



Tech Executive  
Leadership Initiative

## POLICY BRIEF

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# Using A Self-Service Online Portal To Improve Outreach For Foster Youth

*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 self-service online portal that allows foster youth to continually update their contact information.*

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Oklahoma's Department of Human Services (OKDHS) should create a self-service online portal that allows current and aged-out foster youth to provide, edit, and continually update their contact information. This would increase the ability of agencies that provide services to foster youth to reach those youth reliably, thereby increasing the number of youth who successfully connect to government and community resources.

### BACKGROUND

Contact information used to reach foster youth in Oklahoma is often missing or unreliable. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, [Oklahoma Successful Adulthood](#) (OKSA), a program within OKDHS, reported that hundreds of economic stimulus cards mailed out to foster youth were returned as undeliverable.<sup>1</sup>

To learn more about this project, please visit [aspenpolicyhub.org/teli](https://aspenpolicyhub.org/teli)

The primary contact information held by OKDHS and OKSA is for the foster parent, not the child in care. Although fields for the child's email and phone number exist in the OK KIDS database (the database that state agencies use to track contact information for foster youth), this contact information is rarely used; it has been estimated that fewer than 5 percent of caseworkers know how to access and update these fields.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, data stored in OK KIDS is not updated after age 18 unless the youth voluntarily re-enters custody, which makes reaching aged-out youth even more difficult.<sup>3</sup>

As a result, OKDHS and other programs often cannot reach youth directly, resulting in lower awareness of and participation in support programs available to aging-out foster youth, such as OK Promise, SNAP, TANF, Medicaid, and homeless shelters.

## RECOMMENDATION

We recommend creating a self-service portal for web and mobile devices, allowing foster youth and recently aged-out youth to confirm and update their contact information (including email, phone number, and address) for direct communication with OKSA and OKDHS. Having accurate contact information will improve the ability of agencies to reliably reach youth in foster care (aged 14-17) and recently aged-out youth (aged 18-21), raising awareness of and participation in those support programs. This youth portal should be a component or subdomain of [OKDHSLive!](#), the existing self-service portal used by adults to manage OKDHS benefits, ensuring cohesive and continuous services. A mock-up of this self-service portal can be found [here](#).

We propose a strategy based on avoiding overburdening caseworkers by directly targeting youth. This strategy is appropriate because, as described by the Child Welfare Information Gateway, [turn-over among caseworkers is high](#). Heavy workloads have represented a challenge in the child welfare system for decades and continue to negatively impact families and children. Allowing youth to update their information shifts the burden from the caseworkers (who are currently responsible for tracking, entering, and updating youths' contact information in the case database) and minimizes continuity issues arising from high turnover among caseworkers.

Our proposed solution is also effective because of its simplicity and relatively low cost of implementation. This project improves upon previous attempts to develop better data collection systems. In the past, OKDHS engaged in an initiative to unify data from different agencies under one enterprise system built by Accenture.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, our solution is not an extensive, complex system but a simple, effective, lower-cost alternative to improving information collection that is more sustainable in terms of human and capital costs over the long run, and represents a first step toward building more robust foster care information systems in the future. Budget details are included in the [Implementation and Operations Overview](#).

### **INCENTIVES**

A small, immediate incentive will encourage youth to develop the habit of keeping their contact information current. As an example of a successful incentive-based program, [Think Of Us](#), a research and design lab for the social sector, reported offering foster youth \$25 gift cards as a reward for the completion of a 15-minute survey.<sup>5</sup> We recommend that OKDHS solicit the help of non-profit groups and local businesses to gather donations of small incentives, such as gift cards, clothing, food coupons, or similar items. DHS can limit the redemption of incentives based on a limited time period (e.g., monthly or quarterly) to prevent overuse.

Caseworkers will need to receive proper training and incentives to make this effort successful and boost the ~5 percent data entry rate for youth contact information. Bonus pay or employee perks (such as parking incentives, paid time off, and pizza parties) should be offered to caseworkers to also reward workers to communicate about the program to youth.

### **BUDGETS & FUNDING**

We estimate that this proposal will cost OKDHS approximately \$32,000 in development for the web portal and \$78,000 in annual maintenance, along with staff time. More information on our budget estimates can be found in our [Implementation and Operations Overview](#).



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### REFERENCE

For this project, interviews were conducted with program and technical leads from OKSA, OKDHS, and NRCYS. To help formulate our recommendations, we also spoke with representatives from the Youth Law Center and from Think of Us.

*For more information about this project, please see our [Implementation & Operations Overview](#) which gives more information about the steps required to develop the proposed portal and the budget required. Additional information can be found in our [video walkthrough of the self-service portal](#), which demonstrates what the self-service portal will look like and provides a summary of our budget calculations.*

### ENDNOTES

1 Interview with Oklahoma Successful Adulthood Program employee, February 2023.

2 *Id.*

3 Interview with Oklahoma Department of Human Services Child Welfare Services employee, February 2023.

4 Interview with Sherry Skinner, OKDHS Child Welfare Services Programs Administrator, March 2023.

5 Email exchange with Think Of Us team, March 2023.

### 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](https://aspentechpolicyhub.org/teli)



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