



Tech Executive
Leadership Initiative

POLICY BRIEF

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Putting Foster Youth in Charge of their Transition into Adulthood with a Web Application

As part of their 10-week policy training, the leaders of the Tech Executive Leadership Initiative spent 6 weeks working on a real-world government challenge. In teams of 4-5, the leaders proposed ideas to help the State of Oklahoma's Department of Human Services (OKDHS) better connect aging foster care youth to existing government and community resources. Each team narrowed its focus to a specific part of the problem, conducted research, and developed solutions. Below is an overview of one team's solution: creating a web application that digitizes existing Oklahoma resources.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To increase utilization of government and community benefit programs by aging-out foster youth, **Oklahoma's Department of Human Services (OKDHS) should develop an interactive, mobile-friendly web app that empowers foster youth ages 14-18 to directly manage their growth into adulthood.** This app would transform the current paper-based, caseworker-driven transition plan processes into a youth-driven effort. By putting the youth in the driver's seat and introducing them to the resources available to support them, OKDHS would enable them to take a more proactive role in defining their goals and working with their support team to achieve them. This, in turn, should result in more youth achieving their goals.

BACKGROUND

Oklahoma's Department of Human Services currently offers 2 planning tools to help foster youth ages 14-18 prepare for adulthood outside the formal foster care system:

- ▶ [Plan for My Future](#), a 12-page Word document that asks youth to self-identify goals against 7 Key Elements.
- ▶ [My Transition Plan](#), a 10-page PDF form, similar to *Plan for My Future* but with more specific topics that youth are supposed to discuss with their caseworker.

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While the vast majority of aging-out foster youth in Oklahoma write a transition plan (88% in 2022), several barriers prevent these plans from being effective tools in successfully transitioning into adulthood:

- ▶ **The process is led by OKDHS, not the youth.** Caseworkers typically drive the planning process, filling out the forms on paper based on conversations with the youth. The forms bucket goals into 7 Key Elements that may not make sense to foster youth.
- ▶ **Youth depend on caseworkers to take action.** Caseworkers often do not follow through on checking the status of completing actions, or on supporting youth in actions like obtaining essential documents. Additionally, other supportive adults typically are not aware of the action items.¹
- ▶ **Lack of visibility into the youth's progress.** Foster youth should receive a paper copy of their plans from their caseworker, including each time an update is made. This does not always happen.

Other organizations have developed alternative tools to support the transition to adulthood. From design to content to interactivity, each of these examples has advantages over OKDHS' current paper-based tools. However, none are comprehensive alternatives.

- ▶ National nonprofit [FosterClub](#) offers an eye-catching paper-based [Transition Toolkit](#) designed for aging-out foster youth to directly own.
- ▶ A national support community for foster youth called iFoster maintains an [Android-only app](#) for foster youth to discover available resources and store essential documents, but it lacks goal-setting functionality.
- ▶ Think of Us, an organization led by people who have experienced the child welfare system, identified [14 features that foster youth said they would want in an app](#).² It has since paused development of its own app, but is contributing to a youth-facing portal that foster care software developer [Binti](#) anticipates releasing in 2024.
- ▶ The private company [Realworld](#) has created an iOS-only app that over 100,000 young adults use to learn about and manage adulthood essentials. Realworld focuses on personal finances, health and wellness, and career growth, but does not cover topics such as housing or allow for custom goals outside its topic areas.

RECOMMENDATION

As organizations such as these have shown, alternative tools – especially web applications – have multiple advantages over paper-based forms. Of particular note, web apps can incorporate research-proven methods to incentivize engagement and follow-through. For example, nudges such as reminders with specially crafted language and gamification through digital badge awards can encourage teens to take certain healthy actions.³ A web app can also proactively inform youth about the tools and resources available to them as they set new goals. Furthermore, web applications that are mobile-friendly are easier and more economical to build, manage, and access than native applications for iOS or Android.⁴

OKDHS should develop a mobile-friendly web app for foster youth ages 14+ that transforms the *Plan for My Future* and *My Transition Plan* forms into an inspiring, youth-driven, and interactive experience.

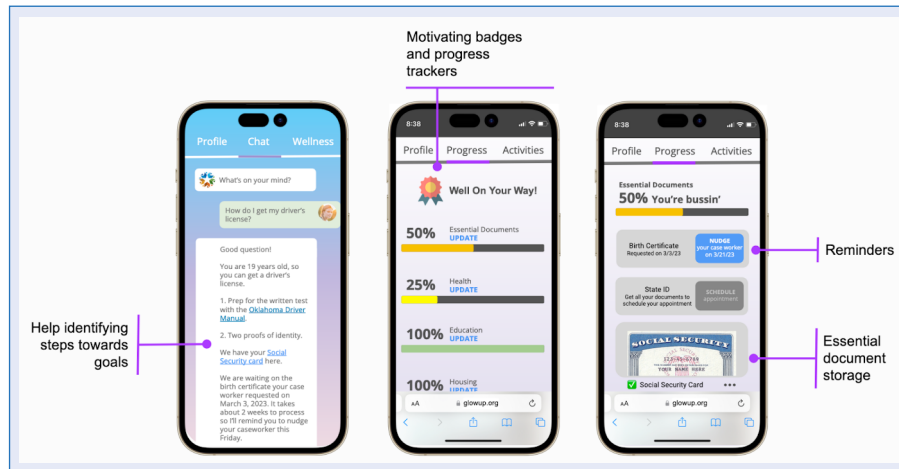
Unlike off-the-shelf apps, a custom OKDHS web app can be tailored to the particular needs of the foster youth you serve, while remaining accessible to users who access mobile content in a variety of ways.

Our proposed **web app, henceforth referenced by the working title “Glow Up,” would support youth in their transition to adulthood.** Glow Up would give youth, in a format designed by and for them, the tools to (1) identify their own goals, (2) break down those goals into achievable steps, and (3) ask for help from OKDHS caseworkers and other supportive adults.

The Glow Up app would accomplish this by offering a number of features tailored toward helping youth identify and achieve their goals. For example, the app would allow youth to take on goals suggested by OKDHS or to set their own goals (for example, “Get my driver’s license by Xth birthday”). The app would also suggest smaller steps to achieve larger goals (such as “Get a copy of my birth certificate by MM/DD/YYYY” as a step toward getting a driver’s license). In suggesting steps, Glow Up would point users to available community and government resources (such as links to practice written driving tests or community driving courses). Finally, Glow Up would track user progress, including sending reminders and awarding badges to motivate continued achievement.

To offer additional support and accountability, Glow Up would also offer a dashboard to allow caseworkers and other supportive adults to monitor progress toward goals and receive requests for support in accomplishing individual steps.

The following conceptual design shows examples of the features and tone that Glow Up could offer:



We believe a Glow Up app would address all 3 barriers discussed in this memo's background:

- ▶ **Most notably, it would put the youth in the driver's seat**, allowing them to articulate their own needs by creating or adapting their own goals. Glow Up could help make suggested goals more achievable by breaking them up into steps and providing links to resources. In this way, Glow Up would also model how foster youth could continue to approach big goals as they age out of the foster system by identifying and tackling discrete steps.
- ▶ **It would help youth follow up with their caseworker and supportive adults to take actions when necessary.** Glow Up can automate reminders when the youth is waiting for their caseworker or another supportive adult to take action. Automated reminders would reduce the mental load for both the youth and their supportive adults while nudging quicker action.
- ▶ **It would enable visibility for OKDHS and supportive adults on the progress that youth are making toward their goals.** The primary users for Glow Up would be foster youth, but Glow Up would also have a feature set for OKDHS and the supportive adults that youth invite to be part of their planning process. These features would let OKDHS and supportive adults understand a youth's overall progress toward their goals.

As a first step, OKDHS should develop a 12-month pilot program codesigned with aging-out



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and recently aged-out foster youth. The goal of a pilot would be to demonstrate whether pilot participants are more likely than non-participants to achieve their transition-related goals and to use the resources of the Oklahoma Successful Adulthood Program. If the pilot is successful (as measured through survey data and goal attainment data measured through the app), OKDHS should make the app available to all current foster youth aged 14–18, and market it to both foster youth and caseworkers.

For more information on our proposed solution, please see the following additional deliverables:

- ▶ [App Design Concept](#): Illustrates high-level examples of Glow Up’s functionality.
- ▶ [Pilot Proposal](#): Provides more details of the set of pilot app features and how to measure the success of the pilot.
- ▶ [Technical Considerations](#): Provides recommendations for how to keep the application architecture simple while ensuring security for and granting privacy to the youth.

ABOUT TELI

This project was completed as part of the Tech Executive Leadership Initiative (TELI), a 10-week skills-building initiative that prepares experienced technology leaders to engage effectively with public sector challenges. Learn more at aspentechpolicyhub.org/teli



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ENDNOTES

- 1 Interview with staff from the University of Oklahoma’s National Resource Center for Youth Services, Spring 2023.
- 2 Sixto Cancel et al., “[Aged Out: How We’re Failing Youth Transitioning Out of Foster Care](#).” *Think of Us*, (2020): 47.
- 3 A [recent example from Instagram](#) showed that nudges prompted 1 in 5 teens to switch away from content that could cause negative body images. Gamification done well, as described by [Edutopia](#), is a common technique for motivating students to learn.
- 4 These advantages are summarized in CSSChopper’s “[Progressive Web Apps: Everything You Need to Know](#).”