

Chronic PTSD in Foster Children

PTSD. We hear this acronym so often, that perhaps we don't stop to think about what it really means. Of course, we know it translates to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, but let's break it down and try to better understand why **one in four foster children are experiencing PTSD**, and why former foster youth are twice as likely to have it than a U.S. war veteran. Then let's explore how **focused intervention can help support a child's recovery** from trauma-related issues including PTSD, and avoid the trauma-related outcomes that often sabotage these children into adulthood.

The "trauma" of PTSD may be exposure to that of a single, distressing event; exposure to a recurring distressing event over a period of time; or exposure to multiple types of distressing events over a period of time. We can all certainly agree, that even a single traumatic event is too much.

When a child is removed from their home, it is in response to evidence of their maltreatment. It is these events of maltreatment that manifest the trauma. Sadly, children are victims of sexual abuse, emotional abuse, physical and emotional neglect, and experiencing or witnessing domestic or community violence. The extent and range of **maltreatment that prompts a child's removal from their home**, is broad, appalling and heart breaking. And though the child's removal is essential to their welfare, **removal from a home they know and a family they love only compounds their trauma**.

Let's face it. **No child enters foster care without having experienced significant trauma**. For many current and former foster children and youth, they relive the traumatic events in response to triggers of sight, smells, sound or other stimuli; responses indicative of PTSD. But even for children whose trauma doesn't result in a diagnosis of PTSD, the repercussions of the trauma are often extensive. They can include persistent fatigue and anxiety, depression, emotional avoidance, and hypersensitivity to stimuli. Trauma can deeply impact a child's self-esteem and their ability to trust and form healthy relationships. Each of these responses has the potential to **impact a child's long-term ability to be successful in school, and in society as a whole**. With limited resources to address their emotional and mental health, **we are dooming children to underwhelming and unfulfilling adult lives** that support a cycle of abuse, neglect, incarceration, homelessness and worse.

The Statistics are Grim

As we began to create a picture of the trauma experienced by children and youth who land in the foster care system, perhaps you added some detail and context and imagined yourself, your child, or another loved one placed in such an unimaginable situation. If so, or if you were yourself a foster child, you will likely not be surprised by the **bleak outcomes of the innocent children who have fallen into the foster care system**. Much care is needed to help these children reclaim their idealist spirits that have been trampled by the very people who are supposed to keep them safe and be their greatest source of inspiration and motivation.

In the U.S. over the past decade, we've seen little fluctuation in the **staggering number of children and youth in foster care**. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reports 687,345 in care over the 2018 fiscal year. Though the existence of these number alone illustrates a slew of social, racial, health and economic inequities in our country, for the purpose of this narrative we will focus on changing outcomes, including these provided by the National Foster Youth Institute (NFYI).

Of the more than 23,000 youth who age out of U.S. foster care each year:

- 20% become instantly homeless,
- only half are gainfully employed by the age of 24,
- only about half finish high school, and fewer than 3% earn a college degree,
- 70% of females will become pregnant before their 21st birthday, and
- 25% continue to suffer from PTSD.

According to NFYI, more than 85% of children in foster care have two or more different placement settings within the first 12 months, and 33% change elementary schools five or more times. **The original traumas are compounded and exacerbated by ongoing instability**, and even children or teens who land in a permanent and loving home, with trauma unaddressed, continue to struggle with PTSD and other trauma-related afflictions.

Our Vision: A trauma-informed approach to transforming the lives of youth in foster care.

For more than three decades, Progressive Life Center (PLC) has catalyzed positive outcomes for the most vulnerable children and youth: those in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, others with mental health and behavioral needs, and those who are facing economic, food and housing insecurity. For these children, **academic achievement, and social and emotional wellness, are impeded by volatile living conditions, frequent school transfers, low expectations and a variety of neglect and abuse.**

Based on our years of experience in helping youth and families succeed, PLC has developed a model for the ACE Center. Our ACE Center will provide coordinated services to **promote Academic excellence, Cultural and career enrichment, and Emotional wellness.** It is our long-term goal to open an ACE Center in each of our current service regions – Prince George’s County and Baltimore, Maryland; Newark, Delaware; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Washington, DC. Staffed with each regions’ top teachers and counselors, these community centers will help improve outcomes for a multitude of youth in the child welfare system, while also serving as a model of care for other providers. With extensive planning behind us, we seek to secure funding during 2021 to open our first ACE Centers in Prince George’s County and Delaware.

With the ACE Center’s afterschool, summer and weekend programming, we will ultimately help foster youth correct course, placing them on a pathway to post-secondary success.

Addressing Academic, Cultural, and Emotional Needs

ACE Center teachers and counselors will support the academic, cultural and emotional needs of youth through the implementation of proven models, including those which are evidence-based or evidence-informed. Staff will be trained or certified to provide supports through a Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) model, an approach that recognizes and addresses the role trauma may play in an individual’s life.

Academic: To address chronic academic deficiencies, ACE will augment children’s public education with **high-quality learning experiences** toward strong content mastery and their development of the “Four Cs”: critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity. An array of academic support will be provided to each youth as needed, including educational assessments; individual and group instruction and tutoring; liaison with school personnel; attendance and report card monitoring; educational planning and advocacy; and SAT/ACT preparation.

Cultural: Many of the same factors that lead to a youth’s entry into the child welfare system explain their **lack of exposure to and awareness of higher education and career opportunities.** Studies by the Center for Applied Research Solutions (CARS) indicate it is essential, that by middle school, foster youth begin thinking about college and career interests, and begin building connections in the community to support their goals. CARS reports that those in foster care dream of college just like many other youth. However, youth in the child welfare system often report that **college and career are not an expectation** and they are seldom provided the guidance and supports needed to navigate post-secondary pathways. **ACE youth will be exposed to a range of career options** through workplace visits, college tours, career fairs, and guest speakers. ACE will offer financial literacy, and also provide high school students access to internships. With our proven programming, the exposure will offer concrete options in which a **youth can envision their success**, and begin to develop a sense of worth and confidence toward the development of goals.

Emotional: The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) recognizes the importance of a trauma-informed child welfare system; their website provides a slew of resources to help professionals identify and implement treatment programs for foster youth. However, during our decades-long experience operating foster care programming in Maryland, Delaware and Pennsylvania, our contract **budgets have not provided for even the most basic therapeutic counseling.** Outside of our various contracts, the funders will provide some therapeutic

supports, but typically only for children or youth whose trauma-related behaviors have escalated to the point of causing imminent danger to self or others. Still, within the contract, we do approach our work with foster children and youth under a trauma-informed model. And during our continuing education for foster parents, we do provide information and training to help them recognize and help the children in their care cope with the effects of trauma. But this is simply not enough. Therefore, while even ACE's academic and cultural programming will follow a **trauma-informed model**, youth will also participate and build upon regularly-scheduled **counseling sessions to address past and ongoing traumas**. Sessions with licensed therapist will include individual, peer-group and family counseling, and our therapist will advocate for trauma-informed parenting through training for biological and foster families. ACE will also host PLC's proven multi-family therapeutic weekend retreats toward uncovering trauma, strengthening relationships, and promoting healing.

Initiating Support During Middle School

According to the U.S. Department of Education (DOE), high-quality middle-grade schooling is essential in preparing young people for high school, college, and career success, emphasizing that early intervention yields better outcomes and is more cost-effective than high school intervention. For these reasons, PLC's ACE Center will initially serve students who are currently in grades 6 through 8, with continued support through their high school graduation and beyond. As our capacity to serve increases, we will provide responsive intervention to serve the full K-12 continuum.

ACE Impact and Outcomes

In each of our regions, our ACE Center staff will collaborate with and **hire top local teachers and pediatric therapists** specializing in youth trauma-informed care. We will work closely with local departments of social services, family services, and juvenile justice, all of which we have longtime and thriving alliances. In collaboration with local departments of education, our programming will work in harmony with each region's learning standards.

With **high dose and coordinated academic, cultural and emotional support** for youth, and supplemental wrap around direct and coordinated **services for biological and foster families**, youth participating in ACE will begin to heal and find a path to long-term wellness.

Short- to Mid-term Outcome Goals

- ✓ Improved school attendance rates.
- ✓ Reduced school suspensions or expulsions.
- ✓ Increased proficiency in school, particularly language arts and STEM subjects.
- ✓ Reduced involvement in criminal activity.
- ✓ Increased confidence in career opportunities.

Long-term Outcome Goals

- ✓ Increased high school graduation rates.
- ✓ Increased college and career readiness.
- ✓ Increased college entrance or vocational training placement.
- ✓ Increased completion of post-secondary education.
- ✓ Full self-sufficiency.

Why PLC?

Progressive Life Center is uniquely qualified to introduce and operate the ACE Center. Founded in 1983 to improve the delivery of mental health services to individuals and families in Washington, DC, today we provide foster care, kinship care, youth diversion and family preservation programming throughout the mid-Atlantic. Our unique, culturally competent approach to providing quality human services is accredited by the Council on Accreditation, and recognized by The Child Welfare League of America, and the Association of Black Psychologists. PLC's extensive experience, combined with careful and strategic planning and research, yields our confidence that the ACE Center will provide remarkable outcomes for the vulnerable youth we will serve. Because, we believe all children deserve to grow up to be happy, successful, confident contributing members of their community.