00;00;09;22 - 00;00;31;27

Michelle

But then we get to see everything through their eyes. And it's amazing because I imagine if you were to ask them four or five years prior, would you have seen yourself here? I'm not so sure they would have said yes. They just don't give up. And that's where they've come from, wherever background they've come from, they just don't give up.

00;00;36;06 - 00;00;47;27

Courtney

Welcome to Adjusting the Sails, a podcast for parents, caregivers and service providers for Children with Disabilities. I'm your host, Courtney Ring Staff, and this is my co-host, Melina Danko.

00;00;48;07 - 00;00;50;29

Melina

Hi, everyone. We are so glad you've joined us.

00;00;51;10 - 00;01;22;16

Courtney

Melina is the assistant director of communications and marketing at the Center for Excellence in Disabilities and the project director of the West Virginia Family two Family Health Information Center. I am a licensed social worker in Morgantown, West Virginia, and I've created this podcast to be a platform where parents, caregivers and service providers can come together, exchange information, educate one another, and find support and connections through the relatable topic discussions.

00;01;23;10 - 00;01;32;06

Courtney

We cannot change the direction of the wind or the strength of the storm, but together we can adjust the sails.

00;01;35;00 - 00;01;57;09

Michelle

On the shelf lease. I'm in the eastern panhandle of West Virginia. I am currently the modified program manager and I've been program manager for a little over a year now. I started off as a social worker with the the HHR and Youth Services right after graduating college and then was looking for to move back towards our home area.

00;01;57;18 - 00;02;33;14

Michelle

I stumbled upon this position with Monotype program as a specialist. The modified program with WB, you said we are grant contracted with the HHR to provide these services and funds to former foster youth that have aged out of foster care or have had a legal guardianship or adoption completed after the age of 16. And we can help assist with educational expenses up to $5,000 per school year, and that's usually paid directly to the school for tuition, books, dorms, meal plans, school supplies and then anything after that.

00;02;33;14 - 00;02;55;16

Michelle

It's usually songs that's educational based. We can usually help the youth with that assistance. It's a transition piece from foster care into a college or university of their choice in West Virginia. Right now we have about 300 collectively between the workers and that's active and referrals right now is probably our busiest time of year getting ready for that fall semester kickoff.

00;02;56;03 - 00;03;07;20

Michelle

So this is typically when we're seeing the most of the referrals and probably the most active caseload. So they're ranging about 300 between referrals and active use in the program right now.

00;03;08;03 - 00;03;29;21

Melina

So Michelle, you said that the modified program helps to transition into a college or university program. Are there other things like a trade or some kind of like vocational school or other kinds of trainings that if somebody didn't want to go to college, that they would be able to get assistance with.

00;03;30;10 - 00;03;51;17

Michelle

Absolutely. So the trade gets a little trickier for our funding. They have to be Pell Grant eligible. So it usually depends on the trade and how long the trade is. Usually if it's a two year trade, their Pell eligible, which we can assist with paying for that as well as the supplies needed during that time. But then there are some trades that are shorter and more of a training program, if you want to call it that.

00;03;51;17 - 00;04;08;29

Michelle

It's about six months to a year and when we come across those youth, we still let them know, even though we can assist, we help guide them to some resources in the area that might be able to assist. Bruce might be able to offer some funding for them. West Virginia workforce has some grants for training programs like that.

00;04;09;14 - 00;04;21;25

Michelle

So really just linking them up to what their goals are. And if they're not with us, that's fine. But we still want to help make that connection so they can still have that foundation to build upon and just kind of run with it with their interests and what they want to do.

00;04;21;28 - 00;04;28;08

Courtney

Are there areas of the state where you feel like you received the most referrals or like areas where you'd like to target or plan to target?

00;04;28;24 - 00;04;58;14

Michelle

I want to say between Canal County and Monongalia Monroe and Marion, counties tend to be the higher regions. As far as referrals, let's say the eastern Panhandle, we still have referrals, but we don't open that many from the Eastern Panhandle. And then probably the southeast side of West Virginia has a little bit less referrals. I mean, they all still have a lot of referrals in each area, but as far as number was, it would definitely be the Canola and Monongahela County regions.

00;04;58;23 - 00;05;17;12

Melina

How can somebody know if they would be a good fit for Modify? I mean, I feel like a lot of high school kids who are graduating high school, they don't really know what they want to be when they grow up. They don't know what they want to do. So how do they know if the time is right for them to apply or seek out help for modify?

00;05;17;18 - 00;05;34;23

Michelle

It's basically we're just listening to the youth, you know, we get the referrals all the time because we do a lot of information sessions. So we want to let the youth know that, hey, you have these benefits, they're on the back burner. You know, you can come back to our program up until the age of 26 and still receive some educational assistance.

00;05;34;23 - 00;05;53;17

Michelle

So just letting them know their options and then letting them kind of talk to you about what they actually want to do and just listening to them and help guiding them and making those connections for those resources. So if they want to go and work, that's fine. You know, we don't look at success as being a college graduate.

00;05;53;23 - 00;06;15;01

Michelle

That's not a success for everybody. If if you want to be a productive member in society and go to work, that's great and we applaud you for that. So, you know, just making those connections, but also hoping we make them understand that these benefits are safe for them as long as they age out of foster care or had that legal guardianship or adoption after 16 that they can come back at any point.

00;06;15;22 - 00;06;33;25

Michelle

Typically, those that do come back or are more successful because they've had that piece where they weren't in school and they were able to kind of do what they want to do and and either found what they wanted to do or just realized that working wherever they were working, just wasn't going to cut it. So and they tend to be a lot more successful.

00;06;34;27 - 00;06;39;09

Melina

What are some of those things as far as readiness that you look for.

00;06;39;20 - 00;07;11;21

Michelle

When being accepted to a college have already applied for fast the have your acceptance letter kind of no and not a specific program but no some sort of degree that you're wanting to study. I know me personally, I teach mine three times. So you know, it's not dead set on one. The one degree you come into, but being able to again help guide them and listen to them about what they want to do and kind of help guide them to the appropriate major, maybe even seeking some sort of services on campus about what kind of job you can get with that.

00;07;11;21 - 00;07;28;27

Michelle

Is that ideal for West Virginia if you want to stay in West Virginia or would you have to move to California to be able to have a job, or would you need eight more years on top of your degree, too, to get anything out of it? So just keeping it realistic with them too, I think is key. Kind of not sugarcoating it, just giving them the facts.

00;07;28;29 - 00;07;48;20

Michelle

They need the facts. They need to know the facts to help make the best decisions for themselves. And again, so we have those conversations at the beginning. Once we receive those referrals and if they're not ready. So if they don't have any idea of what they want to study or if they haven't, you know, haven't even started looking at colleges or even applying for FAFSA, that's fine.

00;07;49;09 - 00;08;10;12

Michelle

At that point, we again, we kind of refer out to other services to help them explore maybe interest, job shadowing, something where they can kind of see what they want to do, what kind of educational setting might be best for them to depending on their background and just really trying to help educate them on where they can be successful of the information that they're providing us.

00;08;10;24 - 00;08;14;23

Michelle

So it's still their goals, but giving them information to help meet those goals.

00;08;15;17 - 00;08;24;13

Courtney

So at what point does modify, step in and start working with that person then after they've applied or while they're making decisions about what to do after high school?

00;08;24;22 - 00;08;51;18

Michelle

So we typically get the referrals once they're about to turn 18 and foster care or they're about to complete high school and we start having those conversations with them. We're hoping we're not the first ones, having those conversations with them, but sometimes we are and that's fine. And just helping them kind of think about what they want to do pass tomorrow, kind of getting them to look at a year goal, maybe, maybe not five years, but just something a little bit longer than the immediate tomorrow.

00;08;52;11 - 00;09;13;05

Michelle

So I think that's probably the hardest is getting them to just broaden that a little bit and then we can kind of set some more concrete steps to how do you get there? But yeah, so we receive the referrals, we have these discussions with the youth, their teams, their workers and try to help do some transition planning. I know one of the issues coming out of foster care is housing.

00;09;13;19 - 00;09;35;13

Michelle

The state is not the greatest right now on housing. She is coming out of foster care. And that's unfortunate because they're they're aging out every day. So, again, helping them find the resources that they need to meet their needs, letting them know all the benefits they're eligible for, whether it's with us or another program, and just really helping them choose out of all that information.

00;09;35;13 - 00;09;41;20

Michelle

What do you want to do? Because they have options. It's just some of them just do not know those options. So we're happy to tell them.

00;09;42;20 - 00;09;48;16

Courtney

Who on that youth team do you find typically connects them to modify.

00;09;48;29 - 00;10;14;21

Michelle

Usually a DHHS or worker or a foster parent or legal guardian? We have youth referred themselves all the time. They kind of take the initiative and they run with it. The other day I had a youth telling me about the program, so it was great. He's read our you know, he's read the website, he's done his research. So we have a lot of youth that just take the initiative and will do it themselves, too, because they know some of these workers are just really busy, but they want to make sure those referrals get in.

00;10;14;21 - 00;10;24;06

Michelle

So it's typically a social worker, school staff. We have high schools counselors sending stuff to you all the time.

00;10;24;06 - 00;10;26;14

Melina

And what is that process for a referral?

00;10;27;01 - 00;10;52;10

Michelle

So our referral process now is on our website. You fill the form out as best as you can. It'll ask for case numbers and client ideas and those are not required fields, so just fill it out as best as you can. I always encourage anybody if they don't know for sure if they were actually 18 or if they were 16 when the legal guardianship or adoption occurred, I would still put those referrals and we check the state systems to verify if they're if they're not eligible.

00;10;52;10 - 00;11;20;04

Michelle

Again, we still offer other potential services that can help meet the educational needs of the youth and their goals. So we still offer those additional pieces just in case they're not eligible. But again, I would still strongly suggest anybody just putting in those referrals. We can screen them to determine if they truly are eligible and if they are, then we get them assigned to a worker to do the intake process and screening.

00;11;20;04 - 00;11;28;09

Courtney

And so then after the intake process, how is youth matched with a worker and then what does that relationship look like until that person is ready to be discharged.

00;11;28;26 - 00;11;46;16

Michelle

So they will get matched with a were the first worker will be depending on where they are in the state when the referral is made. Once we have an acceptance letter to whatever school they want to go to, that worker may change if it's in a different region than where they originally are. So at that point we help to get them transferred usually before the start of the school year.

00;11;46;16 - 00;12;17;03

Michelle

So they have that connection with their their new worker at that school. And that worker is more knowledgeable about the school and the resources itself. So we definitely want to get them connected as soon as possible. And then from there, you know, we keep contact with them monthly, make sure, you know, that their needs are being met, that they don't need anything for school or if they're running into the financial aid issues with all the documentation, you know, we're there to help navigate and put them in connections with the people that we are connected with through the schools to help get it done.

00;12;17;14 - 00;12;43;13

Michelle

And then hopefully the end goal is seeing them graduate. You know, that's the ultimate goal. Or if that's not their goal or at least seeing them still succeed in life, whether it be a job or a trade or some other thing, that they can get a foundation for themselves in their adulthood to just thrive. So that's ultimately the goal, whether it be college or university, whichever, as long as they're taking a step forward, basically.

00;12;46;08 - 00;12;51;29

Melina

In some of the youth that you guys have worked with are really thriving. So can you tell us about some of them?

00;12;52;12 - 00;13;16;25

Michelle

Yeah, absolutely. So this past year, I think last fiscal year, we had about 15 graduates. If I'm calling offhand or in our reports since I've been with the program, I think that's the most that I remember in a year of having graduated. So those are huge successes. You know, them coming out of foster care may not have the supports that are typical freshman would have is crucial.

00;13;16;25 - 00;13;34;03

Michelle

So, you know, we're not there the whole time holding their hands. So they do a lot of independent stuff as well. So it's not just us. They are putting more work into it, you know, and we mirror that. So we have a lot of youth that have graduated being teachers. We had one that was an engineer last year.

00;13;34;03 - 00;13;52;17

Michelle

We had one that I just heard about and maintain contact with her. She just got a scholarship to teach in Indonesia. She's going to be an English teacher for the school year teaching English and learning about the culture. So she leaves soon for that. Have a lot of them that when they graduate they're traveling to other countries and just seeing the world.

00;13;52;17 - 00;14;11;27

Michelle

So it's awesome that, you know, we still have that contact with them. We get to see everything through their eyes. And it's amazing because I imagine if you were to ask them four or five years prior, would you have seen yourself here? I'm not so sure they would have said yes, but they just don't give up. And that's I think that's the beauty of the job is where they've come from, wherever background they've come from.

00;14;11;27 - 00;14;24;29

Michelle

They just don't give up. They still drive and pursue with those goals. And it's just it's awesome to see. I just love this side of it.

00;14;24;29 - 00;14;51;21

Melina

So you mentioned that often a lot of the youth just don't have a lot of supports as or as many supports as college freshmen would have. And one of my favorite stories that I've heard, a modify youth participant share, was that just how helpful that relationship was with her modify worker. She said that she got into a car accident and didn't know what to do and so she called her modify worker.

00;14;51;21 - 00;15;10;08

Melina

And that was the first person that she called to say like, Oh my God, what your idea? And her modify worker talked her through it. You know, call your insurance company, you know, talk to the court, talk to the policeman, get a, you know, a report. Here's the things you know, and talk to her through that whole thing that was just so real to me.

00;15;10;08 - 00;15;30;02

Melina

Because you think about all of these things that happened to us as we grow up, we go to the pharmacy because we have a cold and you stand there and you're like, I don't know what I'm supposed to buy you know, things that you just don't think about that are those milestones that you would typically just call your parents and say, What do I do?

00;15;30;19 - 00;15;40;13

Melina

And some of these youth have such a good relationship with our Modify worker that that's who they call to reach out to. And to me, that was really powerful.

00;15;40;29 - 00;15;55;28

Michelle

Yeah, that, that was one of those one of my old years. I remember that cause she was she was so French. And I'm glad she called me because the person was a construction equipment in Morgantown that backed into her and they weren't going to call the cops. I'm like, No, no, no, you're so I need to call the cops.

00;15;56;20 - 00;16;15;07

Michelle

So, yeah, it's those moments again that a lot of us take for granted don't even really realize that these youth are coming out with little to no person to lean on. And we hope to be that person. You know, we have to it takes some time to build that trust, but that's what's any relationship either way. We still stand there with them and we're there to help them.

00;16;15;07 - 00;16;41;25

Michelle

Whatever. Again, whatever their goal is, it does not have to be with us. We're still going to assist and navigate them to the appropriate connections. So yeah, it's I love the relationships and even hearing other coworkers talking about the relationships and the conversations they have with their youth. It's kind of funny because again, you just never realized until working on this side of it, it's like, Oh yeah, I guess I did have somebody tell me that the whole time and they just don't know.

00;16;41;25 - 00;16;47;25

Michelle

And that's I'm glad we have the staff we do to be able to help assist.

00;16;47;25 - 00;17;13;00

Melina

Something else that I thought was remarkable is a lot of the youth who have graduated from school and participated in Modify have gone into helping professions so, you know, social workers or have said, I want to do something like a modify worker so that I can help people who have helped me, you know, like I've been helped. And I think that was really special.

00;17;13;10 - 00;17;31;00

Michelle

Oh, yeah. Yeah. They definitely it's like their way of giving back. You know, they come from that experience. So who better to assist than somebody that's been in that experience? So yeah, we have a few now that I think are going to be strong advocates for the foster care system, and I applaud them on that and give them every opportunity they can.

00;17;31;00 - 00;17;45;28

Michelle

Just do it. Now, youth we serve and work with is just amazing. They, they all come in just different backgrounds. That makes it even more beautiful. But again, just seeing them grow is awesome.

00;17;46;20 - 00;17;53;00

Courtney

Are there any services or agencies that you refer to when you get youth who are in certain regions?

00;17;53;08 - 00;18;11;22

Michelle

The biggest one here recently is the Teal Project with the HHR, which is typically for those youth that either they just want to work, which is fine, or if they want to do a training program, which is a little bit of a quicker process to a trade, they get out in the field and work quicker. So that's probably our biggest one here recently.

00;18;11;23 - 00;18;40;14

Michelle

Division of Rehabilitation Services in West Virginia is another huge one that many people don't realize. You know, a lot of our youth have IEPs, so they're usually eligible to receive the services or if they're interested for transition. And they are the ones that we usually try to refer to as far as assessments, you know, seeing what type of education background with this youth be successful in and what are their interests and where can they be successful based off what the youth is supplying to the IRS workers.

00;18;41;03 - 00;19;11;25

Michelle

So again, really helping them guide them through the unknown, really, because some of them just never had the time or have never explored like what I want to do when I turned 18, besides, you know, besides knowing I'm leaving foster care. So those are two of the big ones. Again, workforce West Virginia is another one that we refer to as a youth is wanting to do some sort of training program and then anything local with each region, you know, each region worker has their own specifics as far as what specific services might be in that region.

00;19;11;25 - 00;19;32;27

Michelle

So usually just depends on on what they're looking for. But I know housing's usually the biggest one little program or some of them have like the HUD programs that they can refer to. But unfortunately those are waitlisted too. So but I'm glad that the education about the job programs that the HHR is getting out there. So just letting them know that they have those options.

00;19;34;17 - 00;19;43;25

Courtney

Going back to you, saying that a lot of your youth did receive IEPs in school, what types of students with disabilities have you helped to go on to college?

00;19;44;01 - 00;20;16;02

Michelle

ADHD Autism is another big one. We're seeing that here more and more. So we have schools and Marshall has an autistic center, I think related around that. And Shepherd University up in the Eastern Panhandle actually just received one, too. So it's and those are some big ones. And then, like I said, ADHD, A.D.D., anxiety, depression. So those are those are key, especially when we know those youth coming in, if they have those diagnoses already, just letting them know of any mental health services on campus is crucial, too, because we all know that first year it's scary.

00;20;16;17 - 00;20;39;06

Michelle

So letting them know that they have safe options on campus, as well as working with the youth, the social media and text, you know, letting them know helplines. They have text help lines and stuff like that now too. So again, it's really part of that. This is the information you need once you if you're going to school, here's the services on your campus, make sure you utilize them, they're free.

00;20;39;15 - 00;21;00;29

Michelle

And just letting them know that and reminding them, you know, if you're running low on food, we have food banks in the area. Let's help find you some of that, too. So just gets down to specifics when it becomes each youth specific. But mental health is a bit a big one actually. So really making sure that they know they have options on campus and knowing how to get there, too.

00;21;02;20 - 00;21;21;12

Melina

One thing that I was curious about is you said that Modify can help with financial assistance for college up to $5,000 a year. Many colleges cost more than that. So what are ways that the students can get help with the rest of the expenses?

00;21;21;29 - 00;21;51;11

Michelle

With our funding, with all the other scholarships and grants they receive? Our funding can't push the youth over that cost of attendance. So usually we say up to $5,000. Typically the youth receive that unless they're receiving a lot of other grants and scholarships that get them close to that cost of attendance. And if that's the case, then we're usually emergency expenses, small check each month just to live off of or or save for the next semester to see what that's going to bring since each semester so different.

00;21;52;09 - 00;22;20;01

Michelle

But also there is foster care tuition waiver. So that's a little bit different. Everybody seems to think that that's part of our program. But it's it's actually just for the state of West Virginia, for youth that have completed their high school education while in the care of DHHS or were in the care for at least one year prior and have applied to go to college within two years of graduation, those youth can be screened at the financial aid office through their school.

00;22;20;01 - 00;22;39;09

Michelle

For those waivers, it does have to be a West Virginia public college or university to be able to get that applied. It's usually with a custody verification letter that we can supply to those youth, even if they're not in the program, to help them get screened through their school to see if they're eligible for that waiver. And so that's like another grant for them.

00;22;39;09 - 00;23;08;10

Michelle

Basically, our youth also are eligible for Max Pell Grant because they are independent status because they are in foster care after 13. So that's another big one. Again, especially for those youth that may have missed, you know, was adopted at 15. They're still eligible for that independent status. So again, we communicate that with them to make sure they fill out their fast four correctly and what's going to be expected for years to come, because the schools usually require verification every school year, depending on the school of that information.

00;23;08;10 - 00;23;14;28

Michelle

So just letting them know that this is going to be normal practice, but it's necessary to get those funds released.

00;23;15;28 - 00;23;18;18

Courtney

What keeps you motivated in in your work.

00;23;20;04 - 00;23;36;25

Michelle

Think it's just the use all the different youth that we get to experience. You know, I've still held on to some clients that I worked with that they're so close to graduating and I was just selfish and I refuse to hand over those cases. I want to see them to the end. You know, we a lot of sweat and tears went into this.

00;23;36;25 - 00;23;57;25

Michelle

So, yes, I'm going to see them to the end. So I think it's just this is just don't give up. They don't they've been through so much and they just shine and it's it's intoxicating, really. Like, so just seeing them, you know, being able to do what they do on a daily basis, you know, some of them have had people tell them, you can't do that.

00;23;58;15 - 00;24;18;20

Michelle

Well, I'm telling you what they're feeding off of that and they're doing it very nicely. So I think it's just the youth and the team I work with is amazing. We've got an exceptional crew. I can't thank them enough for everything that they do. They go above and beyond for their youth. 9 to 5 is not their hours and they're just there.

00;24;18;20 - 00;24;38;24

Michelle

So I thank them for that too. A lot of them have great relationships with their youth, and they're hard to let go when they're done with our program, because you've had that relationship with them and now with now we got to let them fly. But knowing that they're they're done, they've done met their goals, you know, again, we maintain some contact with them.

00;24;38;24 - 00;25;01;05

Michelle

Some of them have families now. And, you know, curious to those ones that came into the program with children and still completed their education, because I cannot imagine how they did that with little to no supports. Even still, they still thrived and completed that education. So they've set an amazing foundation for their life and their child. Kudos to them.

00;25;02;12 - 00;25;08;01

Courtney

So if you had a youth who was going to go on to grad school, does your program continue or is it just for undergraduate.

00;25;08;15 - 00;25;34;25

Michelle

Now, just for undergraduate when the youth are starting to, you know, work it again? We're in that year of graduation. So right now, if we have youth graduating, we want to set them up. We're setting them up. We want to make sure they have career clothing that they if they have, need a computer before they leave, you know, if they're going to go to grad school, they have a new computer they can use, help them replenish school supplies, anything they need for their career.

00;25;34;25 - 00;25;56;15

Michelle

We try to help get that before they leave. Basically try to use up that funding that's left for them and get them a nice start into their career world. And I think that's huge because a lot of them didn't realize that, you know, we can continue, you know, at still education, but it's that's that's your career. Now we want to make sure that you're graduate and always make sure you have the supplies to go get your job.

00;25;56;29 - 00;26;19;18

Michelle

That's really nice, especially since, you know, we have nursing students and staff that are coming out making sure they go on scrubs and just everything. Tools for our our trade kids. It's such a wide range of stuff that we've seen requests for, but just making sure that they are still we still want them set up for success even when we're not there.

00;26;20;16 - 00;26;42;19

Melina

So I think it's important and I'm glad that you're here today because the reason why we did this podcast is because it's foster care awareness Month. And so I think a lot of focus goes on the youth that are in foster care, as they should, but no one knows a lot about the things that happen when the youth turns 18.

00;26;42;19 - 00;27;07;11

Melina

I don't think that that's something that people really think about often. If they're not in the social service world, if they're not working with that population. So I think it's important for us to highlight that there are programs and supports out there that can help youth who are turning 18 and therefore aging out of foster care, which most people don't even have never even heard that word.

00;27;07;25 - 00;27;21;22

Melina

And so I am appreciative that you're here today to to share that. And that's why we wanted to shed a light on this program to hopefully get more people to know about modify and make referrals.

00;27;22;15 - 00;27;43;14

Michelle

Absolutely. Yes. And like I said, our referrals link is on our Web page. All of our contact information goes on there, too. Feel free to reach out to me. Modify Program Manager. Happy to assist with any questions. Again, I can't stress enough, even if you're not sure the specific dates of when a legal guardianship or if you actually turn 18 and foster care.

00;27;43;14 - 00;28;02;27

Michelle

Please, please just send in the referral. Course we can tell you is now best we can tell you as we got some services for you so it doesn't hurt. Again, if you need help us putting that referral in, I'm happy to do that. I've done that many of times. I've said on the phone and just put the referral in for that person just to ensure that it does get incorrectly and that it's submitted.

00;28;03;14 - 00;28;28;12

Michelle

We also have a link on our page to help assist our youth for donations. So every holiday season we try to send gift cards or some sort of, you know, small gift for these youth because, again, they're the ones often forgotten. So we want to make sure they at least have something for us during the season, because a lot of them are either at home or by themselves or some stay on campus if they don't have anywhere to go.

00;28;28;12 - 00;28;41;01

Michelle

So just ensuring that they do have something from us, just letting them know that somebody does care and somebody is thinking about them so that donation link is actually on our main page as well, right around Modify said Sessions.

00;28;42;11 - 00;28;48;07

Melina

What are some things that you would want people to know about Modify that Modify can't help with?

00;28;48;26 - 00;29;11;00

Michelle

There's a confusion that we're a housing agency, that we're warehousing agency, which if we have youth that age out of foster care, we can offer some independent living assistance. So typically, if they're going to a college or university their first year in a dorm, with that, we can offer a small subsidy in addition to their educational expenses if they aged out of foster care.

00;29;11;14 - 00;29;35;14

Michelle

But that's different than, you know, obviously a housing agency. We don't have apartments just for our youth. I wish we did. You know, our youth have to search for apartments like anybody else. And they struggle with that because, one, sometimes they need a cosigner, which, you know, we cannot offer that. And to just finding housing, especially at one campus or near a school, you know, those fill up pretty quickly.

00;29;35;24 - 00;29;58;14

Michelle

So that's why it's really important about transition planning. It should happen at 16. We'd be happy if it happens at 17 to give them a year of planning. What do you want to do where you want to be? And just really listening to that youth. But I would say that's probably the biggest is there's the assumption that we can just put them in apartments, especially if they don't want to do school.

00;29;58;19 - 00;30;21;12

Michelle

I try to explain it as education is the foundation and then upon that, if you're in school and age out of foster care, then yes, there is an independent living benefits for you. But as the modify workers, we still want to ensure that they're ready for that responsibility. And because let's be real, you know, we can offer up to $900 for an apartment, but is that going to cover every expense that you have?

00;30;22;05 - 00;30;43;20

Michelle

Maybe not. I don't know. So, you know, really trying to budget can you pay bills if your rent is 900, what are you going to do about your utilities and everything? So it's more than just putting somebody in the apartment. It's okay. So then why? So, you know, we don't want to think the negative, but what if that youth does not do well in our program?

00;30;43;20 - 00;31;11;00

Michelle

We have to stop services that they just signed a year lease and they're no longer the program. After six months, they still have six months that they're obligated, that they no longer have that assistance. That's why we're really caution, especially those you just coming out of foster care, of putting them in apartments just because we want to make sure that they have their feet on the ground and they don't have all these obligations coming at them at once.

00;31;11;00 - 00;31;21;01

Michelle

College is enough of a transition to go into, let alone living on your own and being expected to know how to pay bills and all that stuff that comes with independent living.

00;31;21;23 - 00;31;24;20

Melina

What are the requirements to stay in the program?

00;31;24;20 - 00;31;48;23

Michelle

For our youth, they have to complete 80% of the classes that they sign up for each semester. They have to finish the semester at least with a 2.0 and maintain their eligibility for FAFSA. The FAFSA requirements are a little different than our requirements as far as GPA and completion rates. So that's a looks at the accumulative where we take each semester by itself.

00;31;48;23 - 00;32;12;25

Michelle

So that can become confusing for a youth at times that because if they lose the federal funding as fast for our funding has to stop because our funding can only be applied as the federal funding eligible basically. So if they lose their fast, unfortunately we have to stop when our youth aren't ready and we encourage them to go to school when they're not ready and they become unsuccessful.

00;32;12;26 - 00;32;34;29

Michelle

We're playing a part in ruining their fast eligibility in a lifetime. Somebody can do an appeal for fast for three times in our program. You can appeal twice and still be in the program. After that second one, we probably can assist. So within a year they could potentially done two appeals, so they would have one for the rest of their life.

00;32;34;29 - 00;32;57;21

Michelle

So that's huge. Pell is good until 26, so we don't want to ruin that within their first year. So again, that's why being ready for school is a huge piece. That's a huge step, not just for the setting itself, but the funding. You know, obviously it's best to be prepared to be able to go on to school. You know, we all hiccup insolvent.

00;32;59;07 - 00;33;02;24

Michelle

We definitely do want to play a part in ruining somebody federal aid.

00;33;03;11 - 00;33;33;02

Courtney

I think this is helpful to you because so many people, I think, have this misconception or this idea maybe that the student or the youth will will actually get more services if they are adopted, if they just age out of foster care without like a permanent family. And I like the fact that Modify works with those youth who were adopted after a certain age and those who aged out like working in foster care.

00;33;33;02 - 00;33;52;03

Courtney

In the past, families decided not to pursue adoption because their child was like 16 or 17 years old, and they wanted them to be able to access scholarships and grants that were only going to be open for kids who were aging out, foster care actively. And so that means those kids aged out with no permanent families. And so, I don't know.

00;33;52;03 - 00;33;54;04

Courtney

I appreciate the fact that Modify works with both.

00;33;55;05 - 00;34;17;24

Michelle

Yeah, yeah, we definitely do. The only difference is, is those that age obviously have that independent living subsidy available to them, whereas the legal guardianship and adoption youth don't. I will throw out another little caveat or whatever out there if if we have anybody that's contemplating adoption or legal guardianship of a youth that's 15, 16 or older, please invite a modify worker.

00;34;17;24 - 00;34;37;00

Michelle

We would love to come to your meetings and just let you know what the benefit differences are so the youth can have a say in that too, as far as what they would want to offer. And we're hearing, you know, they were given the wrong information, college would be free or that they were eligible even though they were adopted at 13.

00;34;37;00 - 00;34;55;20

Michelle

And it's like so unfortunately we have you know, they've been told that the last four years that college was going to be paid for. And then when they make a referral, that they're not even eligible for the program. So that's, I can imagine, a huge gut punch to anybody that was helping their child prepare for college, that thought that these services would be available to them.

00;34;56;16 - 00;35;17;07

Michelle

So again, any any conversations going on as far as in details, as far as, you know, starting that process of looking at adoption or legal guardianship? Modify is happy to be a representative in those meetings to give that information correctly because we obviously want the families to be prepared if they if they're not eligible for these services because they did want to do adoption.

00;35;17;07 - 00;35;41;19

Michelle

And that's fine. That's great. I'm glad they have that permanency, but I also want them to be able to have that planning that if modify services aren't there, they can still plan appropriately. That's probably one of the toughest parts of the job is being that person that told them that, no, you're not eligible as such a hard sentence to say to them, which is why we try to follow up with.

00;35;42;01 - 00;35;45;18

Michelle

But here's these other options that may be of use to the youth.

00;35;47;03 - 00;36;06;21

Courtney

Yeah. And even those who are adopted, they still have access to the adoption subsidy up until I don't know if it's 21 or 26, I always get that mixed up, but up until a certain age. And they also qualify for the adoption subsidy, which like right now I think is like $600 a month. So that just help supplement those living expenses do right.

00;36;07;17 - 00;36;21;19

Melina

So I guess my last question would be like thinking about your time and modify and where you are now. What would be like one moment that stood out to you the most, like, you know, your shining memory.

00;36;22;22 - 00;36;43;14

Michelle

Probably my first graduate from start to finish. You know, when I got her work for the whole four or five years and she finally graduated, that that was the best. Like I remember obviously I remember all my other graduates prior to that, but she was special because she was my first start to finish. She was my youth the whole time, unfortunately, got to see her stumble.

00;36;43;14 - 00;37;01;01

Michelle

She picked yourself back up, she dusted off and she graduated and she's doing great now. She's a mother. She's got a job. You know, she's she's living her life. So that was she's one of the ones I still keep in contact with because you just you have these connections and either I don't like it or they don't like it, and that's fine.

00;37;01;01 - 00;37;07;27

Michelle

But I think that would probably be when I finally had my first graduate because it's such a huge no no.

00;37;08;21 - 00;37;13;07

Courtney

Is there anything that you would like to add that you just want the listeners to know about your program?

00;37;14;15 - 00;37;38;20

Michelle

Check out our website again. Please reach out to me if you guys have questions interested in presentations, we are happy to help do presentations for your workers, staff, foster homes. You know, we are on pride panels throughout the state to help try to disperse this information to foster homes and potential legal guardian and adoptive homes. Just again, keep that information correct up to date.

00;37;38;23 - 00;37;57;12

Michelle

All of our information on our website is about as up to date as it's going to be. So please, if you have any questions, please reach out. And again, if you want to donate, our donation link is on there for our youth. And just just know that West Virginia foster youth aging out and meeting goals that are in our program or not, they're all amazing and they're all going to do great.

00;37;57;12 - 00;38;06;08

Michelle

They just need to know their options and that they need to know the facts.

00;38;06;08 - 00;38;21;27

Melina

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