

# **BRIDGING VISION AND PRACTICE:**

## **A Process Evaluation of the My First Place™**

### **Model Launch in New Jersey**

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The views expressed in this brief are solely those of the authors and do not represent any official view of First Place, its partners, or its funders.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In July 2023, the New Jersey Department of Children and Families (DCF) partnered with First Place for Youth (First Place) and two provider agencies, Catholic Charities Diocese of Metuchen (CCDOM) and Volunteers of America (VOA), to launch *My First Place* (MFP), a housing and education/employment model for transition-age youth ages 18 to 24 who have aged out of the foster care system. The MFP program offers safe, stable housing and individualized coaching in life skills, education support, and career development to help participants build a foundation for long-term self-sufficiency.

Despite concerted efforts to improve the transition to adulthood for those aging out of foster care, youth continue to face persistent barriers to independence. Rising living costs, especially for housing, together with limited access to tailored education and employment pathways, have left many without the supports necessary to thrive. My First Place was introduced to address these gaps by providing extended, youth-driven support aimed at building lasting stability.

This report presents findings from a process evaluation conducted by First Place, the model developer and implementation coach for CCDOM and VOA. The evaluation documents the first 18 months of MFP operations in New Jersey, offering insights into youth served and their outcomes, fidelity to the program model, and implementation strengths and challenges to date.

## KEY FINDINGS

- **Sites Implementing Model to Fidelity or Near to Fidelity**  
Both CCDOM and VOA are implementing the model to fidelity or near fidelity benchmarks. Challenges include inconsistent bimonthly engagement from their Education and Employment Specialists as well as the on-time completion of biannual action plans.
- **Strong Program Design with Minimal Adaptation**  
The core MFP model required few changes to fit New Jersey's context. Minor adaptations focused on accessibility and cultural responsiveness, such as renaming assessments, offering virtual events, and translating materials into Spanish.
- **Effective Implementation Supports and Partnerships**  
Structured coaching, weekly operations meetings, and shared decision-making among DCF, First Place, and providers created a strong foundation for coordinated service delivery. First Place's role as an external coach helped surface provider concerns and fostered trust across stakeholders.
- **Early Challenges**  
Initial hurdles included hiring qualified staff, securing housing, and navigating youth referrals through the Adolescent Housing Hub. These were addressed through collaborative problem-solving and coaching.

- **Steady Program Growth and Strong Retention**  
Within 18 months, both sites reached their enrollment targets of 30 youth each. Retention was high, with 95% of youth remaining in the program for at least 90 days.
- **Progress toward Outcomes**  
Among youth in the program for at least three months: 98% avoided detention/incarceration; 88% made progress toward self-defined goals; and 73% were employed, with over half maintaining employment for 90+ days
- **Youth Experience**  
Youth described MFP as a meaningful improvement over prior services, citing better housing, increased autonomy, and supportive staff relationships. Some youth noted inconsistent staff engagement and a need for more personalized support.
- **Filling a Critical Gap in the Continuum of Care**  
MFP serves youth beyond age 21 and those with prior child welfare involvement who are currently homeless—groups often excluded from traditional transitional living programs.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To build on early successes and strengthen program quality, First Place recommends:

1. **Maintain and Improve Fidelity** - Ensure consistent engagement from staff and timely completion of assessments and action plans.
2. **Deepen Relationship-Based Coaching** - Train staff to build authentic, empathetic relationships and engage youth in meaningful, developmentally appropriate ways.
3. **Expand Career Pathways** - Connect youth to living-wage jobs through partnerships in high-growth sectors like healthcare, technology, and finance.
4. **Integrate Youth Voice** - Create structured, inclusive avenues for youth feedback, such as advisory councils, town halls, and peer-led discussions.
5. **Consider Scaling to Additional Counties** - Reduce youth displacement by expanding MFP to more regions, allowing youth to remain connected to their communities.
6. **Sustain Implementation Supports** - Continue coaching, operations team meetings, and quality improvement efforts to support program maturity and fidelity.

In conclusion, the first 18 months of MFP implementation in New Jersey demonstrate the promise of a high-quality, youth-centered intervention designed to support transition-age foster youth as they move toward independence. With strong partnerships, effective coaching, and continuous support from DCF, both sites have achieved early milestones in enrollment, retention, and youth progress. Continued investment in implementation supports, quality improvement, and intentional expansion can help ensure that MFP in New Jersey maintains its early momentum and supports New Jersey's broader strategy to support young adults aging out of care.

## INTRODUCTION

In New Jersey, youth aging out of foster care continue to face challenges despite efforts to improve the transition to adulthood. The overall number of overall number of youth in care in the state has declined significantly—dropping from 6,191 in December 2017 to 2,937 in December 2024, a 52% decrease—with a similar decline among transition-age youth (ages 18 and older) of 48% during the same period (from 332 to 172).<sup>1</sup> While such declines may be worth celebrating, the population has remained fairly stable the past 3 years and their poor outcomes speak to the need for analysis and support.

By age 21, only about half of these young adults are employed, and about 12% and 9% respectively report histories (or current statuses) of housing instability or incarceration.<sup>2</sup> Nearly 1% and only 1% have attained their associate's degree or higher.<sup>3</sup> By age 21, only a small share report accessing financial, food, or housing assistance. With the high cost of living in New Jersey, these figures underscore the need to enhance the state's evidenced-informed, developmentally appropriate, and relationship-driven programming to meet the needs of young adults exiting foster care.

In July 2023, New Jersey's Department of Children and Families Services (DCF) awarded its "2023 RFP –Transitional Living Program Focused on Education and Employment" to Catholic Charities Diocese of Metuchen (CCDOM) and Volunteers of America (VOA) to implement a new housing option in the state of New Jersey – First Place for Youth's My First Place™ (MFP) program. First Place was awarded a separate RFP to serve as the model developer and coach to these new MFP sites.

Now with over 60 youth served in its first 18 months, DCF partnered with First Place for Youth (First Place) to conduct a process evaluation. The goal was to document and understand the launch of MFP in New Jersey, how well it is being implemented, and what factors impact delivery of the intervention.

### What is My First Place?

MFP is a nationally recognized education and employment program model that provides housing and case management to youth (ages 18-25) who have aged out of foster care. With a place to call home, program participants can focus on education and employment goals, build community, and establish foundations for long-term success. Participants develop good tenancy skills, practice financial literacy skills, and maintain relationships with landlords. By individualizing plans for each participant to progress to living-wage career pathways, this

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<sup>1</sup> New Jersey Child Welfare Data Hub. Children in Placement: Point in Time.  
<https://njchilddata.rutgers.edu/portal/children-in-placement>

<sup>2</sup> National Youth in Transitions Database. "Outcomes Data Snapshot: New Jersey 2017 – 2021."  
<https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/nytd-outcomes-nj-2021.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

program helps them build the education, networks, and skills to be self-sufficient in the long term.

Each youth is provided with a fully subsidized and furnished room in an apartment, a team of social workers to support them, and a stipend for groceries. Each youth also receives regular case management support from:

- Youth Advocate (YA), who meet weekly to help participants develop healthy living skills.
- Education and Employment Specialists (EEs), who meet bi-weekly to explore and support youth education and employment goals on a pathway to a living wage.
- Housing Specialists, who secure housing units, ensure apartments meet quality standards, support youth moves in and out of program, and address any maintenance needs.

## BACKGROUND AND TIMELINE

DCF's Chafee Plan 2020 – 2024, Strategy 5 notes that many “services for young adults rest on program models that have not been updated in over a decade” and that their housing continuum can benefit from thorough review and updates to programs serving young adults 18 or older as they prepare to transition into self-sufficiency and independence.<sup>4</sup> As a member of the DCF team shared with us:

“What we found is that young people between the ages of 18 and 21 would come into programs at 18 or sometime later, and when they turned 21, no one was ready to graduate. Everyone still had a housing need. They couldn't afford to move out on their own, and when they did, if you followed up in 6 to 12 months, most of the young people were couch surfing and still facing homelessness.”

The launch of the nationally recognized MFP program was a step toward addressing this gap to 1) ensure evidence-based and evidence-informed models are leveraged to best serve those participating in Extended Foster Care; 2) to deliver services that are youth-driven, culturally competent, and cater to the evolving needs of young people; and 3) in line with DCF's 2025-2029 Chafee plan “to increase access to evidence-informed housing interventions within DCF's housing continuum.”

DCF established the MFP program across 2 provider organizations, CCDOM and VOA, serving 3 counties: Union, Somerset, and Middlesex, while also being open to youth enrolling from across the state. The goal for Year 1 of implementation was to enroll 30 youth at each provider site (for a total of 60 youth).

With contracts issued in July 2023, DCF, CCDOM, and VOA quickly mobilized to learn about the program model. Key to this was a 6-week, hands-on training organized by First Place held with

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<sup>4</sup> New Jersey's 2020-2024 John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood.  
<https://www.nj.gov/dcf/childdata/njfederal/NJ-DCF-2020-2024-CFSP.pdf>

staff from both provider sites in September that leveraged role-playing and field shadowing. The training focused on core components of the MFP model such as how to provide housing via master-leasing and how to provide culturally competent and youth-centered services via practice philosophies such as trauma-informed care and positive youth development, among others. Sites busied themselves with hiring staff in new positions specific to the MFP model (such as YAs, EEs, and Housing Specialists), securing housing, and ensuring their data systems were set up to track youth served, fidelity metrics, and outcomes measures on a regular basis.

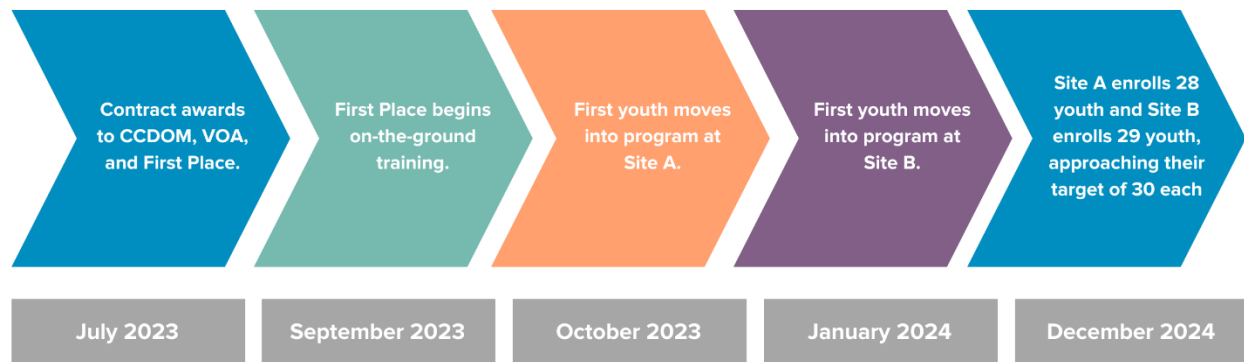


Figure 1: Timeline depicting the process from contracts award to sites achieving youth enrollment targets

The launch of the MFP model in New Jersey marked several important firsts for First Place and helped motivate the creation of this learning brief. It is the first time:

- First Place has partnered directly with a state government to launch the MFP model;
- The MFP program launched and scaled to 60 youth served within 18 months of implementation;
- Two nonprofit providers have been trained concurrently to introduce the MFP model; and
- Nonprofit providers of the MFP model have used their own data systems from the outset of program launch.

This process evaluation seeks to better understand program implementation after more than 18 months since the first youth moved into program and to provide insight into:

- The perspectives of participating youth on the program's strengths and challenges.
- Characteristics of the youth being served and their progress toward key outcomes of interest, including education, employment, and well-being.
- The perspectives of providers, DCF staff, and youth on launching the program in a new environment.
- The extent to which MFP has been implemented as originally intended.
- Adaptations or enhancements made by implementing agencies and the challenges encountered during implementation.

The findings of this process evaluation are intended to inform how to improve MFP program quality in New Jersey and how to best support its continued success and possible scaling. By identifying ways to improve MFP, youth currently in program or that enroll in the future may benefit through an improved quality of services. In addition, by gaining a deeper understanding of program implementation to-date, and specifically by incorporating participating youths' perspectives and input, this process knowledge stands to contribute to broader efforts to strengthen services for transition-age youth aging out of foster care within and perhaps beyond New Jersey.

## METHODOLOGY

For this process evaluation, First Place's Evaluation and Learning team leveraged a number of quantitative and qualitative data sources to gain a deeper understanding of implementation, service delivery, fidelity, and short-term progress measures.

- **Interviews:** The evaluators conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 individuals, including youth participants, direct service staff, site leadership, and DCF administrators. These interviews were designed to elevate firsthand perspectives on early implementation and identify both successes and sticking points across roles.
  - 8 interviews were conducted with staff from service providers, DCF, and First Place.
  - 5 interviews were held with current participants to learn more about their experiences. Youth that had been in program for at least 90 days were selected at random and were compensated with a \$50 Visa gift card for their time.
  - All interviews were semi-structured and conducted virtually, typically taking about 45 to 60 minutes to complete. Transcripts from all interviews were then reviewed along with in-interview notes to conduct thematic analysis.
- **Administrative data:** The evaluators collected administrative data from service providers, in aggregate and anonymized, to understand the demographic and baseline characteristics of those being served, as well as youth progress toward outcomes. Demographic and baseline data was provided for the first 64 entrants into program, whereas progress measure data was provided for 40 youth who had entered program before January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2025 and had been enrolled in program for at least 90 days. They also analyzed monthly data reports from both sites collected since program launch in October 2023 on youth served, fidelity, and outcomes for exited youth.
- **Youth service reviews<sup>5</sup>:** First Place coaches previously conducted 4 Youth Service Reviews (YSR) - 2 for each site. This practice technique includes detailed review of 1 MFP program participant (leveraging interviews with youth and their staff as well as file review). The findings provide details regarding the quality of practice at each site across

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<sup>5</sup> First Place conducts a modified version of the Center for the Study of Social Policy's quality service review.



8 practice areas (such as Engagement, Team Formation & Functioning, Youth Voice & Choice, and Pathway to Exit).

## LIMITATIONS

There are several important limitations to note. First, First Place occupies a dual role as both model developer and evaluator. While this gives us deep context and real-time access to data and stakeholders, it also introduces the risk of bias. To help mitigate this bias in this process evaluation, the team used administrative data, objective fidelity measures, and structured interview guides to center the perspectives of youth and partners in the work.

Second, the findings are generalized across both providers offering services in three counties. The providers, as well as the counties, vary in size, infrastructure, and context. This adds external validity in allowing our findings to be generalized across other counties and providers but complicates direct comparisons. Where differences are notable, we highlight them explicitly rather than average them out.

Finally, the evaluators acknowledge that while rich in detail and value, they only conducted 5 youth interviews – about 8% of youth served that were enrolled for at least 90 days. While youth were selected at random, their experiences may not reflect the overall average experience of all program enrollees. Moreover, youth voice, which is a crucial component to better understanding the success of a program, is inherently constrained in this evaluation by power dynamics and voluntary participation. The evaluators are especially grateful to the youth who chose to share their time and experiences with them. Their perspectives are woven throughout this report and will continue to inform implementation moving forward.

## ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

### YOUTH CHARACTERISTICS

When evaluating the rollout and implementation of MFP services, it is essential to ensure that resources and services are distributed to young people in New Jersey in an equitable and fair manner. To monitor the program's equity, the team used administrative data from both sites and compared them to the demographics of Transition Aged Foster Youth (TAY) in New Jersey.

The most common racial group served by the providers has been Black/African American/African youth (34 youth, 54%), followed by Hispanic/Latino/a/e/x (16 youth, 25%), White (9 youth, 14%), Multiple Race/Ethnicity (4 youth, 6%), and Asian/Asian American (1 youth, 2%). To date, there have not been Native Hawaiian, Other Pacific Islander, or Native American

youth enrolled in the program. This demographic breakdown generally mirrors the demographics of transition aged foster youth across the state of New Jersey.<sup>6</sup>

## Racial/Ethnic Identity

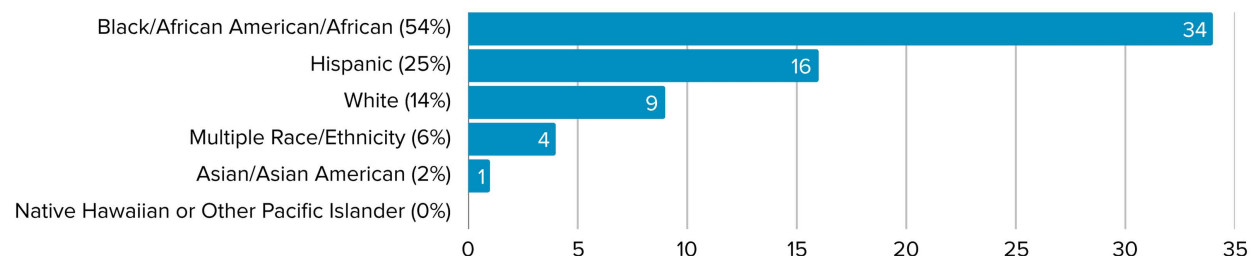


Table 1: Breakdown of racial/ethnic demographics of enrolled youth by number and overall percentage

Regarding gender, slightly more women (38, 59%) have enrolled than men (26, 41%), compared to the state average of 54% women.<sup>7</sup>

Youth characteristics of those served reflect the complexity of needs among participants at the time of enrollment. At one site, nearly half (48%) of enrolled youth have a documented history of sexual exploitation or intimate partner violence. Across both sites, 63% (40 of 64) entered the program with an open CP&P case, and 23% were experiencing unstable housing prior to entry (e.g., emergency shelter, homeless, or other unstable housing; see Table 2 below). These figures underscore the importance of a program model that centers trauma-informed care, stable housing, and consistent adult support for young people navigating complex systems.

## Prior Living Situations

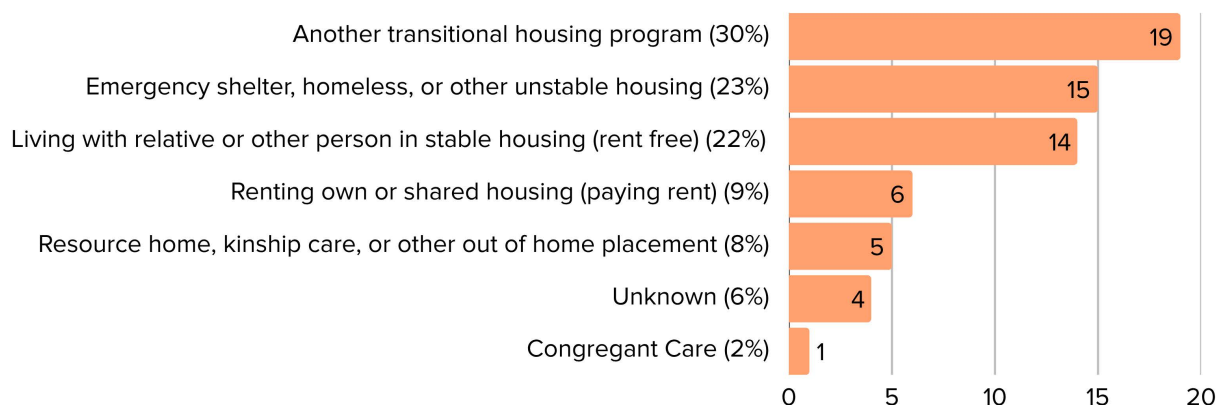


Table 2: Breakdown of Youth Living Situations prior to program enrollment. The majority of youth were previously in another transitional housing program (30%), followed by homelessness or other unstable housing (23%)

<sup>6</sup> Office of Applied Research and Evaluation, New Jersey Department of Children & Families. Young Adults Transitioning Out of Foster Care in NJ. <https://www.nj.gov/dcf/adolescent/NYTD-Data-Brief.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

Regarding employment characteristics, half of the youth (32 of 64) were unemployed at entry. Seventy-five percent (48 of 64) had attained at least a high school diploma or GED prior to enrollment, and 16% (10 of 64) had some prior postsecondary education experience. These baseline figures suggest that while many youth have taken foundational steps toward economic and educational stability, they continue to face barriers that put them at risk of disconnection—barriers that My First Place is specifically designed to address.

## PROGRAM FIDELITY

Once the MFP program model is up and running, ensuring it is operating with high program fidelity becomes a critical aspect of successful implementation. In this context, program fidelity refers to how closely the model is being practiced according to its design. For MFP, there are 12 key metrics used to monitor fidelity, which fall into two categories: “Structure and Staffing” and “Services and Supports,” outlined below:

- **Structure and Staffing**
  - Supervisory Lead
  - Intake Specialist
  - Youth Advocate (YA)
  - Education & Employment Specialist (EE)
  - Staff Supervision
  - Staff Assignments
- **Services and Supports**
  - Action Plans
  - Assessments
  - Strengths Documented
  - YA Engagement
  - EE Engagement
  - Monthly Outcome Scales

To monitor program fidelity at the provider sites, providers are required to submit monthly data reports that document fidelity scores for the prior month. Since both sites were implementing the MFP model from the ground up—covering everything from staff hiring to youth enrollment—it was anticipated that sites would initially fall short of internal fidelity target of meeting 80% of all metrics and would build up to reaching this target as they matured. A 2011 study published in *Implementation Science* found that it typically takes anywhere from three to five years for a new program to mature from exploration to full implementation.<sup>8</sup>

When looking at the data regarding fidelity, both sites appear to be on pace at this stage of implementation, as evidenced by both sites quickly meeting a majority of fidelity metrics. Site A has shown particularly strong growth and can be considered as implementing the program as

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<sup>8</sup> Chamberlain, P., Brown, C. H., & Saldana, L. (2011). Observational measure of implementation progress in community-based settings: The stages of implementation completion. *Implementation Science*, 6. doi: 10.1186/1748-5908-6-116

designed, whereas Site B has more intermittently hit fidelity (see Figure 2), often one metric shy of meeting the minimum 80% standard.

### Average Quarterly Fidelity by Provider Site (In %)

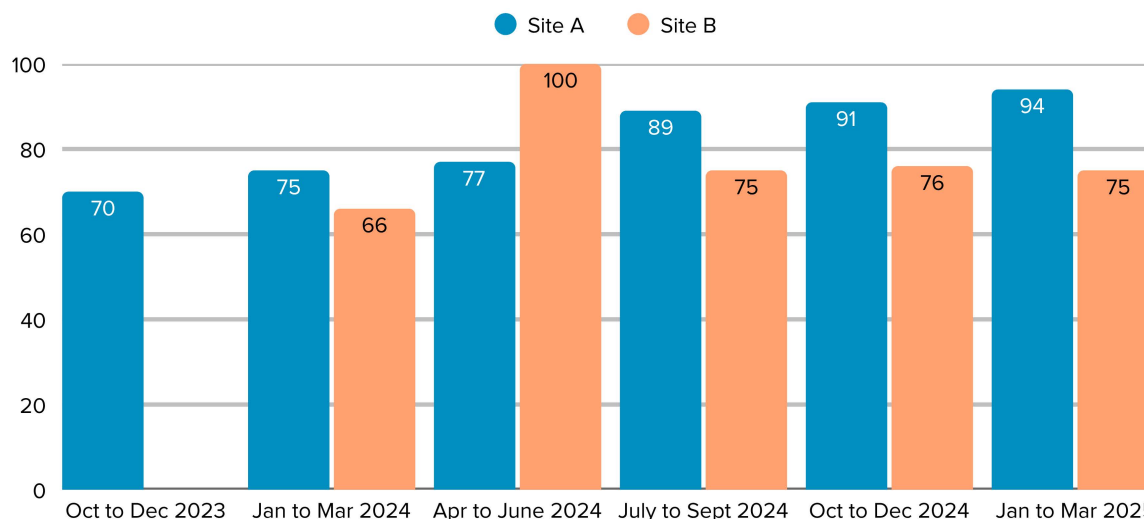


Figure 2: Average number of fidelity metrics met by fiscal quarter. Both sites demonstrate higher-than expected initial fidelity, with Site A demonstrating particularly impressive growth since program launch.

However, as noted earlier, both sites have faced challenges in meeting the high-fidelity standards set by the MFP model, particularly in the services and supports areas during the early months. For both sites, Education and Employment Specialists have at times struggled to achieve the target engagement of young people in the program and to complete the bi-annual action plans on time as required to track progress and support the youth in setting new goals. Site B has faced unique challenges in hitting certain metric targets related to YA engagement and the on-time completion of assessments as well. These patterns identified in the monthly fidelity reports were corroborated by both First Place coaches as well as participating youth at that site (see Box 1).

#### Box 1: Quotes Speaking to Initial Challenges in Meeting Fidelity Targets

**Provider Staff:** “This is not just a check in. We’re not here just to make sure that they’re alive. This is skills building. This is learning and teaching them what they need to be to be successful adults.”

**First Place Coach:** “So they slipped back into what they did in other programs. Once they realized that they had that much slippage, both the program manager and program director really leaned into that work. They recognize like, ‘Oh, we’re having all these issues because we’re not following the model as designed.’ They were just trusting that their staff were doing what they said they were doing, **but then the data was showing something otherwise. And**

then youth behavior was showing them otherwise.”

**Participating Youth at Site B:** “I don’t really speak to my [Education and Employment Specialist] a lot. My educational coordinator doesn’t really reach out to me, and when I do see her, it’s just like, ‘Hey, are you passing your classes?’ and I go, ‘Yup,’ and she’s like, ‘Okay, cool bye.’ And then I don’t see her for like 2 months.”

It’s important to highlight the interconnected nature of the MFP model, where high fidelity in the structure and staffing areas is essential for achieving success in the services and supports metrics. For instance, the low performance in EE engagement can sometimes be attributed to site difficulty in hiring staff and the lack of intentional program oversight (alluded to in Box 1), which were addressed by regular coaching and in-depth discussions from the First Place coaches as well as action from that site in improving staff screening for hiring and providing effective supervision that properly sets and upholds role expectations.

## PROGRAM QUALITY

First Place coaches conduct Youth Service Reviews (YSRs) with new sites every six months in year 1 and annually thereafter to assess quality of services. Youth Service Reviews are a case-based appraisal of direct care services designed to strengthen practice, build competency and capacity, and improve results. This approach includes a review of youth electronic records, chart reviews, YA and EE staff discussions, and a youth interview. The YSR explores practice, how well youth are benefiting from services received, and how well services are working for these youth. Sites are scored on “1” (absent) to “5” (optimal) scale across 8 practice areas (see Table 3 below for breakdown of scores by site and domain).

### Average Site Scores across YSR Domains

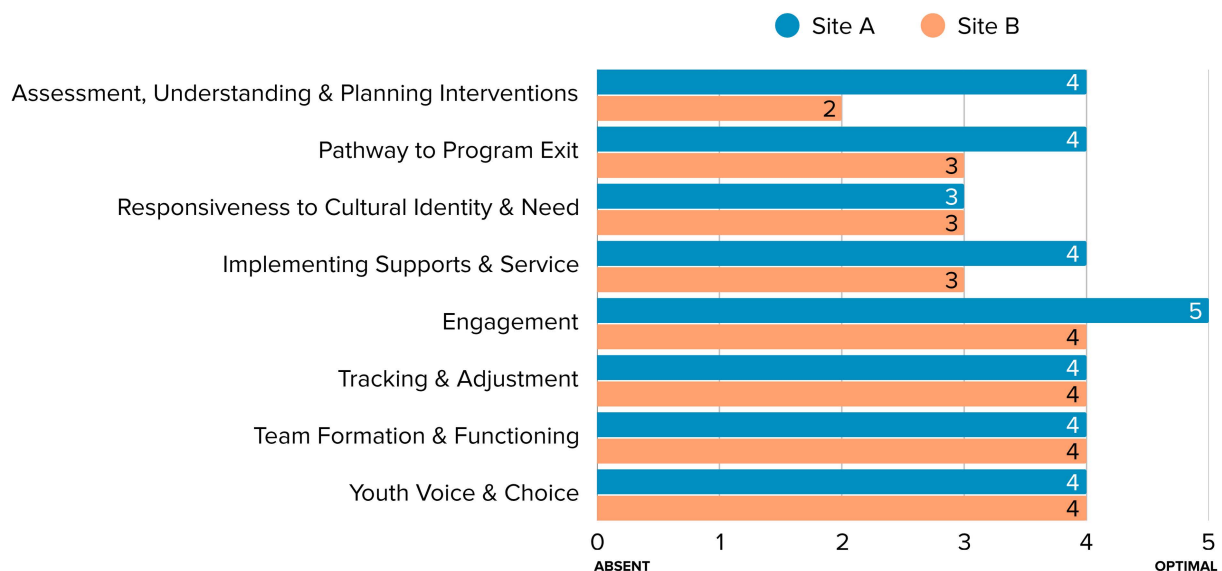


Figure 3: Breakdown of YSR Domains and the average score for each provider site.

Across 4 YSRs, completed by 2 randomly selected youth at each provider site, sites were rated as good (4 out of 5) on youth voice and choice and engagement, in-between fair and good on team formation, tracking and adjustment, implementing supports and services, and pathway to program exit, and in-between poor and fair on assessment, understanding and planning interventions as well as responsiveness to cultural identity and need.

First Place coaches have provided recommendations to help sites improve quality of services in each domain, such as:

- Develop SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) goals with youth during action planning
- Regularly review and update youth achievements toward goals, and leverage interventions to support youth skill-building and goal progress
- Incorporate the expressed identity of the young person into MFP services and create events or partnerships that help youth celebrate their culture
- Organize more workshops and events to build skills and community among participants
- Support youth's mental health by developing tailored interventions to support youth in building effective coping strategies

## MFP LAUNCH: STRENGTHS & CHALLENGES

### STRONG PROGRAM DESIGN WITH MINIMAL LOCAL ADAPTATION

The My First Place model has been implemented in California for over 20 years and has served thousands of young people aging out of the foster care system there. Since 2018, the MFP program has expanded to serve youth in other states including Ohio, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey in 2023 and most recently in Mississippi in 2025. Despite such expansion, each locality has its own set of unique strengths and challenges, and the extent to which the MFP model would need to be adapted to best serve the needs of local youth and service providers in New Jersey was not known.

Across interviews with DCF and staff at both provider sites, there was consistent praise for the core program design (see Box 3). Sites shared that overall, they did not need to make any significant changes to the model to serve youth in New Jersey, and that minor adaptations focused on increasing accessibility and responsiveness to the population they serve. These included renaming the “Intake Assessment” the “Readiness Assessment,” translating assessments into another language, offering certain events for youth virtually (not just in person), and organizing community events in partnership with participants in other programs.

#### **Box 2: Quotes from DCF, Youth, and Provider Sites Speaking to the Strength of the MFP Model**

**DCF Staff:** “We couldn’t find anything fully evidenced-based, but when we found My First Place, it was evidence-informed and aligned with what we heard from focus groups—youth needed support beyond 21, especially with housing, education, and employment. That’s what drew us to MFP.”

**Participating Youth:** “I like this program. I have a certain level of independence, but also guidance, a few rules, and support.”

**Provider Staff:** “I really appreciate just the small things like the things built into the program that help to celebrate the young people, because sometimes it’s difficult to celebrate small things, celebrate wins and just recognizing the young people.”

**Provider Staff:** “[MFP] is one of my favorite programs to implement. I love the model. I would do it all over again 10 times over. The model really speaks to the opportunity that these young people have to grow and to make themselves. And you know what I tell every young person that I would meet with, I’d say: Look, I want you to use this program to your max so that when you leave here you never have to rely on another program again.”

**Provider Staff:** “It works – everybody’s gonna see that it works, the process works, with room to expand and things like that. I’ve said it from the jump, this might be the way for everything in New Jersey. Like this program, this system – I can see this being what’s implemented across the board.”

## POWER OF PARTNERSHIP & IMPLEMENTATION SUPPORTS

Multiple provider staff highlighted the strength of the partnership and relationship between DCF, providers, and First Place. Providers frequently emphasized the value of having First Place at the table; not only for intensive training on the model but also for support in navigating the real-time challenges that arise during implementation. As one provider staff described, they were able to quickly schedule a coaching call and left with an idea they “never would have thought of.”

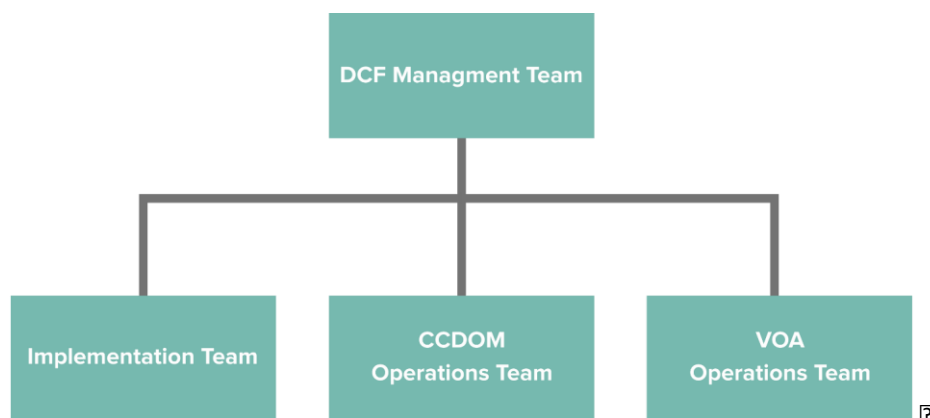


Figure 4: Organizational structure of the partnership in implementing MFP in New Jersey

Such relationships were developed thanks to structures set up by DCF's Office of Strategic Development, who themselves are trained in implementation science. Managers at each site were supported by First Place with hourly coaching every other week during the first year of implementation. Operations calls with each site were also set up to problem-solve and discuss early launch and implementation challenges and included representatives from DCF and First Place. Implementation committee calls were also held every other week between DCF and First Place to review and discuss operational successes and challenges, and help remove implementation barriers. First Place coaches were able to leverage prior experience in training affiliates in other states as well as firsthand knowledge in having implemented MFP at various California sites.

DCF staff also acknowledged the uniquely powerful benefit of having an outside coach like First Place at the table:

"I think having supervision and coaching from someone outside of the Funder is really allowing [providers] to express what they're seeing and what needs to change—and then helping it get to us in a way that it just didn't in the past."

"Ultimately, we're their funder. So it was hard for them to say, 'Oh, I'm struggling with this.' but they could easily go to [First Place] and say that."

This speaks to the value of the bridging role that First Place coaches have played; in listening to provider concerns, pushing back when necessary, elevating concerns to DCF when appropriate, and even coaching DCF on how to work with or support their implementing providers. One DCF staff called the collaboration a "unique relationship," describing it as a triangle where "MFP [was] meeting providers where they were, bringing them along," while also maintaining alignment with DCF.

Weekly operations team meetings, structured coaching, and shared decision-making within the Management, Implementation, and Operations Teams, helped "streamline communication between the three," ensuring that, as one DCF interviewee put it, "everyone was in the room they need to be in." This intentional approach to partnership has laid a strong foundation for coordinated service delivery and long-term sustainability. As one First Place coach shared:

"I think it's our most successful affiliate partnership. I'm really impressed with the level of investment that DCF has in not just wanting to scale the model but understand the model and work with providers to be successful."

## INITIAL PRE-LAUNCH & EARLY IMPLEMENTATION HURDLES

Interviewees across all roles shared that while the launch of MFP in New Jersey was ultimately successful, it was not without challenges. These challenges were largely due to the ambitious timeline and the complexity of having the funder, model developer, and separate providers at the table. Contracts were awarded to providers and model developer in July 2023, with the



expectation that programs would hire staff, acquire apartments, and be trained on the model in just 3 months, in order to then support youth moving into program by October.

In attempting to meet these aggressive timelines, both sites reported initial difficulties hiring the right staff and building teams with the skill sets needed to implement a high-touch, relationship-driven model. This was further complicated by early staff turnover, necessitating quick pivots to find and train replacements while qualified leadership staff filled the vacant roles.

Another challenging area was the initial process of finding and securing housing. One provider, leveraging a scattered site approach, addressed this challenge by calling landlords directly and pitching the program with a focus on guaranteed rent, while the other leveraged an existing relationship to rapidly expand their housing portfolio at a single property. Despite the tight housing market and limited timeframe, both provider sites were quick to problem-solve and ensure they acquired sufficient units to support youth moves into program.

In addition to early staffing and housing challenges, both providers faced initial hurdles with youth referrals and utilizing New Jersey's Adolescent Housing Hub. While the Hub serves as a centralized tool for connecting providers with youth experiencing homelessness, it lacked (and still lacks) a clear mechanism to identify which youth had a foster care history—leaving providers to manually review long lists with many interested youth not being eligible due to a lack of child welfare involvement. Providers raised these concerns during early operations calls. Framing these issues as expected growing pains, DCF partnered with providers to improve the process, ultimately accelerating enrollment efforts.

Initial challenges such as these are typical of any new site launching a complex, youth-centered model, but New Jersey's implementation benefited from DCF's investment in implementation science, the various collaboration spaces, and the strength of the relationships between partners.

### **Box 3: Quotes Speaking to Initial Challenges and How Partners Were Able to Address Them**

**First Place Coach:** “I think it's the same challenge that all new My First Place teams face: just making sure that they have the right folks on their team.”

**Provider Staff:** “I was tasked with ‘go find landlords’ and didn't even know where to start. I was cold-calling, right? Digging [old contacts] up and just reaching out to landlords that I had worked with several years ago, and you know, educating them on this model and the benefits of master leasing.”

**DCF Staff:** “The problem is, the [referral] system...it's not perfect. And so I think our providers really struggled. Half of the time the phone numbers didn't work. One, we assured them the process wasn't punitive. And then we also figured out, you know what? Let's ask questions. What can we do to help? We started to do some community outreach and some other things

that helped kick up the referral process and get things moving, and we were open to listening to their feedback about what they were experiencing and trying to fix it.”

## STRONG GROWTH IN YOUTH SERVED & YOUTH RETENTION

*“It can’t be undersold how great it was that we had our first youth move in. It was a big deal.” - DCF*

Since the initial launch in summer 2023, the MFP program has demonstrated strong and steady growth. Site A moved 4 youth into program in its first quarter of launch, starting in October 2023 with site B moving its first youth into program in January 2024. Both sites initially struggled with the original target of reaching 30 youth enrollments by July 2024, with site A hitting 18 and site B hitting 12; mainly due to barriers mentioned in previous sections.

Eventually, with the various implementation supports, coaching, and plugging of gaps, both sites were able to accelerate move-ins in July 2024 through the end of the year. Ultimately, both provider sites reached their initial targets of 30 youth enrolled within the first 18 months (see Figure 5); an impressive milestone demonstrating each sites’ ability to overcome aforementioned barriers and challenges.

### Cumulative Youth Enrollments by Site

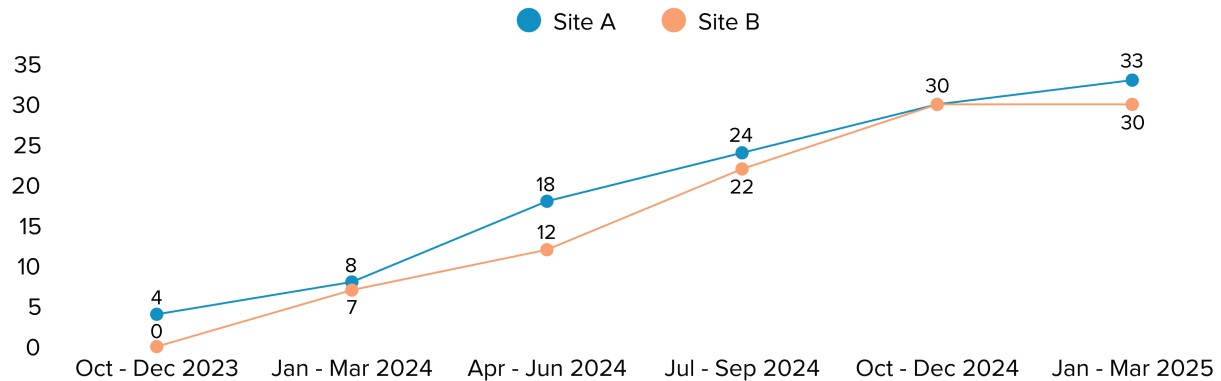


Figure 5: Time course chart detailing the cumulative number of youth moving into each site by quarter

A notable component of this growth is provider sites’ success in retaining youth once they enrolled. Between October 2023 to March 2025, just 3 youth exited within 90 days of entry, with the remaining 8 exiting youth in program for an average of 214 days. Of 63 entries, both sites have only experienced a total of 11 exits. While exits have increased as the programs have started serving more youth and youth are hitting the more time in program, providers have demonstrated an impressive short-term retention rate: 95% of youth have stayed in program at minimum of 90 days (63 of 66 enrolled youth).

When asked what contributes to this level of engagement, one DCF staffer explained simply that the program “is giving young people what they said they wanted.” Others echoed that youth are

not just staying—they are engaging with services, forming relationships with staff, and finding real value in what the program offers. As one staff member shared, “The model really speaks to the opportunity that these young people have to grow and to make themselves.”

### Youth Exits by Site

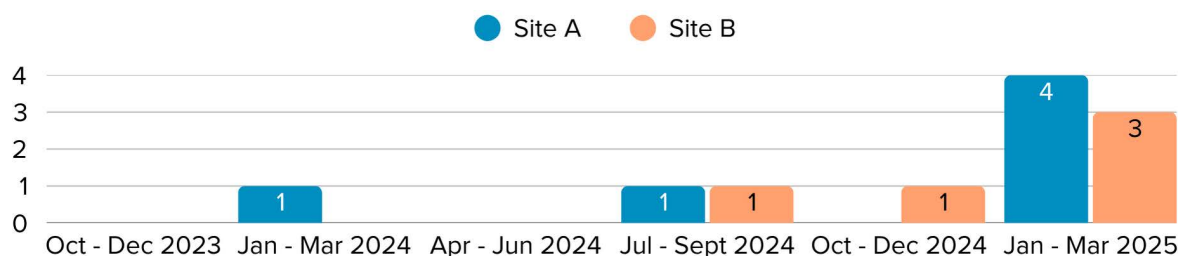


Figure 6: Time-course chart detailing the number of youth exits by fiscal quarter

## YOUTH FEEDBACK ON PROGRAM

The evaluators interviewed 5 actively enrolled youth and reviewed interview notes from 4 youth that participated in the Youth Service Reviews. Many highlighted the quality of housing as a major improvement from previous living conditions, such as experiencing homelessness or precariously housed living conditions.

Most of the youth emphasized the value of their relationships with staff, describing them as respectful, supportive, and collaborative. The program’s staffing model—with distinct roles for EE, YA, and housing specialists—was appreciated for its clarity and structure. For the most part, youth described feeling guided, coached, and challenged in healthy ways (see Box 4).

However, some youth expressed disappointment with their relationship with one of their staff members, citing that support from their YA or EE felt inconsistent, or lacking compassion or understanding when setting expectations without providing adequate support. One youth expressed significant challenges with their assigned roommate, to the point that they expressed not feeling safe without further remediation.

Overall, youth feedback reflects a program that is meaningfully different from other services available to them—one that provides high-quality housing, emphasizes independence, and offers staff support that, when effective, becomes a core part of their success.

### Box 4: Quotes from Youth Speaking to Program Experience

#### On Housing:

- “Honestly, I was really shocked. The apartment was really nice. They’re pretty big, they have a nice kitchen...I was pretty relieved because my last apartment [in a different program] had roaches, and it was more run down.”

- “Really, I was homeless – but I had a friend that was already there, and he was telling me like, ‘Oh, it’s a spot where like if you used to be in foster care, or for me like if you’re experiencing homelessness, they’ll help you out.’”

#### **On Staff Support:**

- “My worker is absolutely lovely. She does everything she can.”
- “The most beneficial aspects are the way they delegate the sense of what worker is doing what. We have three workers; we have a YA and an EE and a Housing Coordinator. I think it’s really smart they give these jobs to three different people.”

#### **On Not Feeling Supported:**

- “Can you just like try to listen and understand where I’m coming from, because there’s different obstacles. What I’m going through right now, and I feel like they don’t really understand.”

## **STRONG NON-PROFIT PARTNERS**

The successful early implementation of My First Place in New Jersey would not have been possible without the dedication and determination of its nonprofit provider partners, CCDOM and VOA. Both organizations brought a wealth of experience supporting youth experiencing homelessness and a demonstrated commitment to meeting the unique needs of transition-age foster youth. Their existing infrastructure, community partnerships, and deep ties to local service systems enabled them to move quickly despite ambitious timelines.

First Place coaches and DCF staff have both shared how strong the two implementing partners are. First Place coaches mentioned that the providers are youth-driven, ensuring safety in units, regularly meeting with young people, and doing their utmost to remove barriers. Further, providers were noted as understanding the importance of the fidelity metrics and meeting youth where they are to support them staying in program. As one DCF staff member put it, “[My First Place] has been implemented very well. We wanted to get youth into these stable apartments so that they can continue to get a job or get educated. And that's happening.”

The strength of these nonprofit partners has been central to the early success of MFP and is a critical foundation for the model’s long-term sustainability in New Jersey.

## YOUTH ARE MAKING PROGRESS TOWARD OUTCOMES

### MFP Youth Progress Measures Across Sites

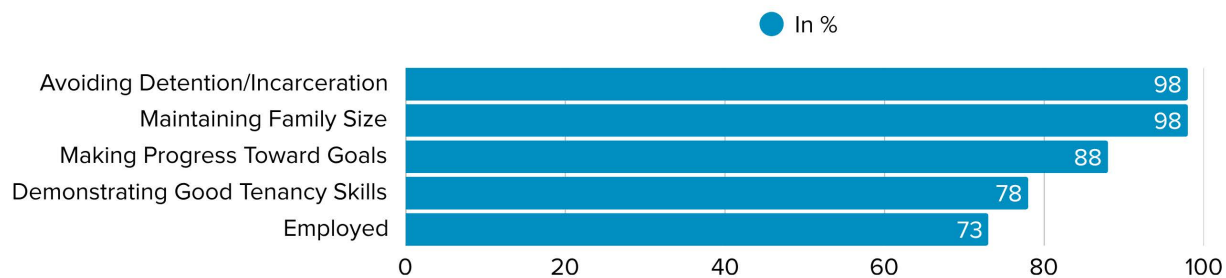


Figure 7: Breakdown of MFP progress measures across both Provider Sites

Preliminary data suggest that the youth in the NJ MFP program are making meaningful progress across key outcome areas: healthy living, employment, and education. Among the 40 youth who had been in program at least three months and remained active as of December 31, 2024:

- Healthy Living
  - 78% (31/40) were demonstrating good housing skills, as evidenced by consistently passing housing inspections conducted by their MFP staff
  - 88% (35/40) were making progress toward their self-defined, youth-centered goals
  - 98% (39/40) had avoided detention or incarceration
  - 98% (39/40) had maintained family size
- Education
  - 78% (32/41) engaged in education
    - 5 enrolled in a high school diploma or GED program
    - 14 enrolled in a postsecondary education (PSE) program
    - 7 have made measurable progress towards PSE attainment
    - 6 have earned a vocational certificate
- Employment
  - 73% (29/40) were employed
  - 59% of those employed (17/29) had maintained employment for at least 90 days

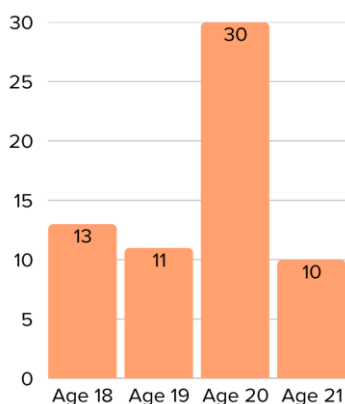
While these quantitative markers provide important signals of success, youth are making progress in many other areas that may not lend themselves to easy quantification. As one provider shared,

“We celebrate when a young person is in program and stays in program. Then something's working, right? We celebrate just them meeting with us regularly. Because that just shows the engagement level.”

## ADDS TO EXISTING CONTINUUM OF CARE

Through interviewing provider and DCF staff, it became clear that the MFP program addresses a critical gap in New Jersey's continuum of care for youth aging out of foster care or those with prior child welfare involvement but were more recently experiencing homelessness. While traditional transitional living programs typically end at age 21 and may leverage congregate settings and/or limit a youth's autonomy, MFP offers young adults the opportunity to live independently in apartments and remain in the program beyond age 21—an offering not previously available in most areas of the state. In addition, MFP is the first transitional living program in NJ that pregnant and parenting youth can enter, expanding housing options available to them. The 6 beds allocated for this sub-population filled up quickly, which may speak to additional unmet need that can be explored in further research.

### Age of Youth at Entry



When looking at the age distribution of youth enrolling in the MFP program, nearly 2 out of 3 participants enter at age 20 or 21 (see figure 8 for the complete distribution). This age distribution reinforces the unique role MFP plays in reaching young adults on the cusp of aging out of state-supported services. These young adults are navigating the critical years immediately following foster care exit, when many find themselves without a stable place to live or access to ongoing support. Providers and public system partners alike emphasized that prior to MFP, options were scarce for this age group—particularly for youth who were not already engaging with higher education or more intensive service programs.

*Figure 8: Distribution of enrolled youth by age, highlighting the demand for programs serving youth 20+*

The program also serves youth not typically eligible for programs within Extended Foster Care in other states such as those with child welfare involvement at some point prior to turning 18 and were currently experiencing homelessness (typically, EFC housing programs in other states require youth to age out of foster care at 18). Nearly 1 in 4 youth (15/64) entered the program directly from homelessness (whether sheltered or unsheltered) without also still having an open Child Protection and Permanency case in New Jersey.

The program's unique design, which centers youth voice and prioritizes autonomy, was consistently named as a major differentiator from other housing programs. It provides an environment where young people can build skills, make mistakes, and grow without the confines of group settings or the pressure of institutional oversight. This model has helped expand what's possible for young people aging out of care, both in terms of housing stability and personal development.

### **Box 5: Quotes Speaking to the Strengths and Learnings of How the MFP Model Adds to the Continuum of Care**

**DCF Staff:** “This program does two things that our traditional transitional living programs didn’t: you can stay beyond 21, and it honors youth voice in the sense of getting some autonomy and living independently—like living in apartments, and not in these congregate settings.”

**Provider Staff:** “Everybody was happy to hear about a program like this, because usually when young people are aging out, there’s very little support for them after.”

**Youth Participant:** “This is the only program for my age, because I’m 21.”

**First Place Coach:** “[The youth] are coming from across the state. And what [DCF and Providers] have found in program, at least initially, is that youth keep going back to where they are from...when they follow up with the young people [who don’t enroll], it’s because they keep going back to the county or city where their support system is.”

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE & EXPANSION**

### **1. Continue to raise the standard on meeting MFP fidelity consistently**

Both sites should continue to maintain focus on youth retention and meeting and exceeding the fidelity standard. In particular, sites should pay close attention to regular YA and EE engagement and the on-time completion of assessments and action plans. Such fidelity standards are intended to support high-quality implementation of the program that can meet the needs of youth as they transition from foster care to independence.

### **2. Ensure high quality services focused on building authentic relationships and coaching (not just checking the box)**

Continue to build and coach direct service staff on the unique needs and challenges of the population being served, the importance of taking the time to get to know the youth, their hopes and interests, and to build the relationship as the foundation for services. Staff should also be coached on improving understanding, empathy and how to have deeper, exploratory and at times uncomfortable conversations with young people. Youth we spoke to felt they weren’t always listened to or supported fully. Sites can sign up each of their staff for DCF’s Youth Thrive training, which focuses on positive youth development, trauma-informed care, and more. In

addition, management may wish to consider conducting more role playing and field shadowing to both model and coach on this skill and creating more space to listen to and validate what youth may be experiencing.

In addition, sites can leverage the learnings and practice recommendations from the YSR to ensure services are developmentally appropriate, responsive to cultural identity and need, are supportive of a successful program exit, and are leveraging existing assessments and understanding to plan and implement relevant, youth-centered interventions.

As one of the First Place coaches shared:

“It should be a challenge. It's always gonna be a challenge. And it's just going a little bit deeper with young people. How can I use this golden broom to help teach a skill? Why am I doing roommate meetings? Because it teaches conflict resolution. How are we intentional about the work that we're doing as opposed to just showing up and checking the box?”

### 3. Build out career pathways and partnerships in high-growth, living wage sectors

*“If we want young people to be independent from the system, one of the ways we do that is sustainable living wage jobs.” - First Place Coach*

Both providers shared a desire to further build out living wage career pathways for young people at their sites. Of the 6 post-secondary education completions to date (3 completed security guard training and another 3 completed cosmetology), all were in fields that typically do not lead to living wage or support stackable career growth. While these milestones can and should still be celebrated, it is important that **program focuses on career coaching towards income advancement and building relationships that allow them to refer youth to training programs and paid job work experiences in New Jersey's high growth sectors with demonstrated pathways to living wage opportunities** like Healthcare, Technology, & Finance.<sup>6</sup>

**Programs can practice effective career coaching which involves three parts:**

1. Lead with the job, connecting employment to education and training so that youth understand ‘WHY’ they are engaging in a particular post-secondary program
2. Explore different post-secondary options to allow youth to identify which is the best fit for themselves, key to elevating youth voice and choice in the process, and
3. Build community connections and resources (e.g. transportation funds/partners, childcare, etc.) that support youth to succeed in their career and education paths.

**In tandem with such coaching, sites can develop effective career partnerships by:**

1. Understanding what careers are growing in their region and offer pathways to living wage opportunities



2. Identify and build strong partnerships that link youth to those careers, including schools, training programs, and employer partners. For instance, the Union County site may have opportunities to explore formal partnerships with Union College that has workforce training certificate programs in healthcare and other fields such as Certified Medical Assistant, Patient Care Technician, and Accounting Technician.<sup>7</sup>
3. Expose and connect youth to those careers through exploration activities such as career days, job shadows, internships, and on-the-job training.

These critical steps can help connect young people to life-sustaining living wages.

#### **Box 6: Earn and Learn at MFP Sites in California**

After careful vetting, MFP sites in California have established formal and informal partnerships with community colleges, businesses, and non-profits offering paid internships, on-the-job training, pre-apprenticeship, and apprenticeship opportunities whose services are trauma-informed. California sites have also pursued additional workforce funding to help incentivize and pay youth to participate in such opportunities, when they do not pay themselves. This helps to encourage youth who may have an interest in a certain field but find barriers to enroll due to a lack of income.

#### **4. Strengthen the integration of youth voice**

While both providers reported listening to youth feedback, neither have consistent or structured ways to more formally incorporate it. Instead, providers rely primarily on informal, relationship-based channels, such as direct conversations between youth and their assigned staff, occasional town hall-style meetings from one provider site and Youth Voice Assessments and Consumer Satisfaction Surveys from the other. While these efforts demonstrate a willingness to hear youth perspectives, they may unintentionally limit the depth and representativeness of feedback. Power dynamics between youth and staff, as well as inconsistent relationships, can create barriers to open communication. This may be particularly true for youth who may not have the social skills or who may not feel comfortable voicing concerns or suggestions directly.

Each site should consider opportunities and spaces for youth to offer feedback on program so as to continue to be in touch with and responsive to youth's needs and wants. Casey Family Programs has a helpful brief<sup>9</sup> about how to authentically engage youth in a variety of ways that may be worth consulting. These might include anonymous surveys, structured youth focus groups, the hiring of program participants as interns or peer mentors, peer-led discussions, or the creation of youth advisory councils with shared decision-making power. Creating formal,

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<sup>9</sup> Casey Family Programs. How can agencies and organizations prepare for authentic youth engagement? February 8, 2022. <https://www.casey.org/youth-engagement-oneseries/>

inclusive avenues for youth feedback will ensure the program continues to evolve in alignment with the voices and needs of those it serves.

#### **5. Consider scaling to other counties to minimize displacement of youth from their community and connections**

Providers and First Place coaches shared the challenges of many youth having to switch counties to participate in this program. That can cause challenges with having to re-enroll in school, switch jobs, or simply feel disconnected from natural supports. Staff shared some youth end up leaving program early to move back and be closer to their community. This challenge could be particularly challenging for parenting youth, who may lose vital access to informal childcare supports. To address this, DCF may wish to consider scaling this program to other counties. Not only would this support youth in maintaining connections to existing community, jobs, and education, it would increase the number of youth being served by evidence-supported housing models.

#### **6. Sustain (and where needed bolster) existing implementation supports, CQI processes, and fidelity monitoring across all implementation sites**

As MFP sites continue to mature, critical to their success will be ongoing partnership, coaching, and support. Operations Teams calls can help to ensure clear communication and trust among various parties while also trouble-shooting new issues as they arise. Additionally, these meetings can bridge gaps in MFP site procedures with DCF policies. First Place coaches will also be critical not only to supporting sites in consistently meeting fidelity but in supporting the implementation of other recommendations listed above (e.g. in building out career pathways which was recently the subject of a peer learning call).

## **CONCLUSION**

Strong partners, clear model, spaces for collaboration all have contributed to the successful launch and scaling of MFP in 3 counties in New Jersey. Youth are making progress toward measurable outcomes and generally appreciate the housing and staffing support. Sites can continue to improve by focusing on the quality of services and responsiveness to youth needs while further coaching staff on practicing empathy, leveraging SMART goals, and creating authentic relationships with youth. Deepening the program in key areas such as career pathways and supporting youth in their transition from program will also strengthen it. It's clear that everyone we spoke to believes deeply in the model and not only hopes for its continued success, but its growth to other counties in New Jersey.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Matt Levy**, Vice President of Evaluation and Learning at First Place for Youth, leads the design, implementation, and analysis of programs and interventions supporting transition-age foster youth (18-24) in California and nationally. In this capacity, he is responsible for shaping the organization's evaluation strategies, ensuring rigorous measurement of program effectiveness, and providing actionable insights to drive continuous program improvement and scaling. With over 12 years of experience in managing research and evaluation projects, Matt has developed a deep expertise in applied research, data-driven decision-making, and program evaluation. He has led or supported multi-stakeholder evaluation partnerships with prominent research institutions such as Westat, Chapin Hall, and the TAY Hub, focusing on the effectiveness of programs for transition-age youth, particularly in foster care and youth development. Levy holds a Masters in International Policy from Stanford University.

**Michael Evans**, Data & Analytics Manager at First Place for Youth, oversees the organization's data environment, ensuring it is optimized for both internal and external use. He designs and leads data analysis projects that empower staff and leadership, providing actionable insights that inform decision-making across the organization and with key partners. Michael also develops tools that support staff in utilizing data to make informed, evidence-based decisions that drive program success and improve outcomes for transition-age foster youth. Bringing more than 10 years of expertise in data science and research, Michael specializes in leveraging data science, machine learning, and visualization tools to tackle complex challenges in the nonprofit sector. Throughout his career, he has led efforts to improve data systems, conduct detailed outcome analyses, and support research initiatives that measure the effectiveness of programs for transition-age foster youth. Evans holds a Masters in Psychology from New York University.