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Meeting them where they're at: service provider perspectives on the needs of extended foster care participants

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ABSTRACT

To provide the best services possible to young people eligible for extended foster care (EFC), it is critical to understand their needs and to structure services accordingly. This study examined the perspectives of service providers working with young people eligible for EFC regarding their clients' needs and how to be responsive to marginalized subgroups. This study included four focus groups and 14 individual interviews with service providers working with youth eligible for or receiving EFC. Results illustrate a range of unmet service needs and changes needed so that EFC services can better support the transition to emerging adulthood for young people. .

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Introduction

Extended foster care (EFC) is a program of services and benefits provided to young people transitioning from the foster care system who have not yet reached legal permanency. Legal permanency can be described as a permanent living arrangement with an adult caregiver that is legally recognized for an individual who was involved in the foster care system (Winokur et al., 2018). EFC acknowledges that young people who have technically “aged-out” and not reached legal permanency could benefit immensely from continued support as they transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2023), around 19,000 individuals transitioned from foster care without achieving legal permanency in 2021. EFC is meant to provide support as individuals strive to obtain stable housing, pursue educational opportunities, gain work experience, and navigate the joys and challenges of the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood is generally regarded as spanning the ages of

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18–29 (Arnett, 2014) and has been characterized as a developmental transition period between the teenage years and adulthood, with major implications for one's future well-being. Characterized as a period in which individuals form their identity and explore new directions in work and interpersonal relationships, it is also regarded as a time of some instability and of the sense of being caught “*in-between*” (Arnett, 2014). For many young people exiting foster care, emerging adulthood is a premature role transition with precarious implications for their future. This study examines the needs and service delivery gaps in EFC from the perspective of service providers. Potential solutions to improve EFC and ways to better serve and support emerging adult participants are explored as well.

The present study was conducted in Washington State, which has had an EFC program since 2012. In Washington State, EFC is offered as a voluntary program for all young people leaving foster care at age 18 until they turn 21 years of age. Participants may enroll in EFC at any time prior to their 21st birthday and may re-enroll if they leave but decide to return at a later date. Administrative data from 2022 indicates that in Washington State, there were 858 young people ages 18 through 20 in the EFC program, with approximately even numbers of each age group: 18-year-olds (33%), 19-year-olds (36%) and 20-year-olds (31%).

Literature review

The lifespan perspective for young people in EFC

The lifespan perspective is a combination of theories that conceptualize human development from birth to old age as a continuous and dynamic experience across the lifespan (Baltes et al., 1999; Rudolph, 2016; Zacher & Froidevaux, 2021). Instead of focusing on concrete developmental periods with static tasks and rigid expectations tied to one's age, theories that fall within the lifespan perspective (e.g., life course theory, developmental systems theory) emphasize contextual and intrapersonal factors that impact one's development and their ability to accomplish different goals and reach expectations (Rudolph, 2016). According to the lifespan perspective, a young person's journey to emerging adulthood is affected by the unique events an individual experiences and each individual's journey through life may look different for a variety of reasons. Important milestones during emerging adulthood include the development of their identity, establishment of autonomy and the development deep interpersonal relationships. However, life events such as violence or changes in family structure or dynamics, are especially impactful for many young people during this period and may affect their path into emerging adulthood (Chaku & David-Kean, 2024).

Social and environmental changes over the past few decades have shifted the conventionally understood timeline for arriving at adulthood and thus impacts how individuals conceptualize life milestones for young people entering emerging adulthood. Over 20 to 30 years ago, it was commonplace for young people to get married in late adolescence and their early twenties, find a steady career, have children soon after, and settle into building their own families (Sawyer et al., 2018). Further, the pursuit of higher education was not always necessary for a stable and meaningful career. However, recent research illustrated that young people are taking much longer to prepare for full adulthood. Specifically, young people are often not reaching emerging adulthood milestones such as living on their own and eventually buying a home, until their late 20s and sometimes early 30s (L. Jones, 2019; Sawyer et al., 2018). This is due to a variety of different factors, including the current cost of living, requirement of postsecondary training for competitive salaries, and increased competition for employment. These concerns are even more pressing for young people aging out of their foster care placement as they have even more factors that can impact their transition into emerging adulthood such as unaddressed trauma, lack of stability, and educational barriers if they have moved to several different foster care placements during the duration of their time spent in the foster care system (Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Harden, 2004; L. Jones, 2019; Schofield, 2002). Using a lifespan perspective when working with young people transitioning from the foster care system can provide a holistic viewpoint in helping them make a successful transition from adolescent to interdependent young adult.

Unique needs for specific demographics of young people transitioning into EFC

The research literature illuminated the many ways emerging adulthood is challenging for certain groups of young people who have needs not well met by the existing child welfare services. Those demographic subgroups included but are not limited to young people: who are pregnant and/or parenting (Schelbe & Geiger, 2017), who identify as a minoritized racial/ethnic group (Flowers-Corpening, 2022; Grinnell Davis et al., 2023), who identify as LGBTQ+ (Mountz et al., 2018), undocumented young people (Križ & Skivenes, 2012), those who are incarcerated or leaving juvenile rehabilitation (Zajac et al., 2015), young people who have health and mental health difficulties (Lee et al., 2014; Zajac et al., 2015), and individuals living in rural areas (Fusco & Cahalane, 2013). It is important to consider each of these subgroups, as they represent individuals whose needs are often marginalized in systems and who may be less willing to participate in EFC. Additionally, research illustrated an individual's experience in the child welfare system can influence whether they participate in EFC, which is a voluntary program (Park et al., 2020). For example, one qualitative study explored the experiences of African

American young adults who exited foster care and who chose to not engage in EFC and illustrated that the young people's traumatic experiences of abuse in care, broken promises, and lack of autonomy made them unwilling to further engage with the child welfare system after turning 18, despite it being potentially helpful (Flowers-Corpening, 2022). These factors combine to create uniquely challenging experiences for young people transitioning out of the foster care system, especially those representing marginalized subgroups.

Current study

The current study examined the unmet service and support needs of young people in EFC from the perspective of service providers. This study emerged from a systems assessment of EFC in Washington State, where the research team investigated the service and benefit gaps, barriers, and facilitators to accessing and utilization of EFC by young people transitioning into emerging adulthood. The current study provided additional depth to the qualitative analysis portion of the systems assessment by expanding the description and analysis of service provider perspectives and implications for needed practice reforms. The study contributes to both the child welfare and broader youth development literature by adding to the field's understanding of service needs in the area of extended foster care and of practice changes to better meet those needs. The study aimed to share the voices and insights of participants who were actively providing services to help this group of marginalized young people successfully make the transition from late adolescence into emerging adulthood.

Methods

Procedure

This study used qualitative data from semi-structured focus groups and individual interviews with service providers and experts on EFC. Specifically, this study included data collected from four focus groups (4–8 participants in each group) and 14 individual interviews. Interview participants were recruited utilizing targeted snowball methods where community partners referred the researchers to potential participants and participants in turn referred community partners who 1) currently worked with young people in EFC and 2) possessed subject matter expertise. The focus groups included EFC staff from all 6 regions of Washington state and a small number of the state's Juvenile Rehabilitation staff. Program leadership from the State child welfare agency facilitated recruitment of department staff for the focus groups.

Interviews were conducted by members of the research team. Focus groups and interviews were between 45 minutes to 90 minutes long. Focus groups and interviews sought participants' perspectives on the following topics: the most

important and beneficial aspects of extended foster care, the various developmental processes of lifespan development and how well service delivery responds to lifespan development needs, how workers integrated the social networks of the individual receiving services, specific barriers to service provision in EFC, and regional differences across the state (Washington State; see [Appendix](#)). The study proposal was considered by the State Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the relevant University IRB and was determined to be exempt. Informed consent procedures were followed for all focus group and interview participants, including informing individuals that they were free to skip any question or end their participation at any time. All focus groups and interviews were audio recorded using the video-conferencing platform, Zoom, and were later transcribed using Otter.

Additionally, the project was guided by an advisory group of young people who had experienced extended foster care. The advisory group met with the research team several times throughout the project, giving input on the larger systems assessment methods, helping to shape the semi-structured interview guide used for the focus groups and interviews, and providing feedback to inform the study findings.

Data analysis

Once the transcripts were prepped, the data were analyzed using a rapid qualitative analysis approach which involved creating a template spreadsheet that contained the guiding questions and broader topics from the interview guide (Nevedal et al., 2021). The researchers then coded each transcript by reading through and placing quotes from the participant into the question or topic that most aligned with the quote (Keniston et al., 2023; Nevedal et al., 2021). Using rapid qualitative analysis allowed the research team to conduct efficient analysis of verbatim transcripts to examine the participants' perspectives with the intent to gather the information quickly to disseminate back to community partners and the participants themselves (Keniston et al., 2023). Rapid qualitative analysis was appropriate and necessary as the findings and recommendations which emerged from the study were intended to inform legislative advocacy during the state's time-limited legislative session.

Results

In the results of this study, the participants' perspectives illustrate the needs, situations, and experiences of young adults eligible for, receiving, or leaving EFC. Specifically, service providers reported on the barriers that young people accessing EFC come across as they make the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood. Additionally, service providers identified the unique situations of specific subgroups accessing EFC and how the layout and

limitations of the program impacted the service providers' ability to serve them responsively and effectively.

Services in the transition to emerging adulthood

Most participants interviewed for this systems assessment study voiced a strong need for services that accounted for the specific time period in the young person's life as they utilized EFC services. Specifically, participants in the study pointed to the importance of being intentional on the type of services provided to young people to ensure the services aligned with where they were at in their respective lives. One study participant explained: "... it's important for us to recognize the predictable and understandable dynamics around service provision for this age group and really center and think about what can and should we offer, that will have a meaningful, positive impact in their lives."

Other participants discussed specific skills that needed to be explicitly addressed with young people in EFC, especially considering various areas of growth typically associated with the years leading up to adulthood that are not prioritized in foster care. For example, one participant explained the importance of discussing money with young people utilizing EFC:

... Young people have been asking for financial empowerment, training and support, they get this money, but they are conscious that, there's a lot of trauma around money, right? People who have experienced abuse, trauma, power, control, and high levels of poverty, some of the young people, they're very conscious of this, just say, "Yo, I get this money. But I don't, I don't really know what to do, I don't know how to budget."

Moreover, across the majority of the focus groups and interviews, participants discussed the importance of service providers trying to remember where they were when they were transitioning from adolescence to emerging adulthood. Specifically, participants considered their own children's needs or how they benefitted from extra support as a young person transitioning into adulthood. As one interviewee shared:

I didn't always manage my money very well, when I was 18 to 21, but if I was really against a wall, my mom was able to be a backup safety net for me. And I think young people in extended foster care don't have that same opportunity that many other young adults have to make mistakes and grow from them.

Additionally, many of the participants identified the importance of finding caseworkers who enjoy and understand the nuances of working with this specific age group. One participant explained,

I feel like fundamentally having people in the positions that are making decisions that really understand and appreciate the complexities of what it's like to be a teenager, to be

a young adult, trying to launch is paramount. And then from there, then you make policies that are human centered, youth centered.

Lastly, service providers emphasized the importance of considering the young person's previous experiences in foster care placements prior to transitioning to emerging adulthood and being eligible for EFC services. One participant explained, "I think some of the barriers is some young people who have been in foster care have not had a good experience. So, they automatically assume extended foster care is going to extend their hell or poor experience." Overall, most of the participants discussed the importance of service providers, and even broader systems, to consider where the young person is in their life journey transitioning from their foster care placement to EFC to provide appropriate services to cultivate their development into emerging adulthood.

Needs of specific subgroups

The largest theme from this study reflects how specific subgroups of young people identified had specific needs that remained unmet. As detailed below, service provider participants identified subgroups of young adults with specific demographic or other characteristics that had many services and support needs which the EFC program did not meet. The study participants voiced their concerns with the inadequacy of the existing services in supporting the young adults as they needed to be and their frustrations at services that were not sufficiently responsive to young people's needs.

Undocumented young people in EFC

One socio-demographic group that participants identified as being severely underserved were undocumented young people eligible for EFC. Many EFC staff discussed how undocumented young persons' unique lived experiences, and their status marginalized them in their foster care placement and EFC program due to the lack of structural support. Specifically, participants highlighted that undocumented young people in care are underserved by current services and benefits, as they are not even eligible for many benefits and programs. One EFC staff member explained:

We have a really high number of undocumented youth in EFC that didn't come to us through the traditional route, that came to us through private dependencies, and then became eligible for EFC. But the practice model within DCYF is not really intended for these youth, and many of the services that are available to these other extended foster care youth are not available to these youth who are undocumented. . . Our staff are having to do a lot of that work themselves a lot of independent living work with these youth themselves and housing programs that are not available. And so that is a really huge gap for this particular set of youth.

Undocumented status also affects eligibility for benefits designed to support educational advancement for young people with foster care experience. As an EFC focus group participant shared:

When you're not a permanent resident you can't utilize funding such as FASFA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) and you have to do WASFA (Washington Application for Student Financial Aid) you can't do ETV (Educational and Training Voucher) which is a supportive support that helps with unmet needs. It's a much larger burden on our undocumented folks who want to go to college.

Young people involved with the legal system

Many participants expressed concerns for young people involved with the legal system. Specifically, participants expressed specific concerns for young people transitioning out of the juvenile legal system who could greatly benefit from a service like EFC. One participant who works in the legal system explained,

Let's say someone's incarcerated for four years when they turn 18, they're released and they're back in the world with very little experience doing anything independent with not a lot of support. I think it's hard to be successful under those conditions.

The majority of the participants discussed the importance of coordination between different systems, such as the juvenile courts and legal system, to best serve young people coming into EFC who have been involved with multiple systems during their childhood and adolescence. One participant stated, "I think that there has to be training for child welfare workers on how to meaningfully engage youth on your caseloads. And I think that training needs to also be extended to courts."

Young people in rural areas

Participants revealed that young people in certain regions faced service gaps, specifically young adults living in rural regions or "service deserts" as service providers called them during interviews. Particularly, participants discussed the differences between services provided in urban environments compared to rural settings. One participant elaborated on the differences between urban and rural areas:

Yeah, there's more services available to youth who are in cities. There tends to be more available to young people who are in urban centers, for example, it's easier to get a youth something, if you are in the [Seattle] office, compared to more rural settings, it's much harder.

Specific to Washington state, a few participants talked about the contrast between different areas of the state that have a drastic impact on how young people receive services. One participant declared, "Yeah . . . I think the availability of independent living services really varies by region, particularly rural

areas, don't have really ILP [Independent Living Program] services. So really a small fraction of young people who are eligible for ILP receive ILP."

Parents

Another population participants identified as needing specific resources were young adults who were parenting. The needs of young adults who were parents was also mentioned by staff in EFC and specifically by participants who worked within the Juvenile Rehabilitation (JR) department. Particularly, JR staff identified the importance of parenting classes for young parents utilizing EFC, as one participant explained:

Parenting classes, number one . . . especially the young men. I've noticed they come out [of JR], and they're really anxious. They want to jump in and help out, but they don't really know how to help out. So, I suggest parenting classes. I'd say that was definitely a need, because a lot of times their children are born while they're with us, and so their first meeting with them is when they come out.

Intersecting identities: LGBTQ+ and minoritized racial/ethnic identities

Another demographic group that participants often identified as needing dedicated services were young people who identified as LGBTQ+ and/or a minoritized racial/ethnic identity. Participants identified specific needs for these groups that were simply being overlooked and not accounted for in service delivery. One EFC staff person explained:

I think King County is kind of seen as the most progressive for LGBTQ+ youth. I have many on my caseload, but it is super insufficient. They are coming up against all kinds of barriers and stigma and lack of culturally competent services. . . . trying to navigate coordinated care and Medicaid is a nightmare for all of our kids, but particularly for our trans youth who are working on gender affirming care.

Finally, many participants noted that the young person's many social identities intersected and often interacted with each other in complex ways that could impact how services are provided and received while the young person is in EFC. One EFC staff elaborated on the complexity that intersecting identities can create with service provision of EFC:

So, I just I think that . . . in terms of services, I think the people who live further out from an urban center are going to have access to fewer services. So, I think that's a challenge. And then if you happen to be a LGBTQ young person, or child, a young person of color, and you're living somewhere in eastern Washington that's very white, and not terribly accepting of LGBTQ, etc, then that's going to be hard.

One participant explained how it is hard to serve diverse youth when the service providers do not reflect the identities or experiences of the young people in EFC: "Well . . . we have too many white social workers who are taking care of kids of color, or queer youth, who either have no experience with that, or come with bias that they just really don't understand." The

insights from the participants emphasize the dire need of intentional recruitment, retention and robust training among service providers from a variety of backgrounds and experiences to provide holistic services to the young people eligible for EFC.

In addition to identifying the specific needs and hurdles to service utilization for distinct subgroups of young adults eligible for EFC, it is important to acknowledge the lack of financial resources of nearly all the young adults exiting the child welfare system. When reflecting on the most important aspect of EFC for young people, one participant was quick to identify economic insecurity as a critical issue and the importance of the economic resources EFC provides:

... when we were looking at how to continue benefits during the pandemic, it was the financial support of extended foster care. That was the most critical thing that young people identified as wanting to continue, even if they couldn't stay in extended foster care sort of as a program.

Housing instability, homelessness, and economic instability

Across all of the interviews and focus groups, a clear through line was the need for greater services and benefits to improve housing stability for young adults in EFC. Perhaps in recognition of the present, post-pandemic economic context, service provider participants consistently voiced concern about housing instability among all EFC young adults transitioning to adulthood, but especially those in subgroups that are marginalized. Housing that is safe and stable is essential yet elusive in this region and additional services and supports are needed to meet the need.

Participants expressed a great deal of frustration and concern about the housing options for the young people they served across all focus groups and interviews. Topics that came up included the lack of affordable housing that was safe along with the perceived inadequacy of the Supervised Independent Living (SIL) stipend (a monthly stipend of \$810 offered to EFC participants who meet Federal eligibility criteria). As one EFC staff member described:

It's hard out there with housing, to get a cheap, crappy, one bedroom apartment in an area that I wouldn't recommend you walk outside after dark is \$1,300 a month. I mean, that's almost my mortgage. So, it's just crazy out there.

Participants also discussed a desire to focus on long-term stable housing for young people exiting their foster care placement instead of a hyper focus on rapid rehousing. Additionally, the service providers discussed frustrations on the eligibility criteria that create difficult circumstances for young adults utilizing EFC. One difficult scenario that came up during interviews was when young people had to choose between remaining in EFC or using a housing voucher. Young people, regardless of their age, who utilize

a Federal housing voucher have 90 days to leave EFC. In one EFC worker's words:

So, the Feds have really dumped a lot of money into our area [for housing vouchers] . . . but truly, again, these youth are not prepared — to exit within the 90 days . . . They're looking at very short term, and what I'm already seeing now is now I've got 18, 19, 20 year olds, who are facing an eviction because they failed under FYI, because there's not enough money, and there's not enough support when we had to get out of their lives and don't provide them the \$810 after 90 days, and so that's a nightmare.

Another EFC staff talked about having to utilize the program just to prevent homelessness among a young person facing housing barriers, even when they might not be the best fit for the program overall:

I currently have a young adult who has severe mental health [problems]. Is she a good fit for this program? No. — But is this the only program she has to be able to survive and give her some type of type of information to launch, and some . . . things to support her so that she is not homeless? Yes.

Participants emphasized the importance of considering the young person's basic needs and recognizing that even with all of the resources and support EFC aims to provide youth, none of it can truly make an impact if the youth cannot find safe and stable housing.

Young adults in EFC and trauma

Participants identified the impact of the trauma impacting young people in EFC in a variety of ways, leaving them in a place where they are often trying to catch up for experiences missed while they were in care. One EFC staff person explained their perspective regarding the importance of considering where the youth is, developmentally, psychologically, and emotionally, and to work on countering the effects of having been in foster care, “I think our average youth, coming into EFC is developmentally, socially, emotionally, behind. Being in care . . . it's a trauma just being in foster care.” Service providers recognized the need to address the trauma of having been in foster care through counseling and social supports. As one EFC staff member shared: “Having support groups . . . to connect with other foster care youth or youth who experience similar trauma that they can relate to I think is important.” It's critical to acknowledge that young people in the child welfare system being “behind” is in no way an indictment against them as people, but instead a reflection of the lack of support and resources from the system that is intended to serve them.

Mentorship and support networks

In terms of potential solutions to make EFC both more accessible and appealing to young people eligible for the benefits and services, participants

identified that EFC could better utilize the support networks of young people and connect young adults to mentors to assist with long-term stability and success in EFC. One EFC staff explained:

I see this age group specifically really needing mentorship of some sort, and while we can provide some of that as their worker, there's only so much we can provide. So, if we could be reaching into communities to set that up, whether it's mentorship around a career they want to enter, or a trade they want to enter or school, or whatever it may be.

Another EFC staff noticed that young people who are doing the best in EFC seem to be the individuals with the most support in their environments outside of just their caseworker:

The youth that were doing the best are the ones who have the most extensive support network, and it just goes to show natural supports are way better . . . than we are at providing those skills. But it really depends on the youth, whether or not they got lucky enough to maybe be placed in a foster home that's supportive, or just have family that's supportive.

Another participant outlined the importance of looking past legal permanency, and focusing on other types of permanence that are of great importance of young people and can help them transition from late adolescence to emerging adulthood:

Well . . . obviously those that are in extended foster care have not obtained permanency and I think that we need to not stop attempting to find permanency for young people and I [want] the field to define permanency in three ways not just legal permanency, which is the historical focus, but that we should also be working with young people on cultural permanency and relational permanency in making sure that young people really are having concerted case management efforts to address all three.

Overall, participants emphasized the importance of service providers of taking a communal approach and identifying important people in the young person's life that could assist the service provider in ensuring the young person has the holistic support they need to make the successful transition out of foster care into a positive and meaningful adulthood.

Discussion

This study expanded upon qualitative analyses conducted in a larger systems assessment of EFC to assess how well EFC is meeting the needs of the young people it is serving from the perspectives of the service providers on the ground (Tajima et al., 2023). This study has drawn two main conclusions that contribute to the literature and inform future development of EFC as a program for young people. The first is that the foster care and EFC system are inadequate in providing these young people with services to support their transition to emerging adulthood. The second is that, like many programs

attempting to meet the needs of marginalized young people, there are specific demographic and other subgroups of young people (e.g., those involved with the justice system, living in rural environments, young parents, LGBTQ+ and minoritized racial and ethnic subgroups, and those who are undocumented) for whom EFC falls short in addressing their specific needs.

The results of this study align with prior research in many ways, reflecting previous literature and echoing the voices of young people who have experienced living in the child welfare system and also the viewpoints of child welfare staff. For example, in the current study, service providers identified that young people are wary of utilizing EFC out of a fear of continuing the cycle of restriction that they experienced through the foster care system, which may stunt the development of important life skills needed to thrive as an emerging adult. Prior research underscores how factors such as autonomy, agency, and permanency can all be impacted due to experiencing and navigating the child welfare system and all of these, in turn can impact young people's transition into emerging adulthood (Ball et al., 2021; Barnett, 2020; Jankowska et al., 2015). The lack of autonomy experienced by youth in the child welfare system can limit their ability to meet short and long-term goals since they are often not able to engage in normative adolescent activities (e.g., spending the night at a friend's house or getting their driver's license in high school) until emerging adulthood, when they turn 18 and transition out of their foster care placement (Barnett, 2020).

Young people in the child welfare system may also struggle maintaining healthy relationships and support networks because of multiple placements while in care. Difficulty with relationships and relational health skills can also be a result of experiencing maltreatment during and/or before entering the system that may also affect cognitive development (Jankowska et al., 2015). This emphasizes the importance of service providers coordinating other across service systems and geographic regions to provide integrated services to young people that consider both their trauma as well as their individual circumstances and overall personhood. Further, the focus of the child welfare system is centered on legal permanency, either through reunification, guardianship, or adoption, however, participation in EFC means none of those were adequately achieved. Once in EFC, the focus changes to relational permanency and cultural permanency and helping the young person make and maintain meaningful relationships and support networks to help them successfully transition to emerging adulthood and reach their life goals (Ball et al., 2021; A. S. Jones & LaLiberte, 2013). With appropriate programming and resources, EFC can help provide young people access to new support networks while also helping them continue developing the ones they may already have in their immediate environment.

The study findings also align with recent research that highlights that being involved in EFC offers significant benefits, especially for marginalized

demographic and other subgroups of young people eligible for EFC. EFC can help counter the adversities caused by the foster care system and the lack of preparation for the transition into emerging adulthood. For example, research illustrates that remaining in EFC until 21 can be effective in reducing homelessness, pregnancy, criminal legal involvement and is associated with improved outcomes in areas such as education, employment, and social support (Courtney et al., 2021; Kelly, 2020). Further, to best address the concerns of marginalized groups within the participants utilizing EFC facing other forms of discrimination (e.g., minoritized racial/ethnic groups and LGBTQ+ young people) research emphasizes the importance of more caseworkers reflecting those whom they serve (LaBrenz et al., 2022; McCormick et al., 2017; Tordoff et al., 2021). It has also been shown that, among Trans youth seeking gender-affirming medical care, longer delays in receiving treatment were reported among those who had lower income, were on Medicaid, and who had less family support (Tordoff et al., 2021). Importantly, these are considerations that apply to the majority of EFC participants in some capacity and underscore the importance of extra support in EFC for particularly vulnerable groups.

Limitations

To the authors knowledge, few studies have investigated the perspectives of EFC workers or of community-based service providers regarding the service needs and barriers for young people exiting foster care without permanency; however, an important limitation of the study is that it focuses only on one state's EFC program. Our findings may not necessarily be generalizable to other states or jurisdictions. Furthermore, this study included a limited number of interviews and focus groups, conducted with an availability sample of participants who were selected because of their position working with young people in EFC or eligible for EFC. Our participants were not randomly selected, so our findings are not representative of the perspectives of all EFC staff or community partners. Lastly, this study is biased from the perspective of a small number of researchers from one institution who were under contract with the state's child welfare agency to conduct this qualitative project as part of a larger systems assessment of EFC.

Future directions for research and policy

There are many routes further research can take building upon what was gathered from this study. With regard to policy change, one of the concerns identified in the study was eligibility criteria for accessing EFC services and benefits and the barriers which eligibility requirements can pose, particularly for marginalized subgroups of young adults in foster care. This study

highlighted the value of policy reform related to eligibility requirements so that more young adults exiting care can participate in EFC, as pointed to by other research on the benefits of EFC (e.g., Courtney & Hook, 2017). While Federal eligibility requirements such as employment or pursuing education, may still be worked toward in the program, they are better structured as goals rather than barriers to participation.

Additionally, one approach prioritized in this study, and which is critical for future research, is the prioritization of the voices of those with lived experience living in or dealing with the child welfare system. Prioritizing the voices of young people in foster care and EFC or who were formerly in care, and the perspectives of case workers providing services is essential to shed light on issues that might otherwise be overlooked. For example, in the present study, the advisory group of young people with lived expertise gave input on the research plan for the larger systems assessment of EFC, helped refine the interview questions for the qualitative research, and helped validate the study findings with their own experiences. Lastly, further research on the needs and experiences of subgroups of foster youth and young people, especially those who hold a variety of minoritized identities, would help improve understanding of the specific nuances that would make the child welfare system more equitable for these specific groups of young people.

Conclusion

Through analyzing the needs of young adults eligible for EFC from the perspectives of service providers, this study illustrates important nuances to consider when providing EFC programming to young people transitioning from their foster care placement to EFC. The findings of this study can be used to refine EFC so that the services provided better meet the goal of the program, which is to give young people exiting the foster care system a transitional period into emerging adulthood and remove barriers that disproportionately hold them back from a wholistic lifespan perspective.

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Data availability statement

Not applicable.

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Appendix Interview Guide

- (1) What is the most important aspect of EFC for young adults transitioning from foster care?
- (2) How should the age or developmental level of young adults impact how EFC services are provided?
- (3) What other factors impact how service providers should provide services to young adults in EFC?
- (4) How should service providers involve the young adults' social networks in service provision?
- (5) How could EFC in Washington be improved upon?
 - (a) What gaps do you see as a _____? (gaps may be at the system or individual level, or gaps in young peoples' lives)
 - (b) If you had to propose at least one specific policy, intervention, or recommendation what would it be?
- (6) What are the barriers to supporting the unique needs of young adults in EFC?
 - a. What culturally specific barriers and needs are there? How do you overcome barriers?
- (7) What regional differences affect services and benefits to young adults in EFC?
- (8) Is there anything else you would like to address or discuss before the interview concludes?