

Support for Youth In and Aging Out of Care



NICWA
National Indian Child Welfare Association
Protecting Our Children • Preserving Our Culture

The National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) created this resource to compile and organize several resources for youth involved with the foster care system.

Youth who are currently in out-of-home placements or who are transitioning out of care often need to advocate for themselves to make sure their needs are met and often need to meet with people from several different support programs. This can be a daunting process for youth who are seeking this support alone or don't know where to start to meet their needs, so this resource is a starting place for Native youth who are looking for advice when working with caseworkers and program staff who can support them, and for support with advocating for themselves.

Introduction



There are many places to start when looking for resources that can support you as you navigate your life in the foster care system and as you are aging out of care. For the first part of this resource, we outline tips for working with your caseworker, because your caseworker and case team can advocate for your needs and help direct you to resources. For the second part of this resource, we share a number of resources you can contact directly to seek support in different aspects of your life as you transition out of care, including housing assistance, health care, college and career access, and overall mental health resources.

Navigating all these processes can be overwhelming, especially if you need to establish them without support from caseworkers or other adults in your life. The third part of this resource outlines tips for advocating for yourself as you work with these systems.

Working With Your Caseworker



Working with a caseworker or multiple caseworkers is often typical when you are in out-of-home care, and as you become a teenager or young adult, caseworkers try to get more of your input about your case and the resources you need. Building a relationship with caseworkers can be challenging, but communicating with them is helpful because they have a lot of information and resources to share with you.

The Child Welfare League of America has a guide for youth who are participating in their own case planning: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/using-your-voice-guide-youth-participating-case-planning/>. Here are some strategies it outlines to make communicating with your caseworker less overwhelming:

- ★ **Set expectations.** Express to your caseworker how you want to be involved in case planning, like setting up regular planning and check-in meetings with them.
- ★ **Collect contact information.** Make sure you have the phone numbers and email addresses for everyone on your planning team, including caseworkers and your legal representation, so you can contact your team if you have questions outside of planned meetings.
- ★ **Ask for what you need.** Don't be afraid to ask your caseworker, attorney, or other team members for what you need, with everything from clothing, transportation, or personalized services. Don't hesitate to ask for support from doctors, counselors, mentors, or others.
- ★ **Ask questions.** The child welfare system can be difficult to understand, and no one should expect you to be an expert on what is happening.
- ★ **Request options.** Your caseworker will often ask you what you want, and it's okay if you don't always have an answer. You're allowed to request options about how to participate in meetings or other parts of your case process.
- ★ **Write notes.** It's normal to be nervous about vocalizing your needs and wants to your team. One way to prepare for meetings with your caseworker is to write down the questions and concerns you have beforehand, so you remember everything you want to bring up when you are meeting with your care team.

Find your state's foster children's bill of rights for ways you can advocate for yourself while involved in the child welfare system.

You may be in touch with multiple caseworkers from programs that provide different services or resources. Writing notes and questions is also helpful to make sure you keep track of what you've told each caseworker. You can also request joint meetings with multiple caseworkers present, so you don't have to take more time or repeat yourself to multiple people.

Many states and local agencies have their own version of a Foster Children's Bill of Rights. This is a document that directs how foster youth should be represented in their cases and outlines for youth who are involved in the child welfare system to advocate for themselves.

Find your state's foster bill of rights here: <https://naccchildlaw.org/your-case-your-rights/>.

This is Oregon's version as an example: <https://sharedsystems.dhsoha.state.or.us/DHSForms/Served/de9014a.pdf>.

This document can also be used to guide you in what to ask for when you communicate with your caseworker.

Some Tribes also have bills of rights for children in Tribal foster care. You can ask your Tribal caseworker about this as well.

If you are not in the Tribal child welfare system and don't have a Tribal caseworker, your state-assigned caseworker is still responsible for making sure you have access to people in your Tribe. Ask your state caseworker how they can connect you to people in the Tribe, and how they are reaching out to your Tribe to see what resources are available to you.

Resources to Contact Directly

This section outlines contacts you can reach out to or research yourself if your caseworker doesn't mention them. The following resources are helpful when you are in the foster care system and as you transition out of care.

+ Mental Health Resources

Everyone deserves access to mental health resources that are understanding of your culture, identity, and life experience. You can ask your caseworker for help accessing counselors or other mental health providers. If you are looking for a place to start, in addition to conversations with your caseworker, here are a few resources you can explore:

For Native youth, the organization We R Native, housed at the Northwest Portland Indian Health Board, has resources for Native youth across the country: <https://www.wernative.org/>.

The Ask Your Relative program is a Question-and-Answer service where you can “text” a group of educators, public health professionals, and caring adults who can answer a range of questions about mental health, relationships, and life in general: <https://www.wernative.org/ayr>.

We R Native also has a tipsheet specifically for Native youth who are dealing with adoption or foster care situations: <https://www.wernative.org/my-life/life-hacks/adoption-foster-care>. This resource talks about the complicated emotions of dealing with foster care and adoption, and offers advice about how you can look for support.

Separate from We R Native, there is a mental health lifeline specifically for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Indigenous Peoples. Dial 988 on your phone or visit: <https://988lifeline.org/help-yourself/americanindian-alaskanatives-indigenouspeoples/>.

+ College and Career Resources

Determining your future career path, whether that's applying for college, trade school, an apprenticeship, or entering the workforce right away, can feel overwhelming and complicated, especially if you are trying to figure this out by yourself.

The American Indian College Fund has resources for students pursuing both college and other career paths: <https://collegefund.org/students/>.

They have a Scholarship Application Portal that allows you to [submit scholarship applications](#) (for scholarships from the College Fund).

The [College Access and Success page](#) has guides for every part of the college application process, including how to pick colleges, apply to colleges, and pay for college.

The [Career Readiness and Employment page](#) has resources to find what career works for you and to develop your professional skills, including a tipsheet for [Creating Your Resume](#) and a [database](#) for searching for academic programs and jobs according to your interests.

College Horizons is a pre-college program for Native high school students that helps with the college selection and application process: <https://collegehorizons.org/>.

The Federal Student Aid website has a page specifically for Native students, with information about how to apply for financial aid and scholarships to consider: <https://studentaid.gov/resources/financial-aid-for-native-americans>.

We R Native has a specific page dedicated to resources for Career Pathways: <https://www.wernative.org/my-pathway>. They have searched through many educational and job opportunities and have a “Top Picks” list that’s a great place to start.

Your Tribe may offer workforce support in different ways, including [vocational](#) or technical training, running [a job board](#) that posts new job opportunities, or offering workshops to update your resume and look for jobs. Ask your Tribal caseworker or Tribal contacts what your Tribe provides.

Other Supportive Resources

As you transition out of the foster care system, you may be looking for ways to support yourself as you try to live on your own. Here are some places to start:

Housing

The Department of Housing and Urban Development has a resource page specifically for Native American programs. It includes resources for finding your local Public Housing Agency, finding Rental Assistance, and finding your regional Office of Native American Programs: <https://www.hud.gov/helping-americans/public-indian-housing>.

If you are trying to find housing for yourself for the first time and are looking for financial assistance, this is a good place to learn about what is available to you.

Health Care

The Indian Health Service has locations across the United States, in both rural and urban areas. Use this locator to find a location near you: <https://www.ihs.gov/findhealthcare/>.

When you’ve found a location near you, contact them directly to learn what services they provide and what you’re eligible for. All IHS locations provide different services, but they can include doctor’s appointments, dental clinics, health centers for preventative health care, behavioral (mental health) services, and more.

Nutrition Assistance

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a way to help pay for food. To learn about if you’re eligible to apply, contact your local office, which you can find here: <https://www.usa.gov/food-stamps>.

The application should be simple; it’s just a way to determine if you are eligible for the program. When you find your local office, you will also find a state-specific website that provides a helpline, information on how to apply, and places to ask questions once you receive SNAP benefits.

Financial Education

The Native Workforce Services Program provides in-person workforce training programs for those in King County, Washington, and online Financial Education Services regardless of location: <https://unitedindians.org/community-services/native-workforce-services-program/>.

Learning about your finances and how to budget can feel very complicated, but this resource and others can be a starting point for what you can expect of how to manage any money you are receiving from your work or your Tribe.

StrongHearts Helpline

StrongHearts Helpline is a 24/7 safe, confidential, and anonymous helpline for Native peoples experiencing domestic and sexual violence:

844-7NATIVE (844-762-8483)

For more information, visit: <https://strongheartshelpline.org/>. This is accessible to anyone, no matter if you are still a youth or becoming an adult, and can be a resource outside of your caseworkers if you need additional support.

This list is not exhaustive, but provides a starting point as you transition out of care.

Advocating for Yourself



Advocating for yourself and your specific needs is important when you are communicating with caseworkers and with resource programs like those mentioned above. It can also feel very challenging because these systems are complex and can involve a lot of paperwork, so there are ways you can learn to express your needs, so your voice is included in the planning of your case and life.

The National Association of Counsel for Children has toolkits about learning to advocate for yourself, that outline what self-advocacy means and some strategies for implementing self-advocacy in your case: <https://naccchildlaw.org/your-case-your-rights>. Some standout strategies include:

- ★ **Gathering and documenting evidence** about the rights you have and how the caseworkers and other support systems around you need to meet them.
- ★ **Preparing your talking points** so you can create a script when you need to verbally advocate for yourself.
- ★ **Advocating for your rights in writing** as a way to help you gather your thoughts and prepare for meetings with caseworkers or other support systems.

Conclusion

Learning how to speak up for yourself, vocalize what you need, and navigate all of these systems that can respond to you and support you to find what you need can feel overwhelming. However, all of these systems and more exist to help you learn how to advocate for yourself so your voice is counted when it matters most—the planning of your case in foster care and your life beyond. These resources are a starting point to many more that are available to help you, so you don't feel alone in navigating this process.

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NICWA'S MISSION

The National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) protects the safety, health, and cultural identity of all Native children and families—today and for future generations—by upholding culturally based services, community strength, and Tribal sovereignty.

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