



Questions and Answers about the North Carolina LINKS Program

Q: What is the North Carolina LINKS Program? And what does LINKS stand for?

A: Effective October, 2000, the North Carolina LINKS Program replaced the former Independent Living Program for older teens in foster care. The program is mandated through the John Chafee Foster Care Independence Act, and is a Title IV-E program that is designed to help adolescents aged 13 through 20 who are or were in foster care to become connected with the resources they need to help assure that they will have a well-connected, self-sufficient life. LINKS doesn't "stand" for anything. The word LINKS signifies the connections that every adult needs in life: to family and friends, to businesses, employment, education and training; and to resources and opportunities. The LINKS program is supervised by the state LINKS coordinator and is administered by designated staff in each county Department of Social Services.

LINKS services include an objective, written assessment of the young person's life skills, goals, and motivation to work toward those goals. The assessments are completed by the youth and by someone who has directly observed the youth's skills, such as the caregiver. Once the needs and strengths are identified, the youth and agency develop a plan to work toward goals defined jointly by the youth and agency. These plans are as individual as the assessment findings, and should use the strengths and resources that the youth has in order to become increasingly self-sufficient. The recommended and preferred assessment tool in North Carolina is the Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment www.caseylifeskills.org. Counties may opt to use the Daniel Memorial Life Skills Assessment.

Services are best provided with a Youth Development approach. Services are tailored to the strengths, needs and interests of the youth or young adult. Services are designed with the youth, and may include life skill training, the development and nurturing of a personal support network, exploration of educational and career opportunities, remedial educational assistance as needed, and counseling. For young adults, additional services may include financial assistance to attend school, purchase of needed items or services, or assistance to locate and move into appropriate housing. For youth who have left custody and are struggling with achieving self-sufficiency, outreach services and resources are available.

Q: Who is eligible for LINKS?

A: Any youth or young adult who is not yet 21 years of age and who is or was in DSS foster care between the ages of 13 and 21 is eligible for LINKS services through the county DSS. For youth and young adults who are no longer in custody, access to services must be authorized through the county who did have custody. Youth who have reserves equal to or more than \$10,000 are not eligible for services funded through the program. Youth and young adults who are illegal or undocumented alien residents are not eligible for LINKS funding. Neither adoption nor emancipation affects eligibility status.

While a youth may be eligible for services and resources through LINKS, the youth must demonstrate willingness to do their own part in achieving independence. The LINKS

program is a wonderful resource for those who need it and who are willing to do their share, but it is **not** an entitlement to those who are not doing so.

Q. Is the local DSS required to provide services to *all* eligible youth and young adults?

- A. No. While a broad group of youth and young adults are eligible for LINKS programming and financial assistance, there are three distinct priorities for service:
1. Youth who are 16 to 21 and are in foster care or are on a CARS/VPA agreement and young adults who aged out of the agency's custody since December of 1999 and who are not yet 21 years of age have **top priority** for LINKS services. Each local DSS agency must make diligent efforts to engage these youth and young adults to determine their need and interest in receiving LINKS assistance. Youth and young adults who refuse services should be re-contacted periodically to determine their status and interest.
 2. Youth ages 13-15 who are in foster care and young adults who did not age out of care but are now 18 to 21 and are requesting services have **secondary priority** for services and resources. The agency may opt to serve these groups if it is willing and able to do so, or may serve individuals within these groups as appropriate. There is no requirement for outreach with these groups.
 3. Youth ages 13 to 18 who were once in foster care and are requesting services have third priority for receiving LINKS services and resources. The agency may opt to serve some, all, or none of these individuals.

Q: Can all former foster youth over the age of 18 get help with housing?

- A. No. Only youth who were in foster care on their eighteenth birthday are eligible for consideration for the LINKS Housing Funds. Young adults who qualify for these funds are those who were in a foster care living situation on their 18th birthday or who were in a relative placement or other court approved family placement that was not the removal home. Young adults who were in a correctional facility on their 18th birthday are specifically excluded and cannot receive Transitional Housing Assistance. They can, however, receive other LINKS Special Funds and services.

Q: Can other LINKS funds be used for rent or rent deposits, or for room and board?

- A. No, only LINKS Housing Funds can be used for these costs.

Q: Can other LINKS funds be used for associated costs such as utilities, utility deposits, furniture, moving costs, etc.?

- A: Transitional funds may be used for any of these expenses.

Q. Why are Transitional Funds not to be used to provide for "senior expenses" such as class rings, prom gowns, tuxedo rentals, graduation invitations, hair styling, etc?

- A. LINKS funds are provided "to assist young people to transition successfully from foster care to self-sufficient adulthood" LINKS Special Funds are intended to supplement the county's allocation by reimbursing counties for expenditures which are allowable under those criteria. This is a limited source of funding, and judicious usage of the Special Funds helps it to last as long as possible. While all of these "senior expenses" are important to teens, they do not meet the criteria for the use of LINKS Special Funds. Agencies may choose to use their county allocation for some or all senior expenses, but

are encouraged to solicit from local businesses, civic groups, or other similar organizations to provide funds to encourage student achievement.

LINKS funds can be used to “match” funds earned by the youth. Some agencies provide matching funds, once the youth has earned his/her share, midway during the youth's senior year in high school. In this way they can choose whether or not to use the funds for senior expenses or for some other needed purchase. This approach encourages several skills needed for adult living, such as working toward a goal, saving and budgeting money, making financial choices and comparison shopping.

Q: What is available for youth and young adults that have problems with alcohol or drugs, or have been in trouble with the law?

A: If a young person between the ages of 13 and 21 are determined to be at exceptionally high risk of not making a successful transition to adulthood, Transitional Funds may be used to help pay for services or other resources that will help to reduce that risk. While these funds cannot be used for housing, they can be used for a variety of other services or purchases that have a reasonable possibility of reducing the risk. However, LINKS funds cannot be used to supplant other public funds available such as Medicaid, Mental Health funding sources, etc.

Q: You have mentioned LINKS Special Funds How are these funds accessed? Does the money go directly to the youth or young adult?

A: The county DSS must first certify the eligible individual with the LINKS coordinator as eligible for funding and must then advance county funds on behalf of that individual. The social worker then requests reimbursement before the 15th of the month through the Coordinator, who turns the requests over to the state Controller's office. Funds are sent by Electronic Funds Transfer (EFT) to the county with the next payment, usually the first week of the following month.

No funds go directly to the youth or young adult from the State LINKS program. Counties are reimbursed directly. The county may choose to provide direct funding to the youth/young adult as circumstances direct, or may reimburse a private agency or foster parent for LINKS allowable expenses they have incurred as a part of an agreement with the agency.

Each county should be assured that if they determine a youth is eligible for LINKS funds, they can act quickly to advance funding with the knowledge that they will be reimbursed promptly. Prior authorization of eligibility can be made by FAX to the state coordinator (919-715-0766).

Q: If a youth is from county A and now lives in county B and needs services, which is responsible for authorizing eligibility? For providing services?

A: The county that had custody is responsible for authorizing access to funds, because they have the case history to verify eligibility. Services may be offered by either county, and reimbursement will go to the county that advances Special Funds and requests reimbursement. This should be arranged between the counties in advance.

Q: How many North Carolina youth and young adults are eligible for the LINKS program?

A: As of September 30, 2006 over 5000 youth and young adults ages 13 through 20 were in DSS custody or placement responsibility or had aged out of foster care. In addition there are an unknown number of youth and young adults who have left custody and who are having a difficult transition to adulthood and who could benefit from short-term re-involvement with LINKS services.

Q: What are the responsibilities of a LINKS liaison?

A: The responsibilities of the LINKS liaison have expanded significantly with the passage of the John Chafee Foster Care Independence Act and the resulting NC LINKS program. Among the responsibilities of the county LINKS liaison are:

- Develop a good working relationship with eligible teens and young adults, their caregivers, supporters and social workers, including other agencies in the community that work with teens;
- Work cooperatively with eligible county youth and young adults to develop and conduct a relevant and effective county LINKS program;
- Utilize a youth development approach in working with LINKS teens and young adults that will provide a challenging and supportive environment within which to learn;
- Engage the broader community in providing a supportive learning and living environment for teens and young adults from the foster care system, which may include engaging community partners in mentoring youth in jobs, providing tangible supports to the LINKS program, sponsoring achieving youth, training youth in groups about subjects such as banking, credit, car purchases, comparison shopping, and other life skill areas;
- Develop budget for operation of the county LINKS program;
- Establish eligibility for LINKS and for LINKS Special Funds; assure that ineligible youth and young adults are not served using additional Federal IV-E funds;
- Register eligible youth for LINKS Special Funds; submit requests for reimbursement of Special Funds to the state LINKS coordinator on behalf of county. Assure that uses of funds requested are allowable;
- Consult with state coordinator as needed;
- Conduct diligent outreach efforts to all young adults 18 to 21 who aged out of foster care in county and offer/provide appropriate services to those young adults;
- Creatively advocate for teens in foster care and for young adults who have aged out of foster care; encourage youth to be self-advocates and leaders;
- Respond to requests for data from the state coordinator, including annual county survey;
- Prepare an annual plan for the county LINKS program based on county resources and needs ;
- Participate in LINKS training offered through the Staff Development Section (LINKS 101, 201, and Groups Course, as appropriate);
- Participate in Regional training with state LINKS coordinator;
- Participate in monthly conference calls with county liaisons and state coordinator when schedule allows;
- Bring county youth to regional events such as SAY-SO conferences, Real World, and LINK-UP conferences and participate actively with youth and other adults in attendance; and
- Meet with liaisons from other counties to consolidate or coordinate services as appropriate.

Q: Tell me about the Education Training Vouchers. Who is eligible? How will these funds be accessed? What can these funds be used for?

Funding for the Education Training Voucher program began in October, 2003. Administration of the program is handled by Orphan Foundation of America, a scholarship program that benefits young adults exiting the foster care system. Youth who were adopted after their 16th birthday or who were in care on or after their 17th birthday are also eligible for these funds.

Eligibility: Young adults 17-21 who were in foster care on or after their 17th birthday (including those who are on a CARS agreement) and young adults whose adoption from foster care was finalized after age 16 will be eligible if

- they are accepted for enrollment or are students in good standing at a certified/licensed college or vocational training program and
- are making satisfactory progress toward completion of the program.

Eligible young adults must be citizens or documented alien residents and may not have in excess of \$10,000 in personal reserves.

21 year old students who are receiving ETV funds may earn extended eligibility until their 23rd birthday if they are making satisfactory progress toward the completion of their degree requirements.

Eligible young adults must apply for these vouchers and must supply information to the contractor regarding their academic performance, work and community activities, and their application for/awards of other grants or loans. High school students who anticipate applying for these funds would benefit from using their non-school time for school sponsored activities, for employment or for volunteer community activities.

The website for the North Carolina ETV program is www.statevoucher.org. The user should click on North Carolina to get to the main menu. The student can go directly to the on-line applications and other information provided. County social workers can access the information about their county students using a special code which must be gotten from the state coordinator.

Q: Where can I learn more about the LINKS program in my county?

Every county has an individual who is responsible for assuring that required services are provided. You can get the name of that individual as well as general program information from Joan McAllister at Joan.McAllister@ncmail.net or by calling (919) 733-2580.