I. Domain Space and Requirements Gathering Report

H541 Interaction Design Practices
2nd November 2023

Aging out of Foster Care

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Executive Summary

Foster care refers to continuous care given to children who have been separated from their parents or legal guardians. The state agency regulates their welfare through placement in shelters like foster family homes, relatives' homes, and potential pre-adoptive homes, among others [1]. Indiana is home to nearly 31,000 children in foster care and has the fourth-highest rate of youth in foster care in the nation [2].

Aging out of Foster care: Foster children who don't get adopted often have to go from one foster home to another until they reach a specific age limit set by the state. In Indiana, the older youth age out of the system at 18 years. Aging out is the process of a youth transitioning from the foster care system toward independent living. As per FY 2021, 8,691 older youth aged out of foster homes in the state of Indiana, out of which only 1,844 were adopted, leaving 1,624 with termination of parental rights who were left alone to survive independently [3].

State assistance for aging out: Indiana provides support services to help older youth transition into adulthood, targeted towards those who are likely to turn 18 in foster care or foster alumni (until the age of 23) who require assistance [4]. This is a voluntary extended older youth services program where they can re-enter the foster care system and avail assistance in the areas of housing, education, and employment.

Target Users:

1. Aging out older youth (18 - 23 years): These users are eligible for state-assisted youth services. They get financial support and a few years to prepare for independent living before leaving the system.

2. Aged out older youth (23 - 25 years): Once they cross the age of 23, they do not have the option to opt for extended foster care and have no external financial support hence, they are completely on their own.

Focused Problem area and the scope: Through primary research, we discovered that the extended services program supports older youth up to a certain age & to a limited extent, which is insufficient for them to survive in the real world. After this, they often navigate life independently, with little or no support or guidance to assist them during this transition. They must get the required guidance in their formative years to transition to an independent and stable life.

Common Key Problems and their Impact:

1. Lack of stable social connections: Since older youths have crossed the age limit of adoption, they do not have any families to rely on, and they have limited or no support from their previous foster families [5]. They also change multiple foster homes across the years, due to which they are unable to form and maintain long-term friendships. Additionally, they are also habitual to short-term commitment to people, which carries forward into their relationships. it can result in loneliness and emotional instability, as they often lack deep bonds and support from their social connections [5].

2. Limited exposure to the knowledge of basic life skills: Since users do not have a stable family life or social connections to guide them, they do not get enough exposure to basic life skills like cooking, opening a bank account, booking a doctor's appointment, etc. They also lack professional skills that will prepare them for a stable job.

3. Lack of financial stability: Users till the age of 23 have minimum financial support till they age out of the system, and users more than 23 years old have no financial support. Due to the lack of funds, many users drop out of college and find it difficult to get a stable job. Financial crises lead to homelessness. One in five foster youth who age out of care or emancipate will be homeless within two years of leaving the state's custody [6]. This generally provokes young adults to get into illegal activities like robbery, trespassing, etc.

Social Impact: The statistics show that these older youths are at considerable risk of homelessness [7] and have a high possibility of getting into criminal and illegal activities after getting out of the system, which can increase the crime rate and lower the social status of the state.

Educational Impact: In Indiana, only 55% of foster youth graduated from high school as compared to 87% of all students, and only 11% of students in foster care were likely to earn an honors diploma, which is 2.5 times less than all students [8]. This impacts their ability to secure a stable job.

Key findings from research and interviews

We aimed to gain insights into the challenges young adults face within foster care provision centers and those who have transitioned out of the system. Additionally, we also sought to understand the perspectives of caregiving individuals surrounding these aged-out youth. To do so, we visited a foster care center and interviewed three staff individuals, one being the Vice President of Fostering and Adoption Services. We also interviewed one aged-out foster alumni.

1. Significant instability after leaving the foster care system: Many struggle to secure stable housing, often resorting to odd jobs to make ends meet. Studies indicate that between 31% & 46% of individuals transitioning out of the foster care system experience episodes of homelessness[9]. This situation is notably different from their peers who have the support of their parents or financial assistance, which enables them to maintain stable housing[10]. From our interview, the participant who had aged out of the system said, "We feel like we are playing catch-up with the other people of our age in terms of getting basic utilities to live." The consequences of this harsh reality of lagging behind and not getting any stable living include homelessness, unemployment, substance misuse, and involvement with the criminal justice system[3].

2. Lack of social support: Older youth expressed their fear of making a living after leaving the system. This is primarily because the foster care system provides limited opportunities for them to develop and exercise decision-making abilities, resulting in a sense of helplessness among older youth [11]. Consequently, many of them seek dependence, whether it's in the form of a mentor or emotional support. The participant expressed, "We are constantly in survival mode, always compelled to rely on ourselves without anyone to call our own."

3. Lack of necessary skills: Aged-out youth face difficulties maintaining long-term employment. This challenge is primarily due to their background in foster homes, which often involved short-term commitments, influencing their job stability. One of the interview participants noted, "They get fired easily because they talk back, or they simply quit as they have commitment constraints." This is mainly because these young adults have huge and sudden responsibilities on their plates, with no formal moral education. As a result, unemployment rates are notably high among aged-out youth, with studies indicating that 47% of former foster children are unemployed [12].

Problem Framing: How might we help aged-out older youths successfully transition to self-sufficient individuals with a stable lifestyle by using social computing platforms?

What has been done to address this problem?

There have been various initiatives taken by the government and other foster care organizations to develop platforms to help connect aged-out individuals with vital resources for self-sufficiency. Notable among them are:

1. Youth.gov: A collaborative effort involving multiple U.S. federal agencies, including the Department of Health and Human Services, Education, and Labor, focuses on providing information, resources, and tools to support the well-being and success of young people, particularly those aging out of foster care.

2. Sparkle by Firefly: An app that works as a security repository for older kids aged out of foster care to store their personal documents while seamlessly linking them to resources like housing, pantry, employment, emotional well-being.

3. Indiana State Assistance: Programs directed towards providing voluntarily requested assistance after aging out, in terms of housing, career training, tuition fees, etc., depending on their respective needs and eligibility.

a) Extended Foster Collaborative Care: Older youth can request to re-enter the foster care system until age 21.

b) Older Youth Services (OYS): For teens turning 18 in foster care to help them transition into adulthood.

c) Voluntary Older Youth Service: A voluntary extension of the OYS from ages 21-23 years old.

While progress has been made, challenges persist, and there is a need for continued efforts to provide extensive support and improve the outcomes for these young adults as they transition to independence.

Appendix

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Primary Research

Age Group: Teens

Study Goals: We aimed to study the challenges young adults face within foster care provision centers and those who have transitioned out of the system

Directions:
1. Helping teens with resources to attain stability (financial, housing etc)
2. Connecting teens to mentors for future assistance and guidance
3. Helping teens increase their chances of getting adopted

Questions - Organizers/ helpers/caretakers
1. How does fostering generally work here?
2. How often do teens go to foster families?
3. Do families get an option to choose which kids/ teens they would like to foster?
4. On average, how many teens get adopted per year from your organization?
5. After which age does the adoption rate decline?
6. Are there teenagers who don't wish to get adopted after a certain age? Why?
7. Do you provide any educational or vocational training/ Support?
8. What happens to teens once they are over 18?
    a. Do you guys provide any support or help?
    b. If Yes- what?
    c. If No- Why?
9. What are some common reasons why kids are put up for fostering?
10. Do you have any contact with teens over 18 after they leave your foster home?

Questions - Older Youth
1. At what age were you brought into foster care?
2. How many foster families have you been with?
3. What was the time period of your stay with these foster families?
4. What was your experience like staying with these families?
5. What is your emotional response after leaving a foster home?
6. Why do you think families are not inclined towards adopting teenage kids?
7. How many other kids were with you at foster homes?
8. Do you wish to get adopted?
    a. If yes- how do you think your life would be better?
    b. If not- why?
9. Have you ever tried getting assistance on your mental health?
10. What is your level of education?
11. Do you have any specific future goals or preferences for a job?
12. What support does your foster center provide regarding your skill development?

Interview Notes:

Notes - Brooke Clawson.
=> 21 case will stay open in the state.
=> Indiana Increased it to 23.
=> Lacked stability., Family - NO.
=> Poor peer connections, drug abuse, housing
   issues , Eviction on history.
=> Rent, Transportation etc is helped with
   in batches.
=> Case mangers help these teens.
Developed an app recently.
Tiktok style Guide videos.
Learning management system , budgeting etc.
Help in Resume + Job Interview + Soft skills
Brokering service - connecting them to different
sources.
("Connections have faded over time")
Foster success - check it out.
Most of the time kids are going from home to
home. [shelters at times]
"Hard to trust". "Attachment Issues".
"Prove me wrong foster Parents". - kids say.
"Hard for case mangers" to manage them.
Peer navigator program
"Transportation - Employment.
Emotional Regulation + Employment.
They fight usually & get terminated.

"I could die alone, and nobody would notice"
• Foster parents are never like have a real connection
→ 10 year old → depression
→ No privilege to say change a
   foster parent
→ Abusive childhood
→ Messaging landlords , "Rental voucher"
                        from city
21 birthday with 2 distant relatives
↳ "Anything to avoid a group home"
   "Feels rug can be pulled under you at any point"
— came to system → 7 years old
                    15 families
TRUST issues , don't "trust anybody"
"Always in Survival Mode"

Nightmares and flashbacks
↳ Did MRIs and Scans → Because of abuse
                        Bipolar disorder
                        PTSD, depression
Stats: [25% foster children age out suffer
         direct effect of PTSD]

Aggressive with foster parents
Slept on tiled floors

"Hated people, Hated God, Hated my life"

Mental health facility (7 months)

$1000 from state each month (differs by state)
                            (xxxx)
"Tight rope that you're walking. One bump
  and you fall"
$500 from job → dropped out of college
[No financial education]
Trauma of being in the system
Got into robbery
abs [1/4th → 1 night in prison | 1/3rd experied homelessness]
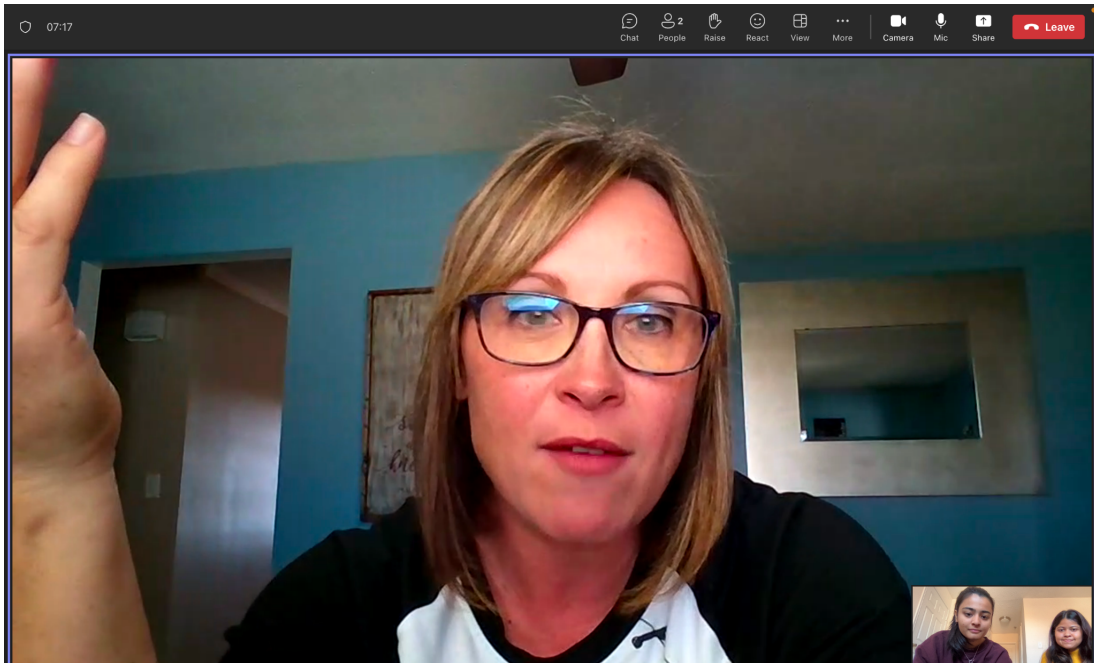"Playing catch-up with normal kids"
ability -
     Abusive Parents
[Stats : 25,000 kids age out of foster care in US every
                                                    year]
     20% become instantly homeless

Interview:

Screenshot from an interview

Field Visit Images:

Photos of Team Ganymede volunteering at Firefly Children and Family Alliance, Indianapolis.

Personas:

Persona 1- Meet Alexa (category: User *Aging-out*)

Alexa Abraham

AGE	19
GENDER	FEMALE
EDUCATION	NURSING
WORK	UNEMPLOYED
LOCATION	INDIANAPOLIS

Unstable · Independent · Frustrated · Dejected · Optimistic

"Other people look forward to their 23rd birthday, whereas I fear the life I am going to live afterwards"

Bio

Alexa is a teenager who was brought into the foster care system at a tender age of 10 . She has been to seven foster care homes but was not able to find a forever home. Now she has crossed the legal age of adoption and has no hope of a family support. Before she turned 18, she applied for the "Older Youth Services and Collaborative Care" to remain in the system and continue to get support as she was incapable of living on her own due to lack of life skills and finances.

Pain Points

- Concerns about financial stability after dropping out of the system.
- Due to instability throughout her childhood, she faces frequent mood swings, signs of depression and loneliness.
- She finds it hard to connect with people and create meaningful relationships.
- She is unhappy with her experience living in the facility.
- Lacks the knowledge of basic life skills needed to survive in the real world.

Behaviors

- She sometimes becomes violent or has outbursts due to her poor mental health.
- She finds it difficult to trust people due to her past experiences as she feels like no one cares about her.
- She constantly worries about her being homeless.

User Needs and Goals

- Life skills to survive without the support of the system.
- Emotional support and guidance.
- Find a decent house to live in after moving out of the facility.
- A job to provide her financial stability.

Persona 2- Meet Jack (category: User *Aged-out*)

Jack Lopez

AGE	24
GENDER	MALE
EDUCATION	COLLEGE DROPOUT
JOB	CLEANING STREETS
LOCATION	GREENCASTLE

Depressed · Frustrated · Needy · Volatile · Unsettled

"I have struggled all my life with metal trauma. And now I feel like I am playing catch-up with the other people of my age in terms of getting basic utilities in order to live a stable life"

Bio

Jack is a foster care alumni who was brought into the foster care system at the age of 7. He has been a victim of substance abuse as a teenager. He legally aged out of the extended foster care system at 23. He is currently living in a relative's abandoned apartment with no electricity as he cannot afford his own place. He dropped out of college to do odd-jobs to support himself.

Pain Points

- He finds it difficult to afford an house. Worried about being homeless.
- Don't have skills required to get a stable job and is struggling to find a good job.
- Have nobody to go to for emotional support, during emergencies or holidays.
- He struggles with doing tasks like cooking, applying for jobs, finding a place to stay, opening a bank account etc.
- He finds it difficult to teach himself all tasks.
- Unable to manage finances on his own.

Behaviors

- Struggles to survive with odd jobs
- He is prone to falling to substance abuse due his history.
- He is afraid he might get into illegal activities to survive
- He carries the foster care system mindset with him and has the baggage of being pushed around.

User Needs and Goals

- Stable income and a place to stay right now.
- Emotional support and a few people to call home.
- To acquire skills to come out of survival mode.
- Refrain from getting into illegal activities