

The Foster Care System and Higher Education

KAITLIN Hello, and welcome to The Foster Care System and Higher Education. My name is Kaitlin
HENNESSY: Hennessy. I am the program coordinator at WSU Global Connections.

Today, presenting is Dr. Amy Salazar and Cheyanne Boyer. Dr. Salazar is a professor in the Department of Human Development at WSU Vancouver. Cheyanne is a student in Human Development at WSU Vancouver as well.

Dr. Salazar received her PhD at Portland State University in Social Work and Social Research. Her research interests include aging out of foster care, child welfare, and LGBTQ youth well-being. Thank you all so much for coming out tonight. I'm going to turn it over to Dr. Salazar and Cheyanne.

AMY SALAZAR: OK, hi, everyone. Thanks for having us today. As Kaitlin said, I'm Amy Salazar. I'm in the Human Development Department at WSU Vancouver.

I'll just make one addition to the introduction. I'm also a licensed social worker in the state of Oregon, so I have a lot of experience with interacting with kids in care. Was there anything else you wanted to add to your introduction?

CHEYANNE
BOYER: No, that's pretty much covered.

AMY SALAZAR: OK, great. OK, so today we have five things that we want to talk about. Oh, and I also wanted to say that-- to build on what Kaitlin was saying about asking questions-- if you want to ask those as we go, that's totally fine.

I just might wait until the breaks that we have dispersed throughout our presentation to respond to those, but you can feel free to go ahead and type those in just so you don't forget them. And Kaitlin, if any come up that you feel like, for clarification purposes, it'd be helpful for me to go ahead and answer, you can just let me know about that.

OK, so today there is five things that we will be talking about today. And the first one is we want to talk a little bit about youth aging out of foster care and what that looks like. And the second piece will be looking more specifically at youth who have been in foster care, and accessing and succeeding in higher education.

And then the third piece we'll talk about is federal legislation, the different laws that have been passed to help support higher education achievement for youth who have been in care. And next, we'll talk a little bit about developing and testing interventions that can help support youth who have been in foster care in both accessing and succeeding in higher education. And finally, we talk about a few different ways that you all can get involved if this is an issue that sounds interesting to you.

OK, so I just want to provide a little bit of background on youth transition from foster care to adulthood. There's a term that we use in the field called aging out of foster care. And some people aren't familiar with that term, so I just want to explain that.

When you see-- as they're moving through the foster care system, they either are reunified with their biological families, or they might be adopted, or they might go into a few different guardianship permanency outcomes. But if none of those happen, and youth stay in the foster care system until they're too old to be in it anymore, then that's what we call aging out of the foster care system.

So at any given time, there are over 400,000 kids across the country in the foster care system. And over the last few years, this number's been on the rise. For a little while, it was going down, but now it seems to be going back up. And of those 400,000, about a fourth of those, or 100,000 of kids in foster care, are between the ages of 14 to 20.

And so one of the current trends in foster care is something that's called extended foster care. So it's extending the possibility for children and youth to stay in the foster care up to about 21. So that's why some youth are older than 18 and they're still in care.

For youth to stay in extended foster care, they usually have to be either working or going to school-- that can be high school or some sort of post-secondary program-- or have a developmental disability. If one of those isn't occurring, then youth aren't typically eligible to stay in care past 18.

So like I said, about half of the states now have extended foster care till age 21, which can be helpful for youth as they're moving into adulthood. So the older the youth are when they're in foster care, the less likely it is that the system will be able to find adoptive families for them, because people tend to prefer adopting babies or smaller children.

So when youth in foster care are-- when they're in their mid to late teens, the focus of their

casework often starts to shift from maybe reunification and adoption to more of planning and preparing for that transition to adulthood, since they won't have as many traditional supports in their lives to help prepare them for that.

So while of course there are exceptions, as a group, youth who have been in foster care can really struggle as they make that transition to adulthood, compared to their general population counterparts. So here on this slide are just some of the more common challenges, that we know from the scientific literature, that youth who are leaving foster care face.

Youth who have been in foster care who are transitioning to adulthood are more likely than their non-foster care peers to have alcohol or substance use challenges, have criminal justice system involvement, become parents at an earlier age, experience or be at risk for homelessness. And then they also are more likely to struggle with mental health challenges and physical health challenges, have lower rates of employment, lower rates of educational attainment at both the K-12 and the higher education levels, and also have lower incomes.

So that's just a little bit about youth as they transition out of foster care. So they're faced with a lot of challenges, often because they've had a lot of challenging past experiences and because they don't have the same level supports going into adulthood that a lot of other youth have.

So now I want to focus a little bit more on foster care and higher education. So it's especially challenging for youth who have been in foster care to access and be successful in higher education. In terms of just post-secondary attendance, the estimates are that about 20% to 40% of youth who have been in care have completed some level, some college, by about age 25 to 26, compared to about 60% to 72% of the population.

And in terms of any post-secondary completion, youth who have been in foster care are about four to five times less likely than their general population counterparts to complete any post-secondary degree. And thinking specifically about bachelor's degree completion, only about 2% to 9% of youth who have been in foster care earn a bachelor's degree, compared to almost a third of the general population.

On this slide, I've sort of compiled-- so there's a lot of different scientific studies that talk with youth who've been in foster care to start to look at factors that youth are reporting have been obstacles for them. So some of the most common challenges that we find in the literature, or is

supported by the literature are that piece around lacking the caring, knowledgeable, supportive adult, lack of access to financial resources-- so lots of your responses reflected those too.

There's also this issue of lack of post-secondary preparation. So one respondent was talking about how students are moving around a lot. That's definitely true for youth who have been in foster care. It's really common while youth who have been in the K-12, while they're in foster care, to have to experience bouncing around from school to school.

And every time that happens, that sets them back in their educational progress. So some students experience several school changes and that can really make it problematic, along with everything else that's going on, to be ready and in a good place to be able to start college.

Another big challenge can be maltreatment, trauma history, and then mental health challenges that sometimes result from that. The primary reason that kids end up in care is for some type of maltreatment. And so you have the mental health challenges that come from that. And also the mental health challenges that come from living in a system and being separated from your family, and things like that.

And then finally, the last one is-- which a couple of you also sort of touched on-- is the lack of comprehensive long-term support that can meet diverse needs. So when you're talking about students who don't really have the traditional supports to fall back on, and have had a really hard time moving through a really challenging child welfare system, and having maltreatment histories, and so on, it's understandable that they're going to need some really good supports to help them be successful. And those are frequently not available. So I think those are some of the really the challenges that we see.

So I'm going to stop. Oh actually, let me go a little bit further before I stop for questions. So I just wanted to point out that despite the overwhelming challenges that kids who have been in foster care face, most youth who are in foster care report wanting and expecting to go to college.

The literature tells us that earning a post-secondary degree can help close gaps in employment and income between foster youth and their peers. It really can provide a way out of poverty. That can be really challenging for youth who have been in foster care to sometimes achieve.

OK, so now I'm going to pause for another couple of seconds to see if any additional questions-- if you have any questions right now.

KAITLIN Dr. Salazar, we have one question [? to ask. ?] Have the rates of college graduation or higher
HENNESSY: education increased or decreased over time, or has it stayed constant since the research has been available?

AMY SALAZAR: That's a good question. So first of all, we have to kind of guess and estimate college graduation rates, because there aren't any, for example, nationally representative databases that can tell us really accurately. So we kind of have to piece those guesses together, but there hasn't been a lot of movement in those college graduation rates since people have been looking at this.

So they're remaining pretty low, even though-- there's been a lot more interest from the field in addressing this, especially over the past decade or so. And so it might just be that those efforts need to catch up with the students who want to access them, but we haven't been seeing a lot of change so far. And so there's still a lot of work that needs to be done.

KAITLIN Thanks for that [? quick ?] response. That's all the questions we have right now. We actually
HENNESSY: just had one come in as I said that. Gabrielle asks, do colleges have coordinators to help children in care navigate the school system?

AMY SALAZAR: That's a great question. So a lot-- Cheyanne's about to talk about some legislation and programs that are available. And it is a trend right now. More and more colleges are getting foster youth specific campus support programs that can help youth who are coming from foster care to navigate the new college environment and help make sure that they're getting connected with the resources that are available to them.

So yes, not all colleges have them, but more and more colleges are getting them. And almost every-- especially public college in Washington state has one of these programs.

So I'm going to hand it over to Cheyanne, and she's going to talk a little bit about some of the key legislation. And she'll also touch on some of those college support programs and some of the services they offer.

CHEYANNE OK so at the policies, laws, and resources-- 1999 was when the Foster Care Independent Act
BOYER: established the John Chafee Foster Care Independence Program. This actually provides

funding so schools can provide services and help prepare these youth to transition from foster care to adulthood. They support with the education, so the higher education piece, the employment, financial management, housing, emotional support, connection, caring adults.

Some common services are [? light ?] case management, life skill building classes and workshops. Those are really helpful when it comes to [INAUDIBLE] they're aging out of foster care and they're ready to find a place to rent or resume building for future employment, applying for colleges. These services also include emergency funds, mentoring, and educational advocacy.

AMY SALAZAR: So I'll just say really quick that every state has these programs. So if you're in Washington state, then we have them. And they're usually [? in ?] each-- run by counties, but if you're in the United States, then your state has some of these programs that are serving youth.

CHEYANNE BOYER: OK, and with the Educational and Training Voucher Program, established in 2002, was specifically for youths who are aging out of foster care. This was eventually added to the Chafee Independence Program. This, specifically, is to provide resources for education and training.

So that could be a voucher up to \$5,000 a year for post-secondary education and training. So if the foster youth ends up wanting to pursue higher education or go to a vocational school to receive training to eventually get employment, then this ETV voucher would definitely help them with that.

AMY SALAZAR: And states can decide how they want to use this money. So sometimes the amount that students get isn't \$5,000, maybe it's \$3,000, because they're trying to give it to more students or something like that, but it can be up to \$5,000 per student.

CHEYANNE BOYER: OK, so with the state tuition waivers, these programs, currently only 20 states have tuition waivers for former foster youth. Eight additional states have foster youth-focused scholarship and grant programs. As you can see, the orange states have state level tuition assistance program for youth from foster care.

AMY SALAZAR: So this has really been a trend over the past decade or two-- that states are adopting these tuition waiver programs. So this is something new and more and more states are turning orange over time.

CHEYANNE

OK, so the Washington Passport to College Promise Program-- this answers, I think it was Gabriella's question about navigating the school system. It was created by the state of Washington to support foster youth from care, and help them access and succeed in college.

BOYER:

It offers three main kinds of support-- so student scholarships. They help with the funding piece so the financial burden is no longer on the student. It helps with campus incentive funds to post-secondary institutions.

They designate campus support staff and take other steps to recruit and retain former foster youth. So they will provide funding for someone on campus to help navigate the higher education system with the students.

The third part, a partnership with the college success foundation to provide additional students intervention and retention services for foster youth and training and technical assistant to campus staff. So what this means is college success foundation is going to be a back-up off-campus, so if a student has even more financial burden and they're going to be able to help them with that.

And in 2014-15 academic year, 376 students were served through this program. Most college campuses in Washington have a Passport Program. I want to add that the Passport Program also has a Passport Navigator, which is going to be a peer mentor, so most likely a student from the college to also help the student navigate the higher education system.

AMY SALAZAR:

So this is what we're doing in Washington. Like Cheyanne was saying, these are at most of the schools in Washington. And this is a part of another trend that we were talking about earlier of more and more colleges and universities developing campus support-- foster youth-specific campus support programs.

So all the California state colleges have them. Most of the schools in Michigan have them. So it's definitely a trend.

And across the different programs, some of the more common services that they provide are things like college-focused mentoring, or helping work out enrollment and financial aid issues, how to fill out the FAFSA-- you have to do it a specific way when you've been in foster care. They might host holiday dinners for students who don't have a family to spend holidays with, they might send care packages, emergency funds, things like that. So they all do their own kind of model, but those are some of the more common things that some of the programs

provide.

OK, it looks like we have several questions popping up. So I'm going to go ahead and pause here and we'll address some of those.

KAITLIN HENNESSY: Thank you, Dr. Salazar. The first question asks, from Kerry, what percentage of foster kids are aging out in Washington state and taking advantage of, or are aware of, the Passport Program?

AMY SALAZAR: That's a really good question. So one of the recommendations that I'm about to bring up is how some students-- they are eligible for these things and they don't know about it. So they might have access to several thousand dollars or to free tuition to a state college, and they just don't know about it.

So in terms of numbers for aging out in Washington per year-- I don't have that off the top of my head. I'd have to look that up-- but if there are about 100,000 youth between the ages of 14 to 20 across the country, you know, you can kind of guesstimate that that would be probably a coup-- maybe 1,000 or so. But of course, that's just a guess, so somewhere around the ballpark.

And in terms of how many youth know about the College Promise Program, it really kind of varies. First, they have to know about it. Then, they have to be ready to go to college to take advantage of that.

So some states have age limits on the services. For example, youth might only be eligible for a program like this up to age 23 or 25 or something like that. Do you know if the Passport Program has an age limit, because I actually don't know?

CHEYANNE BOYER: So with the Passport Program you have to be the mass ages 21 to access the funds and you have, I want to say, up until five years to use the funds, and then they expire.

AMY SALAZAR: So you have to start using them by 21?

CHEYANNE BOYER: Yeah.

BOYER:

AMY SALAZAR: OK, OK, so if you think about youth who have-- they've kind of had a rough time getting to college in the first place, a lot of youth don't start college until a little later than traditional

students. So they might not be ready to use those funds, so they might miss that window of eligibility.

Doesn't completely answer your question, but I hope that gives it a little bit more information.

KAITLIN

Thank you, another question asks, are the FAFSA funds higher for foster care students?

HENNESSY:

AMY SALAZAR: So I think that youth are probably-- and you can jump in, if you want to-- assessed pretty similarly. However, a lot of states have scholarship programs that are specific to youth who have been in care.

So you fill out the FAFSA as part of how you apply for those ETV funds that Cheyanne was talking about earlier-- the education training voucher funds-- and for other foster care-specific scholarships. So in that way, they're just unique funds available to youth who have been in foster care that wouldn't be available to other students.

CHEYANNE

BOYER:

And to add on that one, a foster youth fills out the FAFSA. They're going to file as independent if they're under the age of 26, to be considered independent for any other student with parents that are available to fill out the FAFSA with them.

But as foster youth, since they were a ward of the state, then they get to file as independent, so it based on their income only. And that typically can be an advantage for the FAFSA funds, because then you can get Pell, and State Need Grants.

AMY SALAZAR:

But the challenge with that is a lot of colleges look suspiciously when students that young are applying as independent students, 'cause most students have to apply as dependents. And so, a lot of times youth who are in foster care actually have to get proof that they were in foster care and are allowed to apply as independent. And so you can imagine the challenges that can come up.

You have to get that paperwork and those things proven. And that can set your financial aid back from getting it awarded. So it can get really messy. So that's another reason it's really helpful to have those campus support people who can help you work all those things out.

KAITLIN

HENNESSY:

Thank you, another question asks, after the implementation of these laws and legislation, has there been any increase in graduation rates?

AMY SALAZAR: So I don't think so. So these laws have been in place-- we've had independent living programs since about, I don't know, we had them since at least 1999. I think they went beyond, before that. And most evaluations of independent living programs don't find any evidence of effectiveness.

And there's no evidence-based approaches-- like, approaches providing these services that have proven effectiveness. So while we're doing more and more to address these things, we don't know how to do it in a way that's really effective yet. And so we haven't seen changes in graduation rates really.

KAITLIN HENNESSY: Thank you, and then we have another question that asks, of the 400,000 children in the foster care system, how many end up reuniting with their birth families?

AMY SALAZAR: So I don't know that off the top of my head either, but they are really-- so if you look up, it's A-F-C-A-R-S-- so AFCARS, A-F-C-A-R-S, 2016-- I think, if you just Google that, you'll be able to find a really succinct report of the numbers of youth going in and out of the foster care system as of about a year ago. So they put one of these reports out every year.

And it's a really good overview that answers questions exactly like that. Why youth went into care, why they left-- how they left care, the age ranges, and all those sorts of things, so I'd refer you to that.

KAITLIN HENNESSY: Thank you, another question asks, do other countries have a foster care system?

AMY SALAZAR: They do. A lot of other countries have foster care systems, but a lot of countries-- well, some countries have foster care systems and some countries have more of an orphanage model. So they don't actually have foster families, like families that they recruit to take care of kids whose parents have maltreated them, or who have died, or something like that. So it kind of depends on the country as to what model they use.

Some countries-- more Western countries-- have foster care systems. And you're more likely to find maybe orphanages or other kinds of services like that in more developing countries. And also a lot of countries have-- I'm actually starting to look at this right now-- some countries also have these programs that help youth, as they're aging out of foster care, to prepare for adulthood. But again, that's only limited, usually in kind of richer countries that have more resources to be able to devote to things like that.

KAITLIN Excellent, thank you. Another question asks does the US have any orphanage type systems left?
HENNESSY:

AMY SALAZAR: So not technically, but we do have residential treatment centers and group homes. So for kids who the system isn't able to find a foster home, for whatever reason, we do have group homes, which is a facility sometimes locked and sometimes not, where a lot of kids live together in a home-like setting and have staff who come in and out, rather than foster parents.

And we also have residential treatment centers, which are for kids who, for example, are experiencing more high-level mental health challenges, and they might be a risk to themselves or others. So we have facilities like that as well, but I don't know. I don't know of any places that still continue to call themselves orphanages at this point in our country, but we have more of those other kinds of settings.

So I think I might move ahead right now just so we can be sure to get through the content, but then we'll have more time at the end to answer some more questions. Does that sound all right, Kaitlin?

KAITLIN That is excellent, thank you.

HENNESSY:

AMY SALAZAR: OK, great. OK, so the next thing I want to talk a little bit about it is my experience going to testify in Congress. So last December of 2016, I was invited to present in front of the United States Congressional and Senate caucuses on foster youth in Washington, DC. And the purpose of them inviting me and my presentation-- so I did a presentation and then I had several meetings with congressional committee members. And the purpose of them inviting me was to provide recommendations for future legislation that would be aimed at improving the post-secondary outcomes of youth who have been in care.

So during that presentation and throughout the day when I was meeting with the committee members, I provided these recommendations that you see here to the various congressional committees for them to consider for future legislation. So I'll just review these really quickly. They're really similar to the chall-- they really mirror pretty closely the challenges I brought up earlier.

So there's this piece about consistent caring adults, so finding ways. Just because your biological parents aren't there any more for you potentially, doesn't mean that there aren't

other caring, supportive adults that we can get really involved in youth's life. So looking into ways to do that.

Second, sufficient financial resources-- so making sure-- so this means, not only covering tuition, for example, but also emergency funds. So for example, if youth are in-- or you might have a good example. I don't know that you have heard of and about this, but if a youth is moving through college, and all of a sudden, they have an unexpected bill come up.

And they have no way to pay it, and they have to use their financial aid to pay it. And then they can't afford to pay for all the other things, then just something that small can just derail the whole process. So having those sufficient resources available, including emergency resources.

Did you have any examples you wanted to share?

CHEYANNE

I know the College Success Foundation, they do have emergency funding for that specific reason. So if a student car breaks down and they need new tires or something, then they're going to be able to cover it, to help them better succeed in college.

BOYER:

AMY SALAZAR:

Right, yeah, so that's what some of the college support programs do. And some of the independent living programs and things like that sometimes have those.

So the next recommendation is around flexible supports for diverse needs. And that can mean a lot of different things, so there's not going to be a one size fits all program that's going to meet all youth needs, and help them all really be successful in college. So there also needs to be flexibility around the eligibility criteria.

So as we were already talking about, it's more common for youth who have been in care to not start college right out of high school, or to take a little bit longer while they're in college, because they're navigating a lot of challenging things. So things like eligibility criteria-- making those as flexible as possible.

And the fifth recommendation has to do with youth knowledge of eligibility. So as I was saying before, we can have all these great resources, but if youth aren't knowing about them and taking advantage of them, well, then they're not really doing anyone any good.

As you can probably understand, when some youth get to the point where they-- if they haven't had a good experience in care, and they turn 18, and they run as far away as they can from the child welfare system. So they might not learn about those different resources. So

making sure that we're getting that information out to youth so that they know about them.

So those first five recommendations are around youth support, but I also have three recommendations specifically for supporting programs that work with youth and care, to help them go to college. So the first one is helping systems work together.

So the child welfare system, and the higher education systems, and the K through 12 school systems are all very separate and they have different responsibilities. And it can be really hard to find ways to help them work together to support youth who are being touched by all of these systems, so coming up with ways to make that easier is important.

Another piece is data systems to track progress. So like I was saying before, we kind of have to estimate how many youth in care are getting to college, being successful in college. It's hard to piece that together, and it'd be a lot easier to track how all this is going if we had better data systems to do that.

And then finally, evaluation resources-- so I touched on this a little bit. There are a lot of programs out there that support youth in care, but we really have so little evidence on how well these programs work, and what works and what doesn't, that people are creating new programs all the time. And we just have no idea what works and what doesn't. So my third recommendation has to do with making sure that programs that are serving youth in care are able to have the funding to be able to evaluate what they do so that we can know if it's working or not.

So these are the recommendations I shared while I was at Congress. And so when I was there, they were working on potential reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. That was one bill or law that's coming up for the time to be reenacted. So some of this may or may not be included in the reauthorization of the law.

So as you can see, or I hope you're hearing from this, that there's a growing number of states extending foster care. There's a growing number of states doing tuition remission programs, building college campus support programs. There's a lot of excitement and momentum around this area of work.

However, we still have a long way to go before we're able to support youth in a way that really moves the needle in graduation rates, that we're really set on that level playing field with their non-foster youth counterparts.

OK, so we're getting short on time. So just very briefly, I'm going to talk about developing and testing programs to help foster youths succeed in higher education. So like I was just saying, we have very limited evidence for all these different services that we have, of what works and what doesn't.

But even without knowing, we're still not achieving an acceptable success rate. So it's not just an issue of, well, we don't know, maybe they are working. We're not getting levels of graduations more to those who aren't in foster care. So that means we still have work to do.

So because we don't have any evidence-based practices for supporting youth in going to and succeeding in higher education, this has become one of my career goals. So it's one of my goals in my career is to expand the evidence base for post-secondary support programs for youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood. And as part of that, about a couple of years back, I received funding from the National Institutes of Health to develop a post-secondary access and retention intervention for youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood. And I call this intervention Fostering Higher Education.

And we don't have a lot of time to talk about this today in depth. But just really briefly, Fostering Higher Education is a post-secondary access and retention intervention that contains professional educational advocacy, mentoring, and also a curriculum-- you can see it here on this slide-- that says top six potential pitfalls for higher education.

So this is a curriculum that teaches youth about some of the most common pitfalls for students as they're going to college. Things like not getting enough sleep, or drinking too much, or not taking care of your physical or mental health, or having relationship problems-- things like that-- that are challenges for all youth going to college. And so it's a curriculum that helps them learn about those potential pitfalls, so that they don't become problematic for them.

So I've developed this program, and I'm really excited about it. And I'm in the process of applying for funding so that, hopefully, I can do a randomized control trial to actually test to see if this is an effective approach for helping more kids both get into college and then stay, maintain, enrollment in college and be successful.

So if you want to know more about Fostering Higher Education, this slide has two articles that describe it and talk about it. So they're available through the WSU library. You should be able to access them for free. And if you have any challenges, [? do ?] [? not ?] feel free to just

reach out and email me. And I can help you get connected with those.

OK, so the last thing we're going to talk about are a few different ways that you can get involved. So since a lot of you have some connections to foster care, as we discovered in our early polls-- maybe this is an area that you find really interesting, that you're really passionate about-- so we just wanted to make some suggestions for that.

So the first recommendation I have is just being supportive of youths who you come in contact with in everyday life who might have been in foster care. So youth who have been in foster care can experience a lot of stigma, a lot of judgment, because of the fact that they are in care. Sometimes people assume that they're not very smart, or they have behavioral problems, or they ended up in foster care because they're juvenile delinquents, or something like that. And so not making those prejudgments, not contributing to those stigmatizations can be really helpful, in and of itself, if you come in contact with youths who have been in care.

Another way you can get involved is looking to be in a CASA. So a CASA is a Court Appointed Special Advocate. It's also sometimes known as guardian ad litem. And there's CASAs or guardian ad litem in every state in the United States.

And these people are just community volunteers. You don't have to be a social worker. You don't have to have any other kind of qualification, but they are community volunteers that-- they learn-- they do a training where they learn about child welfare system.

And then they get assigned a case. And a case is usually a family. So for example, a family has four kids, and you would be a CASA for those four kids. And as your role as a CASA, you learn-- you go to their team meetings, you learn all about their case, you hang out with them, you find out kind of how their placement's going, if everyone's doing what they should be doing in the case to support the youth.

And then you go to court, and you testify, and you make recommendations to the judge about what you think should happen in that case, in the best interests of the child. So that's one volunteer opportunity you could look into. I was a CASA for a couple of years. And so, I could help answer any questions about that if you want to know more.

Another recommendation is being a foster parent, if you've thought about that at all. So it's a big commitment, and it's not something that people should take lightly, but the fact of the matter is most states are having foster care, short-- foster parent, foster homes shortages

right now. I know Washington and Oregon are both really struggling with this.

So finding families that are willing to open their homes to youth is something that states are really struggling with, especially for older youths. Like I said, when people become foster parents, a lot of times there's a preference to be a foster parent for babies or for younger kids, but it gets much harder to find families for older youth. And if you're fostering youth who are older, you could be that caring adult who's helping them get ready to be successful to go off to college.

So another recommendation is being a mentor. So this can look-- a lot of different states have various mentoring programs that provide opportunities to be a mentor for youth who have been in care. Do you know any local mentoring programs for youth [? in care? ?]

CHEYANNE

So maybe one would be the Boys and Girls Club. They have very different-- they serve a different population, so they serve many different kids coming from many different backgrounds.

BOYER:

AMY SALAZAR: But including kids in care?

INTERPOSING VOICES]

AMY SALAZAR: OK, so sometimes you have to search for those. They might be at local nonprofits or something like that, but there are usually some of those around.

And then the last recommendation is to learn about your local independent living program. They often have a lot of, like Cheyanne was explaining, they have lots of different workshops, they have lots of different events. And a lot of times, you can get involved with those events as a volunteer.

So for example, if you-- I don't know, let's make something up-- maybe you have a really interesting career and you to talk to youth about-- like, oh how do you go into being-- I don't know-- an engineer or something like that. Maybe you could go give a talk about that career at the local independent program.

Or, maybe you're a really good cook and you go give a lesson on cooking, which is something that they do a lot at our local independent living program. They'll have nights where-- they'll have cooking nights so that all the youth will cook dinner together. So they're building skills on

how to cook. And then they have that community dinner together where they all connect with each other.

In addition to volunteering, you can also donate to local independent living programs-- not only money, but also stuff. So when youth are transitioning to adulthood, think of all the things you need for a house. You need sheets. You need towels.

You need food. You need dishes. You need pots. You need pans. And so, you know, youth have to come across these things one way or another.

So a lot of independent living programs will have-- I don't know-- they'll have rooms where they have a lot of donations that youth who need them can just-- or they need some pots and pans, and just pick one up as part of the donation closet or something like that.

Just a few ideas for ways that you might be able to get involved. I have my email up here if any of you want to reach out to me. Or if you want to reach out to Cheyanne as well, I can forward her your questions or your emails. So thank you very much, and I'll just open it up for questions now in our last few minutes.

KAITLIN

HENNESSY:

Thank you so much. One of our questions is do you have an opinion on why some of these programs aren't more effective yet, like the Password to College Program and independent living programs? I mean, in regards to graduation rates or more students going into higher ed.

AMY SALAZAR:

Right, so I think that the social work field is notoriously underfunded, and has a lot of people who are in positions with very low wage positions doing work that's really complicated and challenging. So I think part of it is just finding that-- finding a way to make a really strong program with really limited resources. And often those resources are changing, going up and down or being cut.

The other thing is, for independent living programs specifically, independent living programs-- they're not only focused on higher education. They're also focused on helping kids find housing, helping kids learn how to rent an apartment, and how to clean your house, and how to find a job, and how to do all these other things.

So some independent living programs, I guess, are better than others-- [? that probably ?] are really focusing in on providing post-secondary support, and some are just kind of spread so thin that it doesn't-- it's not able to become a priority. So those are some of the reasons. And like I was saying, we don't really have any established models that we know are effective.

If we had that, then locations could just say, OK, I'm going to put this program to use, because I know it's useful. There's evidence and we know it works. But we don't have that, so people are always having to come up with new programs and try out new things. So I think it's just kind of a challenge to get to that point.

And there's a lot of people working on this, but we're definitely not there. And there's a lot of good work being done. I mean, there's youth all across the country who are really benefiting from these wonderful programs. We're just not able to really get to that scale to where it's making a large-scale change in the numbers of youth graduating.

KAITLIN HENNESSY: OK, thank you so much. Our next question is a two-parter. And it asks, are there high school coordinators, specific for foster youth, in place to connect them with college? And secondly, what are some independent programs in Portland? Thank you so much for this information.

CHEYANNE BOYER: Um, the first one, I know AmeriCorps, they actually-- I've met a couple of them. They coordinate with students to help them transition from high school to college. I'm not sure if that's-- I think that's pretty much the only one that I know of.

AMY SALAZAR: I think it really varies by location. Usually the services that are supporting youth aren't based at high schools. They're usually based in child welfare, so like an independent living program or something else.

Sometimes colleges, themselves, do outreach to bring more youth into care. So a lot-- for example, there's a part of the Passport Program every year has something where they invite any high school students-- I think seniors, I don't know-- to have this college experience. Where they don't have to pay for it and they pick one of the campuses around Washington state.

And the kids get to go and spend the night in the dorms, and learn all about what it's like to be at college, kind of immerse them in that college experience. So that's something that Washington does to help more high school students, sort of, learn about that. There aren't usually people [? placed ?] in specific high schools, or if they are, that's very location-specific.

CHEYANNE BOYER: And the program that you were talking about, the camp, that's called Make It Happen. And that's the College Success Foundation.

AMY SALAZAR: Yeah, and they're actually recruiting for that right now. So if you work with any youth who you

think might be interested, I think I saw today that there's another month open for application.

In terms of independent living programs in Portland, I used to work at the Portland Independent Living Program. There's actually three of them. The biggest one that has the biggest contract that serves most youth in Portland is based at New Avenues for Youth.

So they serve-- I think they serve maybe about 200 youths at a time. And then there is the program based at NAYA-- the Native American Youth Association, I think is the last A. So that program is specifically for native youth.

And the third one, I always forget, I think it's at Impact Northwest. I can't remember off the top of my head, but there are three that receive funding to provide independent living services in Portland.

KAITLIN

Thank you, and our last question asks, how do you find local independent living programs to work with? So I guess in areas outside of Portland also, someone wants to know how to search for them.

HENNESSY:

AMY SALAZAR:

Sure, so I would search for foster care independent living and whatever you're-- they're usually county-funded. So I would look for your county's name and then foster care independent living. I wouldn't just look for independent living, because a lot of times you'll find independent living programs for like older youths, elderly youth, and things-- elderly youth. [LAUGHING] Elderly individuals, so I would totally search for foster care independent living in your county or your state, because sometimes the state has a website where they're all listed there together.

And some places have terrible websites where they even forget to put the phone number or the email address, which I found sometimes, but you should be able to track down some numbers or emails to connect.

KAITLIN

Excellent, thank you so much for sharing all this information tonight, Cheyanne and Dr.

HENNESSY:

Salazar. We really appreciate you coming out. And thank you everyone who's chose to spend your afternoon with us. I hope everyone has a great evening.