

Vouchers: Family Unification Program

By Ruth White, National Center for Housing & Child Welfare

Administering Agency: HUD's Office of Public and Indian Housing (PIH)

Year Started: 1990

Number of Persons/Households Served: Nearly 50,000 households currently hold Housing Choice Vouchers through the Family Unification Program (FUP).

Population Targeted: Homeless or precariously housed families who are at imminent risk of losing their children to foster care or who are unable to regain custody of their children who are in foster care primarily due to housing problems. FUP vouchers can also be provided (for a period not to exceed five years) to youth who are aging out of foster care and young adults who have experienced foster care and could benefit from a voucher for the purpose of moving towards economic self-sufficiency.

Funding: FUP is authorized by Section 8(x) of the United States "Housing Act of 1937" (42 U.S.C. 1437f(x)). Funding is provided by the "Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024" (Pub. L. 118-42, enacted on March 9, 2024) which made available \$30 million for incremental vouchers to serve families and youth involved with the child welfare system.

Appropriators divide FUP into two separate allocations. One allocation of just five million dollars is made available on a competitive basis for both eligible families and eligible youth. The remaining \$25 million is made available on a rolling, non-competitive process for housing authorities that intend to work with child welfare agencies to serve youth.

See Also: For related information, refer to the *Housing Choice Voucher Program, Foster Youth to Independence Vouchers, Tenant Protection*

Vouchers, and HUD-Funded Service Coordination Programs sections of this guide.

FUP is HUD's only housing program aimed specifically at keeping homeless families together and safe and preventing homelessness among young adults aging out of foster care. HUD provides FUP Housing Choice Vouchers to Public Housing Authorities who must work in partnership with public child welfare agencies (PCWAs) to select eligible participants for the program. These vouchers can be used to prevent children from entering foster care, reunite foster children with their parents, and help ease the transition to adulthood for older former foster youth. In an effort to encourage and facilitate self-sufficiency for youth who benefit from FUP vouchers, HUD implemented the "Fostering Stable Housing Opportunities Act" Amendments (FSHO). FSHO was written by NCHCW in partnership with current and former foster youth. FSHO codifies the FYI distribution mechanism and requires PHAs to offer youth the opportunity to extend voucher assistance by two years (for a total of five years) by pursuing paths towards self-sufficiency if they are able (otherwise they are granted the extension regardless). Voucher assistance for families is not time limited.

History and Purpose

FUP was signed into law in 1990 by President George H. W. Bush. The program was created as a part of the Tenant Protection Fund within the "Cranston-Gonzalez Affordable Housing Act of 1990." FUP is designed to address the housing related needs of children in the foster care system. According to HHS, one in ten children who enter foster care are removed from their homes due to inadequate housing. In 2023, over 19,924 children entered foster care because their families lacked access to safe, decent, and affordable housing. Additionally, 18,538 young adults aged out of foster care

without finding any kind of permanency without family to help them gain independence and a solid economic footing. Consequently, nearly a quarter of them are at risk of homelessness in the first year after emancipation.

Despite the obvious impact of America's affordable housing crisis on foster children, child welfare workers seldom have access to the housing resources or supportive services necessary to prevent and end homelessness among vulnerable families and youth. FUP is a long-standing and effective cross-systems partnership that communities can draw upon to keep families together and safe and ease the transition to adulthood for young adults.

Program Summary

FUP is administered at the local level through a partnership between public housing agencies (PHAs) and public child welfare agencies. PHAs interested in administering FUP Vouchers must sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with their partner agency to apply to HUD in response to a Notice of Funding Opportunity. FUP vouchers for families are awarded through a competitive process. Depending on the size of the PHA, communities can apply for a maximum of 75, 50, or 25 vouchers. Planning and communication between partnerships will help communities avoid ordering more vouchers than they will need to serve eligible families. Furthermore, the HUD Secretary can reallocate vouchers among PHAs, essentially offering an "on demand" mechanism for families as well.

FUP vouchers are administered in the same manner as Housing Choice Voucher and are subject to the same eligibility rules. The child welfare agency is required to help FUP clients gather the necessary paperwork, find suitable housing, and maintain their housing through aftercare services. If a child welfare agency elects to refer a young person aging out of foster care with a FUP voucher, the child welfare agency must offer or identify an agency that will

offer educational assistance, independent living programs, counseling, and employment assistance.

Eligible families include those who are in imminent danger of losing their children to foster care or are unable to regain custody of their children primarily due to inadequate housing. Eligible youth include those who were in foster care aged out of foster care and are currently between the ages of 18 and 24 (have not reached their 25th birthday). Youth do not have to be homeless or at risk of homelessness at the time of their application to the PHA.

Funding

Each year between 1992 and 2001, HUD awarded an average of 3,560 FUP Vouchers to public housing agencies. Unfortunately, from FY02 to FY07, HUD used its rescission authority to avoid funding FUP. Funding for FUP was re-established by the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development in 2009 and since then, FUP has received widespread support and a consistent investment of roughly \$20 million annually. In fact, Congress increased the funding for FUP in FY 2022 to \$30 million along with language that synchronizes vouchers for youth with foster care emancipation to eliminate homelessness for youth leaving care.

Forecast for 2025

There is growing interagency support for FUP at the federal level in Congress and within the Administration. Leadership in authorizing and appropriations committees have expressed a high level of confidence and support for FUP and it is likely that FUP will continue to receive steady funding as well as serve as a blueprint for similar interagency housing collaboration.

An important development in the evolution of FUP is an increasing interest in synchronizing FUP vouchers with emancipation to eliminate

homelessness among youth leaving foster care. With the passage of the “Fostering Stable Housing Opportunities Act” (FSHO), Congress moved to codify the non-competitive distribution of vouchers known as FYI so that a portion of the FUP vouchers can be issued “on demand” in such a manner that child welfare agencies can properly time the voucher request with a young adult’s emancipation from foster care. Furthermore, FSHO amends FUP to encourage participation in HUD’s Family Self-Sufficiency Program to help move youth towards economic independence and help them build wealth.

HUD requires that the local public child welfare agencies (PCWA) find partners to ensure that young people have access to a range of self-sufficiency services. Further, child welfare agencies should create relationships with local shelters and the Continuum of Care (CoC) so that youth who have been failed by the child welfare system and end up homeless are identified and referred to the PCWA for FUP. The FSHO amendments to FUP provide a real opportunity to end homelessness for older foster youth and homeless emancipated youth.

Tips for Local Success

The most successful FUP partnerships require cross-training, single points of contact (liaisons) within each partner agency, and ongoing communication. HUD requires that FUP sites have regular communication, liaisons, and other elements to support their partnership and provide case management and other supportive services to FUP households. FUP sites must include ongoing, intensive case management provided by the local child welfare agency or through a contract funded by the child welfare system. HUD underscores the importance of child welfare partners taking part in landlord recruitment, housing training for frontline staff, and emphasizes regular communication with the PHA point of contact. Finally, HUD encourages PHAs

to enroll FUP households in the FSS program because this adds an extra layer of supportive services and helps ensure that FUP households will successfully maintain permanent housing and reduce the amount of subsidy paid by the government over time.

HUD offers the tools and training necessary to implement and operate a FUP partnership on their website free of charge. PHAs administering FUP nationwide demonstrate an extraordinary commitment to at-risk populations and the ability to match existing services to Housing Choice Vouchers to successfully serve hard-to-house families and youth leaving foster care.

What to Say to Legislators

Advocates can help legislators understand that housing is a vital tool for promoting family unification, easing the transition to adulthood for foster youth, and achieving significant cost savings. Advocates can inform their elected officials that when a FUP Voucher is used to reunify a family and subsidize a two-bedroom unit, the community saves an average of \$50,500 per family in mandatory foster care costs. Furthermore, supportive housing for young adults is a tenth of the cost of more restrictive placements like juvenile justice or residential treatment. This cost-benefit information is an excellent way to help legislators understand the importance of new funding for the FUP.

For More Information

National Center for Housing & Child Welfare,
301-699-0151, www.nchcw.org.