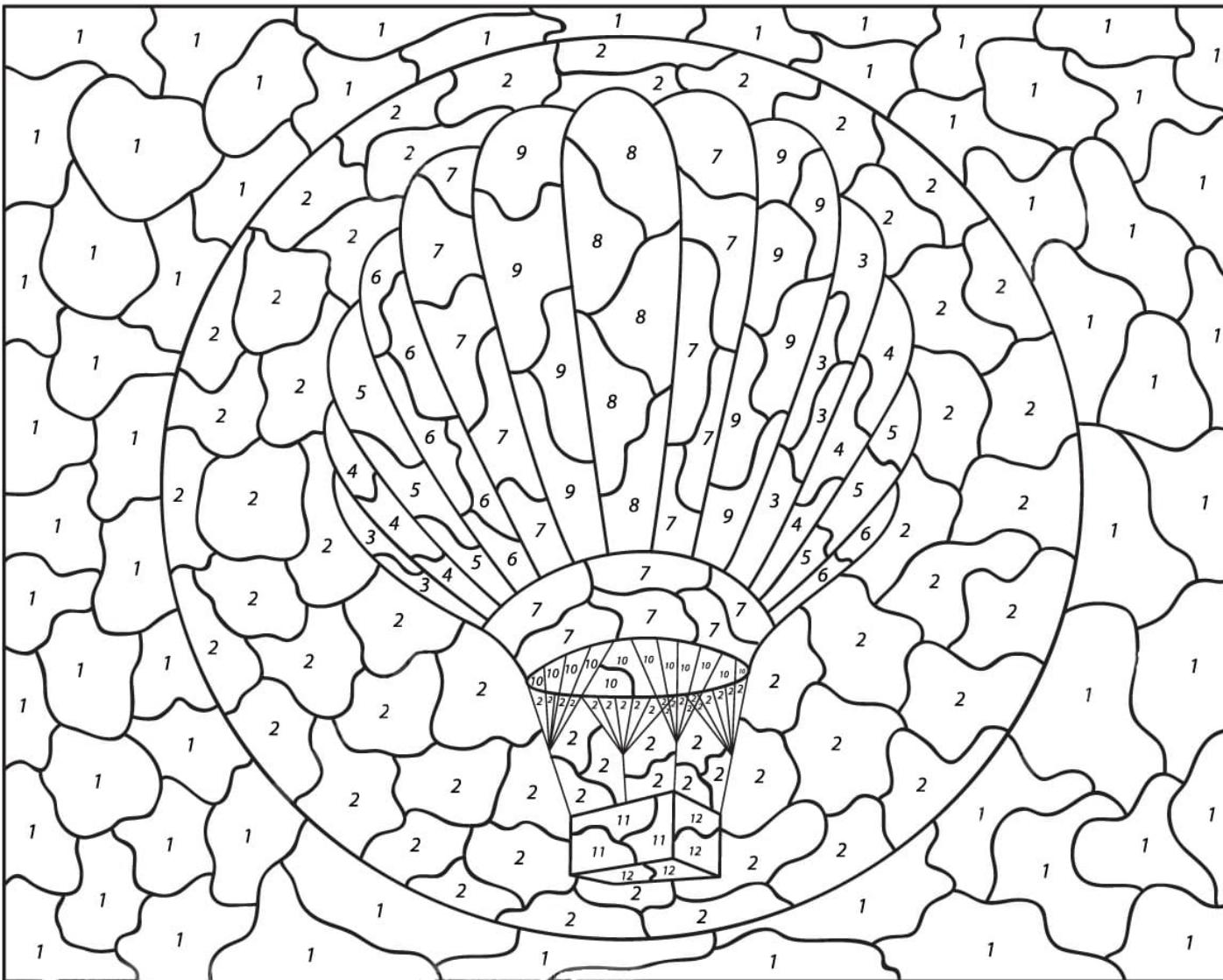
The opportunities listed [on the next page](#) are meant to give you ideas – we don't necessarily recommend or endorse any of them. Ultimately, you may decide something different, not even listed here, is the best fit for you. **Forms of advocacy can build upon each other and can be done in combination or in different orders.**

How to Advocate for Yourself

| Goal | Opportunities |
|---|---|
| <p>National change: I want to be part of creating BIG changes that impact lots of people across the country or world (like, organizing or participating in a rally or march, testifying on behalf of legislation I believe in, presenting at conferences)</p> | <p>Participate in FosterClub's All-Star Internship: https://www.fosterclub.com/allstar-internship</p> <p>Learn more about national advocacy efforts via the National Foster Care Youth and Alumni Policy Council: https://nationalpolicycouncil.org</p> <p>Meet with your legislators; find their information here: https://legis.wisconsin.gov</p> |
| <p>Local change: I want to help change policies in my state or in my community (like, speak at foster parent trainings, participate in YAC or YLT, mentor other youth in out-of-home care)</p> | <p>Review the Youth Leadership Toolkit (free download!): https://store.fosterclub.com/youth-leadership-toolkit</p> <p>Participate in your local and/or state Youth Advisory Council (YAC) and/or Youth Leadership Team (YLT): https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/ys/leadership</p> <p>The YACs and YLTs do fun projects in addition to providing helpful input to DCF and other agencies and participating in advocacy opportunities. Some projects include assembling care packages, purchasing luggage for youth in care, creating videos and resources, and participating a Legislative Day at the Wisconsin State Capitol.</p> |
| <p>Personal/family change: I want to improve things for myself and/or my family (like, speak on my own behalf in court, actively participate in Independent Living Transition to Discharge planning meetings, or chime in during other meetings related to my case)</p> | <p>"Pay it forward" by taking care of siblings or others in the child welfare system once you discharge from care.</p> <p>Invest in yourself and your future by pursuing school and being the first in your family to do something, like graduate from college.</p> |
| <p>Individual reflection: I am learning to listen to myself and trust my own voice. I am focusing on my own wellness now so I can engage with my community later (like, positive self-talk, journaling, leaning into support network, participating in prosocial activities and healthy relationships)</p> | <p>Complete a self-advocacy assessment like this one: https://beforeage18.org/handouts/self-advocacy/activity_self-advocacy.pdf</p> <p>Read and complete the Wisconsin Transition Resource Guide (though the guide says it's for young adults with disabilities, its checklists, self-reflection activities, and tips and tricks are useful for anyone!): https://beforeage18.org/handouts/transition-guide/resource-guide-families.pdf</p> |

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Glossary of Acronyms & Terms and Notes

Glossary of Acronyms & Terms

We know sometimes the language used by professionals in child welfare can be confusing. Don't hesitate to ask if there's something you don't understand and use this glossary to help explain some commonly used terms. Note that the definitions DCF provides below may simplify the formal definition from the law to be easier for you to understand. The "More info" column includes a link to the legal definition when there is one.

| Acronym | Term/What It Means | What It Is | More Info |
|---------|---------------------------|--|---|
| | 504 Plan | Plan developed to make sure a student who has a disability and is attending elementary school or high school receives accommodations and services for learning and success. The student does not necessarily receive special education services. | https://www.understood.org/articles/the-difference-between-ieps-and-504-plans |
| | Abuse | Some examples include sexual, physical, or emotional abuse, which cause harm and/or injury to a child/young person. One of the reasons for which children/young people are placed in foster care. | https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/statutes/statutes/48/i/02/1 |
| | ACCESS | A one-stop-shop for applying for benefits such as assistance with childcare costs, healthcare coverage, and help paying for groceries. Eligibility for some of these supports look different for youth who exit out-of-home care after 18, so be sure to mention your out-of-home care history to ACCESS. | https://access.wi.gov/ |
| | Adoption | The way a child legally becomes part of a new family. A judge, with the help of a caseworker, helps decide if adoption is the best for the child. As a member of the new family, the child has all the legal rights of a child born into that family. | https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/permancy/adoption/?top=135 https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/adoption |
| | Adult guardianship | A guardian for an adult is a person or agency appointed by a court to act for an adult who needs help with decision-making or communication. No person in Wisconsin is a guardian for an adult unless appointed by a court, and no guardian has any powers over an adult except those given by statutes and the court order. | For example: https://www.dane countyhumanservices.org/Disability-and-Aging/Protective-Services/Court-Ordered-Guardianship-or-Protective-Services |

Glossary of Acronyms & Terms

| Acronym | Term/What It Means | What It Is | More Info |
|---------|---|---|--|
| | Adult Services | A broad term that refers to programs and agencies that serve adults - with or without foster care experience - who require additional supports. This may include having an adult guardian, living in an assisted living facility, or receiving other supports. Some young adults who discharge from foster care discharge to an adult service arrangement. | |
| | Agency | See <i>child welfare agency</i> . | |
| ADRC | Aging & Disability Resource Center | A one-stop-shop for older adults and people with disabilities and their caregivers. | https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/adrc/index.htm |
| AODA | Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse | A term you may hear as part of your case and/or child welfare experience. The use of illegal drugs or the use of prescription or over-the-counter drugs or alcohol for purposes other than those for which they are meant to be used, or in excessive amounts. | |
| | Attorney | A person whose job it is to advocate for someone else. In this document, the word "attorney" means the person who acts on your behalf and represents your wants and needs in court. | |
| BC+ | BadgerCare+ | A healthcare program that helps low-income children, low-income pregnant people, and low-income adults in Wisconsin. BC+ is a type of Medicaid. Those in out-of-home care at age 18 or after qualify for BadgerCare+ regardless of income level up to age 26. Be sure to disclose to ACCESS that you were in out-of-home care on or after your 18 th birthday. | https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/badgercareplus/index.htm https://DCF.wisconsin.gov/files/cwportal/policy/pdf/memos/2022-27i.pdf |
| | Brighter Star funding | Wisconsin's name for Education and Training Voucher funding. This funding is specific to young adults eligible for independent living supports who enroll in a program or school after high school. | https://DCF.wisconsin.gov/files/youthservices/pdf/brighterstar-etv.pdf https://DCF.wisconsin.gov/files/youthservices/pdf/bs-funding-guidelines.pdf |

Glossary of Acronyms & Terms

| Acronym | Term/What It Means | What It Is | More Info |
|---------|-----------------------------------|---|--|
| | Caregiver | A family member, out-of-home care provider, or other supportive adult who is responsible for caring for someone else. | |
| | Caseworker | Another name for child welfare professional. This person works directly with you. | |
| CPS | Child Protective Services | The agency type where someone can report a case of child abuse or neglect. CPS includes three stages - access, initial assessment, and ongoing. | https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/reportabuse |
| CW | Child welfare | Wisconsin's child welfare system includes both Child Protective Services (CPS) and Youth Justice (YJ). CPS includes three stages - access, initial assessment, and ongoing. | https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/publications/pdf/5573.pdf https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/familyfirst/case-flow-initial-assessment.pdf |
| CWA | Child welfare agency | Similar to the word "agency," this means your local county human service agency. When specific to a tribal child welfare agency, the word "tribal" will be included as well to make things clear. The child welfare agency is responsible for receiving and following up on reports of child abuse and neglect and deciding how to help the child and the family. Sometimes this requires the child to be removed from the home. | Search for your county's human services department. For example, Rock County Human Services: https://www.co.rock.wi.us/departments/human-services |
| | Child welfare professional | In this guide, the term "child welfare professional" means the county agency's caseworker or social worker who works with you. When specific to a tribal child welfare professional, the word "tribal" will be included as well to make things clear. | |

Glossary of Acronyms & Terms

| Acronym | Term/What It Means | What It Is | More Info |
|---------|---|---|--|
| CHIPS | Children in Need of Protection and/or Services | Until becoming an adult, a child relies on their parents and other adults for protections and to have their needs met. If a child's parent(s) has hurt them (abuse) or has not taken care of them in the way they need (neglect), the child needs protection and/or services. The courts become involved to decide how to best protect and serve the child. | https://www.wicourts.gov/courts/resources/kid/activitybook/families1.htm |
| | Complaint or grievance | In this document, describes the process of providing feedback about something you feel wasn't done correctly, completely, well, or otherwise appropriately related to your child welfare case or your out-of-home care placement. How to file a compliant or grievance depends on what the compliant or grievance is and with what/whom. | |
| | County | States are divided up into counties, and many things are handled at the county level. Wisconsin has 72 counties and for most of them, child welfare is handled at the county level (Milwaukee is the only county where child welfare is handled at the state level). This means your county agency and your county child welfare professional most directly serve your needs in the child welfare system. | https://www.wicounties.org/the-counties/ |
| CASA | Court-Appointed Special Advocate | Not every county in Wisconsin has a CASA program. In the counties that do have a program, the CASA is someone appointed to advocate for your best interests in court. | https://www.wisconsin-casa.org/about https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/presentation-children-child-abuse-and-neglect-proceedings-wisconsin/ |
| DOC | Wisconsin Department of Corrections | Responsible for overseeing prisons, probation, parole and extended supervision in Wisconsin. | |
| | Designee | A person who has been chosen (designated) to do or be something. A designee will often take on responsibilities for someone else in that person's place, for a specific reason. | |

Glossary of Acronyms & Terms

| Acronym | Term/What It Means | What It Is | More Info |
|---------|--|---|--|
| | Discharge from care | Different than a movement between care settings, discharge from care is when a young person leaves care altogether. This may include discharge via reunification, or another form of permanency (like adoption or guardianship). Sometimes a young person discharges from care on their 18 th birthday. | |
| DMCPS | Division of Milwaukee Child Protective Services | Agency responsible for child protective services in Milwaukee County. | |
| DV | Domestic Violence | Violent or aggressive behavior in the home, often involving the abuse of a spouse or parent. | National Domestic Violence Hotline: 800-799-7233 or text START to 88788 https://www.thehotline.org |
| ETV | Education and Training Voucher | In Wisconsin, ETV funds are called Brighter Star funds. This funding is specific to young adults eligible for independent living supports who enroll in a program or school after high school. | https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/youthservices/pdf/brighterstar-etv.pdf https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/youthservices/pdf/bs-funding-guidelines.pdf |
| | Extended out-of-home care | States have the option to allow young people to remain in foster care beyond age 18, up to age 19, 20, or 21. In Wisconsin, a young person may remain in foster care up to age 21 if all three of the following are true: 1. The person is under the age of 21; and 2. The person is enrolled in high school (or equivalent, like GED or HSED); and 3. The person has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in place. | https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/publications/pdf/5627.pdf |
| FUP | Family Unification Program Voucher | A federal housing voucher option specific to families that has housing instability that may result in their child being placed in foster care OR that is delaying the potential return of the child to the family. Voucher has no time limit. FUP vouchers are not available in every county in Wisconsin. | https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/public_indian_housing/programs/hcv/family |

Glossary of Acronyms & Terms

| Acronym | Term/What It Means | What It Is | More Info |
|---------|---|---|--|
| | Foster care | See <i>out-of-home care</i> . | |
| | Foster home | Offers a safe place to live for now, with adults to care for you and provide you the things kids need like clothes, food, and things to do. Some people may refer to those adults as a foster parent, but it is your choice what you are most comfortable calling them. Some foster homes may have pets, or other children who may or may not be in foster care. It can take a while to adjust to the way a foster home differs from where you grew up. It's okay to ask for things that will help make you more comfortable, like your favorite snacks, a soft blanket, or time to talk with friends. Your county or a private agency monitors foster homes, which means, which means the agency checks in on the foster home to make sure your needs are met. Foster parents can be a relative or someone who is new to you. In Wisconsin, a foster home is the most common placement type. | |
| FYI | Foster Youth to Independence Voucher | A federal housing voucher option specific to young adults ages 18-24 who have experience in the foster care system and are either homeless or at risk of homelessness. Voucher provided for up to 3 years. FYI vouchers are not available in every county in Wisconsin. | https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/public_indian_housing/programs/hcv/fyi https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/cwportal/policy/pdf/memos/2023-25i.pdf |
| | Fostering Success | A program available on some of the University of Wisconsin campuses to provide guidance, support, and resources for students with foster care experience, who are/were homeless, or are/were orphaned or wards of the court. | https://www.wisconsin.edu/fostering-success Also search for Fostering Success specific to a school via: https://www.wisconsin.edu/fostering-success/foster-youth-contacts |

Glossary of Acronyms & Terms

| Acronym | Term/What It Means | What It Is | More Info |
|---------|---|---|--|
| FAFSA | Free Application for Federal Student Aid | The FAFSA is a form that's required to access federal financial aid for postsecondary education. Anyone who was in foster care for one day or more after age 13 can answer yes to the question that asks, "At any time since you turned age 13, were both your parents deceased, were you in foster care, or were you a dependent or ward of the court?" and receive independent student status on the FAFSA. That means they will receive a larger amount of financial aid. | https://studentaid.gov/h/apply-for-aid/fafsa https://studentaid.gov/2223/help/orphan-foster-ward-court |
| GED | General Educational Development tests | A group of four academic subject tests that demonstrate academic knowledge equivalent for a high school diploma. Passing the GED test allows a student who did not complete high school the opportunity to earn a Certificate of High School Equivalency. | https://dpi.wi.gov/ged/how-to-gehsed |
| | Group Care | A placement type that provides care for multiple children or young people at once (unlike foster homes, which typically serve fewer children/young people). Examples include licensed group homes and residential care centers. | |
| | Group Home | A licensed group home is a place where staff are paid to supervise and meet the needs of youth. Youth may be there for various reasons; some may not be in out-of-home care or may be in "respite" care. Each group home has a licensor that helps make sure the youth there will be safe, that the program has enough staff, and that there aren't too many youth there at the same time. While there are rules for every group home, they may also set their own rules of what they expect youth to do during their time there. May also be a QRTP with a special certification; see <i>Qualified Residential Treatment Program</i> . | |

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| Acronym | Term/What It Means | What It Is | More Info |
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| GAL | Guardian ad Litem | Sometimes the judge will assign someone known as a guardian ad litem (GAL) to help with a dependency case. GALs help by talking to people, especially children, and telling the judge what they learn. GALs spend a lot of time with the children they're assigned to. They listen to the children and tell their story to the court. The GAL also suggests to the court what can be done to make the child safe and healthy. The GAL's only job is to try to help the court decide what is in the child's best interest. | https://www.wicourts.gov/courts/resources/kid/activitybook/families1-4.htm |
| | Guardianship | When a judge picks someone else to care for a child/young adult instead of their mother and father, and to make important decisions on behalf of the child (like, about education and medical care), that person is called a guardian. This plan or placement is called a guardianship. Like a parent, the guardian cares for the children until the mother and father can do it again or until the children grow up. Guardians do not replace parents, and often youth in guardianship can still visit or talk to their parents if the judge allows, and if parents are able to parent again, sometimes youth exit guardianship. | |
| HSED | High School Equivalency Diploma | In Wisconsin, the HSED is comparable to a high school diploma. Different from the GED because the GED just confirms the student has knowledge similar to a traditional high school education whereas the HSED requires more. | https://dpi.wi.gov/ged/how-to-gedhsed |
| IL | Independent Living | Supports and services specific to young adults who are in foster care for at least 6 months and are age 14 or older. These supports are intended to help the individual develop the skills to be stable and self-sufficient as an adult. | |
| | | Youth who are IL-eligible while in foster care may also be eligible for continued IL supports and services after leaving care. This depends on at what age they left care and from what type of care they left. | https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/cwportal/il |

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| ILTD | Independent Living Transition to Discharge Plan | A plan required for young people who will discharge from placement on or after their 18 th birthday. The plan is required according to both federal and state law and must be completed no more than 3 months before the youth's 18 th birthday. It should be detailed and specific, personalized to the youth, and done at the direction of the young person. | https://DCF.WI.GOV/files/publications/pdf/5844.pdf https://DCF.WI.GOV/files/publications/pdf/5846.pdf |
| ICWA | Indian Child Welfare Act | A federal law passed by Congress in 1978 that goes hand-in-hand with WICWA. Both WICWA and ICWA are in place to best serve and promote the safety and security of Indian families and tribes. | https://www.nicwa.org/about-icwa |
| IEP | Individualized Education Plan | Similar to a 504 Plan, but the IEP provides more comprehensive supports and services for students with disabilities who require special education. | https://www.understood.org/en/articles/what-is-an-iep https://www.understood.org/articles/the-difference-between-ieps-and-504-plans |
| IA | Initial Assessment | Initial assessment is the stage of the process where local and tribal child welfare agencies perform interviews with the child(ren), parent(s), Indian custodian, and others adults who are in contact with the child, such as doctors and educators, and visit the home. Using this information, they determine child safety, whether additional services may be needed, and if maltreatment occurred. | https://DCF.WI.GOV/files/familyfirst/case-flow-initial-assessment.pdf |
| | Judge | An official appointed or elected to their role to decide cases in a court of law. Judges are often elected in Wisconsin. | |

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| Acronym | Term/What It Means | What It Is | More Info |
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| JIPS | Juvenile in Need of Protection and/or Services | <p>Youth may be alleged to need protection or services if certain conditions apply:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • JIPS non-truancy conditions include a parent or guardian unable or needing assistance to manage a youth's behavior; frequently running away from home; or committing a delinquent act before age 10. • JIPS truancy conditions include habitual truancy from school. <p>Youth adjudicated JIPS may be referred to a variety of services, but they cannot be sent to a correctional facility, juvenile detention facility, or a secured residential care center.</p> | |
| | Kinship Care | See <i>relative care</i> . | |
| | Licensor | Responsible for the licensing and ongoing monitoring of an out-of-home care placement. | |
| | Mandated reporter | People who are required by law to report child abuse or neglect to child welfare and/or law enforcement. Teachers and caseworkers are two types of mandated reporters. | https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/cps/mandatedreporters |
| | Medicaid | A joint state and federal healthcare program that serves children, low-income adults, pregnant people, seniors, and people with disabilities. | https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/medicaid/index.htm |
| NYTD | National Youth in Transition Database | A national survey for young people who have foster care experience. Individuals are invited to complete the survey at age 17 and again at ages 19 and 21. | https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/ys/nytd |
| | Neglect | Seriously endangering the physical health of the child by not providing needed food, clothing, shelter, medical or dental care or supervision. One of the main reasons for which children/young people are placed in foster care. | |

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| | Normalcy | Allowing children and youth in out-of-home care to experience childhood and adolescence in ways like their peers who are not in foster care. | https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/sites/default/files/media_pdf/normalcy-reasonable-standards-cp-00079.pdf |
| OPPLA | Other planned permanent living arrangement | A type of permanency goal for young adults ages 16 and older who are likely to discharge from care at age 18 or older. This happens when the CWA will maintain care and custody of the young person until adulthood because other permanency options like adoption and reunification are no longer options. | |
| OHC | Out-of-home Care | Wisconsin's name for foster care. OHC is when a child is physically in the care of someone other than their primary parent or caregiver. | |
| | Permanency | A permanent home for a child/young person. This may be with biological parents, adoptive family, guardian, or other relative or kinship provider. | |
| | Permanency Plan | A plan designed to ensure that a child is reunified with his or her family whenever appropriate, or that the child quickly attains a placement in a home providing long-term stability. The plan is an important tool for assessing a child/young person's needs and their family's needs, and what goals, services, and supports are necessary when the child/young person is in foster care. | https://DCF.Wisconsin.gov/family-first/permancency |
| | Placement | Where a young person is placed/located when in foster care and not living with their parents. There are numerous placement types. | |
| | Placement provider | In this document, describes the person or agency providing placement and care for a child/young adult placed out of home. | |

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| | Postsecondary Education | Education that happens after high school. It may be college but may also be a training or certification program. Brighter Star is a funding source that can help pay for postsecondary education costs for young people who qualify. | |
| | Privileged | In this document, has to do with things you discuss with your attorney. A legal rule that protects the things you say, meaning that they cannot be discussed. Some exceptions apply. | |
| QRTP | Qualified Residential Treatment Program | Program designed for young people with serious mental health or behavioral needs. In Wisconsin, this placement type is only used when the young person cannot receive the help they need in their home or another out-of-home care setting. A group home or residential care center can get a special certification to also be a QRTP. | https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/family-first/qrtp |
| | Relative Care | When a relative is responsible for providing for your basic needs. Relatives may choose to become licensed as foster parents or they can continue to care for you as a "Kinship" provider, meaning they care for you without becoming a foster parent. Relatives can also care for you if they are unlicensed and unpaid. | |
| RCC | Residential Care Center | A licensed RCC is a place where staff are paid to supervise and meet the needs of youth. Youth may be there for various reasons; some may not be in out-of-home care or may be in "respite" care. Each RCC has a licensor that helps make sure the youth there will be safe, that the program has enough staff, and that there aren't too many youth there at the same time. While there are rules for every RCC, they may also set their own rules of what they expect youth to do during their time there. May also be a QRTP with a special certification; see <i>Qualified Residential Treatment Program</i> . | |
| | Respite Care | Short-term care given by another provider. | |

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| | Reunification | Reunification is the goal for many children/young adults who enter foster care. The permanency plan is used to define specific things that need to happen before the child/young adult returns home. | https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/cps/overview/reunification |
| | Safety Plan | A plan that a Child Welfare Professional creates with a family with the goal of safely allowing a child or young adult to remain in the home with their family. These plans are reviewed on a regular basis and help drive goals, supports, and services that can help keep the child or young adult and their family safe and together. | https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/cwportal/policy/pdf/safety-intervention-standards.pdf |
| SIL | Supervised Independent Living | A placement type only available to youth aged 17 and older and is meant to be a steppingstone for you before transitioning to independence. Youth have support like someone checking in multiple times a week and someone they can call anytime, but also have a high level of independence in that they may have their own apartment or rent a room in a house. | |
| SNAP | Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program | Called FoodShare in Wisconsin, SNAP is an anti-hunger program providing nutrition assistance to low-income individuals and families. In Wisconsin, you can apply for SNAP through ACCESS. Youth in out-of-home care at age 18 or later have some special eligibility considerations, so be sure to disclose your out-of-home care history to ACCESS if/when you apply. | https://access.wi.gov/ |
| TPR | Termination of Parental Rights | When all rights and duties of a parent to a child/young adult have ended. The parent's rights are ended by a court order. When this happens, the parent is no longer the parent of the child/young adult, the parent cannot make any decisions about the child/young adult, and the parent is not responsible for the child/young adult. | |

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| | Transition from care | The term used to describe the process when a young person leaves care either to a form of permanence, like adoption, guardianship, reunification, or another arrangement, or due to discharging from care as an adult (age 18+). When discharging at age 18 or older, there are specific transition planning requirements. | |
| TRA | Transition Resource Agency | Responsible for providing independent living services to qualifying young adults ages 18-23 who discharged from care. Seven TRAs serve Wisconsin. | https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/map/il-r |
| | Treatment Foster Home | Like other foster homes, but they have gotten some additional training and resources to help youth heal and thrive. | |
| | Trial Reunification | Occurs when a youth has been in an OHC placement but returns to their parents or caregiver for a specific period to determine whether reunification with that parent/caregiver is appropriate. When in a trial reunification, a young person is still considered to be in care. A young person may transition to official reunification after a trial reunification or may return to their OHC placement. | |
| | Tribal child welfare professional | Represents the tribes' interest in its children under the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) and the Wisconsin Indian Child Welfare Act (WICWA). | |
| VTLA | Voluntary Transition to Independent Living Agreement | Extends care beyond age 18 for qualifying youth who are in a foster home, group home, RCC, SIL, or other relative placement. The young person enters into an agreement and can stay in care up to age 21. To qualify, the young person must meet the criteria to be in extended care. See <i>extended out-of-home care</i> . | https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/publications/pdf/5627.pdf |

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| DCF | Wisconsin Department of Children and Families | The state agency that provides or oversees programs that help children, youth, and families. This includes a lot of different programs and services, such as children in need of protective services, foster care and adoption services, child abuse and neglect investigations, youth justice, and more. Because Wisconsin is a state where most counties administer their own child welfare systems, DCF works closely with child welfare agencies across the state. | https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/about-us |
| WICWA | Wisconsin Indian Child Welfare Act | A state law signed in 2009 that goes hand-in-hand with ICWA. WICWA was passed to clarify the federal law and improve compliance in Wisconsin. Both WICWA and ICWA are in place to best serve and promote the safety and security of Indian families and tribes. | https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/wicwa |
| YAC | Youth Advisory Council | Wisconsin's statewide youth advisory council began in 2005 and includes members from across the state who have experience in the foster care system. The group is committed to advocacy and change for youth currently and formerly in foster care. In addition to the statewide council, Wisconsin has local youth advisory councils located throughout the state. | https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/ys/leadership https://www.facebook.com/wiyac2005 https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/youthservices/pdf/yac-advisors.pdf |
| YASI | Youth Assessment and Screening Instrument | A term you may hear as part of your case if you are served by the youth justice system. An assessment a child welfare or youth justice professional may complete to help determine what supports you may need. | https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/ys/yj |
| YJ | Youth Justice | DCF oversees Wisconsin's community-based youth justice system. This oversight includes supporting the county youth justice workforce, coordinating the Youth Assessment and Screening Instrument (YASI), establishing YJ standards, and administering Youth Aids funding. | https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/ys/yj https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/cwportal/yj/pdf/cb-yj-if.pdf |
| YLT | Youth Leadership Team | Includes members from across the state who have experience in the youth justice system and want to make it better. | https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/ys/leadership |

Notes



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The Wisconsin Department of Children and Families' Bureau of Youth Services developed this guide in collaboration with other partners within and outside of the agency.

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There are resources listed throughout this document. For a complete list of those resources – and more – visit <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/cwportal/il/pdf/il-resourceguide.pdf> or scan the QR code below:



The Department of Children and Families is an equal opportunity employer and service provider. If you have a disability and need to access services, receive information in an alternate format, or need information translated to another language, please call the Division of Safety and Permanence at (608) 266-8787. Individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing, deaf-blind or speech disabled can use the free Wisconsin Relay Service (WRS) – 711 to contact the department.