EXPLORING PERCEPTIONS OF EXTENDED FOSTER CARE IN NASHVILLE, TN

By

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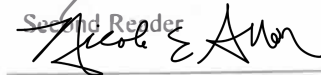
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Exploring Perceptions of Extended Foster Care in Nashville, TN

Approximately 20,000 youth age out of the foster care system each year, leaving the system without reuniting with family or finding a permanent home (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022). Depending on state policy, youth typically age out of the system at 18 or 21 years old or when they graduate high school. At this point, youth may lose access to services through the child welfare system and are thrust into adulthood with little support. As a result, many former foster youth face challenges like unemployment, homelessness, and food insecurity that can affect the trajectory of their lives after they leave foster care (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022; Youth Transitions Advisory Council (YTAC), 2023). The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Fostering Connections Act) gave states the option to increase the foster care age limit to age 21 to address the struggles of foster youth as they become adults (Child Welfare Information Gateway (CWIG), 2022). The Fostering Connections Act is one of the most important child welfare policy changes since the creation of the foster care system, and after about 15 years of implementation, policymakers and practitioners are still learning how to operate effective extended foster care programs.

Extended Foster Care in Tennessee

Tennessee is among the 48 states in America that operate extended foster care programs (CWIG, 2022). The Fostering Connections Act created eligibility criteria for extended foster care programs, and states can choose options to implement from these criteria as well as develop additional criteria depending on the needs and contexts in their local areas (CWIG, 2022). To qualify for Tennessee's Extension of Foster Care (EFC) program, youth must reside in Tennessee, turn 18 years old while in foster care, and meet one of the following requirements:

1. Participate in secondary education or a related program that leads to an equivalent credential,

2. Enroll in an institution that provides post-secondary or vocational education,

3. Participate in a program or activity designed to promote or remove barriers to employment,

4. Work at least 80 hours per month, or

5. Be unable to work or enroll in academic programs due to a medical condition (YTAC, 2023).

Youth who meet the eligibility requirements listed above are able to participate in EFC until they turn age 21 (Tennessee Department of Children's Services, n.d.). At age 18, youth can choose not to receive Extension of Foster Care Services (EFCS), and if they change their minds over time, they can receive EFCS in the future as long as they meet the eligibility requirements. The same is true for youth who initially accept EFCS, decide to stop participating in EFC, and express interest in returning to the program before they turn 21 years old (Tennessee Department of Children's Services, n.d.).

In fiscal year 2023, fifty percent of youth who were eligible for EFC participated in the program (YTAC, 2023). This was the highest rate of participation since the program began, excluding fiscal year 2020, which waived some eligibility criteria. Although the uptake rate for EFC is increasing, half of the youth eligible for the program do not participate (YTAC, 2023). As Tennessee grows and strengthens EFC to support the needs of older foster youth, it is important to identify opportunities for improvement and what works well with program implementation. Research often explores the types of services youth receive through extended foster care programs, and Figure 1 describes the general services available to youth in EFC (YTAC, 2023). The amount of financial support available through different EFCS varies (Tennessee Department of Children's Services, 2023). For example, educational and post-

secondary application fees may differ based on the institution or program. Some financial amounts are standard across all youth, including the vouchers available through the Education and Training Voucher program, which offer youth up to $5,000 a year for post-secondary education, and the individual living allowance, which offers $14.06 per day for youth in EFC, $7.03 per day for youth in EFC with income from other resources, or $20.00 per day for youth in EFC who are the primary caretakers of a minor (Tennessee Department of Children's Services, 2023). Service receipt provides important information about program implementation, but it is also helpful to consider why some youth decline different services or participation in the program. This information may highlight opportunities for the state to expand access to EFC and help youth understand how the program can meet their needs. This study seeks to explore the factors that influence youths' decisions to participate in EFC, the role of eligibility criteria in promoting participation, and the services that are most helpful for youth as they transition to adulthood.

Figure 1.

Overview of Tennessee's Extension of Foster Care Services
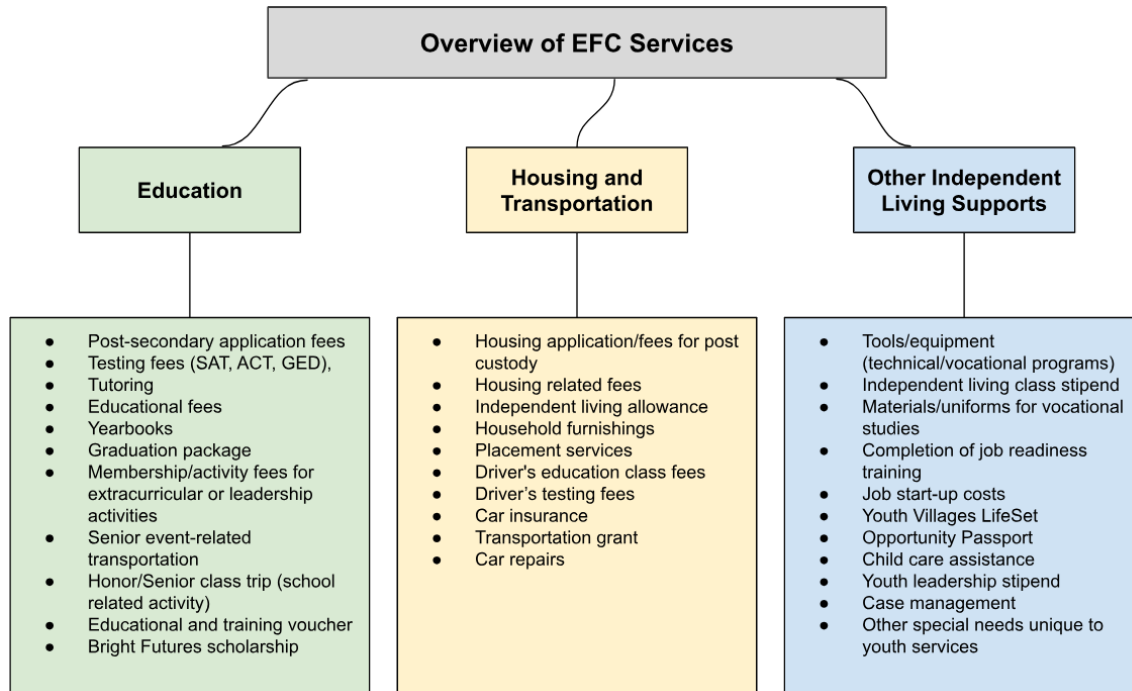
Note. The services included in this figure were described in the YTAC 2023 Annual Report.

Literature Review

This section provides an overview of the current literature on extended foster care programs in the United States. It explores the effectiveness of extended foster care programs, describes perspectives on extended foster care programs, identifies challenges with extended foster care programs, and discusses the motivation for the current study.

Effectiveness of Extended Foster Care

Extended foster care across the country is still a relatively new social support program, and research shows programs lead to mixed results for youth. Some studies found youth who participate in extended foster care report increased earnings and educational attainment (Courtney et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2020; Rubio & Covarrubias, 2020). However, the Children's Initiative for Fostering Futures Initiative (2015) found about two-thirds of the respondents in San

Diego County's extended foster care program were unemployed. Additionally, over half of the respondents who were employed earned less than $10 per hour (Children's Initiative for Fostering Futures Initiative, 2015). Although outcomes may vary for youth, studies have found more time spent in extended foster care programs promotes positive outcomes for youth. For example, for each additional year spent in extended foster care, the odds of experiencing food insecurity and homelessness two years after exiting care decreased by 21% and 19% respectively for youth who participated in the fourth wave of the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (Courtney et al., 2021). These findings suggest time spent in extended foster care can help reduce barriers for youth and promote positive outcomes, although the states and local areas implement their programs differently, which may contribute to variations in outcomes across studies.

Multiple studies have found that county-level characteristics play important roles in the amount of time youth spend in extended foster care and the outcomes they achieve through the program (Courtney et al., 2019; Park et al., 2022; Peters, 2012). For example, youth were expected to spend more time in extended foster care when case workers believed court personnel supported extended foster care (Courtney et al., 2019), and Peters (2012) found the length of a youth's stay in extended foster care varied across jurisdictions in Illinois. Additionally, a larger number of case managers in a country is associated with additional time spent in extended foster care (Park et al., 2022). The political context within counties may also affect the amount of time youth spend in extended foster care as higher proportions of registered Republican voters were negatively associated with the amount of time youth spent in extended foster care (Courtney et al., 2019; Park et al., 2022). Courtney et al. (2019) suggest this association may be related to principles of conservative political thought like an increased emphasis on self-sufficiency and

reduced government spending in social programs. Because county-level factors play an important role in how youth experience extended foster care programs, it is important to explore extended foster care at both state and local levels.

Perspectives on Extended Foster Care

Research on the knowledge and attitudes toward extended foster care highlights some inconsistencies between the ways case managers and youth perceive extended foster care programs. Research shows case managers generally have positive views of extended foster care (Moghaddam & Garcia, 2013; Napolitano et al., 2015). Studies that explore why youth participate in extended foster care highlight how relationships with child welfare agency staff and perceptions of independence can influence decisions to leave or remain in care. Napolitano et al. (2015) found most case managers in California believed the primary motivator for participation in extended foster care was housing and material needs, but youth most often reported a desire to further their education as their primary motivation for remaining in foster care. Additionally, most case managers believed youth did not participate in extended foster care because they did not want to be involved with the child welfare system, but only about one-quarter of youth indicated a desire to avoid social workers or the court system was the primary reason they left care (Napolitano et al., 2015). Many youth in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania reported leaving foster care was an essential step toward becoming an adult, which is why they did not participate in extended foster care (Goodkind et al, 2011). Studies have also highlighted challenges with implementing and understanding extended foster care. Seven out of eight case managers in San Bernadino County, California reported receiving training related to extended foster care and emphasized the importance of training and preparation to provide extended foster care services to youth (Moghaddam & Garcia, 2013), which supports youth reports of receiving

conflicting information about extended foster care and struggling to access services (Goodkind et al., 2011; Napolitano et al., 2015; Rubio & Covarrubias, 2020).

Challenges with Extended Foster Care

Qualitative studies have helped provide additional insight into the experiences of youth who participate in extended foster care programs, and this helps highlight areas for improvement that may be missed with quantitative analyses. Although extended foster care programs offer a variety of services, research shows youth are not always aware of the options available to them through these programs. For example, about three-quarters of San Diego youth in the extended foster care program in California reported they did not receive tutoring although they believed it would be helpful to them (Children's Initiative for Fostering Futures Initiative, 2015). Additionally, most respondents enrolled in post-secondary did not receive grants and scholarships that they were eligible for through the program (Children's Initiative for Fostering Futures Initiative, 2015). Some foster youth in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania noted they didn't understand the conditions they needed to meet to remain in care or they attempted to meet requirements but felt forced out of the system (Goodkind et al., 2011). Foster youth have also reported a desire for improved communications with case managers and increased access to career and life skills support through extended foster care (Contreras, 2014; Rubio & Covarrubias, 2020). Additionally, foster youth expressed challenges with maintaining relationships as they age out of care and desired the opportunity to build networks with other youth, families, and resources in their communities (Contreras, 2014; Goodkind et al., 2011).

Motivation for This Study

Most literature available on extended foster care programs focuses on extended foster care programs in California and the states involved in the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult

Functioning of Former Foster Youth (Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin). Although states can learn from the findings of these studies and adapt best practices to improve their programs, they must monitor and assess their own programs to truly understand whether youth receive the services and support they need to achieve self-sufficiency. State and county characteristics can affect how child welfare agencies operate and youth experience extended foster care programs. As policymakers and practitioners in Tennessee seek to understand how to help former foster youth transition to adulthood and make the most of the program funding available, research is needed to explore the implementation of the EFC program. Some Tennessee policymakers have shown increased interest in the EFC program since the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, legislators introduced a bill to raise the age limit of the EFC program to 23 years old in the current session. Research on the EFC program can help drive evidence-informed policy and improve the experiences of older foster youth who participate in the program.

Before I discuss the methods and results of this study, I would like to acknowledge my standpoint as a White woman pursuing higher education. I have never been directly involved in the child welfare system. My experiences volunteering with child welfare professionals and youth fueled my desire to pursue a project in child welfare. I acknowledge that my positionality influenced this project, connected me with organizations in Nashville that were willing to support this project, and helped me make meaning of the information collected through this study. To help address any biases, I worked closely with other individuals to design this study and provided opportunities for participants to review interview summaries.

Methods

This section describes the methods used for this study, including the study design, recruitment process, sample characteristics, data collection processes, and data analysis procedures.

Study Design

The Department of Children's Services (DCS) administers Tennessee's EFC program, so I initially met with DCS staff in the Independent Living (IL) program to identify ways my research could meet the needs of the department as it continues to grow the EFC program. This study sought to deepen the understanding of Tennessee's EFC program by using qualitative methods to explore the perspectives of staff who provide services through the EFC program. No hypotheses were tested, but the study aimed to understand the thoughts and experiences of participants, allowing grounded theory to emerge through semi-structured interviews. The following research questions were explored through the perspectives of staff within community-based organizations:

1. What factors do staff believe influence the decision of older foster youth to opt in or out of the Extension of Foster Care program?

2. How does the Extension of Foster Care program's eligibility criteria facilitate or hinder participation in the program?

3. What supports or services do staff perceive as most helpful for youth as they transition to adulthood?

The Vanderbilt University Institutional Review Board approved the study and identified it as meeting the criteria for exemption (d)(2) under 45 CFR 46.104.

Recruitment

DCS staff identified two community-based organizations, Monroe Harding and Youth Villages, that would be helpful to work with because they serve a significant number of young adults who participate in EFC. Monroe Harding operates within Nashville, but Youth Villages has several offices throughout Tennessee. This study focused specifically on staff in the Nashville area due to time constraints. Before conducting interviews with staff, I met with the directors of programs that serve young adults in EFC within each community-based organization. These conversations informed the development of the semi-structured interview protocols used with participants and helped recruit participants from each organization. After establishing contact with each organization, I shared my information with my primary contact, who either connected me directly with staff over email or set up additional calls and arranged for me to meet other staff in person. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants with experience providing services through the EFC program and working directly with foster youth in Tennessee.

Participants

Staff in Monroe Harding's Young Adult Resource Center and Youth Villages' LifeSet program participated in this study. These staff work with young adults who participate in EFC, who choose not to participate in EFC, and who are not eligible for EFC. Eight staff members across both organizations participated in the study: four staff from Monroe Harding and four staff from Youth Villages. Due to the small sample size of the study, participant demographics are not reported. The number of staff within each program varies and sharing demographic information could potentially identify participants. It was imperative to protect the confidentiality of all participants to encourage honest reflections, thus any potentially identifying

information was excluded from the analysis. Participant roles varied within each program, but all worked closely with young adults who participate in EFC. Their experiences working in child welfare, including roles outside of their current organization, ranged from less than one year to over 15 years.

Data Collection

Data were collected through five semi-structured interviews with the eight study participants. Seven of the eight interviews were conducted virtually through Zoom, and one interview was conducted in person at the community-based organization. To gather information systematically, a semi-structured interview protocol was used to guide conversations across interviews. The semi-structured protocol facilitates natural conversations and allows the interviewer to follow the trajectory of the discussion by asking a range of follow-up questions to clarify responses and encourage participants to share additional details. All participants agreed to participate over email and again before the interview began. Interviews ranged from 30 to 50 minutes. Participants were entered into a lottery to win one, $50 Kroger gift card after interviews were completed.

Data Analysis

I did not record interviews, but I took detailed notes throughout each conversation. Following each interview, I created summaries of the interview notes to aid with analysis by de-identifying all information and organizing information in a consistent format. All participants were asked if they would like to review a summary of the interview notes to ensure the notes accurately reflected the conversation from their perspective. Two of the eight participants elected to review the summaries, and six participants declined. Interview summaries were imported into NVivo 2024 and coded through an iterative process of open and axial coding. I identified potential codes after reviewing themes in the data, so I did not prepare a codebook before I began

my analysis. To connect information across interviews, I looked for repeated concepts across at least two participants. Due to the small sample size, some reflections shared by one participant were uplifted to capture unique perspectives and insights on the EFC program.

Results

This section describes the results of this study exploring perspectives on the EFC program and presents findings by research question.

Factors That Influence Decisions to Opt In or Out of EFC

Foster youth have diverse backgrounds and experiences, and participants emphasized that numerous factors can influence whether youth opt in or out of the EFC program. Figure 2 presents the factors discussed by participants across interviews with the size of each factor reflecting the number of participants who discussed the topic. All participants identified experiences with DCS as the primary factor that influences a youth's decision to participate in EFC. Participants felt regardless of how or whether the EFC program is explained to youth, if they have had bad experiences with DCS, almost nothing could convince them to participate in EFC because they are no longer required to interact with DCS. Because EFC is voluntary, youth have agency for what can feel like the first time in their involvement with DCS. Participants also noted it's important for youth to make the decision for themselves, and many youth desire to live independently after feeling overserved throughout their lives. Six participants highlighted that the age restrictions of EFC and general timing in a youth's life can also affect whether they participate in EFC. For example, some youth may opt in or out at age 18 but change their minds over time. These youth may come back while they are still eligible and try to reenter the program, or they may age out before they can take advantage of the resources available. Four

participants shared they've helped youth reenter the program, while three participants noted they rarely see youth attempt or desire to reenter the program.

Figure 2.

Why Youth Opt Out of EFC
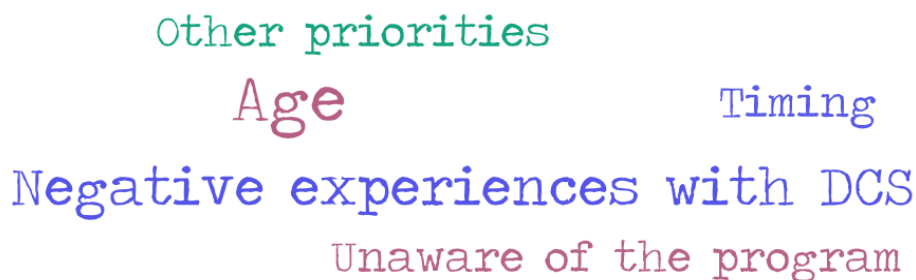
Note. The size of each word or phrase in this figure represents the number of participants who identified the topic as a factor that influences a youth's decision to participate in EFC.

Some participants noted that youth who qualify for the program may face challenges related to their basic needs or health that take priority over participation in EFC. Although youth with medical conditions that prevent them from meeting other requirements may qualify for EFC, this means youth must have access to medical care and disclose any conditions to DCS. Access to medical care varies for youth, and youth also have different levels of trust with DCS staff, so they may hesitate to share medical information to remain in EFC. Additionally, youth often focus on the issues they currently face, so they may not understand how pursuing education or working through EFC could benefit them in the future. Participants remarked that EFC sets expectations for youth, and these expectations add more pressure to youth as they navigate the transition to adulthood. Some participants said this provides a helpful structure for youth; however, others indicated the pressure makes the transition to adulthood even more complex and

may lead youth to opt out of the program because they don't have the capacity to take on additional responsibilities for EFC.

Participant perspectives varied on whether awareness of EFC influences youth's decisions to participate in the program. Half of the participants noted that they rarely see youth who qualify but do not participate in EFC. They shared that nearly all youth they serve are aware of the EFC program by the time they age out of care. Other participants indicated the extent to which youth understand what is available through EFC and how they can access the program varies by DCS staff. Some IL Specialists provide more information about EFC than others, and some can explain the benefits and requirements of the program in ways that resonate with youth more than others. Six participants noted youth typically do not ask about EFC, but they believe their colleagues and partners at DCS generally discuss the program with youth. Two participants cautioned that youth slip through the cracks and may not even realize they qualified for the program until they reach age 21. They added many youth are unaware of how the program can help them, so they may not understand what they might be missing until they are no longer eligible for EFC.

Role of EFC Eligibility Criteria

Participants noted EFC eligibility criteria can both facilitate access and create barriers to access for youth. In 2023, Tennessee expanded its eligibility criteria to allow youth who work 80 hours a month to qualify for EFC. Half of the participants in this study emphasized the importance of the work pathway, as many youth who age out of care want to enter the workforce. This legislative change expanded access to the EFC program, making participation possible for more youth throughout the state. All participants felt the work pathway was a positive change for the EFC program, but three participants highlighted youth may still struggle

with maintaining eligibility. For example, youth who pursue the education pathway while working may not be able to keep up with the expectations for academic enrollment and achievement. Additionally, youth who decide to pursue the 80-hour-a-month work pathway while also pursuing education or training opportunities may struggle to meet the work requirement and keep up with education and training responsibilities. Some youth would rather leave EFC than try to meet requirements that do not align with their current obligations and plans. Three participants noted eligibility criteria can be applied inconsistently across youth with some youth able to maintain eligibility while unemployed and others being discharged from the program quickly if they can't find consistent work. Three participants highlighted that IL Specialists will often work with youth to identify options that help them stay in EFC while three others indicated EFC requirements are often rigid and not adapted to meet youth where they are.

Participants identified age as the primary eligibility criterion that creates a barrier to participation in the EFC program. First, youth must turn 18 years old while in foster care to qualify for EFC. This means youth who exit care at age 16 or 17 are not eligible, regardless of the amount of time they have spent in foster care throughout their lives. Additionally, four participants identified more than one youth who exited care just before their 18th birthday. Participants noted some IL staff explained the EFC option to youth and presented options for them if they were interested in the program after they turned 18 years old. On the other hand, participants also noted some IL specialists were not flexible and did not explain potential options for youth, so those youth never qualified for EFC. Participants also identified challenges with the upper age limit of 21 years old. Three participants highlighted the ways trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences affect the development of foster youth. Although youth may reach age 21 on paper, participants cautioned that they may present as younger due to the trauma they have

experienced throughout their lives. Additionally, participants noted that it is challenging for youth to establish a consistent support system by age 21, which further complicates their transition to adulthood. Half of the participants emphasized that they serve a significant number of youth between the ages of 21 and 26 who could continue to benefit from EFC. The other half of the participants did not discuss raising the age limit and noted the additional three years of support available through EFC does help youth transition to adulthood.

Services That Help Youth Transition to Adulthood

All participants described EFC as an important program that can make the transition to adulthood a little easier for youth through a range of services and formal and informal supports. Figure 3 presents the services discussed by participants across interviews with the size of each factor reflecting the number of participants who described the service as helpful for youth. Participants identified housing, financial support, and transportation as the most helpful services for youth in EFC. All participants noted housing services are commonly requested and used by youth in EFC. Housing support meets a basic need for youth who age out of care, and four participants remarked that this helps youth focus on other responsibilities or goals because they do not have to worry about where they will live. One participant remarked that many of the youth they see would likely be unhoused without the support from EFC. Several also participants noted the financial support provided to youth makes a significant difference for youth because it provides consistency for youth as they navigate unexpected expenses and challenges maintaining jobs that provide a steady income. Seven participants also highlighted the importance of transportation, describing these services as instrumental in helping youth maintain their eligibility in EFC because most youth need to use some sort of transportation to participate in education opportunities or go to work.

Figure 3.

EFC Services That Help Youth Transition to Adulthood

Note. The size of each word or phrase in this figure represents the number of participants who identified the service as helpful or useful for youth in EFC.

Six participants emphasized the importance of case management and wraparound services available through the EFC program. Youth transitioning to adulthood often struggle to identify and build support systems, so the support available through EFC makes a difference for youth. For example, youth may not understand how to read medical bills or file taxes, and EFC helps connect youth to people who can answer their questions and navigate the responsibilities that come with adulthood. Additionally, five participants noted EFC helps youth take responsibility for their lives while also providing youth consistent support, so they do not have to navigate challenges alone. Three participants emphasized that youth need emotional support, and EFC provides them with people who are consistently available to them and able to help find resources that can meet their needs. Five participants shared youth find education and employment services helpful through EFC. Participants work with youth in and outside of EFC

to identify options that can help youth meet their goals, and EFC opens additional doors for youth to explore throughout their journeys to adulthood.

Participants described that availability and access to EFC services can vary for youth. For example, one participant noted that some youth are not interested in accepting the housing services, if they have already found a housing option that they like or if they are not willing to live with roommates. EFC provides offers different housing options, including apartments with or without roommates, but the availability of those options may vary based on the number of spots in apartments or dorms and the number of youth interested in EFC living arrangements. Additionally, two participants noted the time it takes to access services like housing and transportation support can dissuade youth from accepting these services because they may not be able to wait for requests to go through an approval process with DCS. Although EFC offers several services, two participants cautioned that this doesn't necessarily mean all youth access those services. For example, one participant noted they encounter youth who are unaware of some of the benefits available through EFC and struggle to work with case managers to receive benefits promptly.

Discussion

This section will discuss the findings of the study in the context of existing literature, primary limitations, and recommendations for future research to expand our knowledge of the EFC program in Tennessee.

Connections to the Literature

Participants in this study generally had positive views of EFC, which aligns with the existing literature (Moghaddam & Garcia, 2013; Napolitano et al., 2015). Similar to other studies that explore perspectives on EFC, this study found most staff believe youth generally opt out of

extended foster care if they have negative experiences with the child welfare agency and desire to live without DCS requirements (Goodkind et al., 2011; Napolitano et al., 2015). This study also highlighted that youth face competing priorities and demands, which may mean they do not have the capacity to consider how EFC can support them in the future. Participants had mixed views on whether lack of awareness affects participation in extended foster, which aligns with the literature that shows some youth seek more information about the program while others are generally aware of it (Goodkind et al., 2011; Napolitano et al., 2015; Rubio & Covarrubias, 2020).

This study also explored perspectives on the role of eligibility criteria in promoting participation in extended foster care, which other qualitative studies have not specifically reviewed. More time is needed to understand how Tennessee's recent expansion of eligibility criteria may impact participation in the program, but participants described it as a meaningful change, and data show an increase in uptake since the start of the program. Between fiscal year 2010 and 2022, the number of eligible youth who participate in EFC has more than doubled, with 50% of eligible youth participating in the program in fiscal year 2022 (YTAC, 2023).

Age was widely discussed as a factor that affects whether youth participate in EFC. Some participants focused on the challenges with youth turning age 18 while in care, and others indicated additional time in EFC would benefit youth and maximize support for youth who are interested in the program. EFC serves as a stepping stone to self-sufficiency for youth, so finding ways to provide a continuity of support as youth continue to develop could be meaningful. Extended foster care intends to help youth avoid service cliffs at age 18, but the drop-off at age 21 can feel just as sudden and isolating for youth. Notably, states can choose to extend foster

care beyond age 21, but they do not receive federal reimbursement through Title IV-E for youth over age 21.

This study found views on the flexibility of EFC eligibility criteria are mixed, as some participants described EFC as rigid, while others even suggested additional structure and a more consistent application of rules would benefit the program. Interestingly, all participants work within the same local area but had different experiences with the way eligibility criteria are implemented. Participant experiences were associated with their organization, so staff who work in the same organization generally had the same views about the implementation of eligibility criteria. Research has shown that county-level characteristics may affect extended foster care, and findings in this study suggest characteristics within counties or organizations may also play a role in the way youth experience extended foster care (Courtney et al., 2019; Park et al., 2022; Peters, 2012).

Housing, financial support, and transportation services available in EFC were identified as the most useful EFC services for youth. Some studies found these services were important from the viewpoint of case managers while youth highlighted the importance of education and employment activities (Moghaddam & Garcia, 2013; Napolitano et al., 2015; Rubio & Covarrubias, 2020). This study also found general emotional support and guidance available through EFC can be helpful for youth, which aligns with the literature that shows youth appreciate strong communication and relationships with case managers (Contreras, 2014; Moghaddam & Garcia, 2013; Rubio & Covarrubias, 2020).

All participants work for organizations that serve youth who participate in EFC, youth who decline to participate in EFC, and youth who are not eligible for EFC. Participants indicated they provide the same general services to youth in their organizations regardless of their

affiliation with EFC. Participants described that they may present different options to meet youth needs when they participate in EFC because EFC gives youth more options. Youth who do not participate in EFC have other resources and supports available as well, although they may not have as many as youth in EFC. Only a couple of participants described challenges with access to EFC services, but these findings align with the literature that shows youth are not always aware of or able to access services through extended foster care programs (Children's Initiative for Fostering Futures Initiative, 2015). Although there are challenges with extended foster care, most participants remarked that extended foster care provides services and supports that can help youth. however, some participants felt the program could help improve outcomes for youth while others emphasized youth in EFC still must take responsibility for their future and have support systems outside of the program to meet their goals and become self-sufficient. Similar to discussions around eligibility criteria, participants from the same organization generally held the same views about the EFC program more broadly.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, recruiting participants was challenging, and the sample size of the study limits generalizability. The small sample size suggests findings from this study can encourage future research rather than draw conclusions about EFC. Second, there are a range of organizations that provide services through the EFC program in Tennessee, but participants worked within just two organizations recommended by DCS. These organizations serve a large portion of youth in EFC, but the perspectives of staff at these organizations may vary from those of staff at other organizations. Additionally, the perspectives of staff who provide services through EFC in different regions of the state may not be reflected in this study because all participants worked in Nashville. For example, there may be differences in the

perspectives of staff who serve youth in suburban or rural areas compared to staff who serve youth in urban areas. Next, only one individual coded data in this study. While information was coded consistently across interviews, an additional coder would bring a different perspective that could help prevent coder biases that may obscure the perspectives of participants. Fourth, the perspectives of youth and individuals who oversee EFC were not captured in this study. To identify best practices and areas of improvement in EFC, it is critical to explore the experiences of youth who participate or decide not to participate in the program. Additionally, previous studies have found youth and staff perspectives on extended foster care can vary, so it is important to explore both perspectives to build a comprehensive understanding of extended foster care (Napolitano et al., 2015). The perspectives of DCS staff are important because they work closely with community-based organizations to provide comprehensive support to youth and help youth enroll and discharge from EFC.

Recommendations

Although aging out of care is typically not the case plan goal we hope to see for youth, nearly 900 teenagers aged out of care in Tennessee in fiscal year 2022 (YTAC, 2023). This means EFC can help hundreds of teenagers in the state explore their interests and find paths to self-sufficiency with the support of the child welfare system and local communities. EFC can offer a variety of supports and services, but it must also understand how to connect with youth and operate as a program that acknowledges and reflects their context and needs rather than dictates how they should live. Incorporating the voices of youth in the program policies and procedures can help DCS and community-based organizations understand how to promote access to EFC, improve youth experiences, and provide EFCS that align with youth interests and allow them to explore different opportunities. Eligibility criteria are important, and the support for the

workforce pathway displays how the criteria can help more youth access the program. The upper age limit of EFC suggests youth are ready and prepared to live on their own when they turn age 21. It's challenging to comprehend that youth could become adults and live independently after just three years of EFC. Additionally, this study found staff believe youth in EFC could benefit from the program after they turn age 21, which signals there are youth in need of the support EFC offers who are forced to find their own resources or navigate their transition to adulthood on their own. EFC can make a difference in the lives of youth, but the program must meet youth where they are and provide flexibility that empowers them to identify and meet goals that help them become thriving adults.

Extended foster care programs were created to address decades of research that highlighted how challenging the transition to adulthood can be for former foster youth. As we approach 15 years of extended foster care in Tennessee, research can help DCS and community-based organizations assess and improve the program. Continued exploration of the EFC program will provide valuable insight that will help grow and strengthen the EFC program across the state. Additional research is needed to understand how DCS and its partners throughout the state work together to serve youth and implement EFC requirements related to eligibility. Research on the perspectives of youth who opt in and out of EFC would provide important insight to help understand how to increase awareness of and access to the program and provide services that meet the needs of youth. Existing literature shows perspectives of youth and staff sometimes differ, so exploring both viewpoints in future research would help highlight gaps of understanding and areas of alignment.

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