

**Pathways Forward: A Career Development Program for Young Adults Transitioning from
Foster Care**

Pathways Community Resource Center

Patrik Strate

Bellevue University

MCC645 Career Development

Dr. Amber Bloom

July, 2026

Pathways Forward: A Career Development Program for Young Adults Transitioning from Foster Care

Executive Summary

Pathways Forward is an original, eight-week career development program proposed for Pathways Community Resource Center (PCRC), a fictional nonprofit agency serving the Denver metropolitan area. The program is designed for young adults ages 18–24 who are preparing to leave foster care or who have already left care. Its mission is to help participants build sustainable, self-directed career and education pathways through counseling, identity exploration, skill development, practical work exposure, advocacy, and lasting relationships with caring adults. This scope reflects community career counseling as a developmental and preventive practice that includes coordination, consultation, advocacy, and case management rather than treating rapid job placement as the sole outcome (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2022).

The design follows the first five planning steps identified by Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey (2022): define the population, assess its needs, write measurable objectives, select delivery methods, and determine program content. PCRC will enroll a pilot cohort of 24 participants and deliver weekly three-hour workshops, at least three individual counseling sessions, near-peer mentoring, employer engagement, educational planning, and barrier-removal case coordination. A strengths-based philosophy will guide every service: foster-care experience will be understood as a context that has shaped opportunity, not as a fixed deficit or diagnosis. Participants will retain meaningful choice over goals, assessments, disclosure, referrals, and pacing, consistent with trauma-informed principles of safety, trustworthiness, collaboration, peer support, and empowerment (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014).

PCRC will assess whether the pilot was delivered consistently, how participants experienced it, and whether short-term outcomes improved. Primary targets include stronger confidence in career decision making, completion of an individualized career-and-education plan, production of employment materials, connection to education or credential pathways, and entry into employment, paid work-based learning, or education. Results will be reviewed at the end of the program and again after 90 and 180 days. Because studies of services for young people leaving care report promising but mixed findings, PCRC will treat the first cohort as a learning pilot and will not assume that workshop attendance alone leads to long-term economic mobility (Morton, 2018).

Program Mission and Philosophy

The mission of Pathways Forward is to partner with young adults transitioning from foster care as they build self-defined, sustainable career and education pathways through strengths-based counseling, practical learning, advocacy, and enduring community relationships.

Career development is understood as the continuing process through which people make meaning of identity, work, learning, relationships, and life roles—not simply the act of obtaining a first available job. Accordingly, PCRC will connect workforce preparation with identity development, confidence, resilience, educational planning, trauma-informed care, and advocacy. The program will recognize survival and adaptation as sources of competence and will work in partnership with participants rather than directing their choices. This philosophy draws on social cognitive career theory’s attention to self-efficacy and contextual supports and on community career counseling’s coordination, consultation, advocacy, and case-management functions (Lent et al., 1994; Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2022).

Target Population and Its Characteristics

Planning Step 1: Define the Target Population

Pathways Forward will serve Denver-area young adults ages 18–24 who spent time in foster care after age 14 and are either approaching emancipation, participating in extended care, or living independently after case closure. Priority outreach will occur through county child welfare teams, Chafee providers, housing agencies, community colleges, workforce centers, and youth-serving nonprofits. Participation will be voluntary, free, and available regardless of current employment or school enrollment. PCRC will seek a cohort that reflects the racial, cultural, gender, disability, parenting, immigration, and sexual-orientation diversity of the metropolitan region without using identity categories as proxies for need.

This population deserves specialized career services because the transition to adulthood is rarely accomplished alone. Most young adults rely on parents, extended family members, mentors, and established networks for advice, housing, transportation, emergency help, and introductions to work. Young adults leaving foster care are often expected to navigate the same developmental milestones with fewer stable supports and after disrupted relationships or placements. Longitudinal research has documented lower employment and earnings among former foster youth than among same-age peers, while systematic reviews identify persistent challenges across education, housing, health, and social connection (Courtney et al., 2011; Gypen et al., 2017; Hook & Courtney, 2011). These are population-level patterns, not predictions about any individual participant.

Participants will enter with varied assets: adaptability, self-advocacy, practical problem-solving, cultural knowledge, work experience, caregiving skills, and persistence. They will also differ substantially in academic preparation, digital access, disability status, parenting

responsibilities, housing stability, mental health, and trust in institutions. The program therefore rejects a standardized “job-ready/not job-ready” label. Intake will identify current aspirations, resources, barriers, and readiness for career decision making, then match the intensity of service to the individual (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2022).

Needs of the Target Population

Planning Step 2: Determine Needs

PCRC will conduct a participatory needs assessment before launch. The assessment will combine (a) a confidential survey of at least 40 eligible young adults, (b) two compensated listening sessions led with a care-experienced co-facilitator, (c) interviews with child welfare, workforce, education, housing, and employer partners, (d) review of deidentified referral and service-gap data, and (e) a scan of local labor-market and education pathways. A four-member Youth Design Council will review findings, identify priorities, and approve curriculum language. In this way, participants will help define the needs the program addresses rather than having professionals define those needs for them (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2022).

Six connected need areas are expected. First, participants need opportunities to connect interests, values, identities, strengths, life roles, and lived experience to possible futures. Social cognitive career theory proposes that self-efficacy and outcome expectations shape interests, goals, choices, and persistence, while supports and barriers influence whether options feel attainable (Lent et al., 1994). Career counseling must therefore attend to both a participant’s beliefs and the real conditions surrounding a choice.

Second, participants need educational navigation that links career goals to high school completion, community college, four-year study, apprenticeships, and short-term credentials.

Colorado reports that only about one in four students who experience foster care during high school graduates with the same cohort, underscoring the importance of flexible educational reengagement and continuity (Colorado Department of Human Services [CDHS], 2024). Eligible young adults may also benefit from Colorado Chafee services and Education and Training Vouchers, which can support postsecondary education and training (CDHS, n.d.).

Third, participants need opportunities to build and demonstrate workforce readiness. This includes communication, digital literacy, job-search knowledge, interviewing, workplace rights, professional norms, and experience translating informal or unpaid responsibilities into marketable competencies. Career-readiness interventions that combine groups, individualized services, and hands-on exposure are promising, although the evidence remains too limited to identify a single best model (Morton, 2018).

Fourth, career progress depends on stabilizing conditions. Housing disruptions, transportation, documentation, health care, childcare, food security, legal concerns, and technology can prevent participation or job retention even when motivation and skills are strong. Federal Chafee policy explicitly recognizes education, employment, housing, financial management, emotional support, and connections to caring adults as related transition needs (Administration for Children and Families [ACF], 2019). PCRC will use coordinated referrals and flexible participation supports rather than interpreting missed sessions as lack of commitment.

Fifth, many participants need trustworthy, enduring relational support. Near-peer coaching and youth-directed goal work have shown promising effects on self-determination and confidence among older youth in care, although results vary across studies (Blakeslee et al.,

2020). Mentors will supplement—not replace—licensed counseling, case management, or natural supports.

Sixth, services must be trauma informed without becoming trauma centered. Trauma exposure can affect attention, emotion regulation, trust, and responses to authority, but career workshops are not trauma-processing groups. PCRC will establish predictable routines, transparent boundaries, multiple ways to participate, private spaces, permission to pass, collaborative goal setting, and warm behavioral-health referrals. These practices align with SAMHSA’s (2014) trauma-informed framework while keeping the program focused on career development.

Measurable Objectives to Meet Needs

Planning Step 3: Write Measurable Objectives

Objectives were selected to capture learning, behavior, connection, and transition outcomes. Targets apply to the 24-person pilot and will be interpreted with confidence intervals and attrition information rather than as stand-alone proof of effectiveness.

Need Domain	SMART Objective	Measure	Time
Career agency	By week 8, 75% of participants with matched pre/post data will increase their Career Decision Self-Efficacy Scale–Short Form score by at least 0.30 standard deviations.	Pre/post CDSE-SF; matched analysis	Weeks 1 and 8
Career plan	By week 8, 90% of completers will produce a participant-approved plan naming one primary goal, one alternative, required education, barriers/supports, and three dated actions.	Counselor-scored plan rubric	Week 8
Workforce readiness	By week 7, 85% of completers will create a tailored résumé, complete a mock interview, and demonstrate at least four of five rubric competencies.	Portfolio and interview rubric	Weeks 6–7
Education connection	By day 90, 60% of participants seeking education will submit an application, financial-aid/ETV inquiry, or enrollment document.	Documented milestone with consent	90 days

Need Domain	SMART Objective	Measure	Time
Work/learning entry	By day 180, 65% of reachable participants will enter or remain in employment, paid internship, apprenticeship, credential training, or postsecondary education.	Participant report plus verification when authorized	90 and 180 days
Supportive relationships	By week 4, 80% of participants will identify at least two supportive adults or organizations and complete one warm connection.	Support map and referral log	Week 4
Program quality	At least 85% of respondents will report that services were respectful, choice-centered, culturally responsive, and emotionally safe.	Anonymous exit survey and interview	Week 8

The CDSE-SF is appropriate because it measures confidence in tasks central to career decision making and has established psychometric support (Betz et al., 1996). PCRC will not use assessment scores to restrict participation or determine employability. Scores will guide counseling, measure aggregate change, and be interpreted alongside participant narratives and observable milestones.

How Career Planning Services Will Be Delivered

Planning Step 4: Determine Delivery Methods

PCRC will use a blended, relationship-based service model. Weekly workshops provide peer learning and efficient skill practice; individual counseling allows deeper exploration, assessment interpretation, and tailored planning; mentoring extends consistent support; case coordination addresses environmental barriers; and employer and education partnerships create access to real settings. This differentiated approach responds to the broad roles of community career counselors described by Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey (2022).

Each cohort will meet once weekly for three hours at PCRC, with dinner, transit support, and hybrid participation when needed. Sessions will open with a predictable check-in and

agenda, include short instruction, guided practice, choice-based activities, and a closing preview. Participants will also receive individual counseling at intake, midpoint, and exit, with additional sessions according to need. Counselors will use motivational interviewing skills, narrative career techniques, and social-cognitive strategies to surface strengths, examine barriers, build mastery experiences, and translate goals into achievable steps.

Near-peer mentors ages 25–35 with lived experience in foster care or another systems transition will meet participants at least twice monthly for six months. Mentors will receive screening, 12 hours of pre-service training, weekly supervision during the cohort, and clear protocols for boundaries, mandated reporting, crisis response, and referral. The program will encourage participants to add natural mentors and community supports so that the formal mentoring relationship does not become the sole source of stability.

Employer engagement will be developmental rather than extractive. Partners will offer occupational talks, job shadows, mock interviews, paid work-based learning, and interviews for qualified participants, but no participant will be promised a job. Employers must sign a partnership compact covering wages, nondiscrimination, predictable supervision, feedback, accommodations, and a designated PCRC contact. The local workforce system can contribute labor-market information, assessments, résumé support, training assistance, internships, and apprenticeships under WIOA (Colorado Department of Labor and Employment [CDLE], n.d.).

Accessibility and retention supports will include transit passes, meals, laptops or hotspots for loan, childcare stipends when allowable, flexible make-up options, plain-language materials, disability accommodations, and warm referrals. PCRC will collect only information necessary for service and evaluation, obtain separate consent for employer or partner disclosure, and explain that declining research participation will not affect services.

Content of the Program

Planning Step 5: Determine Program Content

The weekly curriculum is intentionally sequenced to mirror the career-planning process. Participants begin with strengths, identity, interests, and values before exploring occupations and weighing alternatives. They then turn those insights into education plans, employment materials, interview practice, and concrete next steps. This progression allows practical job-search skills to grow from a clearer sense of self rather than asking participants to pursue the first available option. Each week adds a portfolio item and one manageable action toward the participant's larger goal.

Week	Core Content	Portfolio Evidence	Lead
1. Begin With Strengths	Belonging, program choice, career as a life-development process; intake and readiness	Strengths timeline; initial CDSE-SF; participant agreement	Counselor + peer mentor
2. Identity, Interests, and Values	Narrative identity, culture, life roles, interests, work values; assessment consent	Career story; O*NET Interest Profiler and Work Importance Locator results	Career counselor
3. Possibilities and Labor-Market Reality	Career clusters, transferable skills, job quality, local demand, occupational research	Three-option career map; informational-interview request	Workforce partner
4. Decisions, Supports, and Barriers	Decision-making process, self-efficacy, resilience, support mapping, benefits and barrier planning	Decision matrix; support map; warm referral	Counselor + navigator
5. Education and Training Pathways	Diploma/GED, college, certificates, apprenticeships, financial aid, Chafee/ETV navigation	Education pathway and cost/aid checklist	Education partner

Week	Core Content	Portfolio Evidence	Lead
6. Communicating Value	Résumé, applications, digital identity, references, explaining transitions without forced disclosure	Tailored résumé and application	Career specialist
7. Entering and Sustaining Work	Interview practice, workplace communication, rights, accommodations, feedback, conflict, financial basics	Recorded mock interview; 30-day work-success plan	Employer + counselor
8. Launch and Community	Portfolio presentation, goal commitments, mentor/employer connections, relapse and contingency planning	Final career-and-education plan; posttest; 90-day appointment	Full team

Career Assessments

Assessment will be purposeful, transparent, and multimethod. The intake interview will examine strengths, goals, supports, barriers, education, work history, and readiness. Formal tools will include the free O*NET Interest Profiler and Work Importance Locator for exploration and the CDSE-SF for program evaluation (Betz et al., 1996; U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, n.d.). Counselors may add skills card sorts, career genograms, life-role mapping, or narrative prompts. Results will generate hypotheses for discussion, not prescriptions; participants may decline any optional assessment.

Individual Counseling and Advocacy

The intake session will establish the working alliance, clarify immediate stability concerns, and co-create a service plan. Midpoint counseling will interpret assessment results and refine options. Exit counseling will finalize the career-and-education plan and schedule follow-up. With written permission, the navigator may coordinate with housing, behavioral health,

education, benefits, legal, transportation, or workforce providers. Advocacy may include helping a participant request an accommodation, resolve a documentation barrier, compare training quality, or challenge a discriminatory practice. The counselor will distinguish advocacy with a participant from acting on the participant's behalf without consent.

Staffing and Governance

Role	Core Responsibilities	Minimum Preparation
Program manager, 0.75 FTE	Operations, budget, partnerships, supervision, program consistency, evaluation coordination	Graduate degree; youth-program leadership
Licensed career counselor, 1.0 FTE	Intake, assessment, individual and group counseling, risk triage, mentor supervision	Colorado-licensed or license-eligible counselor; career specialization
Career/education navigator, 1.0 FTE	Case coordination, education and financial-aid navigation, follow-up, documentation	Bachelor's degree or equivalent expertise; resource navigation
Employer partnerships specialist, 0.5 FTE	Recruitment, partner compact, work-based learning, employer coaching	Workforce development and employer relations
Peer mentor coordinator, 0.5 FTE	Recruit, train, match, and support mentors; youth leadership	Lived-experience expertise and formal supervision skills
Evaluation consultant, 0.15 FTE	Data plan, analysis, outcome reports, learning review, privacy	Program evaluation competence
Eight paid peer mentors	Twice-monthly mentoring and cohort participation	Screened, trained, supervised; lived experience valued

PCRC will establish a Youth Design Council with paid membership and voting authority over curriculum revisions, participant-facing policies, and dissemination of findings. Staff will receive training in trauma-informed practice, cultural humility, suicide-alert response and referral, disability access, LGBTQ+ affirmation, mandated reporting, confidentiality, and ethical

career assessment. Monthly reflective supervision will monitor vicarious trauma, boundary drift, and fidelity.

Community and Employer Partnerships

Partner	Contribution	Operating Agreement
County child welfare and Chafee providers	Referral, transition coordination, eligible supports, aggregate needs data	No duplicate case plans; consent-based exchange
Denver-area workforce centers/CDLE	WIOA eligibility, labor-market information, training funds, work-based learning	Warm handoffs and shared milestone definitions
Community colleges, technical schools, and apprenticeship sponsors	Admissions, bridge options, financial aid, ETV navigation, campus supports	Named campus contact and response standard
Housing, health, legal, transportation, and childcare providers	Barrier-removal services and crisis stabilization	Closed-loop referrals
Employers in health care, skilled trades, public service, IT, logistics, and hospitality	Career exposure, paid learning, interviews, supervisors	Job-quality compact and quarterly feedback
Care-experienced youth and alumni	Program governance, mentoring, outreach, evaluation interpretation	Paid expertise; no tokenized storytelling

Evaluation Methods

Evaluation will answer four practical questions: Was the program delivered as planned? Who participated and remained engaged? Did the targeted outcomes improve? How did participants experience the program? PCRC will compare beginning- and end-of-program measures and follow up after 90 and 180 days. The review will include attendance, participation in counseling and mentoring, portfolio completion, change in CDSE-SF scores, education

milestones, and work or training status. Anonymous exit feedback, brief participant interviews, mentor notes, and partner debriefs will help explain what the numbers do not show.

Domain	Indicator	Schedule	Owner
Reach	Referrals, enrollment, demographics, reasons for declining	Weekly	Manager
Fidelity	Core activities delivered; counseling/mentoring dosage; accommodations	Weekly	Counselor
Experience	Safety, respect, choice, relevance, accessibility	Week 4 and 8	Evaluator
Learning	CDSE-SF; portfolio rubric; career-plan rubric	Pre/post	Evaluator
Transition	Applications, enrollment, credentials, paid work-based learning, employment	90/180 days	Navigator
Equity	Reach, retention, experience, and outcomes disaggregated where cell sizes protect privacy	Quarterly	Evaluator + council

PCRC will report how many participants completed each measure, note missing follow-up information, and summarize both overall change and individual milestones. Results may be examined across participant groups only when privacy can be protected. Staff and the Youth Design Council will review feedback after week 4, at program completion, and after the 180-day follow-up. Revisions will be based on more than one source of information and recorded so that PCRC can track what changed and why. If the pilot meets its participation and retention goals, a later study could compare outcomes with those of a similar group that did not receive the program.

Implementation Readiness and Sustainability

A 12-week prelaunch period will finalize referral agreements, recruit staff and mentors, compensate the Youth Design Council, select employers, and test measures. The initial 24-person cohort will allow PCRC to examine demand and delivery capacity without overstating

scale. Funding should cover personnel, mentor and council stipends, participant supports, assessment materials, data systems, insurance, and paid work-based-learning subsidies.

Sustainability will depend on braided support from Chafee-eligible services, WIOA resources, workforce and education partners, foundations, and employer contributions; no single funding source will control participant eligibility or career choice.

The program's central proposition is that durable career development emerges when self-knowledge, confidence, opportunity, education, relationships, and material stability are addressed together. Pathways Forward does not promise to erase structural inequity in eight weeks. It offers an ethically bounded, measurable, and locally connected platform through which young adults can exercise agency, gain credible evidence of competence, and enter the next stage with people and institutions prepared to keep showing up.

References

- Administration for Children and Families. (2019). The John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/grant-funding/john-h-chafee-foster-care-program-successful-transition-adulthood>
- Bandura, A. (1997). Self-efficacy: The exercise of control. W. H. Freeman.
- Betz, N. E., Klein, K. L., & Taylor, K. M. (1996). Evaluation of a short form of the Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy Scale. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 4(1), 47–57.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/106907279600400103>
- Blakeslee, J. E., Powers, L. E., Geenen, S., Schmidt, J., Nelson, M., Fullerton, A., George, K., McHugh, E., Bryant, M., & Reder, M. (2020). Evaluating the My Life self-determination model for older youth in foster care: Establishing efficacy and exploring moderation of response to intervention. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 119, 105419.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105419>
- Colorado Department of Human Services. (2024, May 9). CDHS improves educational outcomes for foster youth. <https://cdhs.colorado.gov/press-release/cdhs-improves-educational-outcomes-for-foster-youth>
- Colorado Department of Human Services. (n.d.). Colorado Chafee program. Retrieved July 29, 2026, from <https://cdhs.colorado.gov/colorado-chafee-program>
- Colorado Department of Labor and Employment. (n.d.). Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act (WIOA). Retrieved July 29, 2026, from <https://cdle.colorado.gov/wioa-js>

Courtney, M. E., Dworsky, A., Brown, A., Cary, C., Love, K., & Vorhies, V. (2011). Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 26. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

Gypen, L., Vanderfaeillie, J., De Maeyer, S., Belenger, L., & Van Holen, F. (2017). Outcomes of children who grew up in foster care: Systematic-review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 76, 74–83. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.02.035>

Hook, J. L., & Courtney, M. E. (2011). Employment outcomes of former foster youth as young adults: The importance of human, personal, and social capital. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33(10), 1855–1865. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2011.05.004>

Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D., & Hackett, G. (1994). Toward a unifying social cognitive theory of career and academic interest, choice, and performance. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 45(1), 79–122. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jvbe.1994.1027>

Morton, B. M. (2018). Career readiness programming for youth in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 89, 152–164. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.04.003>

Niles, S. G., & Harris-Bowlsbey, J. E. (2022). *Career development interventions* (6th ed.). Pearson.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014). SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach (HHS Publication No. SMA 14-4884). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration. (n.d.). O*NET Interest Profiler. Retrieved July 29, 2026, from <https://www.mynextmove.org/explore/ip>