Florida’s Independent Living program needs change. OPPAGA and the Critical Checklist report that the Independent Living program is not achieving the positive results legislators expected. A majority of young adults who aged out of foster care are now incarcerated, homeless, unemployed or on welfare. Additionally, due to out of control growth and a need that continues to exceed appropriations, the program is nearing fiscal collapse. Something must be done. Fortunately, the federal legislation Fostering Connections Act of 2008 enables Florida to reduce state spending but still achieve better outcomes, thanks to additional federal funding. In December 2009, Secretary Sheldon convened a workgroup gathering young adults, advocates, providers, lawyers, judges and case managers to create a new model implementing the Fostering Connections Act. The workgroup presented their redesign proposal to the Department of Children and Families in July 2010.

In response, the Department began drafting legislation using the redesign as a starting point and simultaneously ran cost analyses, searching for budget neutrality and fiscal responsibility.

Independent Living

Our priority is to find a forever family for each child in foster care through adoption or permanent guardianship, realizing that every child is adoptable and deserves a permanent connection.

Regardless, a successful transition to independence starts with effective Pre-Independent Living programs.
- now, program will include all children 13-17 in out of home care, not just children in foster care.
- the new independent living assessment will be standardized, individualized and interactive.
- each child’s educational plan from DOE will be part of the child’s foster care education plan.
- new emphasis on preparing for standardized tests and earning a high school diploma

Beginning at age 17, we must plan for those children aging out of our system by gathering a team of people to collectively plan the next steps by developing a comprehensive Transition Plan.
- case managers will start the transition plan at 17, involving the child in the process as a team member
- transition plan includes the young adult’s goals and milestones to mark progress, the educational plan to employment, which program the young adult will enter at 18, and two assessments (the new independent living assessment and the new needs assessment)

At 18, the young adult can easily transition into one of the following three programs:
- Pathways to Success, to young adult’s 23rd birthday. If attending college or post-secondary full-time, young adults will receive a stipend based on need and access to full support services.
- Foundations for Success, to young adult’s 21st birthday. This extension of foster care provides monthly case management, support services, room & board and a stipend based on need to young adults finishing high school, attending college or vocational, working part-time and attending school part-time, or participating in full-time activities promoting employment.
- Jumpstart to Success, to young adult’s 21st birthday. Young adults ready to transition to adulthood but needing some financial support and services may receive assistance for 12 cumulative months.

The Independent Living redesign is budget neutral, fiscally responsible and accountable.
- the Fostering Connections Act of 2008 allows Florida to use Title IV-E funds for the Foundations to Success program
- passing this bill prevents the fiscal collapse of an already stressed Independent Living program

Young adults, advocates, providers and the Department are united in support of this redesign as the solution for successfully transitioning our young adults to independence and adulthood.

Questions? Contact Alan Abramowitz, Director of Family Safety, at alan_abramowitz@dcf.state.fl.us.