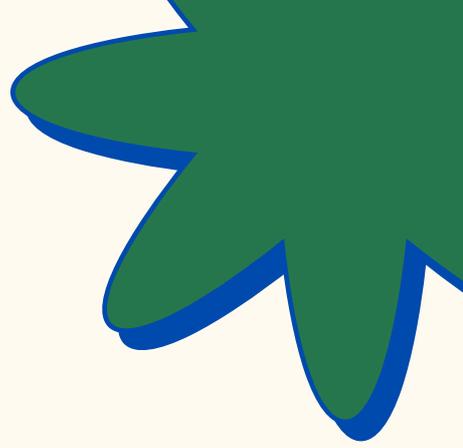


2023

Understanding Your Foster Care JOURNEY





YouthLink

MADE JUST FOR YOU

If you're in foster care, or about to be placed into foster care, we know it can be a little scary. We're here to tell you that you are not alone. Youth Link can help answer all your questions about foster care.

This booklet was created by caring Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) staff, social workers in other states, and the Louisiana Elite Advocacy Force Board (LEAF), young adults who were in child welfare at one time youths who were in foster care right now.

If you still have questions after reading this booklet, please ask your case manager, caregiver, Independent Living Skills provider or another adult you trust. Or, go online to: youthlink.la.gov. This is your life, and you need to know what's going on so you can make the best of your time in foster care and have a chance for a better future.



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The BASICS



WHAT IS FOSTER CARE?

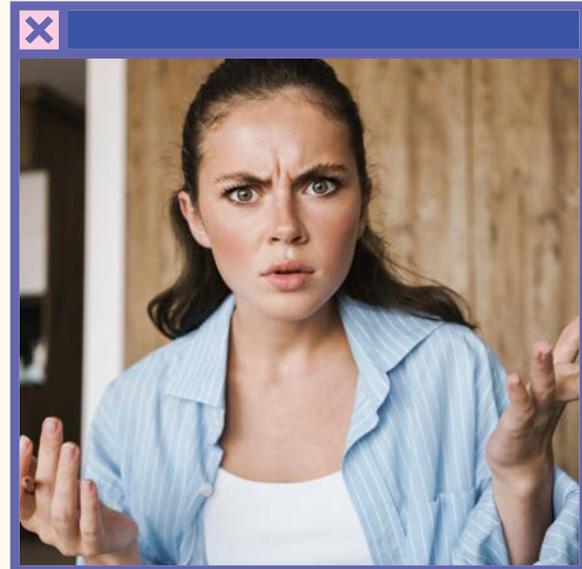
Foster care is when children live in a place that is not their regular home. The care can be with a foster family, a relative, or in a group home to keep them safe and meet their needs.

WHY AM I HERE?

When someone reports that you are being abused or neglected, or that they think you are in danger, someone from DCFS will come to see if you are safe in your home.

If the person from DCFS finds you are not safe in your home, they will contact a judge to let them know about the situation. If the judge agrees that you are unsafe, they will order DCFS to take custody of you and put you in foster care. Once you enter foster care, DCFS will choose a case manager for your family. Your case manager will make sure you have a safe, nice place to live and have all the things you need. The goal of DCFS is to work with families to keep the children in the community safe.

No matter why you enter foster care, you need to remember that you are not to blame and that you didn't do anything wrong. We know being removed from your home can make you feel angry, confused, sad, afraid – or possibly even relieved. All these feelings are okay. Your case manager and caretakers are available to answer your questions and talk with you about how you feel.



The

BASICS



WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO ME?

If you cannot return home, your DCFS case manager, your parents, and others will make other plans with you and help find the best place for you to live.

These plans are called permanency plans. Some of these plans are:

1. Reunification

This means to come together. The Department of Children and Family Services will work to determine when it is safe for you to return home to your previous home and/or caregiver.

2. Guardianship

This is when you are put in the care of a family member or someone else you know

3. Adoption

If it is best for you and something that you want, you can be adopted. This means you legally become the child of the family who adopts you.

4. Alternate Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA)

This means you would stay in foster care until another permanency option is available.

***The agency will make a recommendation about the best permanency goal for you and the court will determine your permanency goal based on your best interest. See the “What Happens in Court” section of this booklet for further details.

WHERE WILL I LIVE?

If you are not able to live with your parents, your case manager’s main goal is to find a place for you and your siblings to live.

Your case manager wants to keep you close to where you live now, so tell them if you have other family or friends who live nearby that you can live with.



The BASICS



WHERE WILL I LIVE CONT.

Here are some other possible places to live while in foster care:

1. Relative or Kinship Caretaker

This type of placement is when you are placed with other family members like grandparents, aunts or uncles, or friends of your family

2. Certified Foster Home

There are many caring adults who open their homes to children who need a safe place to live. Foster homes may have one or two parents and may have other children living in the home

3. Group Home

This is a home where a small number of unrelated youth in need of care and support live together and are supervised by staff. These placements provide additional support and are meant to be short-term.

4. Emergency Shelter

These are places that will provide care for you until your case manager locates a more permanent placement

5. Transitional Living Placement

Sometimes older children live in an apartment, group setting, or their own home with an adult close by in case they need help. This is a good way for them to learn how to take care of themselves and live independently.

Keep in mind that wherever you live, you will have rules and a list of things you need to know about your new foster home. These rules will help keep you safe and will help you feel better. If you have any questions, you can always ask your case worker, attorney, and/or CASA advocate.

CAN I SEE MY FRIENDS AND FAMILY?

Yes, you can visit family and friends unless the court has a no-contact order in place. DCFS will assist in arranging these visits.





Rights & RESPONSIBILITIES

WHAT RIGHTS DO YOU HAVE?

YOU HAVE THE RIGHT

To Know Your Rights

To Have Your Rights Respected

To Privacy

- To have your case information protected and not shared with anyone who does not have the right to it

To Have Access to Your Official Documents

- To have access to your birth certificate, social security card, medical cards, state ID, immunization records
- To have your credit report checked every year after you turn 14 years old

To Live in a Safe Place

- To live in a stable and supportive setting that is free from neglect and emotional, verbal, physical, and sexual abuse or exploitation and is the least restrictive to meet your needs

To Voice Concerns about Your Care or Services

- Participate in all case plan meetings, including supportive adults of your choice to be on the planning team
- Be provided a copy of your case plan every 6 months or whenever changes are made to the plan

To be Heard in Court

- Receive proper notice for an upcoming court hearing
- Attend all court hearings regarding the care to be received

To Have Representation in Court

- To be appointed an attorney by the judge

To Medical Care

- To have medical and mental health needs met on a regular and timely basis

- To be provided adequate trauma-based counseling and therapeutic services throughout the youth's time in foster care
- To know your medications and diagnosis
- To only take medication as prescribed

To Education

- To remain in your school of origin
- To have access to materials necessary for school and to further your education, including access to a computer or other electronic devices and to the internet when needed to complete assignments
- Access to tutoring services
- To know about and receive educational training vouchers (ETV) for secondary education
- Access to information regarding testing accommodations for any learning or developmental disability or special health need
- Access to information regarding college admissions

To Normalcy

- To be involved in extracurricular activities, including school clubs, dances, field trips, and sports teams, and to be provided with supplies and uniforms required for team participation
- To attend a driver's education class



Rights & RESPONSIBILITIES

WHAT RIGHTS DO YOU HAVE?

YOU HAVE THE RIGHT

To Know Your Rights

To Have Your Rights Respected

To Normalcy

- To obtain employment and transportation to employment within the vicinity of foster care placement
- To be provided with the entire amount of the monthly allowance as outlined in the department policy

To Individual Beliefs

- To refuse involvement in religious-based activities
- To continue your cultural, religious, and ethnic traditions and belief systems

To Youth Services

- To attend and have transportation to services, events, and activities provided by the Independent Living Skills Program within the youth's region
- To receive timely notification of upcoming youth advocacy and engagement services in the youth's region

To Communication

- Be provided with the contact info of your caseworker, attorney, and CASA worker, and attend meetings with them on a regular basis
- Access to a phone to talk to or visit with approved friends and relatives, including siblings, at least once a month
- DCFS will provide an interpreter or language line during court and proceedings if English is not your own language

To Same Rights As Everyone Else

- To be free from discrimination of any kind on the basis of the youth's race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic, or social origin, property, disability, birth, or other status

WHAT TO DO WHEN MY RIGHTS ARE NOT BEING RESPECTED?

First, we hope you may be able to work out your concerns with your worker, however, we understand that you may not feel comfortable with this. We encourage you to reach out to your worker's supervisor and/or Foster Care Manager. In these scenarios, we want to encourage you to submit written complaints so they can be included in your record as well as the workers.

If you cannot resolve your concerns, you may submit your concerns to the DCFS Liaison Section using any of the following methods:

- Contact LAHelpU at LAHelpU.DCFS@LA.GOV or call 888-524-3578
- Contact the DCFS Child Welfare Liaison Section at DCFS.LiaisonSection@LA.GOV or call 225-342-5270

What Does Everyone NEED TO DO?

WHAT DOES MY CASEWORKER NEED TO DO?

Your caseworker should visit you in your placement at least once a month and talk with you privately. They should ensure you have their contact information so that you may contact them if needed. They are responsible for arranging meetings for you with your family and friends as allowed by the court. It is also their responsibility to keep your family informed of how you are doing. They are responsible for ensuring you have the resources you may need. Your case manager should make sure you are involved in your case planning meetings which occur every six months. They are responsible for letting you know when your court hearings are scheduled and making sure you can be there. They should make sure your attorney and CASA advocate (if applicable) are aware of how you are doing and share that with the court. In addition, they should make sure your attorney and/or CASA have your current contact information. You should be provided with services you may need to help you. They should help make the transition out of foster care as easy as possible and make sure you have access to your original documents such as your birth certificate, social security card, medical cards, state ID, a completed credit check, and immunization records.

WHAT DOES MY CAREGIVER NEED TO DO?

Your caregiver should ensure your safety and make sure you receive your basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter. They should make sure to keep your information about you and your family confidential and only discuss it with people working with you such as your case manager or attorney. They should accept you for who you are, treat you with dignity and respect, respect your rights, and give you advice when needed. The caregiver should support you in all areas of your life whether that means encouraging academic success; transitioning back with your home, to another placement, living independently, or ensuring you have adequate medical and dental care. Your caregiver should participate and assist in helping you complete areas of your case plan. Whether you are living with a foster family, group home, other facilities, relative or friend, those caring for you have these responsibilities mentioned. If your placement is a certified foster home, group home, or facility, they should make sure they receive the proper training and information to care for you including learning about your heritage or culture.

WHAT DO I NEED TO DO?

When you are in foster care, there are a lot of people working to ensure you are safe and have the things you need. Some things you can do to help may include working with your case worker on your permanency plan, learning the rules where you live, letting your case worker know if there are family members or friends that you would want to visit or live with, and let your attorney know when you do or do not want to visit your parents so they can let the judge know. If you feel unsafe or are having problems where you live, discuss these concerns with your caseworker, attorney, or CASA. Don't run away, no matter the circumstances. Instead, talk to your caseworker or attorney so they can ensure you are safe.

HOW DOES DCFS DECIDE WHAT I NEED?

Getting WHAT YOU NEED

Family Team Meetings (FTMs)

Within 30 days after entering foster care, you should have your first Family Team Meeting (FTM). This is a meeting with DCFS to talk about what you and your family need to do so you can go back home and be safe. It will also focus on what you need for yourself. The FTM also helps find the best way for you to be cared for until it is okay for you to go home or until other permanent arrangements can be made. The following people may be included in your FTMs: your caseworker and supervisor from DCFS, CASA (if you have one), attorney, parent(s), foster parent(s), parent(s) attorney, and other friends and family members.

After the first FTM, you will have a meeting every 6 months, or more often if needed, for as long as you are in foster care. The meetings are held to discuss progress and make changes if needed. At these meetings, a written document called a Youth Transition Plan (YTP) will be made just for you. Your part of the plan outlines what is needed for you to be healthy and safe. Your parents will have their own plan, which lists things that need to change in order for a judge to determine it is safe for you to return home. The main goal is to do what is best for you while making sure you are safe. If you are older than 14 years old, you can make your goals with your team so that you can have a say in your future and can reach the goals you have set for yourself. It is okay if you want to change the goals on your case plan as you get older.

IF YOU HAVE ANY PROBLEMS AT ALL, TELL YOUR CASE WORKER AND/OR SUPERVISOR. IF YOU CANNOT GET IN TOUCH WITH THEM RIGHT AWAY, CONTACT YOUR LOCAL OFFICE AND ASK TO SPEAK WITH A FOSTER CARE SUPERVISOR.

WHAT ABOUT MY EDUCATION?

If you have any trouble with school, talk to your teachers, case worker, or caretakers so they can help you keep up with your school work. If you need special education services, the school will set up a meeting with your teachers, caseworker, caretakers, and others to create an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or 504 accommodations for you. They may want you to take some tests to find out what you already know and what help you need in the classroom. If found necessary, you can have services that will help you with your school work, such as tutors, special education classes and certain therapies.



What If I'm 14+?



If you are between 14 and 18 years old, your caseworker and others will begin helping you plan for your future. By planning ahead, you will be better prepared for life as an adult. Some things you need to think about are:

- What do I need to do to finish high school or other educational programs?
- Where will I live when I reach the age of 18?
- Will I be able to go to college or get other job training after high school?
- What kind of career do I want to have?
- Will I be able to get a full-time or a part-time job?

You should have a backup plan in case you are unable to attain your original goals. Once you have set your goals, talk about them with your case worker, lawyer, CASA worker, or foster caretaker, so they can help you reach your goals. The goals you have will be part of your case plan.

WHAT SERVICES CAN I USE AS I GET OLDER?

Your future is very important to us. We want to make sure you know about all the programs and services you can use as you get ready to leave foster care. Eligibility and the full range of services may not be available to all youth depending on age, location, and/or legal status.

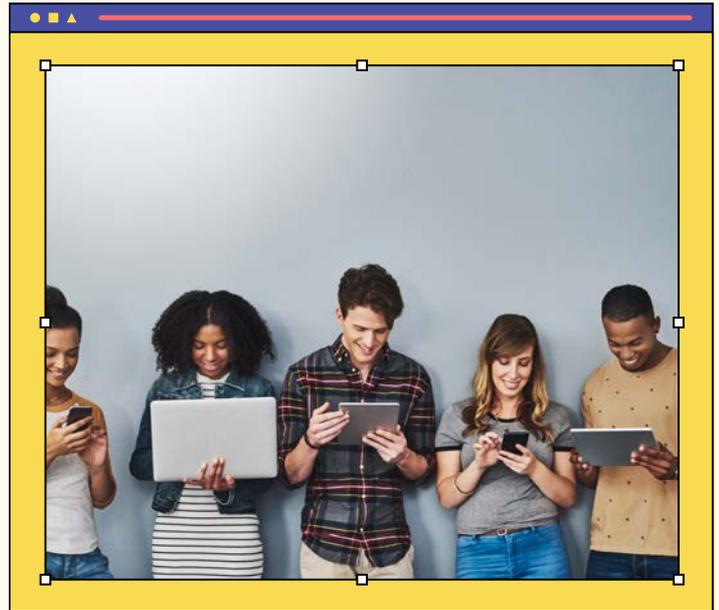


WHAT SERVICES CAN I USE AS I GET OLDER? CONT.

Independent Living Providers (IL)

Wherever you are living, there is an IL provider who can work with your caretakers to make sure you start learning all the things you need to know when you leave foster care. Services such as games, videos, guest speakers, in-home visits, activities, advice from peers, and field trips are there to help you learn things like:

- Goal setting
- Decision making
- Where to go in your area to get the things you need
- Education choices
- Jobs
- How to take care of your money
- How to live on your own
- How to stay safe
- Being a parent
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- How to work and get along with others
- Where to live
- Online Safety
- Healthy relationships and sexual orientation
- Other Supportive services



Case Management Up to Age 23

The IL provider in your area can provide case management services for you from the time you are 18 until you reach 23. It is important for you to always stay in touch with your IL provider, so you can contact them if you need help.

Extended Foster Care

If you are in foster care and turn 18, you may be eligible to volunteer for a program where DCFS will provide case management and other supportive service to you to assist you in working towards independence. If you choose to participate in this program, you will be required to meet with a specialist once a week which may eventually be reduced to once a month. You may not be legally eligible to receive all services due to your citizenship. Please discuss this with your case manager so he or she can help you sign up for the program.

Medicaid Until You Are 26

If you are in foster care on your 18th birthday, you will continue to receive Medicaid services through your 26th birthday. This service is for all youth who turn 18 in foster care, so be sure to get your medical cards from your case manager as you are planning to leave. Dental and vision coverage will be more limited once you turn 18. If you are not a citizen, your overall coverage may be more limited. If you have issues with your coverage, you should contact your Medicaid provider.

WHAT SERVICES CAN I USE AS I GET OLDER? CONT.

Educational Training Vouchers (ETV)

ETV vouchers give you financial help for post-secondary education (like college or a vocational school). The highest amount of ETV you may get is \$5,000 for each school year. To qualify for ETV, you must be under the age of 26, be active in a post-secondary or vocational program and meet at least one of the following requirements. You must have:

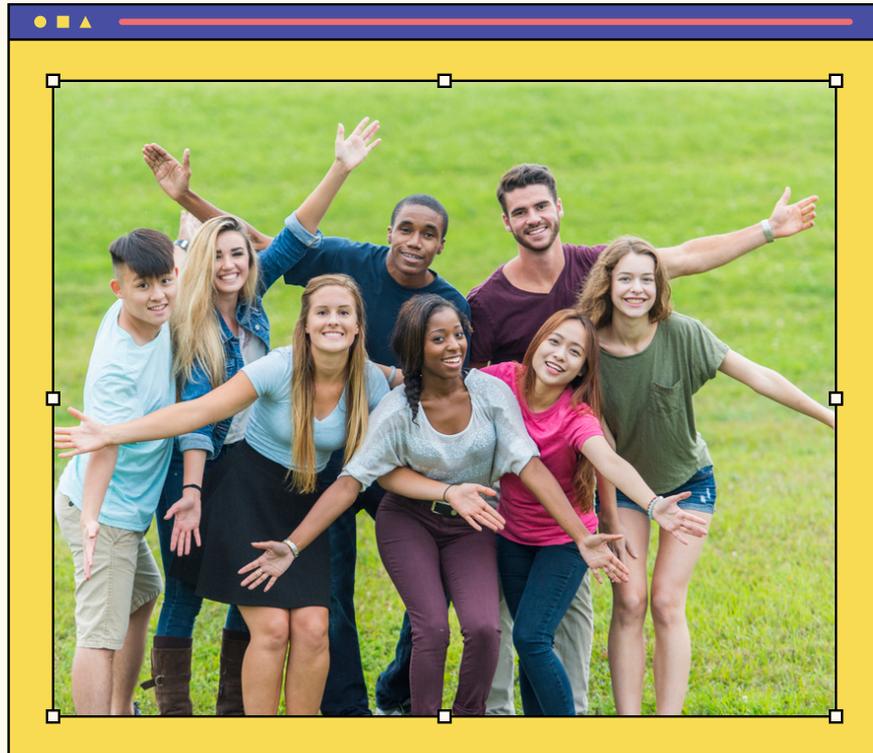
- Left foster care on your 18th birthday
- Been adopted after your 16th birthday
- Entered a guardianship agreement after your 16th birthday
- Had any foster care experience after your 14th birthday and then returned home or to the custody to someone other than your parent

To get these funds, you must meet with the financial aid office at your school and ask them to help you apply for ETV. There is a five-year limit on the funds. To continue receiving these funds you must maintain satisfactory standing. You can also ask your case worker for help. If you are currently in foster care, you should contact your Medicaid provider.

More information can be found at youthlink.la.gov.

Here's to the
NEXT CHAPTER!

You
have
the power
to decide.



Terms To Know

WHOM WILL I MEET?

Case Worker

This is the person you will be talking to the most. They work for DCFS, and it is their job to work closely with you to keep you safe. They assist in answering your questions, presenting your case to a judge, making plans for you to visit your family and so much more. You can talk to your caseworker about any concerns you may have.

Attorney

An attorney is appointed by the judge to advocate for you and tell the court what you want and what you need. The attorney will inform you of your rights and make recommendations to you and for you in reference to your Child In Need of Care (CINC) case. The attorney represents you and maybe your siblings if you have any, and has a duty to keep what you say private unless you say it is okay to tell or compromise your safety.

Judge

The judge is a lawyer who has been elected by the community to make decisions in legal disputes. The judge presides over your family's Child In Need of Care (CINC) case and makes rulings and issues orders based on the law and information presented in court.

Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)

The judge may appoint a CASA who is a court-appointed trained volunteer, if needed, to talk to you and your family, and other people associated with you to provide information to the court, make recommendations in your best interest, and file written reports. Ideally, the same CASA volunteer remains with the child until the case is closed by the court.



Terms To Know

WHAT HAPPENS IN COURT?

The court is where everyone meets to make legal decisions about what is best for you and your family. These meetings are called hearings, and the hearings are led by a judge. The judge will look over your case at least every six months for as long as you are in foster care. You have the right to attend all court hearings and voice your concerns and wishes to your attorney and the court.

Some of the hearings you may have include:

Continued Custody Hearing

This hearing is held within 72 hours of entering foster care and a decision is made about whether or not you will remain in foster care.

Adjudication Hearing

This is when a DCFS worker reports to the judge about the safety of your home and why you need someone other than your parents to care for you.

Disposition Hearing

At this hearing, the judge will decide if it is safe for you to go back home if you should live with a family member or other adult you know, or if you should stay in foster care.

Case Review Hearing

This hearing is held every six months so the judge can make sure you are getting everything you need and that a permanent home is being found for you as fast as possible.

Permanency Hearing

This hearing happens every year while you are in foster care. The judge will decide what your permanency goal will be by checking on your family's progress.

Termination of Parental Rights Hearing

During this hearing, if the judge determines it is not safe for you to return home, he/she may decide to take away your parents' parental rights. If this happens, you may be adopted or live permanently with another caretaker.

As a guide to help you understand the flow of hearings and court proceedings, please review the Hearing flowchart in the appendix

Terms To Know

WHAT THINGS DO I NEED TO KNOW?

Confidentiality

This means everyone working on your case—DCFS, your caretakers, CASA, your lawyer, and others who help take care of you—CANNOT give your information to others who aren't involved in your case or who aren't taking care of you.

Custody

During your hearings, the judge will decide where you will go and who will take care of you. The person, family, or agency the judge chooses will have custody of you while you are under 18.

Least Restrictive Placement

If your parents cannot take care of you, DCFS will first try to find a safe home for you with other relatives, family friends, or a foster family. If you need a special home to meet your needs, you may live in a group home or treatment center with other children.

Life Book

This is like a scrapbook (required), to document your journey through foster care, and it can be filled with important memories such as pictures, report cards, Stories, etc. so that you can remember your life before and during foster care with the assistance of your DCFS caseworker, foster parent, etc. to review every 3 months. Your caseworker can take you shopping for supplies.

Psychiatrist

This is a doctor who will talk to you and sometimes prescribe medications depending on your needs or diagnoses. A psychiatrist's goal is to help you understand your feelings. They help to understand what you need.

Psychologist

This person will talk with you and sometimes give you tests to see what kind of help you need, and how to help you understand and change the way you feel or act.

Caregiver

This is the person who will take care of you or be your foster parent, making sure you get the help you need in school and, if needed, will meet with your teachers.

Therapist or Counselor

These professionals will talk to you and/or your family about any problems and help you find ways to cope.

Appeal

At your hearing, if DCFS, your parents or you do not agree with the judge, any one of you can ask that your case be taken to a higher court to review the judge's decision. Asking for this review is called an appeal.

REMEMBER: FOSTER CARE IS INTENDED TO BE A TEMPORARY SUPPORT TO YOU AND YOUR FAMILY.

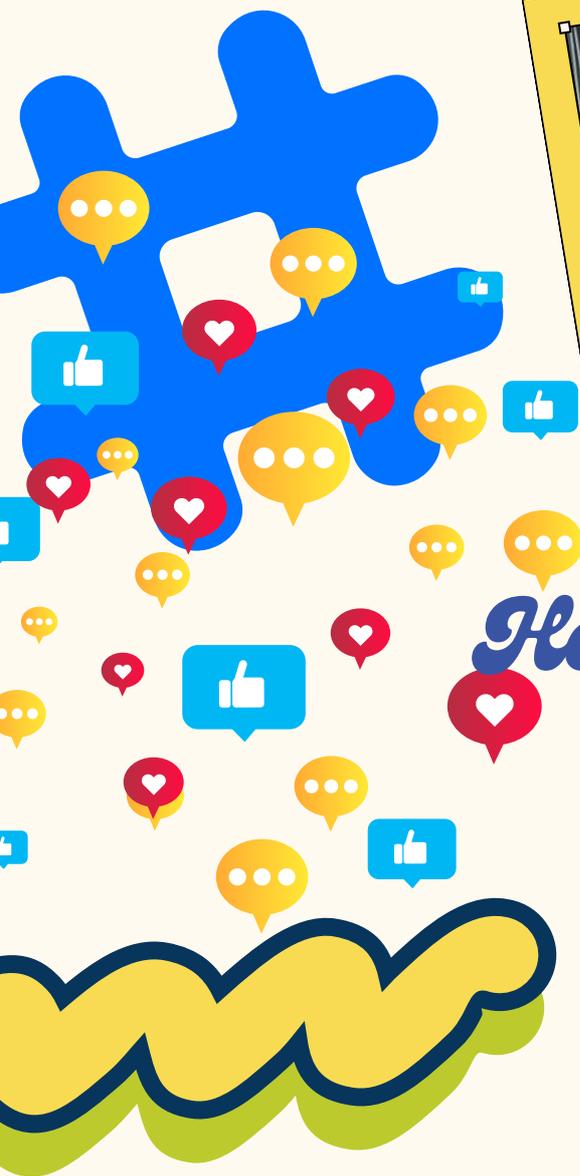


Appendix

DOCUMENTS FOR REFERENCE

IN THE APPENDIX, YOU WILL FIND CHARTS TO KEEP SUPPORTIVE FRIENDS & ADULTS' INFORMATION. ALSO, YOU WILL FIND THE COURT HEARING FLOWCHART TO REFERENCE AS YOU ATTEND COURT.



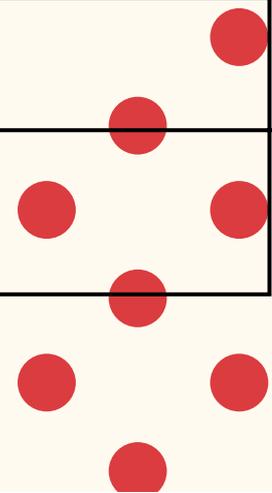


How Do I Stay In Touch

AFTER FOSTER CARE?

Whether you have ever lived in foster care or not, leaving home and living on your own can be a little scary. Just remember that living on your own does not mean you are alone! No one lives day-to-day without the help of others, so fill out this list and keep it with you all the time. That way, you can get in touch with people who can answer your questions and give you the support you need. As technology is always advancing please keep contacts updated in your phone.

Name	Address	Phone	Email



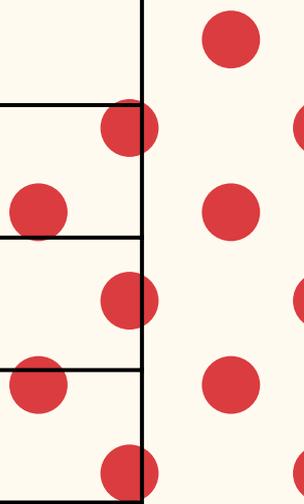


How Do I Stay In Touch

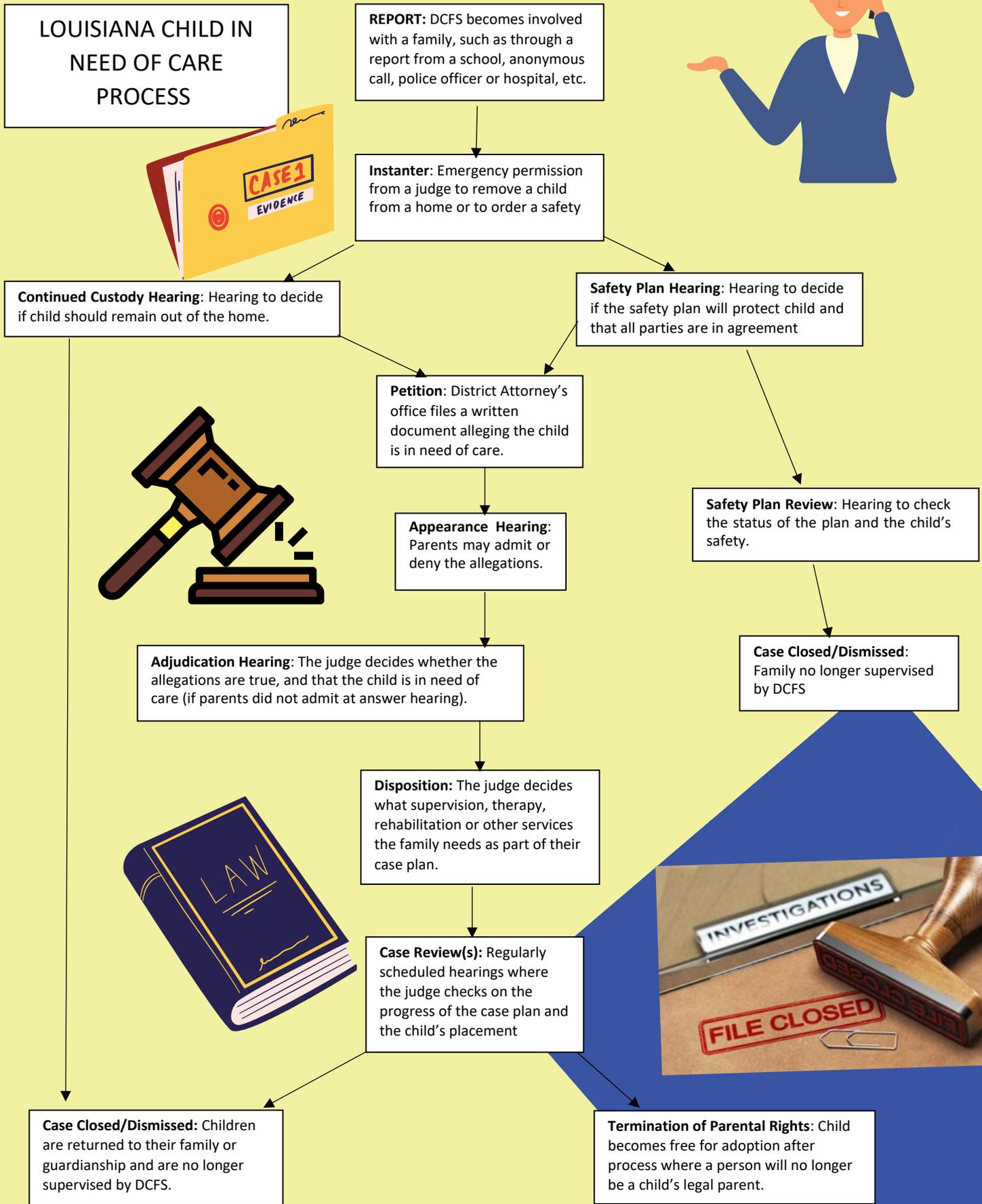
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Title/Position	Name
DCFS Case Manager	
DCFS Case Manager Supervisor	
IL Provider/Region	
Attorney	
CASA	
Caregiver	



Court Hearing Flowchart



Thank YOU

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to extend our special appreciation to the Child Welfare Systems in Maine, Wisconsin, and Texas, to youth in foster care, and to youth aging out whose input and ideas helped make this publication possible.

