



JIM CASEY
YOUTH
OPPORTUNITIES
INITIATIVE

AGING OUT

A documentary film
by Roger Weisberg and Vanessa Roth

A Discussion Guide For Youth, Communities, and Employers



Daniella Anderson Hover and Veasna Hover
Photo Credit: Courtney Bennett

Walking out that door is still very appealing to me right now, because deep down I'm just unhappy with the fact that I'm living in a foster home instead of being where I really want to be and where I need to be. Every night I think maybe I should just go out on my own. But I stay because I know that it's best financially.

Daniella Anderson

I never grew up with a mother and father. I had like 30 mothers and fathers. I was nine years old when I went to my first group home....Home means just my body. I have no home. Home is wherever I'm at, at the moment. This is my home.

David Griffin

To me, getting an education is the only way out, and it's the only way you're going to succeed.

Risa Bejarano

“We should dream of and plan for a day when fewer children require foster care. But until that day comes, we have a moral responsibility to prepare young people leaving foster care to become whole adults who can fulfill their potential and build bright and promising futures.”

President Jimmy Carter, foreword, *On Their Own*, by Martha Shirk and Gary Stangler

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The Film: AGING OUT

AGING OUT was created by award-winning producers and directors Roger Weisberg and Vanessa Roth, with support from the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. AGING OUT is a production of Public Policy Productions for Thirteen/WNET New York. It is expected to be broadcast on PBS nationwide in spring 2005.

The film follows young people as they exit foster care and become parents, battle drug addiction, face homelessness, and even end up in jail. Despite their struggles, the film also shows these youth using the resiliency they developed during their years “in the system.” It also forces us to consider the strengths and weaknesses of the public systems that serve these youth, as well as the roles that private citizens and organizations can play.

In AGING OUT, you will meet three young adults:

In Los Angeles, **David Griffin** looks back on a life in more than 20 foster care, mental health, and juvenile justice facilities. Abandoned by his mother when he was just six weeks old, David leaves foster care for the streets, goes on a self-destructive drug and crime binge, copes with homelessness and incarceration, argues with his former foster parents, and eventually leaves Los Angeles for Seattle with hopes of becoming a fisherman in Alaska.

Risa Bejarano managed to become the first member of her family to advance past the tenth grade, despite shuttling between a dozen different Los Angeles foster homes after being abused and molested as a child. The cameras record Risa as she attends her high school prom and graduates with several scholarships, but they also capture her quiet battle with drug addiction and a devastating emotional breakdown during her freshman year at the University of California at Santa Barbara. When we last see her, Risa is enrolled in a community college.

Daniella Anderson reported her abusive father to the authorities when she was fifteen, and spent the next five years in ten different group homes in New York City. As she leaves the foster care system, she juggles her college career with the hard reality of living with her boyfriend, raising her newborn child, paying rent, and putting enough food on the table.

Brief descriptions of additional people in the film to assist local discussions:

Veasna Hover (age 19): In foster care from his infancy; friend and, later, husband of Daniella; father of their son **Elijah**.

Tim Mayworm – Director of Journey House, David’s group home when we first meet him.

Pearl and Bob Galasso –David’s first foster family; he seeks help from them throughout the film. Melody, David’s sister, continues to live with them.

Delores Ruiz -- Risa’s tenth foster mother, who has been raising Risa for two years. She is also raising four other girls in foster care. She continues to help Risa after she is emancipated.

Alejandra Bejarano (Ale) – Risa’s sister.

Vanetia Williams – Risa’s case manager.

Norma Uriguin – Foster care director of the Inwood House agency responsible for Daniella.



COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES
DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES

Risa Bejarano

Los Angeles, CA 90020



STATE OF CALIFORNIA - HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES AGENCY

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David Griffin

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NYC Administration for Children's Services

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WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU'VE GROWN UP IN FOSTER CARE AND SUDDENLY YOU'RE ON YOUR OWN?

AGING OUT

Funding for AGING OUT is provided by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and Casey Family Programs

A PRODUCTION OF PUBLIC POLICY PRODUCTIONS
AGING OUT

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WRITTEN, PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY ROGER WEISBERG

Film Epilogue

The filming of AGING OUT was completed in September 2003. The following updates on Daniella, David, and Risa were completed in June 2004. The outreach campaign will continue to provide updates.

Daniella

Daniella and Veasna continue to reside in Hartford, CT. The family has been receiving rental assistance from The HUD Section 8 program. In addition, the family receives state funded medical coverage.

Veasna has been employed at The Gap since the filming was completed but has not secured full-time status nor benefits for his family. Realizing the growth limitations of the retail environment, he recently began the process of continuing his college education at Capitol Community College. Daniella is still enrolled at Trinity College and receives loans that the family requires to finance her education. Daniella has also worked at a community technology center, teaching basic and intermediate computer skills to members of the community. She has plans for tutoring at a neighborhood middle school in September. Elijah will begin school at a daycare center or free public Montessori school.

Veasna maintains contact with a few staff members at his former placement at Children's Village. He continues to build a family bond with his former foster family. This extended family offers support for the young couple. Daniella has no contact with any of her former group home staff or foster parents. She has chosen to have limited contact with her birth parents and family.

Veasna and Daniella are preparing for the birth of their second child in July. They plan to move into a larger apartment to accommodate their growing family. Daniella and Veasna both hope to find employment related to the foster care system in order to work with children and youth that have had similar experiences to their own.

David

After traveling by bus to Seattle, on his way to Alaska, David was unable to find a job on a fishing boat. Since September 2003, he has been homeless, living at a Seattle ferry terminal and using a local drop-in center to shower and have occasional meals. With the help of the drop-in center, David is trying to get a job. The Galassos, his foster family, are in regular contact with him.

Risa

After participating in the documentary, Risa resided in an independent living apartment for five months and enrolled in online college courses. She then moved in with her sister Ale. Risa lost her job at a grocery store chain in Southern California as a result of a strike last winter and was seeking employment and looking for a larger apartment to share with her sister and her sister's two-year-old daughter.

Risa was awarded a grant administered by a local organization, giving her up to \$5,000 to help her manage staying in school while making the transition from foster care to independent living. Risa expressed hope that she could return to the University of California-Santa Barbara.

Through early 2004 Risa stayed in touch with Dolores, her foster mother, and went to her house for dinner once a month. She had not seen her birth mother since Mother's Day 2003 and had no plans to do so.

Risa continued to battle drug addiction while struggling to stay in school and hold a job. She bounced around from an independent living program, to her sister's house, to her former foster mother's house. In early June 2004, Risa had no place to live and on June 5 was found shot and killed in an alley in downtown Los Angeles.

This film is dedicated to Risa's memory and the goal of providing teens leaving foster care with the support they need to make a safer transition to adulthood.

Director's Statement

Roger Weisberg

As I prepare to send our second child off to college, I'm struck by how much support he will receive as he "ages out" of our home. He knows he can count on our continued financial and emotional support, and most importantly, he knows he's always welcome home. In contrast, most young people who age out of the foster care system at about the same age have no stable home or parents to whom they can turn, and few have the opportunity to receive a college education. The very system that removed these abused and neglected children from their homes discharges young people, usually at age 18, to fend for themselves with little or no support whatsoever.

It is not surprising that two to four years after being discharged from foster care, 25 percent of these alumni of foster care had been homeless, 40 percent were on public assistance, and 50 percent were unemployed. 25 percent of the boys had been incarcerated and 60 percent of the girls had given birth to a child. Despite these grim statistics, I met some remarkable young people while filming AGING OUT who developed enough resiliency during their troubled childhoods to beat the odds. It was genuinely inspiring to watch these extraordinary young people overcome the tremendous adversity in their lives.

I know that my kids will invariably face some tough times as they navigate the thorny transition from adolescence to independent living. AGING OUT helped me grasp how much tougher this transition is for young people who've been abused and neglected, shuttled between numerous foster care placements, and suddenly find themselves on their own. In making AGING OUT, I wanted to take viewers inside the embattled world of teenagers in foster care to reveal the tremendous obstacles they face as they try to become self-sufficient adults.

I still don't fully understand how some young people can find the inner strength to cope with early childhood trauma, while others cannot. But, AGING OUT made me realize something I should have known from the start. In order to make a successful transition to independence, teens aging out of foster care need many of the same things my own kids need – some continued financial support until they can stand on their own two feet, a safe place they can call home, and most of all, adults who truly care about them.

Co-Director's Statement

Vanessa Roth

The day that most defined the direction my life has taken as a social worker and documentary filmmaker was the day my sister joined my family. She was eight months old and was flown along with fifty other Korean babies from foster homes and orphanages in Seoul to adoptive families in Los Angeles. I was eight years old at the time. When I held my sister that day at the airport, and she smiled at me, I wondered even then what led her biological mother to abandon her. I tried to imagine what this little person's short life had been like for the eight months she lived with temporary caregivers. As we left the airport with my new sister in my mom's arms, she was suddenly and forever part of my family.

My sister was in foster care for a brief, though developmentally, emotionally, and psychologically profound time in her life. I am convinced that those initial life experiences have given her extraordinary coping skills but have also left tragic wounds that can never heal. This mix of early independence and profound internal damage is what I found in the foster children I worked with as a social worker in the foster care arena in my first film, TAKEN IN: The Lives of America's Foster Children, and more recently in the courageous young adults I got to know while making AGING OUT.

I met both Risa and David on the eve of their transition from living in foster care to living “independently.” What I found from the moment I first talked to them both was that these teens did not need to be introduced to independent living; independence had been forced on them from the time they were born. David had lived in over 20 foster homes before he turned 18 and Risa had gotten herself admitted to the University of California at Santa Barbara despite frequent moves and relentless family struggles. For their whole lives, these young people were forced to rely on their own instincts with no consistent source of support or stability to guide them. What they lacked most growing up and needed even more during their transition into adulthood were not programs to teach them how to be on their own, but relationships with people who passionately believed in them and could make them feel part of something.

Long after production ended on AGING OUT, I am left grappling with complicated questions surrounding what young people like David and Risa need most to help them become successful adults. Obviously, there are no easy answers and no one target to blame for their difficult lives, but in the end, I hope that AGING OUT can challenge viewers and inspire new relationships and connections by putting a human face on the thousands of kids growing up and aging out of foster care.

Introduction

Today, more than half a million children in America live in foster care. This year alone, 20,000 of these young people will “age out” of foster care, typically at age 18.

For years, if not their entire lifetimes, their “parents” have been state or county foster care agencies, and now, overnight, they are on their own. Though most 18-year-olds coming from intact families can expect emotional and financial support for years to come, once a foster child turns 18, the state is no longer legally obligated to provide any assistance.

Consequently, many youth aging out of foster care struggle to become self-sufficient. But it does not have to be this way. Communities and policymakers have it in their power to improve conditions for these young people. Although youth leaving care display tremendous resiliency and optimism, their outcomes are better when supports and opportunities are tailored to their specific needs.

Data from several studies paint a distressing picture. Four years after leaving foster care:

- Fewer than half of emancipated foster youth have graduated from high school, compared with 85 percent of all 18- to 24-year-olds.
- Fewer than one in eight has graduated from a four-year college.
- One-fourth have endured some period of homelessness.
- Almost two-thirds have not maintained employment for a year.
- Fewer than one in five is completely self-supporting.
- More than a quarter of males have spent time in jail.
- Four out of ten have become parents.

What Is Being Done?

In 1999, after years of complaints from children’s advocates and youth in care, Congress approved the Foster Care Independence Act, which doubled federal funding for youth aging out of foster care to \$140 million per year and expanded eligibility to include young people from age 14 to 21. President Bill Clinton signed the bill into law on December 14, 1999. The law is commonly referred to as the Chafee Act, in honor of the late Rhode Island Senator, John H. Chafee. An additional \$60 million was added in 2004 for education and training vouchers.

Among other provisions, this law *requires* states to provide services to *former* foster children past the age of 18, including career exploration, job placement and retention services, and vocational training. It also *permits* states to provide assistance with room and board, up to a maximum of 30 percent of their federal allotment, and to extend Medicaid coverage for 18- to 21-year-olds who were in foster care on their 18th birthdays. And, it increases state and federal accountability for young people after they leave foster care.

Although the Chafee Act represents a major improvement, neither the funds appropriated nor the state and county systems charged with spending them, are adequate to meet the challenge. While the new funding is sorely needed, the total available actually amounts to just a few hundred dollars a year for each young person in the target population -- all those between 14 and 18 who are moving towards emancipation, plus those between 18 and 21 who have already aged out.

Despite the Chafee Act, many youth in care are still being sent out into the world with little more than a list of apartment rental agencies, a gift certificate from a discount retailer, a goodie bag full of manufacturer's samples, perhaps a cooking pot, and sometimes a mattress. The additional federal dollars aren't likely to make a huge difference in the future prospects for young people who age out of care unless the foster care system can attract new partners in this crucial effort.

For more information about the Foster Care Independence Act, see the two-part series, "*Frequently Asked Questions -- About the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 and the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program.*"



Part 1 available at www.aecf.org/publications/data/faq_feb.pdf



Part 2 available at www.aecf.org/publications/data/faq_dec.pdf

What Can We Do and Why Use AGING OUT?

The documentary AGING OUT shows us that young people leaving foster care can benefit from a range of services and supports. Here we focus on three areas that recent research – and many young people themselves – tell us are particularly important in improving outcomes for youth leaving care: *education, employment, and connection to caring adults.*

When young people have access to educational and job training opportunities, an entry into the world of work, and an adult to whom they can turn for advice and support, they gain an important measure of stability that can lead to other positive outcomes. Of course, employment, education, and a connection to caring adults is not enough. We also urge communities to give special attention to the need for youth leaving foster care to have *access to physical and mental health services and safe, stable housing.*

AGING OUT prompts us to consider several key questions:

- **What is our community’s responsibility for young people leaving foster care?**
- **What stakeholders in the community need to be engaged?**
- **What types of services and programs can effectively prepare youth for independence?**
- **What support systems/networks are needed to assist their transition to independent living?**
- **How can young people themselves play a more active role in planning their futures?**

One of the most important things we can do as we plan for outreach efforts around AGING OUT is to begin involving young people themselves at every level. We can all learn from the resilience shown by Risa, David, and Daniella as they “age out” of foster care. Just as important is that we listen to young people, to their stories and their voices, so that our responses to their situations flow from an understanding both of their natural strengths and of the deficits created by the circumstances surrounding their upbringings.

Better understanding of the challenges facing youth in foster care is the first step to communities beginning an honest discussion about the issue. We hope that the discussion prompted by the broadcast of AGING OUT will serve as a call to action for a diverse set of constituencies:

Youth: The set of discussion questions and suggestions for taking action may be used by youth to engage other youth or by adults seeking to engage youth in dialogue and action. Tips for facilitators are provided on page 12.

Members of the community: community and faith-based organizations and those that make decisions about community resources and services especially related to aging out.

Employers, training professionals, and educators who can play a supportive role in creating opportunities for youth leaving foster care.

Suggested Activities For Communities Partnering with Public Television or Radio Stations

The AGING OUT outreach campaign provides an opportunity for communities to focus on the challenges faced by youth leaving care, as well as innovative ways to improve outcomes for these young people. By partnering with public television or radio stations, communities will be able to utilize media resources to mount a diverse set of activities to address the issue of emancipation and keep the conversation going well after broadcast.

- Youth-directed projects that engage young people in planning for local outreach.
- Panel discussion of issues related to emancipation with community leaders, policymakers, and local officials. Events can be at the local public television station, a community facility, or high-profile public venue.
- Encouraging home-viewing parties around the region or state.
- Town Hall meetings on emancipation issues that present the voices and viewpoints of youth, educators, policymakers, community leaders, and social welfare professionals. Meetings could be broadcast a local programs.
- Local production or segment on a public affairs program presenting emancipation issues and/or initiative important to your community.
- Public service television or radio spots featuring the perspectives of emancipated youth or presenting local resources for youth in foster care.
- Specialized materials can address local foster care issues and promote available resources; adjust current resources of station/partners.
- Public awareness/action campaign to increase local resources related to identified needs of youth emancipating from foster care such as affordable housing, education, employment, health care/health insurance, childcare, transportation, and financial assistance.
- Encouragement of business leaders to provide part-time jobs, internships, and job shadowing opportunities for area youth leaving care.
- Educational advancement programs, including scholarships, mentoring, and college counseling and application procedures.
- Youth fair with booths/workshops presenting diverse opportunities, including education, life skills, and employment, and local resource organizations.
- Project to support the development of new practices and policies in the local school system related to youth in foster care, e.g., being allowed to remain in one school after being moved to another district.
- Distribution of AGING OUT or a local program on emancipation along with local fact sheets to elected officials and key constituencies.
- Tying your campaign to National Foster Care Awareness Month (May) to take advantage of local events/resources to highlight the AGING OUT film and outreach campaign.

Exploring the Film

The national broadcast of the television documentary AGING OUT provides a unique opportunity to focus public attention on the challenges facing youth aging out of foster care. By convening a wide range of stakeholders, communities can capitalize on this public attention by discussing their approach to helping these young people become successful adults. They also can deepen the public's understanding of the issues, and gain allies in this important work.

Communities may consider events such as forums, panels, or town-hall meetings for viewing the film and discussing its implications. We feel that it is important that the following stakeholders all play a role in planning and executing local outreach efforts:

- Youth in foster care and youth who have recently left foster care
- Representatives of state, county, and city foster care agencies
- Child advocates
- Members of the faith community
- Service providers (e.g., case managers, school teachers, medical professionals)
- Policymakers
- Philanthropic leaders
- Business leaders
- Concerned community members
- Media

Creating opportunities for young people leaving care is an important goal. But simply creating opportunities is not enough. We need to engage young people in our work. We need to learn more about the problems facing these youth and more about what works to fix those problems. And we need to advocate for policies and practices that will improve outcomes in education, employment, health care, housing, and personal and community engagement.

Tips for Adults to Support Youth Discussion

We encourage adults to use AGING OUT to engage youth in discussions related to aging out of the foster care system. It will assist youth who will be personally involved in this process, as well as other youth whose friends or family members may be affected. Viewing and discussing AGING OUT will raise awareness about important emancipation issues as well as lead youth to take action.

Find someone who can facilitate a meeting – an individual who can help you plan and shape your agenda as well as have a clear understanding about goals and objectives. A good facilitator knows when to listen and when to interject and summarize; s/he knows how to move a group along. In addition it will be helpful for the facilitator to establish ground rules about what young adults share about themselves in the meeting. Strategic sharing allows a participant to relate the heart of their story without all the details that can make them too vulnerable or exposed.

Who Should Facilitate? – Because the film raises tough issues, and because young people can find themselves in uniquely vulnerable positions, it is important to have an experienced facilitator who can provide structure and establish some group agreements for responding to the film, outlining areas to be addressed in the meeting and those that require follow up. It will be important to know the resources available for follow up to individuals and/or groups.

Goals – Be realistic about what you hope to accomplish. If you are looking for major change, you may want to consider convening a series of meetings rather than a single event.

Involving Stakeholders – It is important to let members of groups speak for themselves. For example, it is important to involve young people in the conversations about youth.

Effective Sharing – Choose a method of sharing that will meet the needs of your group and help you reach your goal(s). Discussion? Writing? Action? Some combination of these things?

Discussion – Engaging in conversation is an easy way for many people to share with one another. It is especially useful as a starting point for deeper reflection or action.

Writing – Writing provides more time to reflect than does discussion. Because it is done individually and allows for editing, it can also provide a safe way to explore emotional topics. In this context, writing is not an exercise in grammar. Youth should be free to write what and how they want. Be clear about whether writers will be asked to share what they wrote and with whom. Also be clear about what kinds of feedback writers can expect.

Illustrations – Have pads, easels, and drawing implements available for youth who want to express themselves through art.

Action – Discussion can be a stepping-stone to taking action in the real world. Taking action provides hope and helps people know that they can do something to make change.

As you choose, take into account the language levels and abilities of group members. For example, discussion can be difficult if all group members are not comfortable conversing in the same language. Writing might be an intimidating choice for people who have low-level literacy skills. You should also consider the comfort level of the group. Do you already have a close relationship with group members or are you meeting them for the first time? The less pre-existing trust, the less appropriate it is to use particularly intimate or intense methods of sharing.

Support – The experiences of the youth featured in AGING OUT raise some difficult issues. Seeing their stories can evoke intense emotions in some viewers. Know who your local support agencies and/or professionals are and how to contact them in case referrals are appropriate. Pay close attention to how prepared participants are to tackle certain kinds of issues. Take special care not to push individuals too far. If you are dealing with young people who are not ready to talk about their own situations, try altering questions so that participants can consider them as if they were talking about someone else. Better still, partner with a social service agency that can provide mental health professionals who will be available if the need arises.

Be Prepared to Facilitate – Check the background information and resources so you have enough factual knowledge to keep people on track. Most importantly, review the film and other materials prior to your event and deal with your own emotions before you walk through the door. You will be much more effective if you are not trying to sort through your own emotions at the same time that you are trying to guide others in dealing with their emotions.

Preparing the Group

For youth to share openly and honestly, they need to feel comfortable and safe. This is especially true because of the potential for a strong emotional response to the terrible news of Risa Bejarano's death. People often form an emotional bond with characters in a film and we need to be prepared that news of Risa's death will be difficult for some youth and adults to accept. *We are recommending that facilitators and other discussion leaders notify your groups of Risa's passing prior to watching the film.* This will allow the facilitator to forecast what participants might feel and set a context for responding.

As a facilitator, you can help set a safe and comfortable atmosphere by doing the following:

Do introductions. If group members do not already know one another, take some time for everyone to introduce himself or herself.

Set ground rules for discussion. Involve the group in setting some basic rules that will help them feel safe. Those ground rules will generally cover three areas:

1. Confidentiality – Do people want to ask others not to repeat what they have said outside the group?
2. Language – To ensure respect, everyone should agree that certain kinds of language, e.g., put downs or yelling, are off limits. Also, to ensure clarity, ask people to speak in the first person (“I think....”) rather than generalizing (“Everyone knows that...”).
3. Taking Turns – Use techniques to make sure that everyone who wishes to speak can do so, that one person does not dominate, that no one is attacked, that no one is forced to reveal things they do not want to talk about. Be sure to be clear about what your role is.
4. If a mixed group of adults and youth, you may want to add a ground rule that all voices are important to reduce any intimidation and equalize sharing from all participants.

Remind people of the value of listening. You may want to ask people to practice formal “active listening,” in which participants listen without interrupting the speaker, then re-phrase to see if they have heard correctly. Or you may just want to remind them that engaging in conversation is different from participating in a debate. In a debate, participants try to convince others that they are right. In a conversation or dialogue, participants try to understand each other and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening to one another actively.

Remind participants that everyone sees through the lens of his/her own experience. Because who we are influences how we interpret what we see, everyone in the group may have a different view about the content and meaning of the film, and all of them may be accurate. If disagreements occur, ask people to be clear about the evidence they are using to reach their conclusions.

Establish a time-out mechanism. Have a pre-planned strategy for what to do if the intensity level rises. A key word or a non-verbal cue (like putting a hand over your heart to signal that you really empathize with what was just said) can help a lot. Agree on a signal that anyone can use to pause the discussion. Let everyone take a deep breath before moving on to deal with the situation.

Discussion “Starter” Questions

- What new thing(s) did you learn from this film? How do you think the new insight might change you?
- Did anything in the film surprise you? If so, what? Why was it surprising?
- Which things in the film were most like your own experience? Which things in the film were most different from your own experience?
- If you could ask the youth in the film a question, what would you ask and why?
- Before viewing the film, talk about your perceptions of what happens to kids who are aging out of the foster care system. Where do your ideas come from? What kinds of images/stories do media usually present? Do you think this information is accurate?

- After viewing the film, talk about whether or not any of your ideas about kids in foster care or about aging out of the system have changed. What challenged you to reconsider?

See the next section for more discussion questions for youth and ways they can take action.

Youth Engaging Youth – Ideas for Engaging Young People Through AGING OUT

AGING OUT is a film about young people like yourselves. It's about the challenges you face and the strength you show on your journey into adulthood. Around the country right now thousands of young people like you are watching AGING OUT. Some of you might see situations with David, Risa, and Daniella that seem familiar. Youth in the foster care system often speak of a system that is always “dogging” them, or setting the bar too low for what is expected of them.

Despite these obstacles, youth are also finding creative ways to take their unique experiences and turn them into positive change. Because you know the system first hand, whether you know it or not, you can be one of the most powerful advocates for yourself and others with similar experiences. You can share your stories – and your ideas for improving foster care – with policymakers and the media. You can pass along the knowledge you gained to those who are younger than you. And most of all, you can get together with others, organize your efforts, and speak with one voice about the issues you face.

One of the best ways to do this is to participate in a youth leadership board. There are youth leadership boards all around the country and more are starting all the time. Youth boards can help you realize that you are not alone in your journey into adulthood. And they can help you learn how to be an effective advocate for change. A good place to start is by asking other young people, your foster parent, caseworker, independent living counselor, or a trusted adult if they know about youth leadership boards in your area.

Another great place to look is an exciting Web site created just for youth leaving foster care. It's called **FYI3.com**, which stands for youth who are *Informed, Involved, and Independent*.

Here are a few moments from the film AGING OUT for you to think about, some questions for you to discuss with your peers and other community members, and finally, some positive steps you can take to help change the foster care system and create new opportunities for yourself and others.

Dialogue To Consider:

DANIELLA: This is the first time ever being in a family setting in four years. So, now, coming into another family is not easy. Walking out that door is still very appealing to me right now, because deep down I'm just unhappy with the fact that I'm living in a foster home instead of being where I really want to be and where I need to be. Every night I think maybe I should just go out on my own. But I stay because I know that it's best financially. But I want to go because of so many concrete reasons that it's a daily struggle.

RISA: I'm not sure how many siblings I have. I think there're 12. My older brothers were all in gangs, because that was the only family that they knew. So I tried to do the most I can, so I won't be like them

DAVID: I'm an 18-year-old minor. [Laughs] 18-year-old minor – that doesn't fit, but it's the truth. I am an 18-year-old minor with no rights. No freedom. I've been living in institutions my whole life.

Discussion Questions

(Also see the Discussion “Starter” Questions on page 14.)

1. Do any of David, Risa, or Daniella's experiences in foster care seem similar to yours? If so, what is similar? What seems different from your own experience ... or the experience of someone you know?

2. Discuss the following:

- **DAVID:** One part of me was totally happy and exhilarated because I was free. Another part of me was full of despair because I was broke and homeless.
- **RISA:** I didn't expect to come back [to Dolores' home]. I expected to have my own place and to have more things going for me than what I do now. I lost a lot of respect for myself. I felt angry for doing drugs, not doing as well as I can in school.
- **DANIELLA:** I'm 20 years old and at 18 you can sign yourself out of [foster] care, I choose to be in the system, receiving financial support. But since Elijah's [her baby] been born, I don't think I am going to make it to 21, being in the system.

How do the situations of David, Risa, and Daniella compare to those of youth aging out of foster care in your community? What changes in foster care agencies or the foster care system might have made things better for each youth?

3. David, Risa, and Daniella each struggle to be independent of the foster care system while they still need help and support from their foster care parents and staff workers.

- Daniella wants to live in her own apartment with her family, but acknowledges needing financial help from the foster care agency.
- Risa is becoming more independent as she goes off to college, but still needs help adjusting to school and coming to terms with the abuse in her past.
- David wants to be free of institutions but needs help getting on his feet.

What services could their case workers or agencies have provided that would have been most helpful to Daniella, Risa, and David in preparing them for aging out and becoming independent from the foster care system. Discuss each youth, in turn.

4. Choose David, Risa, or Daniella. Name one choice that s/he made or one thing s/he did that you thought was a good thing. Why was it good?
5. Choose David, Risa, or Daniella. Imagine that you were that person's friend. Name one choice or thing s/he did that you would have asked them to do differently. What would you have said to him/her?
6. What event or situation became a "turning point" for each youth – a decision or situation that changed the path they were following? How did they handle the situation? What would you have done differently?
7. How did learning of Risa's tragic death make you feel? Did it recall any other stories you have heard about friends of family members who have been victims of violence?
8. Can you think of ways that we can learn from the tragedy of Risa's death and have her memory guide our efforts?
9. What do you imagine will happen next for Daniella and David? Discuss each youth, in turn.
 - Think about family and connections to caring adults, education, and employment.
 - What obstacles do they face?
 - What opportunities might make a difference for them?
 - Do you think they will have successful futures?

Taking Action

Young people like yourselves have told us that when we, as adults, are working on the problems that you and your peers face, that your voices and opinions be taken into consideration. The operating principle should be, “Nothing about us without us.” (Don’t make any decisions about us without asking us what we think.) Here’s your chance to work with your peers to create change – telling adults what needs to be done and creating new opportunities for yourselves.

1. What would be the best way to involve other young people like you in finding ways to help improve what happens to youth after leaving care?
2. How can you play an important role in advocating (speaking out) for public policies that will help you become independent and healthy adults? What should those policies be?
3. What types of services and support do you need as a youth leaving foster care so that you can become independent? Consider services and programs that can help with education, employment, housing, and connections with caring adults.
 - Are the services you need available in your community?
 - If not, how can you work with other youth to raise awareness so that your community offers these programs and services.
4. Does your foster care agency or community offer independent living skills classes or assistance with basic life skills? Are these services helpful? Do they offer the information/training that youth aging out need? If not, what can you do about it?
5. Good health is important so that youth aging out can go to school and work. Does your community offer health care or health insurance for youth who have aged out? What types of health services do you need?
6. What/how can you tell friends, family, neighbors, potential foster parents, child welfare staff, policymakers, and the media what is going on in your lives and what you need?
7. What are some ways that you, and others like you who have been in foster care, can do to make your voices heard in the community? To the media? To policymakers in city hall, the state capital, or Washington, DC?
 - What messages do you want to communicate to each of these groups?
 - How do you think they can help youth aging out of foster care enjoy successful lives?
8. Organize a youth board in your area. Many youth boards already are doing great things like holding sibling/alumni reunions, holding suitcase drives, and testifying before their local political representatives.
9. Build community awareness by creating a speakers’ bureau or group. Identify key local issues related to aging out.
 - Create discussion questions based on the film AGING OUT that highlight these issues.
 - Visit schools, community organizations, and civic groups to screen/discuss the film.
 - Suggest ways these groups can assist youth leaving foster care and prepare them for independence and success.

10. Tell the media about the difficulties you face aging out of care, as well as the successes you have achieved. Stories about youth in the news often look at negative behavior. You can help change the tone of those stories by sharing good news with reporters.

(These Discussion Questions and Taking Action suggestions were reviewed by youth aging out of foster care. The group of teens from Crittenton Center – Carrier House was convened by Crittenton Behavioral Health staff in Kansas City, Missouri: Amanda Carter, LPC; Janet Kreuger, LCSW, LMSW, and Susan Filmore, MSW. Public television station KCPT provided project oversight.)

Engaging Members of the Community

In putting together this discussion guide, we kept coming back to one simple question: *Wouldn't it be great if every community ensured that every youth that aged out of foster care had a part-time job and a connection to a caring adult?* Those are, by no means, the only types of support that youth leaving foster need, and we suggest other ways you can help below.

But as your community thinks of ways to create opportunities for young people leaving foster care, bear in mind that practical goal. Youth who leave care need safe, stable housing and access to health care. They need education and training opportunities. All of these needs are important.

But making a commitment – like ensuring that all youth have a job and a personal connection – will help you plan activities and events that can lead to increased opportunities in these other areas as well.

Transforming the way communities view their commitment and responsibility to these young people is a beginning to creating opportunities that lead to successful outcomes. To help communities discuss the issues facing youth who are leaving care, and the services provided to those youth, here are some suggested questions to begin these important conversations.

Dialogue to Consider:

DAVID: I never grew up with a mother and father. I had like 30 mothers and fathers. I was nine years old when I went to my first group home. And that's when I really started getting in trouble. . . Home means just my body. I have no home. Home is wherever I'm at, at the moment. This is my home.

DANIELLA: Right now, I'm living out of garbage bags and I don't feel like that's something I should have to do. I shouldn't have to wake up every other week in a new placement. I don't have any of my belonging; they're all at my former placement. I'm a college student and I don't even have my books with me. I've been buying my own diapers, buying my own food, when foster parents are receiving money to do that for me. So instead of allowing me to save, I've been depleting my funds. Veasna can't even come here and visit, and he needs to spend time with his child as well.

RISA: I'm the only one from my whole family who's going to graduate from high school, and not like prison or something. I want to get somewhere, but there are so many obstacles, like I'm lost. Aging out now is scary.

Discussion Questions

1. Jimmy Carter said: *"[W]e have a moral responsibility to prepare young people leaving foster care to become whole adults who can fulfill their potential and build bright and promising futures."* Do you agree with this statement? Why is it important for communities and community institutions to assist emancipating youth?
2. Given what you know of your own community, did David, Risa, and Daniella's story surprise you? What were your immediate reactions to the difficulties they faced gaining an education? Getting and keeping a job? Finding someone to turn to for help and advice?
3. Can you think of ways that we can learn from the tragedy of Risa's death and have her memory guide our efforts?

4. How many young people are there in our community who are transitioning from care? And how are they doing?
5. Since the state is the “parent” for these young people until they age out, how can we make sure that youth leaving care get the support they need to become independent? For instance:
 - How might **David’s** energy and anger been turned into a healthy outlet, like a job training program, that might have given him a better chance at self-sufficiency?
 - What support might **Daniella** and her family have received that would have helped her finish school while keeping the family finances in good shape?
 - During **Risa’s** first months in college, could a caring adult – a mentor or counselor perhaps – have helped her cope with the stresses and temptations of college life?
6. Are there examples of help and support that we provide our own children during these difficult years that David, Daniella, and Risa lacked? What might be some ways for communities to provide these supports?
7. Who else do we need to hear from? Youth? Employers? Caseworkers? Policymakers? How can we make sure that everyone is heard and that their recommendations are communicated to those who can make a difference?
8. What are the demographics of youth exiting care in our community? Do the statistics indicate racial disproportionality? If so, how can our communities address the overrepresentation of minority youth in care?
9. What do you know from your experience and from data that works to help youth succeed? What is already provided in your community? What more could be done?
10. How can our community use AGING OUT? Once the broadcast of AGING OUT is over, are there ways to keep the conversation going over time?

Taking Action

1. Public opinion shows that a majority of Americans would be willing to volunteer their time to help youth in their communities who are transitioning out of foster care. These are good kids, but they need the community’s help to ensure that they become independent, healthy, and successful adults.
2. Here are some specific things that you can do to create opportunities for youth leaving foster care:
 - **Become a mentor:** One of the best ways for youth leaving foster care to succeed is to have a caring adult they can count on for help and advice. There are numerous organizations in your community that can help you learn more. A great place to get started is www.mentoring.org.
 - **Open doors to education:** Helping youth get access to job training and post-secondary education greatly increases their chances for success. Providing assistance with locating training programs, financial assistance paperwork like the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid), and tutoring are all great ways to get involved. Access the FAFSA Web site at www.fafsa.ed.gov/.

- **Introduce them to the world of work:** Offering opportunities for job shadowing, apprenticeships, and internships are a great way to prepare youth in foster care for the working world.
- **Learn about the youth leaving foster care in your community:** Help yourself and others know more about how many youth are transitioning, what their specific challenges are, and what resources are available to meet those needs.

Engaging Employers, Training Professionals, and Educators

Employers, educators, training and service providers all can play a supportive role in creating opportunities for young people leaving foster care. These youth need better access to education, job training, internships, job shadowing, and part-time jobs. Many will need assistance with financial aid paperwork and may require extra assistance transitioning into the workforce.

Below, you will find some helpful dialogue from AGING OUT, as well as some questions to guide discussions, and a list of specific ways that you or your organization can help.

Dialogue To Consider:

NARRATOR: Daniella's family is in financial trouble. Veasna's part-time job doesn't cover their expenses, and their savings have been completely exhausted. When the family could no longer pay for food or rent, Daniella and Veasna decided to turn to public assistance. **DANIELLA:** I felt like it was important for us to make the decision to go the Department of Social Services and ask them for help.

RISA: To me getting an education is the only way out and it's the only way you're going to succeed. . . No one in my family has ever graduated from high school, so it meant more than just me graduating. It made me really proud of myself.

DAVID: I'm going to start a new life. I'm going to Alaska. People don't know who I am. It's an opportunity and it's desperation on my part. What I see happening to me in the future is either being on the streets or going to jail, because I'm wanted in the city and because all the people I know out here are just stoners and drug users. That's exactly what I am and I don't want to be that. I'm not going up there with any money because I don't have any money. I want to make a life that I can be at least a little bit proud of. The only thing I'm proud about now is my defiance that I've held on to for so many years, but that gets old. The only way that I'm going to make it is if I do it on my own.

Discussion Questions

1. Looking at the experiences that Risa, David, and Daniella had as they aged out of care, what difficulties would they likely encounter as they entered the world of work? How might those difficulties have been overcome?
2. What supports do new entry-level employees need to make them successful on the job? Given the circumstances of the young people in the film, would these same supports be effective? What way could you tailor the assistance or training to youth leaving care?
3. As Risa and Daniella enter college, what supports are in place to help them with things like childcare, housing, paperwork, books, and supplies? What do foster youth in your area who are in college do if their dormitories close during breaks and holidays?
3. Since research tells us that youth who have held part-time jobs before aging out have more successful transitions, are there ways that you can help area youth gain this valuable experience?
4. Can you provide any internships, job-shadowing, or job-training opportunities?
5. Are there any employers in the community whose social mission targets vulnerable populations in your area? Does their approach make sense for your company?

6. Successful models for jobs training and advancement include the School-to-Career Partnership that United Parcel Service started in several cities. What are the possibilities for developing such partnerships in your community?

Taking Action

1. Youth leaving foster care are good kids, but they need the community's help to ensure they become independent and healthy.
2. Youth leaving foster care often have not had as much experience with the world of work as other youth. Some of these young people may therefore need extra attention navigating the application, screening process, and on the job training.
3. Specifically, consider three things you/your company can do to help youth in your community:
 - **Introduce them to the world of work:** Offering opportunities for job shadowing, apprenticeships, and internships are a great way to prepare youth in foster care for the working world.
 - **Open doors to job training:** Helping youth gain access to job training and post-secondary education greatly increases their chances for success.
 - **Recruit, train, and employ youth leaving foster care:** Successful models, such as the UPS School-to-Career partnership, show that youth leaving care can make good employees for companies who want to “do good” in their communities while “doing well” at the same time.

Resources

An extensive set of resources for communities and stakeholders, including youth, policymakers, employers, and media, is available online and free-of-charge at the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative Web site, www.jimcaseyyouth.org. Just click on the AGING OUT button.

Key Print Resources:

- Martha Shirk and Gary Stangler, *On Their Own: What Happens to Kids When They Leave Foster Care* (Westview Press, 2004)
- *Kids Count*, special issue devoted to youth in transition, The Annie E. Casey Foundation (Available at www.aecf.org)
- *Assessing the Effects of Foster Care: Early Results from the Casey National Alumni Study*, 2004, Casey Family Programs. (Available at www.casey.org)
- Chapin Hall Center for Children, Three-State Study of Foster Care Outcomes (Available at <http://www.chapinhall.org/>)

Resources For Youth

- www.FYI3.com – FYI3 stands for youth who are Involved, Informed, and Independent. It's a comprehensive, youth-oriented site with information, advice, and interactive features for young people leaving foster care. A useful glossary of foster care terms is available at <http://www.fyi3.com/fyi3/informed/Glossary/index.cfm>.
- www.YouthComm.org – Youth Communication is the publisher of *Represent*, a monthly magazine for youth in care, written and edited by youth. Each issue covers issues that youth in care deal with all the time like mental health, money woes, jobs, and navigating the foster care system.
- www.MockingbirdSociety.org – The Mockingbird Society is an independent, non-profit organization that is dedicated to improving the safety, quality of life and future of the children and adolescents living in the foster care/group home system nationwide. They publish the newspaper *The Mockingbird Times*, which is written by youth in care.
- [National Foster Youth Advisory Council](http://www.NFYAC.org) - The National Foster Youth Advisory Council (NFYAC) is a diverse national group of current and former foster youth and adult supporters from several states who have had direct experience with the child welfare systems. The council's purpose is to provide a voice for and make a difference in the lives of youth currently in care and support their successful transitions into adulthood.

Key Online Resources

- www.Jimcaseyyouth.org – Includes information on what you can do to help youth transitioning from care, as well as links to foster care and youth development organizations.
- www.casey.org – Casey Family Programs

- www.aecf.org – The Annie E. Casey Foundation
- www.caseyfamilyservices.org – Casey Family Services
- www.pppdocs.com – Public Policy Productions; view information on AGING OUT and download the AGING OUT Press Kit.

About the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative is a national foundation whose mission is to help youth in foster care make successful transitions to adulthood. We bring together the people and resources needed to help youth make the connections they need to education, employment, health care, housing, and supportive personal and community relationships.

Launched in June 2001, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative was formed by two of the leading foundations focused exclusively on child and youth well being: The Annie E. Casey Foundation and Casey Family Programs.

A Board of Trustees, which includes members representing both foundations, directs the Initiative's work. Based in St. Louis, MO, the Initiative is led by Gary Stangler, who was regarded as one of the country's most creative and effective administrators during his tenure as director of Missouri's Department of Social Services under Republican and Democratic governors from 1989 until 2000.



About the Opportunity Passport™

The Opportunity Passport™ is the centerpiece of the Initiative's work. It is a tool designed to organize resources to create opportunities – financial, educational, vocational, health care, entrepreneurial, and recreational opportunities - for young people leaving care.

The goals of the Opportunity Passport™ are to help youth leaving foster care become financially literate; gain experience with the banking system; amass assets for education, housing, health care, automobile, and a few other specified expenses; and gain streamlined entry to educational, training, and vocational opportunities.

The Opportunity Passport™ has three distinct components:

- A personal debit account, to be used to pay for short-term expenses;
- A matched savings account, also known as an Individual Development Account (IDA), to be used for asset building;
- Door openers, a host of opportunities to be developed on a local basis. Door openers may include pre-approval for registration for community college courses or expedited access to job-training or adult education courses.

Newly convened community and youth leadership boards will direct the implementation of the Opportunity Passport™ in 12 sites by 2005.

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Outreach Extensions for:

- Outreach campaign ideas and strategies
- Outreach media resources
- Campaign reports
- How to work with public television stations

Contact Greg for:

- Communications questions
- Press and media inquiries

Contact Sandy for:

- Policy and practice related questions

*Information about purchasing tapes is available at
Public Policy Productions (www.pppdocs.com)*

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