

# Chapin Hall Research Brief



## Youth Perspectives: Findings from Phase II of the Illinois DCFS LifeSet Evaluation

This brief summarizes findings from interviews with youth participating in LifeSet. The interviews were conducted as part of Phase II of a formative evaluation of LifeSet in Illinois.

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## Introduction

In 1999, Youth Villages established LifeSet, a youth-centered and service-focused model, to help youth who were formerly in the child welfare or juvenile justice system make a successful transition to adulthood.<sup>1</sup> The model has since been used with transition-age youth in foster care. LifeSet is currently being implemented in 18 states and Washington, DC by Youth Villages or state partners.<sup>2</sup>

In 2018, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) was one of four jurisdictions awarded funding by Youth Villages to implement LifeSet. DCFS has traditionally contracted with private sector service providers to help prepare transition-age youth in foster care for independence through transitional living programs (TLPs) and independent living programs (ILOs). It has integrated LifeSet into its existing service array by contracting with TLP and ILO providers to implement the model. Youth Villages supports those providers with ongoing training, technical assistance, and tools. As of September 2022, LifeSet was being implemented in Illinois by three providers: Hoyleton, Lawrence Hall, and UCAN.

DCFS contracted with Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago to evaluate the implementation of the LifeSet program. This research brief examines how young people experience LifeSet and how LifeSet is or isn't supporting their transition to adulthood.

## LifeSet in Illinois

Each LifeSet team is headed by a supervisor who oversees five specialists, and each specialist is assigned six to eight LifeSet youth.

To be eligible for LifeSet, young people must be between 17.5 and 20 years old. When a young person is referred to a LifeSet provider by the DCFS Central Matching Team, a specialist uses the Adult Needs and Strengths Assessment – Transition to Adulthood (ANSA-T) to determine if LifeSet is a “good fit” for the youth, and, if so, whether the youth should be housed in a supervised or community-based setting.<sup>3</sup>

LifeSet youth meet weekly with their specialist, who provides individualized services to help the youth achieve self-defined goals related to education, employment, housing, independent living skills, and permanent connections with committed adults. Youth Villages offers a range of supports that are generally not available to traditional TLP or ILO providers. These include clinical consultation with a licensed program expert, training, monthly service plan templates, and the GuideTree Toolbox, which includes evidence-based and best practice interventions and resources, available through a web-based portal, tailored to specific needs.

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## Methods

We interviewed 13 young people who had been enrolled in LifeSet for at least 2 months. Our sample included at least three young people from each of the three Illinois LifeSet providers. We had the interviews transcribed and reviewed the transcripts for accuracy. We created an initial codebook based on the interview questions and developed additional codes based on the transcription review. We used Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software, to code each transcript and met regularly to review the codes, resolve differences between coders, and identify themes.

## Sample

The 13 young people we interviewed were between 18 and 21 years old. They had been enrolled in LifeSet for an average of about 15 months.<sup>4</sup> Seven of the young people were either pregnant or parenting at the time of their interview. Prior to enrolling in LifeSet, ten of the young people had been living in a relative or non-relative foster home.

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## Findings

### How did young people learn about LifeSet?

**Almost all the young people we interviewed learned about LifeSet from their previous caseworker while discussing placement options.** For example, one young woman didn’t want to be moved to another foster home after four or five foster home placements. Her caseworker offered a LifeSet TLP as a placement option to “help [her] with adulting and learning how to do things on your own.”

A few young people learned about LifeSet from their caseworker, but while talking about something other than placement options. One young woman learned about the program from her former caseworker who thought LifeSet could help her pursue her educational goals. Likewise, one young man learned about LifeSet because his caseworker thought the program would help him “find myself,” and “give me a purpose.”

Other young people told us that they did not know they were being referred to LifeSet. One young woman only learned about LifeSet when she was contacted by her specialist to schedule a pre-enrollment assessment. In fact, three of the young people we interviewed were not even aware that they were placed in a TLP through LifeSet. As one young woman put it, “[I] didn’t even know what a LifeSet TLP program is. . . . No one told me it was an option.”

## Why did young people enroll in LifeSet?

**Almost all the young people we interviewed cited placement-related reasons for enrolling in LifeSet.**

Some young people hoped that LifeSet would offer them more placement stability. One young person explained that her former caseworker “wanted a better placement for me. . . . She didn’t want me to keep hopping from placement to placement.” A few young people chose LifeSet because they perceived it to be their best placement option. One young woman who had bounced around multiple foster homes enrolled in LifeSet because “don’t nobody want me really anymore. I was getting ready to age out. So it was just to the point where I guess it was time for me to go to a [transitional] living program or whatever.”

However, more than half of the young people we interviewed also cited the ability to live independently and learn independent living skills. One young woman enrolled in LifeSet “so I could be more independent. I’m a young adult now, so I wanna be able to take care of myself and not have to depend on nobody.” Another noted, “Once they said, ‘your own apartment,’ I was like, cool that works for me.”

Importantly, young people enrolled in LifeSet can live independently in the community even if they do not meet traditional ILO program eligibility criteria, such as having a high school diploma or GED.<sup>5</sup> Some young people were attracted to LifeSet because they could live in their own apartment without meeting those criteria.

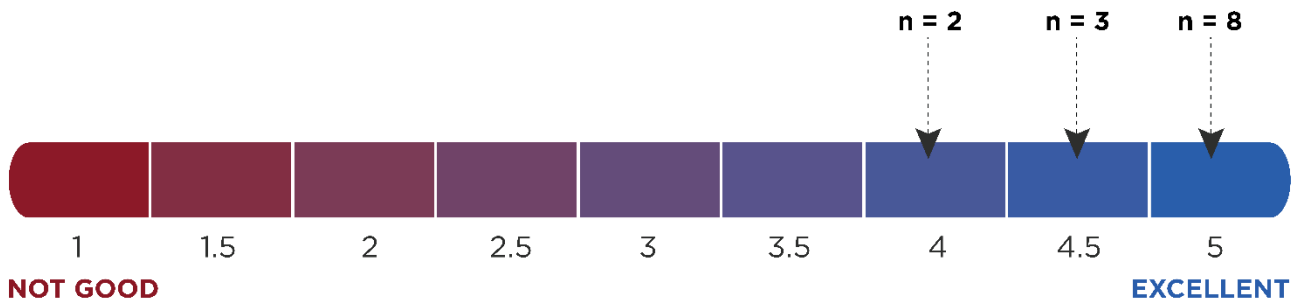
## Differences Between LifeSet in Illinois and LifeSet in Other Jurisdictions

Illinois is implementing LifeSet differently than other jurisdictions. First, the Illinois LifeSet providers are also placement agencies. This means that these agencies must provide LifeSet participants with supervised and/or community-based housing. In other jurisdictions, LifeSet providers are not responsible for placement. Second, LifeSet specialists in Illinois serve a dual role in that they are also the legal caseworkers. LifeSet Specialists serve this dual role in only one other jurisdiction. Third, if young people in Illinois exit LifeSet before their 21st birthday, they remain on their specialist’s caseload until they age out. Again, that does not happen in other jurisdictions, where LifeSet participants have both a legal caseworker and a specialist.

## How do young people feel about LifeSet?

All the young people we interviewed were positive about their experiences with LifeSet. When asked to rate those experiences on a scale from 1 (“not good”) to 5 (“excellent”), no one rated it lower than a 4. Eight young people gave it a rating of 5, including one young woman who asked if she could give it a rating of 10.

## YOUTH RATINGS OF THE LIFESET PROGRAM



Every young person we interviewed would recommend LifeSet to other young people in care.

Some of the young people described LifeSet as giving second chances to young people who had made poor decisions, such as dropping out of high school or committing a crime. One young man noted that LifeSet gives young people who “didn’t do everything that was expected” an opportunity to change. Another observed that “the opportunity that [LifeSet] gives is one of a kind, because it could change somebody’s whole life around if they’re willing to change it.” This opportunity to change was especially important to another young person who realized that “I can’t keep like going through life the way I’ve been going.”

Several young people talked about how LifeSet provided opportunities for personal growth and for learning about the “real world.” One young woman explained that LifeSet “allow[s] me time to grow and get used to what the real world is gonna be like.” Another described learning “a lot about being in the real world, financial-wise and relationship-wise, that I didn’t know before. I’m glad I learned it before I move [at 21].”

For other young people, LifeSet provided much-needed support. One young woman described her LifeSet provider as “the only place where I have actually felt like I got the help I needed.” A young man spoke metaphorically about the support he received, saying “[You know how] you sit down on the stool and you can’t lean back? I can lean back and I can relax because I know I got support.”

“I mean through LifeSet I’ve matured.”

–Young Person

Even young people who were not aware of their enrollment in LifeSet reported having positive experiences. One young woman explained, "I didn't even know I was really part of LifeSet, but I'm not complaining about it since I get all these services and I'm more than happy to participate."

For some young people, the benefits of LifeSet were not immediately clear. That was the case for one young woman who didn't meet regularly with her specialist when she first enrolled. However, once her circumstances changed and she began to engage, she realized that LifeSet "offers a lot."

## **How do young people describe their LifeSet specialist and the relationship they had developed?**

**The young people we interviewed spoke very highly of their specialists** and used words like "caring," "consistent," "genuine," "reliable," "attentive," and "encouraging" to describe them. A few young people even said that their specialist is what they liked the most about LifeSet. As one young woman put it, "It's not the program, it's the worker."<sup>6</sup> Another young woman said she felt loved by her specialist for "checking up [on] me like I'm her daughter."

**Although most of the young people we interviewed seemed to have developed strong relationships with their specialist, a few** acknowledged having difficulty trusting their specialist. One young woman who had been enrolled in LifeSet for less than 6 months at the time of her interview explained, that although "[her specialist] hasn't let me down yet. . . . I'm not gonna depend on her 100% because any time I depend on someone in my corner, they always disappear."

Many of the young people we interviewed described being treated differently by their specialists than by their previous caseworkers. One young woman said she did not try to make time to see her previous caseworker because she "wasn't helpful." By contrast, she said her "[specialist] is more resourceful. She understood what I exactly needed as a youth. She didn't judge or ask too many questions. . . . I felt more open with her." Another young woman felt that prior to LifeSet "no one was hearing me." Her prior caseworker did not respond for over a month when she had reached out for help. Now she felt that she was being heard: "I've never had one [caseworker or foster family] care as much about me as the people at LifeSet." One young man shared how his specialist in LifeSet took time to listen to him, unlike his former caseworkers, who "made me feel as if I was in DCFS every day of my life;" his specialist helped him not to feel like that.

**"[Specialist] has always been my biggest fan, my biggest supporter."**

**—Young Person**

**Eight of the 13 young people we interviewed had been assigned to more than one specialist since enrolling in LifeSet.** These young people reported experiencing a range of emotions when their specialists changed. One young woman was apprehensive about getting a new specialist. She had not had positive experiences with her prior caseworkers and was skeptical that she would have as good of a relationship with her new specialist as she did with her old one. Another young woman was angry about the change, saying, “That was my go-to person. I was really mad that she left.” Yet another young woman said she cried about the departure of her specialist, whom she looked up to as an older sister and role model.

Their initial apprehension notwithstanding, most of these young people were able to forge a strong relationship with their new specialist. One young woman was already comfortable with her new specialist when her prior specialist left because she was familiar with the entire LifeSet team.

### **How do young people describe visits with their LifeSet specialist?**

**The young people we interviewed described visits with their LifeSet specialists as being more meaningful than visits with their former caseworkers.** Young people characterized visits with their former caseworkers as cursory, sometimes lasting only 10 to 15 minutes. One young person described her former caseworkers just coming in to “[make] sure like I wasn’t living in a slob house or something, and they were there for maybe 10 minutes.” Another young woman characterized her former caseworker as “just kind of. . . checking in on you, [to] make sure you’re not running away in the streets, [to make sure you are] going to school. That was it.” By contrast, the young people felt that visits with their specialist weren’t rushed. One young person noted that his specialist is never “like, ‘Oh I gotta go; I’ve got somebody else.’”

All but one of the young people we interviewed said that they visited with their specialist at least weekly, including some who met with their specialist multiple times each week.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, visits with the prior caseworkers had occurred once or at most twice a month. Because visits with their former caseworkers had been inconsistent, a few young people were surprised when their specialist actually visited them weekly.

### **What types of help do young people receive from their specialists?**

**The young people we interviewed described various ways in which their specialists had provided them with guidance, emotional support, and advocacy, taught them independent living skills, and helped them set and achieve their goals.**

“They’re more involved with me than like any other caseworker. Like if I need something I can just call.”

–Young Person

## HELP FROM LIFESSET SPECIALISTS

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### **GUIDANCE**

Specialists provided guidance to young people on a wide range of topics

### **EMOTIONAL SUPPORT**

Specialists recognized when a young person is feeling emotional and helped them recenter themselves

### **ADVOCACY**

Specialists advocated on the behalf of young people and taught them how to advocate for themselves

### **LEARNING LIFE SKILLS**

Specialists taught young people life skills such as managing healthcare and budgeting

### **GOAL SETTING**

Specialists encouraged young people to set goals and provided feedback on those goals

### **Guidance**

All of the young people we interviewed reported turning to their specialist when they needed guidance on a wide range of topics, including employment, parenting, budgeting, housing, education, and relationships. One young woman said her specialist “gives me advice. . . [as] I’m starting to do new things that I’m not used to.” Another appreciated that her specialist “very much guided me.”

### **Emotional Support**

Some young people described turning to their specialists for emotional support when they were feeling sad or just needed to talk. Specialists recognized their feelings and helped the young people recenter themselves. One young woman learned from her specialist that anxiety isn’t necessarily bad; it can keep her alert and help her make good decisions. Specialists also taught strategies for coping with emotions. One young man who liked music was encouraged to breathe deeply and listen to music when he was feeling angry, anxious, or stressed.

### **Advocacy**

Some of the young people we interviewed described how their specialists had advocated on their behalf with landlords or school personnel. Other young people reported that their specialists taught them how to advocate for themselves. One young woman explained that her specialist “made me speak up for myself more. . . not let people just talk over me or just walk over me or just say anything about me.”



## ● Learning Life Skills

All of the young people described learning life skills from their specialists. Among the life skills young people commonly reported learning were managing healthcare (such as making and keeping doctor or therapy appointments, obtaining prescriptions or eyeglasses, learning about health insurance); securing vital documents (such as a Social Security card, Medicaid card, identification card, or driver's license); and budgeting. One young person reported learning how to write and mail a letter.

"I feel like [specialist] is part of the reason I am who I am today and why I even turned my life around."

—Young Person

## ● Goal Setting

A majority of the young people we interviewed spoke about how their specialists helped them with goal setting. One young woman appreciated that her specialist provided guidance but let her choose her own goals. Her specialist would give her feedback on her goals "but she never forced me or told me, 'Oh this is what you need to do when it comes to your life' or 'You can't do this when it comes to your life.'"

Several young people were encouraged by their specialist to set short-term, realistic goals that they could achieve. Some talked about using monthly service plans with their specialist on a regular basis to identify action steps they needed to take and reflect on their progress. One young man found the LifeSet monthly service plan helpful because it broke down how "you're going to achieve this goal. . . [in] your own words." Other young people reported that they did not refer to their monthly service plans very often. One young woman could not recall the last time she had reviewed her monthly service plan with her specialist. However, she had been checking in with her specialist and felt she was achieving the goals that she had set.

## What Goals are Young People in LifeSet Working Toward?

The young people we interviewed identified a wide range of short-term goals they hoped to achieve while they were enrolled in LifeSet and long-term goals they hoped to achieve after they exited the program. These goals were typically related to education (such as attending or graduating from college, or improving grades), housing (such as finding an apartment), employment (getting a job), relationships (such as working on developing friendships or becoming a good parent), life skills (such as budgeting or saving money, getting a driver's license), and well-being (such as improving physical and mental health or staying on medication).

Young people's goals often changed while they were in LifeSet. Some young people had to set aside a goal they had been working on to prioritize more immediate needs. One young woman recalled shifting her priority when she became pregnant from going to school to finding a place to live.

Some young people encountered barriers to achieving their goals. One barrier was that they had "a lot to juggle" in their lives. One young man who was trying to go back to school said, "I feel like there's so much that I want to accomplish now and it's like just not enough time." Another young man found it challenging to find time to study for the GED test while managing work and parenting responsibilities.



Despite these barriers, young people stayed focused on achieving their goals. One young man described how his specialist reminded him to “stick to your goal. Don't let yourself sidetracked. Don't let yourself get distracted from what's really important.”

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## Discussion

To understand how young people experience LifeSet and how LifeSet is or isn't supporting their transition to adulthood, we interviewed 13 young people who were enrolled in LifeSet for at least 2 months. The interviews made it clear that these young people appreciate being in LifeSet. They like and have developed strong relationships with their specialists. Weekly visits with their specialists facilitate the development of these relationships. They also allow young people to reflect regularly on their progress.

Importantly, young people feel that LifeSet is supporting their transition to adulthood. Their specialists provide guidance, advocate on their behalf, teach them self-advocacy, model life skills, and help them set and achieve their goals. Young people appreciate the sense of independence they develop through LifeSet; they set goals for themselves and are motivated to achieve them. Additionally, some young people who would not qualify for a traditional ILO are able to live independently in the community, by virtue of being enrolled in LifeSet.

Almost all of the young people we interviewed said they learned about LifeSet from their prior caseworkers while discussing placement options. They cited placement as a reason for enrolling. This may explain why several of the young people seemed to not distinguish between LifeSet and their TLP or ILO programs. In fact, when we asked if they had any recommendations to improve LifeSet, some young people offered suggestions related to their TLP or ILO provider. They also seemed to conflate services provided as part of LifeSet with services provided to all young people preparing to age out of care (such as financial literacy training).

We recognize that the experiences of the 13 young people who volunteered to be interviewed may not be representative of the experiences of all young people in Illinois who are enrolled in LifeSet. The experiences of the young people who did not volunteer may not have been as positive. Additionally, given the differences between how Illinois is implementing LifeSet and how LifeSet is implemented in other jurisdictions, the experiences of LifeSet participants in other jurisdictions may be different from the experiences of the young people we interviewed.

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The opinions, findings, and recommendations expressed in this publication are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of Youth Villages or the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> LifeSet was previously known as YVLifeSet.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://youthvillages.org/services/lifaset/>

<sup>3</sup> The ANSA-T was introduced after our interviews were completed. Prior to its introduction, specialists conducted a pre-enrollment assessment which focused on many of the same domains.

<sup>4</sup> The number of months young people had been enrolled in LifeSet ranged from 2 to 23.

<sup>5</sup> To be eligible for a traditional ILO program, young people must be at least 18 years old, in an authorized placement for at least 6 months, have a high school diploma or GED, and be employed for at least 45 days.

<sup>6</sup> Although Youth Villages calls them “specialists,” some young people continue to refer to them as “workers” or “caseworkers.”

<sup>7</sup> In addition to weekly in-person visits, LifeSet specialists are also available 24/7 to young people via text or phone.