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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Donna Marie Barrett

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Walden University
2017

Abstract

Exploring Social Support Networks of African American Emancipated Foster Care Women

by

Donna Marie Barrett

MBA, University of Phoenix, 2003

BA, Barry University, 1998

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Human Services

Walden University

February 2017

Abstract

Many youth exit the United States foster care system each year and face challenges related to housing, employment, health care, and education. After emancipation, foster youth can experience family instability, educational disruption, incarceration, unemployment, unstable housing, and emotional problems at a much higher rate than youth in the general population. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the experiences of African American foster women and the social support they received in finding housing upon exiting foster care system. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory provided a conceptual framework of social interrelation for the study. Data were collected from a purposeful sample of 4 African American former foster care women, a foster parent, a social worker, and a director of a support service's programs through face-to-face interviews. Data were analyzed using a 5-step approach for coding and analysis. Key findings were that the mobilization of collaborative social network support from foster parents, social workers, and government officials before foster youth enters their transitional phase were keys to successful outcomes. According to the foster care women and supporting adults' reports, more collaboration among agencies may assist youth with transitioning to independent living. Additionally, one-on-one mentorship program could address housing, education, employment, and health plans prior to emancipation. This study contributes to social change by providing information to those who provide services to foster care youth and may lead to enhanced programs and services encouraging youth to pursue their goals, and promote economic self-sufficiency.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband Philip, our daughters, Kameisha, Nekeisha, and Chante, our grandchildren; Devon, Madison and Laila and our sons-in-law Delbon and Malick for their undying love, support, and encouragement throughout this doctoral journey. Thank you so much for your understanding and for cheering me on every step of the way. I pray that we will continue to grow in the grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. A special feeling of gratitude is expressed to my late mother and father; Florence and Wesley Black for their affection, love, and encouragement throughout the formative years of my life. To my siblings and friends, thank you for being a tower of strength and for your special prayer every day.

I want to thank those whom I have lost on this journey; my sister Jean and my brothers George and Trevor, they inspired me to believe in myself. I also dedicate this dissertation to my fellow doctoral colleagues, Maryse Desir and Dr. Elaine Barclay for their encouragement to stay focused on my goals. Indeed, I give special thanks to the participants of this study for their genuine desire to share their experiences and provide substantial information to improve outcomes for youth leaving the foster care system.

I completed this doctoral journey with a steadfast commitment that "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13, New Kings James Version).

Acknowledgments

I give all praise and glory to God for being my Rock and Shield throughout my life. I could not have accomplished so much without His constant love, care, and guidance. I express my sincere appreciation and gratitude to my chair, Dr. Barbara Benoliel for her support, encouragement, motivation, and guidance. I truly appreciate the positive impact she has made on the dissertation process and the commitment and dedication to attend to every detail of the process. Special thanks to my committee member; Dr. Jan Ivery for her insightful suggestions and feedback and to my methodologist, Dr. Lillian Chenoweth for ensuring the research question, problem statement and methodology aligned. Also, a special thanks to Dr. Desmond Mattocks for his prompt and insightful feedback.

In addition, I sincerely appreciate Dr. Juanita White's editorial expertise. At the time when I needed an expert on Walden University style and form, Dr. White stepped in and became a valuable force. Her guidance and excellent suggestions helped make my dissertation a great product. A special thanks to Dr. William Barkley for his clear and concise explanation on coding and emerging themes at my fourth residency. This exercise provided clarity on coding and helped tremendously with the completion of Chapter 4. Thank you to the entire faculty and administration staff at Walden University. Walden is the best online university in the world with its incredible resource and state-of-the-art platform. Indeed, this journey has been an incredible experience. It has taught me that I can accomplish anything I set my mind on as long as I have the will, determination, commitment and tenacity to do so.

I am also thankful to my family for their support and love throughout this doctoral journey. To my husband, Philip, thank you for understanding that I needed time to complete my school work. To my daughters; Kameisha, Nekeisha, and Chante, thank you for believing in me, for cheering me on and reminding me that “If I believe, I will achieve.” A special thanks to my church family and all my friends for your constant prayers, acts of kindness and encouragements. A special thanks to all participants for sharing their experiences and for providing information that can be used to promote social connections for a successful future for all youth exiting foster care.

My mother taught me to pray each morning before I begin any work. Although she is no longer here, the lessons she taught me has captivated my heart and mind. Each morning before I begin my school work, I prayed and asked God for wisdom and understanding to complete my work. I believed He heard my prayers and provided the words to write every section of this dissertation. Praise God from Whom all blessings flow!

"Therefore, I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them." Mark 11:24

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Chapter 1

Introduction to the Study

There are over 400,000 children living in foster care in United States (McGill, 2016). According to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting Systems, in 2014, there was an increase in the number of children and youth at 415,129 living without permanent families as compared to fiscal year 2013 with 400,989 (AFCARS, 2015). This number represented placements due to alleged child abuse, neglect, loss of a parent, physical or sexual abuse, parent/caregiver substance abuse, or behavioral problems (AFCARS, 2015). As a result of being removed from their home and living in a variety of placement settings, foster youth often experience high levels of emotional and psychological problems as they struggle to cope with the unresolved trauma of loss, abuse, or neglect from family members (Greeson, 2013). Salazar, Keller, and Courtney (2011) posited that removal from the home, numerous living arrangements, and frayed relationships make it difficult to build reservoirs of social support that might help youth cope with life's challenges. Consequently, foster youth lose support in family or program assistance to help with housing, health care, job placement, or higher education (Jones, 2013). The loss of support places foster youth at a higher risk of becoming homeless, incarcerated, unemployed, and welfare dependent. According to data on racialized groups, child welfare workers disproportionately place African American children into foster care, and the children experience negative outcomes at much higher rates when

compared to their European American counterparts (Chaney & Spell, 2015; Knott & Giwa, 2012).

Many African American foster care women are unable to secure affordable housing (Chaney & Spell, 2015), I examined how social support networks can help foster care youth to receive access to housing after they have aged out of the foster care system. A social support network is part of the development and protection for youth at risk of homelessness (Jones, 2014). Hobfoll (1988) defined social support as "those social interactions or relationships that provide individuals with actual assistance or that embed individuals within a social system believed to provide love, care, or sense of attachment to a valued social group or dyad" (p. 121). These support networks provide a sense of belonging, which is a facet of maintaining interpersonal relationships and supporting the health and well-being of African American foster care youth (Chaney & Spell, 2015).

Securing a place to live is a key element in transitioning into adulthood (Jones, 2014). For African American foster care women to avoid homelessness, they need social support networks before and after emancipation (Chaney & Spell, 2015). Reducing negative outcomes for foster care youth can help improve their overall well-being; provide stability; and bring about a change in reduction of cost to local, state, and federal governments. These components can be the foundation on which to build a stable relationship that will help African American women cope with the transition to adulthood.

The Children's Bureau designed foster care to be a short-term solution until a permanent home became available (Monahan, Smith, & Greene, 2013). Children placed into foster care can experience physical or sexual abuse, child neglect, or parent/caregiver

substance abuse (Jones, 2014; Tyler & Melander, 2010). The first choice of temporary shelter is family members, such as aunts, uncles, or grandparents, known as kinship care (Monahan et al., 2013). If no family member is available or willing, the child welfare worker places the child in a foster home (Jones, 2014). One of the goals of foster care is to ensure that children in care grow physically, emotionally, and socially in a safe environment, (Jones, 2014). However, children in care often experience multiple placements, creating disrupted relationships and adding to a higher risk of negative outcomes (Jones, 2014; Salazar et al., 2011). Foster children have histories of maltreatment including 60% suffering from neglect, 20% suffering from physical abuse, and 10% suffering from sexual abuse (U.S. Census, 2012). Removal from the home, numerous living arrangements, and frayed relationships make it difficult to build social supports to help youth cope with life's challenges after they aged out of foster care (Salazar et al., 2011). Courtney (2010) found that a high number of foster care alumni obtain a General Educational Development (GED) rather than a high school diploma similar to their peers. Many of them have a low college completion rates, do not have health insurance, live below the poverty line, and experience homelessness after they leave foster care (Courtney, 2010). On the other hand, foster care children with stable placement histories transition into independent living with concrete resources, supportive families, and the motivation to pursue higher education (Jones, 2013).

Background

Previous researchers have found social support to be associated with positive outcomes for vulnerable populations during their transition to adulthood (Salazar et al., 2011). Jones (2014) found that establishing a positive, consistent relationship with at least

one adult assisted youth in making a successful transition from foster care to adulthood. The child welfare system provides housing; financial assistance; and a range of health, education, and other services while children are in care (Collin & Ward, 2011). However, these services typically end when foster youth reach the age of emancipation (Collin & Ward, 2011). The abrupt ending places the responsibility for providing for life needs on foster care youths, and this results in higher risks of them becoming homeless (Brown & Wilderson, 2010; Collins & Ward, 2011; Dworksky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013; Jones, 2014).

The U.S. foster care system disproportionately places African American children into their system of care (Knott & Giwa, 2012). African American children are more likely than European American children to remain in placement for extended periods (Ezeala-Harrion, 2010; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The longer time in care, along with multiple placements, creates emotional, behavioral, and developmental problems (Cross, Koh, Rolock, & Eblen-Manning, 2013). In 2014, African American children reflected 15% of the child population, yet they represented 24 % of the children who entered foster care (AFCARS, 2015; U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). In addition to placement disparities, African American families experience domestic violence at higher rates than European American families and have less access to social support network connections (Ezeala-Harrion, 2010).

Problem Statement

African American foster care youth transitioning to independent living face many challenges (Chaney & Spell, 2015; Knott & Giwa, 2012). They encounter difficulties in securing employment, finding housing, knowing the right services and programs to

access, and staying out of trouble (Chaney & Spell, 2015; Knott & Giwa 2012). They may find it problematic to collaborate with social support stakeholders, such as social workers, caseworkers, health care professionals, and educators, as well as partnering with agencies such as nonprofit advocacy groups and social change organizations (SCOs; Jones, 2014). Previous researchers have documented disrupted relationship with family and others in their social network after youth leave foster care (Jones, 2014). These frayed relationships place youth at risk in their attempt to adjust to life after foster care and make it difficult for them to access social support services on their own. According to Elder (1980), the movement from dependent role to more independent role is stressful for most youth. Youth with social support network experience positive adjustment and personal development at a much higher rate than youth without such networks (Jones, 2014).

Gap in Knowledge

Researchers have revealed that, despite improvements, social networks lack housing support services for African American foster care youth after they aged out of the system (Curry & Abrams, 2015b; Jones, 2014; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2013). Having reviewed the literature on social support networks for emancipated youth, I was unable to find qualitative case studies on the lived experiences of African American foster care women's access to social support services, specifically those related to finding stable housing. I focused on their lived experiences with the intent to gather information on what assisted or hindered efforts to secure stable housing, along with how foster care officials may improve the overall wellbeing of emancipated African American women.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of African American foster care women in seeking social support networks after they aged out of foster care. The insights resulting from this study may help future African American foster care women aging out of the system navigate the challenges they experience with housing. The formal systems of child welfare (foster parents, child welfare workers, and other foster care professionals) can provide the supportive functions to foster youth and be a resource after former relationships have ended (Collins & Ward, 2011). Additionally, insights from this study may inform foster care agencies in identifying targeted programs and services for African American women prior to leaving care. The information gained from this study could assist social workers and policy makers in producing effective methods of continuous supportive connections for foster care youth. These connections could prevent homelessness among African American emancipated women (Blakeslee, 2012). Additional resources may also help develop collaborative efforts between agencies to promote housing services and provide easier access to programs (Blakeslee, 2012; Collins & Ward, 2011).

Research Question

I examined the lived experiences of former African American foster care women who have sought social support help in finding housing and explore the following question:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of African American foster care women in seeking help for social support services after aging out of foster care?

Social Support Network

Dunst and Trivette (1988) defined social support as "the emotional, psychological, physical, informational, instrumental, and material assistance provided by others to either maintain well-being or promote adaptations to difficult life events" (p. 3). Having a good support network can produce positive outcomes for foster youth (Boldis, 2014). Boldis (2014) and Hannon, Wood, and Bazalgette (2010) stated that foster youth aging out at an older age may adjust to independent living easier. A transition made in small steps provides manageable stages for foster youth to develop necessary skills for adjustment (Boldis, 2014; Hannon et al., 2010). Receiving adequate preparation regarding education, work, and housing are essential components for the well-being of foster youth. Given the importance to the well-being of foster youth, Boldis (2014) noted that improving stronger social connections during and after foster care requires work.

The lack of social support network connections to help youth move from foster care to independent living can lead to failures in the transition process to independent (Jones, 2013). The number of youth in foster care continues to increase (Krebs & Pitcoff, 2012; Richards, 2014). In addition, as foster care youth age out of the foster care system, they find it difficult to cope with life and end up either in jail, homeless, or jobless (Richards, 2014). Despite the challenges, the youth can overcome many obstacles with the social support networks (Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013; Richards, 2014). Deprived of good experiences that a child has while living in an intact family, foster care youth do not have influences such as positive role models, a sense of hope, motivation to achieve, encouragement to do their best, and develop skills to self-advocate to achieve personal goals (Krebs & Pitcoff, 2012). They lose these connections while in foster care

(Krebs & Pitcoff, 2012). Social support networks can help foster youth overcome previous challenges and experiences and increase their chances of having fulfilling, independent lives (Jones, 2013). Empowering teens to take on more responsibility and using resources is an approach that does not require additional funding (Krebs & Pitcoff, 2012). Social support networks create opportunities for foster youth to reduce homelessness and increase their chances of successful independent living.

Krebs and Pitcoff (2012) posited that foster care youth have the potential and the will to become contributing members of society and effect positive social change. However, the lack of supportive network prevents them from advocating for themselves and taking on more responsibility for a successful, independent future (Krebs & Pitcoff, 2012). Until foster youth receive the support they need, most young people aging out of the foster care system will not be ready for college or prepare for successful careers (Jones 2013).

Nature of the Study

The study was a qualitative case study. A qualitative design is used to identify the perspective of research participants; provide in-depth responses; and evoke views, opinions, and feelings attached to their experiences, as well as provide a deeper understanding of the lived experiences (Mikėnė & Valavičienė, 2013). I posed open-ended questions during semi structured interviews with four former African American foster care women between the ages of 18-25. In addition, one foster care parent, one social worker, and one leader from a social services program participated in the study. Anderson and Holloway (2014) and Nurani (2010) found that open-ended questions are rich and explanatory in nature, provide participants with the opportunity to respond in

their own words, and evoke meaningful responses that are important to the participants. Baskarada (2014) asserted that a qualitative methodology provides a rich and complex understanding of a social context or phenomenon. Furthermore, semi structured interviews are more flexible, allow the interviewer to prompt for more information, and provide a better understanding of the phenomenon under study (Baskarada, 2014). I intended to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences that foster care women had with social support services to secure housing after leaving foster care. I recruited participants for the study by posting flyers in areas where they congregated, and I employed snowball sampling to recruit additional participants.

Definition of Terms

The definitions of terms listed below refer to their use in this study:

Aging out: Refers to foster care youth who turn 18, or some states 21, and leave foster care system to be on their own. The term aging out refers to the termination of jurisdiction over the youth (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012).

Cross-over youth: Refers to the population of young people who have contact with both the child welfare and the juvenile justice systems (Xie, Sen, & Foster, 2014).

Emancipated youth: A young adult who aged out of the foster care system at the age of 18 or in some states at the age of 21 (Richards, 2014).

Foster child: A regular child who, through no fault of his or her own, was removed from his or her home due to abuse or neglect (Greeson, 2013).

Homeless foster youth: Foster care youth who have aged out of the system and live on the street or in a shelter (Boldis, 2014).

High workforce turnover: An annual turnover rate exceeding 25%. Caseworkers leave the profession because of low pay, unmet expectations, job conditions, and heavy caseloads (Jones, 2013).

Kinship care: Provided by relatives, particularly grandparents, who provide care for children as a mechanism to prevent them from entering the formal foster care system (Monahan et al., 2013).

Placement: The assignment of a child to a foster care parent/caregiver for proper nurturing of the child (Tyler & Melander, 2010).

Placement disruption: An unplanned change from one foster home to another (Tyler & Melander, 2010).

Social stigma: A negative response to individuals who have characteristics that are different from the social norms (Xie et al., 2014)

Social support network: A system that works in concert with three domains (the biological family, foster care, and peer networks) to improve the well-being of foster care youth (Jones, 2014).

Stable housing: Promotes stability and independence and creates a positive environment for the well-being and health of the foster care youth (Collins &Ward, 2011).

Assumptions

In this study, I made several assumptions. The first assumption was that participants represented authentic experiences of African American women in the foster care system who shared how social services supported or hindered their efforts to secure stable housing after aging out of foster care. The second assumption was that participants

provided a true story of their homeless experiences after they exited foster care. The third assumption was that the use of ecological and social stress framework provided me with an understanding of the relationship between the individual and their environment. According to Coman and Devaney (2011), the ecological and social stress framework, illustrates the relational dynamics of the interrelationship of the individual's environment.

Limitations

In this study, I focused on the housing experiences of foster care African American women. I restricted the participants to focusing only on African American foster care women in the South Florida area. Further, the small sample size of four African American women was not a true representation of all African American foster care women who experienced challenges with finding stable housing after they aged out of foster care. The case study methodology allowed me to use sources and techniques from several sources to collect data; however, the participants, when recalling such events, may forget details about their experiences (Yin, 2009).

Delimitations

I explored the experiences of African American foster care women and their access to social support services relating to housing after they aged out of foster care. Because I did not attempt to address all facets of support services, I limited the issues to focus on housing for African American women, which was not generalizable to all foster care youth who aged out of foster care. In addition, the sample size was not representative of all African American foster care women who had challenges in securing stable housing.

Scope

The racial disproportionality of African American foster youth and the disparate access to social support services after they aged out of foster care was the focus of this study. There are negative outcomes for emancipated foster care African American youth as they seek to secure housing (Dworsky et al., 2013). The purpose of the study was to understand the lived experiences of former African American foster care women as perceived by them. Using a qualitative case study, I examined the responses of four African American women who shared the experiences they had with social support services in securing stable housing. In addition, a foster parent, a social worker, and the director of the Fostering Panther Pride program provided information on their role in assisting foster youth with social support services. The rationale for the study was to give a voice to African American foster care women who became homeless after they aged out of foster care with the intent of providing information to policy makers and professionals who work with foster care youth.

Conceptual Framework

Researchers use conceptual frameworks to outline a course of action; guide data collection; select appropriate research questions; and provide a reference point for the discussion of the literature, methodology, and results (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Factors concerning the child, his or her environment, and the interaction with one another influences his or her outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Further, Cronen and Pearce (1985) and Street and Davis (2002) shed light on the interrelationship between person and environment. These issues brought greater clarity to areas targeted for change, the

best service to facilitate that change, and what needs exist to support the desired changes (Cowan & Devaney, 2011).

The ecological perspective enables an individual to focus on the child, different aspects of his or her environment, and on the mutual influences his or she exerts on one another (Cowan & Devaney, 2011). The support network involves biological parents, foster parents, social workers, school teachers, or other professionals who work with them (Jones, 2014). The ecological perspective, which reflects the interplay of multiple factors, supports these networks (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Because most children have negative experiences in their transition into foster care, this focus may improve their well being in the nuclear, extended, and foster family, as well as the foster agency, the school system, and the courts. Bronfenbrenner (1979) called these relationships the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Each one has its distinctive role in fulfilling the needs of children in care.

Within the context of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems provide multiple levels of influences on the developmental outcomes of children placed in foster care. Microsystems encompass the interpersonal relations experienced by the face-to-face interaction between the individual, family members, and service providers (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The mesosystem includes the foster child's involvement in interrelated settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner defined the mesosystem as, "the set of interrelationships between two or more settings in which the developing person becomes an active participant" (p. 209). The mesosystem includes the child's home, the foster care system, the school, the court, and other professionals with varying

degrees of power (Chaney & Spell, 2015). Exosystems include the impact of various settings the child is not yet involved in, but may still affect the child (ie,, the parent's workplace; Cowan & Devaney, 2011). The outermost structure of Bronfenbrenner's model, the macrosystem, involves the influence of cultural beliefs and norms that affect the child's development.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) proported the interplay between systems is a requisite for the successful development of the child. The collaboration provides resources that can strengthen foster parent's skills and directly or indirectly influence children and families over time (Abrego & Abgrego, 2010). These systems are critical components in understanding the impact that each has on the developing child. Focusing on these components brings clarity to areas targeted for modification, along with what services facilitate and support the desired changes (Cowan & Devaney, 2011). Other factors include the interrelations between the individual (child) and his or her surrounding environments (e.g., biological families, social support network; Cowan & Devaney, 2011). Each system plays a role in the development of the individual (Bronfrenbrenner, 1979).

The ecological framework enables an individual to focus on the interrelationships existing between the child, his or her environment, and the mutual influences he or she exerts on one another (Cowan & Devaney, 2011). Foster care children who experience stable well-functioning foster homes tend to develop social and emotional bonds (Jacobson et al., 2013). The Casey Foundation revealed that children living in healthy environments with social bonds experience physical and emotional stability (Hogberg, 2012). These experiences tend to build coping mechanisms, which serve foster youth

when they leave foster care. Conversely, foster children who experience unhealthy environments tend to have challenges coping with life after they leave foster care.

Lewis (2011) recommended that family therapists engage birth parents in the decision-making process. Involving birth parents would reduce post placement problems, strengthen family relationships, and expedite the movement of children from foster care to permanent homes (Lewis, 2011). Staines, Farmer, and Selwyn (2011) supported Lewis' (2011) engagement of birth parents. In addition, Staines et al. (2011) recommended a team parenting approach, which includes the foster caregiver, social workers, caseworkers, therapists, resource worker, education liaison officer, and professional from other agencies. The goal is to maintain a therapeutic milieu where the child can develop in a secure and stable environment.

Theoretical Framework

In addition to the ecological model, the social stress framework guided my study and provided a deeper understanding of the process linking numerous stressors experienced by African American foster care women who became homeless after they aged out of foster care. African American children entering foster care are at increased vulnerability by virtue of their pre-existing circumstances (Cowan & Devanney, 2011). In general, abuse, neglect, and abandonment are the most frequent reasons that children enter foster care (Thomas, 2012). Coupled with these experiences are stressors that the foster youth endures after they aged out of the system. Although a majority of people adapt to stress, those with foster care backgrounds experience negative outcomes more frequently when compared to the general population (Tyler & Melander, 2010). Stressors, according to Wheaton (1999), are "conditions of threats, demands, or structural

constraints that by their very occurrence or existence, call into question the operating integrity of the organism" (p. 177).

The daily struggles of finding food, securing a place to live, and accessing health care make the situation of homelessness another unique social problem (Cowan & Devaney, 2011). These challenges experienced by African American homeless women influence their propensity for negative outcomes, which include incarceration, substance abuse, delinquency, and physical and sexual victimization (Dworsky et al., 2013). The lack of a supportive social network creates another level of stress that increases risks for adverse consequences (Tyler & Melander, 2010).

Social stress framework is useful for understanding the potential synergies existing between familial, social, and physical environments. Dworsky et al. (2013) found that foster youth who became homeless after aging out of the foster care system appear to experience similar challenges as other homeless youth (Dworsky et al., 2013). Young people who ran away while in foster care and who had frequent placements have an increased risk of becoming homeless (Brown & Wilderson, 2010). Both are markers of instability. This instability prevents foster youths from developing ties to their caregivers or supportive relationships with other adults (Brown & Wilderson, 2010). It may also limit their ability to connect with community-based resources, including programs that provide assistance with housing (Brown & Wilderson, 2010).

According to Wheaton (1999), stressors are conditions of threats, demands, or structural constraints, which forces people into negative behaviors. Foster youths lack adaptive alternatives and find it difficult to cope with everyday challenges (Fratto, 2016). Additional stressors associated with their social situation compounds their adverse

circumstances (Cusick, Havlicek, & Courtney, 2012). Consistently, foster youths find themselves ill equipped for their emergence into society due to a lack of social bonds (Dworsky et al., 2013). Homelessness for the majority of foster youth occurs within the first year after being discharged (Brown & Wilderson, 2010; Cusick et al., 2012).

Significance of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to provide a clearer understanding of the experiences that African American foster care women have with social support services as they try to find stable housing. Researchers have highlighted several successful social support services, programs, and policies, including the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), Fostering Connection ACT (FCA), Foster Care Independent Act (FCIA, 1999), Promoting Safe and Stable Families Act (2001), Chafee Independent Living Program, and One-Stop Career Centers (Brown & Wilderson, 2010; Collins & Ward, 2011; Dworsky et al., 2013). However, the population targeted for my study continues to grapple with their lack of success throughout the transitioning process. The significance of my efforts was to provide data and information about African American foster care women to assist foster care decision makers in improving outcomes for this vulnerable group

Although scholars have focused on youth aging out of care and the increasingly negative experiences they encounter, further researchers should bring to light social support connections and the potential ways it can meet youth's needs for continuous support. Researchers continue to document negative outcomes for emancipated foster youth, specifically, homelessness. However, scholars have not examined the factors leading to homelessness. To date, I was unable to find studies on African American foster

care women's social support networks and the contribution these systems made toward securing stable housing.

Summary

In this chapter, I outlined the history of foster care and highlighted the contribution the Children's Bureau made in advancing the well-being of children. In the 16th century, children were living in almshouses with no parental guidance or support (Thomas, 2012). Today, all over the United States, foster parents/caregivers care for this population of children. Child welfare workers place children with a foster family to provide care and a safe home because of issues related to being abused, neglected, or maltreated (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012). However, many children experience multiple placements, which increases their risks for emotional, physical, behavioral, and development problems in later years (Collins & Ward, 2011; Cunningham & Diversi, 2012; Cusick et al., 2012; Dworksky et al., 2013). Social support network for foster youth requires additional attention. In this study, I examined the influence that social support networks have in preparing children transitioning out of the child welfare system.

Researchers have documented the disproportionate numbers of African American in the foster care system (Knott & Giwa, 2012). Although the purpose of foster care is to provide programs and services to all children in the United States of all races, since its inception, the system discriminates against children of color (Knott & Giwa, 2012). There is an inequitable provision of support services for African American families as compared to European American families (Knott & Giwa 2012). As a result, African Americans remain in the system longer, receive multiple placements while in care, have less frequent reunification with family members, and receive fewer supportive services

(Chaney & Spell, 2015). Knott and Giwa (2012) called attention to these key decision points in the foster care system. Given the right support, resources, encouragement, and programs teaching and preparing them for life beyond the system, foster care youth can become contributing members of society (Krebs & Pitcoff, 2012).

Chapter 2 presents the review of the literature on various topics related to AA foster care women and their access to social support services. Also, in Chapter 2 is a description of the frameworks; ecological and social stress as they contribute to a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Within the context of my study, I explored how social support networks contribute to outcomes related to finding housing for African American foster care women. Emancipated foster care youth face multiple challenges after they leave the child welfare system (Boldis, 2014; Dworksky et al., 2013; Jones, 2013; Turpel & Lafond, 2014). Generally, foster care support includes providing housing; financial assistance; and a range of health, education, and other services while children are in care (Collin & Ward, 2011). However, these services typically end when foster youth reach the age of emancipation. The abrupt ending places the responsibility for providing life needs on the foster care youth, resulting in a higher risk of them becoming homeless (Collins & Ward, 2011; Dworksky et al., 2013; Jones, 2014). Furthermore, the disruption of family and community ties, along with the frayed relationships with social workers, makes the transition to adult living more difficult for foster care youth (Jones, 2013).

Search Strategy and Sources

To obtain articles for the literature review, I used both Walden and Nova South Eastern University libraries to locate articles pertaining to the study of foster care youth. In conducting scholarly research, I searched for articles by topics such as foster youth support network, social support network, African American foster care youth, and the role of foster care parents. My search included databases and search engine such as ProQuest, PsycINFO, PsyARTICLES, PsycTESTS, SocINDEX, and Google Scholar. I selected the most relevant peer-reviewed articles published in the last 5 years. I evaluated each article to ensure credibility, reliability, and validity. Search terms included *African*

American foster care women, social support network, stable housing, emancipated youth, multiple placements, kinship care, role of foster parents, workforce turnover, and *foster care programs.*

Literature Review Related to Key Variables

African American Women and the U.S. Prison System

The Anti-Drug Abuse Acts (1986, 1988) and the War on Drugs, declared by President Nixon in 1972 and further expanded by President Reagan in 1982, enforced stricter drug laws (Bush-Baskette, 2000). These stricter drug laws led to an increase in the incarceration of African American women. Between 1986 and 1991, incarceration of African American women for drug-related crimes grew exponentially from 282 % to 828% (Bush-Baskette, 2000). By the early 21st century, roughly one in every 300 Black women were incarcerated in the United States, as opposed to one in every 704 Latinas and one in 1,099 White females (Gross, 2015). The War on Drugs criminalized a disproportionate number of African American women.

Child welfare service workers placed an increasing number of children of incarcerated mothers into foster care or left them to the care of relatives (Gross, 2015). The majority of these African American mothers were the primary caregivers for their children (Gross, 2015). The increased incarceration of these women resulted in emotional, psychological, financial, and social burdens for both children and their caregivers (Cox, 2012). Children with parents in prison are more likely to end up in foster care (Gross, 2015). The direct impact of incarceration of African American women caused strain on familial relationship (Cox, 2012). The frayed relationship made it

difficult for foster care youth to restore supportive connections with family members after leaving foster care (Cox, 2012).

Researchers revealed that female African American youth are more likely to remain in foster care longer than Caucasians, Hispanics, and other racial/ethnic groups (Chaney & Spell, 2015). In comparison to their counterparts, African American youth are also more likely to rely on kinship care for support, experience multiple placements, and raise children as a single parent (Chaney, 2011; Cross et al., 2013; Hedin, 2014; Landale, Schoen, & Daniels, 2010). In spite of the increased likelihood to experience a host of negative outcomes, African American women have the potential to become contributing members of society (Chaney & Spell, 2015).

Chaney and Spell (2015) examined the adjustment to independent living for six African American women after exiting foster care. Chaney and Spell revealed that a support network in the form of mentors (principals, teachers, pastors, counselors, and social workers who provided healthy influences) was crucial to the youth's well-being. The African American women in the study noted that although various circumstances placed them in foster care, supportive connections served as bridges to a successful life after foster care (Jones, 2014). Given the potential, a qualitative exploration of the experiences of these women may inform foster care professionals and policy makers understanding of how social services are essential in the successful transition to independent living.

The Lack of Social Support Network

The lack of social support networks to help African American foster care females prepare for life's challenges contributes to their having undesirable encounters. Without

such supports, foster youth face challenges in navigating adult life (Jones, 2013). Involvement with the justice system makes these challenges even more difficult. Xie et al. (2014) estimated that approximately a third of youth in the juvenile justice system are also involved in the foster care system and are referred to as crossover youth. Crossover youth experience concurrent entanglements with child welfare and juvenile justice agencies (Herz, Ryan, & Bilchik, 2010). Xie et al. (2014) noted that these youth's susceptibility to homelessness and housing instability after they leave care make it difficult for them to transition to independent living and to provide themselves hope for a better future. To improve outcomes, Davis, Olson, Xie, Sen, and Foster (2014) suggested early interventions and academic and vocational training as essential components for successful transitions into adulthood.

This population of young people, from an ecological perspective, faces challenges after leaving foster care. Adequately addressing their housing needs entail collaborative efforts from all stakeholders (Xie et al., 2014). In order to thrive, young people need stability in their lives with supportive connections from foster parents/caregivers and the foster care system (Davis et al., 2014). Collaborative efforts not only provide stable housing, but also help build healthy relationships and improve quality behavioral health care system to support their positive development (Jones, 2013). Youth lacking these and other protective factors risk crossing over from the child welfare system to the juvenile justice system (Boldis, 2014; Xie et al., 2014). As these youths try to overcome the many negative effects of childhood maltreatment, supportive connections offer the continuum of services needed to bolster the challenges they experience (Xie et al., 2014).

Additionally, networks help strengthen legislative and executive mandates to support emancipated foster youth (Xie et al., 2014).

Background

Foster care services have progressed since the 1500s (Charlene, 2010). Programs began to emerge in 1853 as an organized system when Brace, a minister, sought to provide homes for needy children who were sleeping on the streets (Charlene, 2010). Brace encouraged families to adopt children and to provide for their physical and emotional needs. The minister was influential in helping thousands of children find stable homes where they learned basic life skills in a family atmosphere (Charlene, 2010). The United States government became involved and initiated funding for programs to provide housing and standards for licensing the homes (Charlene, 2010).

In the latter part of the 1800s, formal structures in social welfare emerged that were focused on caring for dependent children (Cuff & Payne, 1979; Curry, Jiobu, & Schwirian, 1999; Endicott, 1992; Schene, 1998). For 7 years, individuals and organizations campaigned to mobilize public opinion to support needy children (Thomas, 2012). Between 1906 and 1912, the National Child Labor Committee worked to introduce 11 bills in Congress (Oettinger, 1960). Although the bills failed to pass, each one brought to light the need for a new federal agency. Midway through the campaign, President Roosevelt called the first White House Conference on Children (Oettinger, 1960). This meeting brought together social workers, educators, juvenile court judges, labor leaders, and child welfare advocates who endorsed the idea of a Federal Children's Bureau (Oettinger, 1960).

On February 15, 1909, President Roosevelt urged Congress to support the pending bills to establish a Federal Children's Bureau. The intent was to review information from the Census Bureau and other existing federal agencies to ensure that they were working in concert to provide accurate, dependable information for abused children (Thomas, 2012). The dissemination of information would help each community to develop and implement programs and services for children in need. President Roosevelt stated, "There are few things more vital to the welfare of the nation than accurate and dependable knowledge of the best methods of dealing with children, especially with those who are in one way or another handicapped by misfortune" (Oettinger, 1960, p. 2). The knowledge gained would help make progress for the youngest and most vulnerable citizens. Without this knowledge, each community would not have the insight to work out its problems, learn, or profit from the success or failure of other communities engaged in the same endeavors (Oettinger, 1960).

In 1912, Congress created the Children's Bureau and charged it with investigating and reporting all matters pertaining to the welfare of children (Thomas, 2012). President Taft signed the bill on April 9, 1912, and appropriating $25,640 was advanced to the wellbeing of children (Oettinger, 1960). During this time, legislators made efforts to reduce child abuse and neglect. Governmental agencies enacted laws to protect, monitor, and supervise foster parents (Charlene, 2010; Thomas, 2012). In addition, they appropriated funds to help states improve their living conditions (Charlene, 2010; Thomas, 2012). These laws were overdue as previous efforts focused on enacting laws to protect animals (Petrow, 2012). The national attention focused on ensuring that children

were safe and healthy and living with healthy families in prosperous communities to build protective factors around children.

Overview of The Children's Bureau

Since its inception, the Children's Bureau has contributed to the child welfare workforce (Thomas, 2012). One of its primary goals is to retain a competent workforce to respond to children and families in need (Thomas, 2012). The mission of the Children's Bureau founded in 1912 was to investigate and report matters regarding the welfare of children (Act Establishing the Children's Bureau, 1912, Section 2). As a result, the Children's Bureau provided research and investigations in infant and maternal mortality (Thomas, 2012). The Children's Bureau built a body of evidence on the scope of child welfare issues with the help of a number of advisory groups and state and local level stakeholders (Cheung & Taylor, 2011). They offered recommendations and developed uniform standards for the implementation of intake policies for child caring facilities (Thomas, 2012). More attention was placed on administering child protection responsibilities, which led to increased organization and delivery of federal resources to support child welfare.

Lathrop, Abbott, and Lenroot provided guidance and financial support on the education of childcare professionals (Thomas, 2012). The Children's Bureau, under the auspices of their advisory board, voted to invest $1.5 million to train workers with the primary responsibility of overseeing foster children and families (Thomas, 2012). From this initiative, 42 states funded programs to train child welfare workers, encouraged staff to study social work, and established personnel standards to recruit the best childcare workers (Bradbury, 1956; Class, 1955; Oettinger, 1960).

During the 1940s-wartime era, fathers went off to war, many of them never to return to their family, causing the need for child welfare services to grow (Thomas, 2012). Mothers had the responsibility of caring for their children and working outside the home. Because children were unattended for longer periods, delinquency rates began to increase, along with concerns regarding neglect (Thomas, 2012). These issues created a need for additional foster care services; however, there was a shortage of social workers as female workers took on other jobs to support the war (Thomas, 2012). The Children's Bureau began to counsel states on how to deal with staff shortages and turnover issues by increasing training and support initiatives (Bradbury, 1956; Oettinger, 1960).

During this time, the Children's Bureau focused on child protection and child welfare topics including the role of the workforce (Thomas, 2012). Bradbury (1956) concluded, "preventive and constructive social work with families and other forms of aid would reduce the number of children removed from their homes for causes associated with poverty'' (p. 31). Thomas (2012) findings brought to light, the unnecessary removal of children from their homes. The investigators found this was due in part to inadequate staffing leading to the inability to conduct thorough preliminary investigations (Thomas, 2012). Subsequently, the Children's Bureau made it a priority to understand how workers made placement decisions (Thomas, 2012).

The Children's Bureau continued to emphasize the importance of a skilled workforce (Thomas, 2012). They focused on educating professionals in all disciplines to understand the concepts of holistic child development and to improve working relationships with federal, state, and local governments. The collaborative effort led to improved training and development of childcare professionals in specialty areas such as

planning, care, research, and fieldwork (Thomas, 2012). The Kennedy Administration authorized aid to states for foster care and approved maintenance payments with a broader purpose to protect and care for all children (Thomas, 2012).

The Assistance and Child Welfare Act (1980) brought changes to the statutory authority for federal involvement in child welfare systems (Thomas, 2012). The act created a new open-ended entitlement program for adoption assistance of certain children and revised the entitlement to foster care maintenance payments under a new Title IV-E of the Social Security administered directly by the Children's Bureau (Thomas, 2012).

Overview of Concept of Social Support Networks

In the last decade, a consensus on focusing on issues related to outcomes for fostered youth emerged (Blakeslee, 2012; Richards, 2014). One area of interest is social support networks, which are entities operating in concert to provide services and support to disadvantaged individuals (Richards, 2014). Social support networks contribute to positive adjustments, enhance personal development, and provide a buffer against the effects of stress (Blakeslee, 2012). According to Blakeslee (2012), the concept of social support network, "is an interactive process that aims to improve an individual's feelings of coping, competence and belonging" (p. 4). These interactive components are essential elements, providing individuals with a sense of attachment, to help them confront life's challenges. Bowlby (1969) suggested that social support, in the form of attachment, develops during early childhood stages. Children learn to be self-reliant, function as supports for others, build lasting relationships, and overcome frustrations during this process of maturation (Bowlby, 1969). Keefer, Landau, and Sullivan (2014) posited that the relationship of parents, caregivers, siblings, friends, and peers serve as attachment

figures for survival and development. Without these attachment figures, the individual lacks the security and support to cope with numerous challenges (Keefer et al., 2014).

Seminal theorists from different academic orientations documented the importance of social support on individual's well-being (Caplan, 1979; Erikson, 1976; Weiss, 1974). Researchers determined that social support networks benefit both physical and mental health. Sandier (1980) and Dean and Lin (1977) documented social supports as mediating variables in a person's capacity to cope with stress, while also supporting the positive effects of networks and family ties if they exist. Dunst and Trivette (1988) and Murphy and Moriarty (1976) revealed that social supports provide emotional, psychological, physical, and informational assistance to maintain youth's well-being and adaptations to difficult life events. Social support networks influence positive outcomes for foster youth, as they increase their ability to cope with multiple risks (Blakeslee, 2012; Greeson, 2013; Jones 2014). People involved with social support networks experience positive events in their lives, have a much higher self-esteem, and take a more optimistic view of life (Greeson, 2013).

Although there is limited knowledge about social support networks for youth leaving foster care, multiple placements contributes to disrupted relationship after they age out of care (Blakeslee, 2012; Greeson, 2013; Jones, 2013). This instability disrupts the attachment needed for healthy transition into adulthood, undermines their well-being and feelings of self-worth, and hinders the development of support network connections after they leave the foster care system. Consistent, caring, supportive, and long lasting relationships achieve positive outcomes for foster care youth (Blakeslee, 2012; Greeson, 2013).

Past researchers have documented the benefits of social support networks during the transition to independent living. Parents, caregivers, social workers, peers, and other foster care professionals are sources for providing emotional and instrumental components to dealing with life's challenges (Blakeslee, 2012; Jones, 2013). Hong, Algood, Chiu, and Lee (2011) referred to these sources as an ecological system aiding in the interrelations between the individual and his/her environment. Stable and supportive relationships facilitated the transitioning of foster care youth through collaborative interactions (Blakeslee, 2012).

An ideal structure for social support networks ensures every foster youth throughout the country has equal access to the same supportive services (Blakeslee, 2012). Collaborative efforts from personal and service network members along with local child network agencies may help foster care youth receive all the necessary training, skills, and support to become successful members of society (Hedin, 2012). Clearly, these relationships deserve increased attention in order to enable foster care professionals and government officials to develop programs and enact laws reducing the negative outcomes for foster care youth.

The Role of Foster Parents

Foster parents play a pivotal role in the child welfare system. Many children enter foster care suffering from emotional, physical, and sexual abuse and neglect (Collins & Ward, 2011; Dworksky et al., 2013; Hong et al., 2011; Jones, 2014). A large portion of these children experience health and mental health challenges (Jones, 2014). Children with these risk factors require therapeutic living arrangements from foster care parents and intervention services from child welfare agencies (Cox, 2013). Cox (2013) noted

foster parents are critical to the successful delivery of adequate health care services to children in foster care. Typically, foster parents' motivations vary, for example, creating a new family, having a second family when biological children leave home, expanding the family unit, or fostering as an alternative means of additional income (Jones, 2014). Whatever the motivation, the foster parent's primary objective is providing a loving and stable home where the child can strive and grow.

Schofield, Beek and Ward (2012) found children receiving parental love and included as part of the family, do very well emotionally in later relationships. Consistently, Birneau (2014) and Hedin (2014) posited children value the opportunity to feel connected to a family where they feel they legitimately belong and form secure attachments. Furthermore, Bowlby's (1969) theoretical assumption revealed that infants show attachment behavior at an early age towards their caregiver. The relationship between a child and primary caregiver forms successful social and emotional development (Hedin, 2014). In the same light, Birneau (2014) found children develop cognitive and emotional stability based on a quality of early caregiver interaction. Those who experience a loving and supportive family network while in care are better able to cope with emotional problems in their adult life (Bimeau, 2014)

To be an effective foster parent, Barth (2011) identified three guiding principles for interaction with children in their care: nurturing and guiding the child's development, promoting reunification, and remaining flexible to permanency planning choices. Foster parents committed to these principles are better equipped to handle challenges. In the same light, Esaki, Ahn, and Gregory (2012) noted preparing and supporting foster parents through continuous training and other support services, as important elements in forging

secure relationships. Jones and Hackett (2011) provided a useful point concerning foster parents who work together with agency caseworkers and highlighted their increased ability to promote the health and well-being of the foster child. Foster parents who understand their role and responsibilities are more likely to perform within the guidelines of the agency (Esaki et al., 2012).

Conversely, foster parents who do not have a clear understanding of their role and responsibilities in relation to the agency's mandates, experience communication problems with caseworkers (Esaki et al., 2012). To this end, increased emphasis on continuous training, covering a range of foster care parents' roles and responsibilities is important to encourage the retention of foster parents. Agreeably, Jones and Hackett (2011) and Schofield et al. (2012) highlighted the need for delineation between the roles of the local authority and the committed caregiver. A clearer understanding of social support network provides foster parents with the skills necessary to establish and maintain a caring, loving, and healthy environment, which fosters the children's stimulation and growth (Blakeslee, 2011).

Emancipated Youth

Every year, approximately 30,000 young people emancipate from the foster care system (Richards, 2014). Large portions of these youth face a myriad of challenges as they try to make it on their own (Jones, 2013). Often, youth transitioning from foster care make the transition without the supports traditionally available. Therefore, they find it difficult to secure stable, affordable housing. However, a study conducted by Richards (2014), found an estimated 14-30 % of foster youth experience at least one night of homelessness following emancipation.

Emancipated youth, also referred to as vulnerable youth, suffer from emotional and behavioral problems as they struggle to enter adult life (Xie et al., 2014). Lacking appropriate support forces these youths to remain in poverty, potentially giving birth to disadvantaged children, resulting in generational cycles, which are difficult to break. Barker et al. (2014) found vulnerable youth are more likely to be racial and ethnic minorities who come from low-income and unstable families, experience low employability, mental challenges, substance abuse issues, and engage in criminal activities. Furthermore, they aged out of support systems designed to help them while they were in care (Barker et al., 2014). Understanding the challenges confronting emancipated youth is extremely important. It is imperative for foster care professionals to design strategies and implement interventions to address foster youth's distinctive needs (Batsche et al., 2014). According to Batsche et al. (2014), addressing the needs of foster youth with support and resources will enhance outcomes for them.

African American Emancipated Youth

African American children make up approximately two-thirds of the foster care population and remain in care longer (AACAP, 2013). Proportionate to the duration in care and multiple placements, is the degree of experiencing severe emotional, behavioral, and developmental barriers (Cross et al., 2013). Reduced social support networks, critical to foster care youth's well being and progress; often compound these challenges (Steen & Harlow, 2012). Without sustainable connections, these youths continue to struggle with negative outcomes (Steen & Harlow, 2012). Statistics from a recent study revealed 18% to 26% of emancipated youth experience incarceration (Cusick et al., 2012), with 11% to 36% becoming homeless (Dworsky et al., 2013). Half of all youth in foster care drop out

of school (Zetin, MacLeod & Kimm (2012), 25% to 50% are unemployed, and 30% to 35% have an average earning income below poverty level (Jones, 2013). These figures provided a very dismal impression of the future for emancipated foster care youth. Given the evidence of the adverse outcomes and lack of social support, there is a need to exploring social support network's ability to advocate for successful youth transitions from foster care to independent living.

The Lack of Social Support Networks

Although foster youth have the ability to pursue their educational goals and become engaged citizens, the lack of structured social support networks creates multiple challenges for foster youth after they exit care (Krebs & Pitcoff, 2012). Blakeslee (2012) noted if youth within the foster care system have access to the right resources and programs it would motivate them to achieve their highest potential and become contributing members of society. Programs such as the Preparation for Adult Living Program in Texas, the Achieving Independence Center in Philadelphia, and the United Parcel Service (UPS) School-to-Career Partnership Program in Maryland, prepare foster youth to live on their own as adults (Collins & Ward, 2011). Although these programs have proven to be successful, unfortunately, national implementation remains elusive (Collins, Spencer & Ward, 2011). Consequently, only specific geographic locations experience successful results.

Youth exiting the foster care system become exceptionally vulnerable young adults (Colins & Curtis, 2011; Osgood, Foster & Courtney; 2010). It is interesting to note in their quest for independence, although services and resources are available, lack of knowledge, coupled with age restrictions and behavioral issues, precluded accessing

existing programs. Previous studies revealed family members' and caregiver's supports are fundamental factors for successful transition (Collins & Ward, 2011; Jones, 2014; Richards, 2014; Smith, 2010). Without this support and guidance, foster care youths run the risk of all the negative outcomes previously mentioned.

Emancipated Youth: Disrupted Social Networks

Changes and movements during custodianship changes, disconnect foster youth from family, friends, and other caring adults (Richards, 2014). Causal factors of this disconnection are a history of abuse and neglect while in care, attachment disorders, health challenges, substance abuse, and missed opportunities to prepare for independent living (Richards, 2014). Over a ten-year period, between 11% and 36% of the youth who age out of foster care, become homeless during the transition to adulthood (Dworsky et al., 2013; Henig, 2009, Smith, 2011). Homelessness is an impetus for incarceration, unemployment, sexual victimization, mental, and emotional problems (Collins & Ward, 2011; Smith, 2011). With no place to go, one in four of these children become incarcerated within two years, one in five experience periods of homelessness, 46% complete high school, with three % earning advanced degrees, and 51 % able to maintain stable employment (Casey Family Programs, 2011).

Homelessness in Miami-Dade County

Florida has the third largest population of homeless persons in any state in the country (Florida Council on Homelessness (FCH), 2015). Every year, approximately 105,000 homeless men and women receive shelter from transitional housing and homeless centers (FCH, 2015). I conducted the study in Miami-Dade County, Florida; where as of January 2015, reflected 30,552 homeless persons; 64% male and 36% female

(FCF, 2015). Several organizations throughout Miami-Dade County, such as Miami-Dade County Homeless Trust, Miami-Dade Public Schools, Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, the City of Miami Beach, University of Miami, Citrus Health Network, Miami Coalition for the Homeless, Switchboard, The Alliance for GLBTQ Youth, Pridelines Youth Services, Educate Tomorrow, Our Kids, Lotus House, Casa Valentina, Miami Bridge, StandUp for Kids, Division of Student Services, Reach Out Miami, Youth Co-Op, Triverden Creative, and FVR-Group collaborate to strengthen the continuum of care to support homeless youth (Provenzo et al., 2011).

The Influence of Social Support Services for Youth Aging Out of Care

Young people making the transition from foster care to adulthood benefit from social support services in finding a job, securing a place to live, accessing healthcare and navigating educational opportunities. Research studies have documented the positive impact social support services have made on the well-being of transitioning youth (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Greeson Garcia, Kim, & Courtney, 2015). To that point Jones (2014) noted that foster care youth who access social services develop life skills needed to achieve self-sufficiency. Despite increased funding and creation of multiple programs such as the Independent Living Program (ILP), the Foster Care Independent Act (FCIA; P.L. 106-169) and the John Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP), there are little improvement in outcomes among foster care youth who age out of foster care. Two overarching elements suggested by Greeson et al. (2015) to improve positive outcomes for foster care youth are to help youth build a supportive network with adults who may serve as mentors before and after they leave care and consistently show that

social support network is vital to their overall success as they transition to independent living.

In a study conducted by Collins, Spencer and Ward (2010) found that social support services help youth during critical and sensitive times in their lives. Foster care youth who "beat the odds" and experience positive outcomes noted that social support services helped them in their quest for housing, employment and accessing healthcare services (Curry & Abrams, 2014; Jones, 2014). On a grander scale, concerted efforts of foster parents, child welfare workers and government officials should develop stronger supportive connections to increase social support services for foster care youth. Promoting social support network will help reshape independent living services and improve outcomes for youth aging out of foster care.

Key Elements to Successful Transition

By expanding opportunities for youth before and after exiting care, successful transitions become attainable. A study of 96 former foster care youth conducted by Collins and Ward (2011) revealed structured transitional related services have the right components to prepare youth for independent living. Another study conducted by Jones (2013) provided insight into how social support networks mollify the challenges encountered after they aged out of foster care. Recently, Florida International University implemented the Fostering Panther Pride program for homeless, foster care youth (FIU Magazine, 2015). The aim of the program is to provide holistic care addressing all the students' needs including academic, physical, emotional, and mental. It also offers a safety net, to support them while they pursue higher education (FIU Magazine, 2015). Through these supportive services, youth build skills, develop leadership abilities and

become involved in self-advocacy work (Jones, 2013). Furthermore, the proposed amendment to the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) expands services to the target population through the collaborative support from other governmental agencies (Jones, 2013).

Foster Youth and Social Support Networks

Emerging themes from the literature identified formal systems of care as potential sources of support. These sources of support include foster parents, social workers, therapists/counselors, biological family members, and adult mentors (Jones, 2014). Jones (2014) found youth capable of accessing social support from multiple sources, better able to cope with distress, than those youth with only one source. Recognizing the individual and circumstantial risk factors along with the growing evidence from studies documenting poor outcomes experienced by youth aging out of foster care, provided an emerging consensus on the importance of social support networks (Blakeslee, 2012). Further, emancipated youth connect with support networks to help secure affordable housing, find employment, pursue educational goals, and receive easier access to health-related services (Jones, 2014).

Biological Family

Jones (2014) encouraged youth to maintain a relationship with their biological family while in care and after they leave care. Jones (2014) supported remaining or reconnecting to their family is an important process for a successful transition. Foster care youth who remain connected to family members found it easier to request temporary shelter, and assistance with other needs (Jones, 2014). Dworsky and Courtney (2011)

agreed contact with family was a protective factor against homelessness among former foster care youth.

Foster Parents

Jones' (2014) study also found foster care youth with favorable outcomes in the transition to independent living remain in contact with former foster parents. Their continued relationship provided a sense of cohesiveness youth did not have with their biological family (Jones, 2014). Also, contact with foster parents offered potential emergency housing when needed (Blakeslee, 2012). Without foster parent support, foster youth adjusted poorly to the abrupt discharge from the foster care system (Blakeslee, 2012).

Social Workers

Since reconnection to their biological families is not possible in all instances, it is crucial foster youth identify alternative connections to fill the void of lost family relationships (Birneanu, 2014). Jones (2014) noted social workers serve an important support role for foster youth, as they establish alternative supportive relationships. Demands brought on by the high volume of cases social workers manage, presumably causes difficulty in providing on-going support. Likewise, Blakeslee (2012) noted social workers are in a centralized position to maintain open communication with numerous service network members to facilitate the flow of assistance for foster youth.

Adult Mentors

Greeson (2013) and Scannapieco and Painter (2014) agreed with the point that successful mentoring programs offer promise for youth aging out of foster care. Mentorship based on, best practices, assisted youth in establishing lasting relationships

with caring individuals, who will ideally support them as they develop productive adult lives (Greeson, 2013). Strong mentoring relationships provided protection against psychosocial stressors (Xie et al., 2014). According to Scannapieco and Painter (2014), exposure to positive adult mentors strengthened the mentor-youth bond, as youth viewed them as role models. They felt their mentors were respectful, helpful, supportive, and instrumental in their gaining self-confidence (Scannapieco & Painter, 2014). Furthermore, Xie et al. (2014) study found youth experience better outcomes when they meet with their mentor at least once per week.

Emancipated youth, a uniquely vulnerable population, experience numerous negative outcomes (Blakeslee, 2011; Greeson, 2013; Hedin, 2012; Jones, 2013). This phenomenon warrants robust social support networks to help prepare youth for life beyond the system (Blakeslee, 2011). Focusing on support networks and highlighting, the many benefits they offer, equips social work practitioners with information, which can expressly use to improve policy and practice (Blakeslee, 2011).

Smooth Transition out of the Foster Care System

In May 2014, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in collaboration with the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) released a report examining both the housing needs and the options available for stable housing for emancipated youth (Richards, 2014). The report highlighted the growing problem the population experiences in attempting to secure affordable housing after leaving care (Richards, 2014). The Annie E. Casey Foundation, an organization committed to the successful transition for foster youth, advocates for programs promoting a smoother process (Richards, 2014). The Chafee Foster Care Independence Program and the Jim

Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative represent two of the most prominent federal and state programs (Richards, 2014). These programs provide funding for independent living services for emancipated youth and prepare young people in foster care for successful transition (Richards, 2014). Over the past ten years, the federal government awarded over $140 million annually to the Chafee Program. Interestingly, foster youth remain unaware of the availability of these and other services such as Section 8 (Housing Choice Vouchers), Family Unification Programs (FUP), and Continuum of Care services, which support their continuing needs (Richards, 2014).

Foster care youth possess complete knowledge and awareness regarding the means to accessing available services. Richards (2014) posited foster youth cognizant of available resources use them. Local housing authorities and organizations developed programs such as the St. Petersburg Housing Authority Program, the Southern Nevada Regional Housing Authority Initiative, and the Oregon Trail Youth Project (Richards, 2014). These programs enable youth aging out of care, opportunities to participate in structured planning for up to one year with direct on-site case management (Richards, 2014). They learn the life skills necessary for successful transition. Although local housing authorities and community-minded organizations offer programs to help foster youth find stable housing, additional national attention would assure all youth in foster care have the same housing opportunities (Jones, 2014). Richards (2014) noted while programs and funding are part of the solution, a need exists to alter the way society views foster care youth. The needed change begins with reversing stereotypical notions surrounding foster youth.

African American Kinship Foster Care

African American foster parents play a critical role in providing out-of-home placements to the disproportionately large number of African American children in the foster care system (AACAP, 2013). African American children in kinship foster care realize higher levels of stability when compared to their peers placed in foster family care (Hedin, 2014; Rosenthal & Villegas, 2011). Hong et al. (2011) noted kinship as a vital option, which promotes positive racial/ethnic identity, maintains ties with family, and preserves familial connections throughout their maturation process. Creating and maintaining stable and nurturing environments also reduced disrupted placements (Rosenthal & Villegas, 2011). When removal is necessary, placing a child in kinship care helped to preserve their community, family, and cultural ties (Hedin, 2014). These entities provide multiple levels of influence on the developmental outcomes of children in care (Hong et al., 2011). Within the context of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological system, kinship care is an important component in the child's development. Understanding the complex relationships between the child and their social ecology is equally important in the development and implementation of appropriate intervention and policy measures for kinship foster care (Hong et al., 2011).

Caregiving practices, whether formal or informal, are particularly common among relatives of African-Americans as they are consistent with the extended family structure and kin networks of their community (Monahan et al., 2013). Stack (1974) introduced the phrase, kinship care, in an ethnographic study describing the extensive support networks within African American extended families. Grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and

other family members displayed a natural response to assist with child rearing when the biological parents could not adequately provide care (Hong et al., 2011).

Undoubtedly, kinship foster care plays a significant role in the well-being of children and families (Monahan et al., 2013). Empirical studies revealed the benefits of kinship care including increased contact with biological families, cultural and ethnic preservation, holistic development, and the comfort of being with family (Hong et al., 2011; Monahan et al., 2013). Increasing social support networks for kinship may improve outcomes for foster care youth (Hong et al., 2011). Since the foster care system continues to depend on kinship care as a viable option, addressing support social connections to ensure family members receive the proper support and services they need becomes an issue for practitioners and policy makers.

Biological Parents' Engagement

An extensive body of research acknowledged biological parents play an integral role in the developmental progress and psychological well being of foster care children (Foehrkolb, 2012; Monahan et al., 2013). Parental visiting promoted successful unification for foster children (Foehrkolb, 2012). The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 brought to the light the importance of continuity when parents continuously engage with their children (Foehrkolb, 2012). One of the goals of the act was to maintain parent/child contact by placing the child in close proximity to their biological parent (Foehrkolb, 2012). Furthermore, Palmer, Durham, and Osmond (2014) study revealed, children whose parents are involved experience better outcomes. Increased family involvement provides an opportunity to engage birth parents, support efforts to change, and foster relationship (Palmer et al., 2014). Strengthening the

biological parent/child relationship was a powerful factor in the decision to insist on unifying foster children with their parents, when feasible (Foehrkolb, 2012).

Preserving the continuity of a child's attachment through biological parental engagement is in the best interest of the child (Foehrkolb, 2012). However, parental engagement is not always healthy. For example, removing a child from the home because of sexual and drug abuse by the parent, on-going engagement may not be in the child's best interest (Foehrkolb, 2012). However, in cases where the disruption was due to the parent's criminal activity and resolved in a timely manner, engagement is not entirely detrimental (Foehrkolb, 2012). Attachment promoted elements positively reinforcing an individual's sense of security. Furthermore, healthy attachment helps an individual maintain emotional balance and resilience in stressful situations and equips them with tools to deal with negative emotions (Monahan et al., 2013). In the same light, Foehrkolb (2012) found developing secure bonds helped children secure strong relationships in their adult life and create an important foundation for acquiring the skills and competence to assist them in coping with challenges and conflicts.

Multiple Placements

Many children in foster care experience multiple placements and do not achieve stability in their living arrangements (Cross et al., 2013). A comprehensive review of the literature revealed foster children who move several times while in care develop psychological and emotional problems (Cross et al., 2013; Norgate, Warhurst, Osborne & Traill, 2012). To reduce the number of placements, foster care parents need support to manage the behaviors of the children effectively at the onset and adequate resources to respond to difficult situations once the child is in the home for any length of time

(Norgate et al., 2012). Removing a child also has a devastating effect on the foster parent (Cross et al., 2013). Similarly, the caseworker may feel they did not have adequate skills and resources to deal with critical events. Documenting this occurrence by the agency illumined the need for additional training and support for foster parents and foster care professionals (Norgate et al., 2012).

In 2013, a study of 36 cases disclosed 53 % of children placed in care moved at least one time due to behavior problems (Cross et al., 2013). In these cases, the primary reason for the initial placement was the children's behavior (Cross et al., 2013). However, the other 47 % of the 36 cases, showed the behavior problem emerged after the first or second placement due to other reasons (Cross et al., 2013). Another study indicated 73 % of the children in foster care remained longer than four years and experienced at least three placements (The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). Even though the child's behavior is the primary reason for instability, Cross et al. (2013) noted providing foster children with the services they need and foster parents with the proper resources and support reduces the imbalance. Considering this, foster care professionals require training to recognize the multiple sources of instability and implement strategies leading to a reduction in multiple placements (Cross et al., 2013). Focusing on these steps, according to Cross et al. (2013) facilitates the prevention of the cascade of placement disruptions and improves the well being of children in foster care.

As stated in previous studies, young people who ran away while in foster care and experienced frequent placements increase their risk of becoming homeless, as both instances mark issues related to instability (Richards, 2014). This instability prevents

foster youths from developing strong ties to their caregivers or supportive relationships with other adults (Richards, 2014). It also limits their ability to connect with community-based resources, including programs providing assistance with housing (Jones, 2013). To this end, foster care professionals require skills to implement intervention when strained placements develop (Richards, 2014).

Preventing Homelessness

Since October 2008, the federal law required child welfare agencies to help youth develop a personalized transition plan, including options for housing (Collins & Ward, 2011). However, the specificity of those plans is unknown. It is important to ensuring all youth placed in care have a concrete plan to address their housing needs after they age out of the foster care system. Zlotnick, Tam, and Zerger (2012) noted the utilization of transitional housing programs reduced homelessness among emancipated youth. Homelessness prevention programs introduced in San Francisco, California, like Larkin Extended Aftercare for Supported Emancipation (LEASE) and Holloway House created stability through planned transitions from foster care to independent living (Zlotnick et al., 2012).

Zlotnick et al. (2012) found transitional living programs, assists in protecting youth against negative outcomes during their maturation process. Researchers found these programs, based on prevention models, successfully prepare youth for independent living, however, there is limited access based on availability (Dworsky et al., 2013). A need remains to increase alternatives and options in order to reach youth at risk of homelessness (Dworsky et al., 2013).

Stable Housing

Curry and Adams (2015b) recognized stable housing as one of the most important aspects of people's lives. Lack of stable housing has the potential to affect economic and health outcomes negatively (Curry & Adams, 2015b). Despite this related knowledge, important questions remain about the contribution social support services play in helping youth secure stable housing after they aged out of foster care. According to Courtney (2010), increased attention focuses on initiatives targeted at housing stability. For example, foster care has forged some efforts to help youth build positive connections with foster family, caseworkers, and other adults (Goodkind et al., 2011). Programs like the Foster Care Independence Act established in 1999 created the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program which provides 30% funding to state for housing (Curry & Adams, 2015b).

Collins and Curtis (2011) argued that during earlier decades young adult entered the housing market soon after leaving their parent's home, securing a rental property or purchasing their first home has become more complex. The complexities are due to higher housing costs, credit challenges, higher unemployment, and housing instability. Given these challenges, some scholars recommend that foster care youth seek interdependence rather than independence by engaging in social support services that help to maintain stability in the years following emancipation (Curry & Adams, 2015a). These social supports may include mentors, family members, foster care caseworkers, and friends.

Success of Foster Care Programs

In the last 40 years, the number of foster care children has increased, as well as the length of time in care (Hogberg, 2012). During those years, the federal government enacted laws, for example, the Fostering Connection ACT (FCA), the Foster Care Independent Act (FCIA) of 1999, and Workforce Investment Act (WIA). It also created social policies including the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Act of 2001 and Educational and Training Voucher (ETV)., the Child and Family Service Review (CFSR), the Chafee Independent Living program, and One-Stop Career Centers to ensure accountability (Richards, 2014). The creation of these laws, policies, and accountability systems promotes stability and supports educational initiatives for children in foster care (Rosenwald, McGhee & Noftall, 2013). Despite these efforts, foster care youth remain unprepared after exiting the system (Casey Family Programs, 2011). A gap exists in the research concerning element of programs providing transitional care and the perceptions fostered youth regarding the skills needed for successful transition to independence (Dworsky et al., 2013).

New Initiatives for Foster Care Youth

In response to the rising number of youth in care and their obvious needs for structured transitional programs, the Federal government has developed and implemented several initiatives. These include the Federal Independent Living Program (ILP) initially authorized by P.L. 99-272 in 1985 under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act and reauthorized indefinitely by P.L. 103-66 in 1993 (Rosenwald et al., 2013). The 1993 legislation authorized federal funding of $70 million per year for states through the Children's Bureau of the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to

provide services to youth between the ages of 16 and 21 (Rosenwald et al., 2013). The services provide programs and tools to help youth prepare for independent living. The goal is to bring awareness to available resources and provide easy access to services (Dworsky et al., 2013).

Casey Life Skills (CLS) is a free interactive tool used to assess behaviors and competencies and provide instant results for foster care youth (Casey Family Programs (CFP), 2011). The program helps youth determine the next steps for independent living, plan long- term goals, and develop healthy habits (CFP, 2011). CLS gives guidance in areas such as healthy relationships, goal-setting, budgeting, educational opportunities, life skills, and career choices (CFP, 2011). The program also offers strategies to improve work and study habits, planning, setting goals, and accessing community resources (CFP, 2011). Designed for use in a collaborative conversation, the CLS allows foster youth to converse with their mentor, caseworker, or service provider (CFP, 2011). The assessment takes approximately 30-40 minutes, and the answers are available instantly for review with the youth. Upon review, the assessor actively engages youth in developing their goals (CFP, 2011).

The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (P.L.106-169), which replaced Independent Living Program as the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP), expanded eligibility for youth ages 18-21, preparing to exit care (Massinga & Pecora, 2004). The program also doubled the funding availability to states and provided over $140 million in new initiatives (Massinga & Pecora, 2004). States contribute 20% in matching funds; however, many states did not contribute (Massinga & Pecora, 2004). In 2003, an amendment to CFCIP authorized $60 million for the Chafee Education and

Training Vouchers Program, distributing these funds to states for postsecondary educational and training vouchers (CFP, 2011). The goal was to provide additional services for youth likely to experience difficulties as they transition to adulthood.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funded the Family Unification Program (FUP) and the Youthbuild Program. In 2000, FUP began their new initiative to offer housing grants to eligible youth between the ages of 18 and 21 exiting foster care (Richards, 2014). The aim of the program is to promote a successful transition to adulthood (Richards, 2014). Additionally, YouthBuild provides funding to local agencies to provide education, counseling, job training, and leadership development opportunities to unemployed and out-of-school youth between the ages of 16 and 24, encouraging participants to complete their course work so they can graduate from high school or work towards their GED certification (Richards, 2014). Although many programs are available for youth transitioning to independent living, providing seamless services for youth exiting care requires more collaboration (Greiner et al., 2015). Jones (2014) noted private organizations and foundations pay attention to the need to develop partnerships to implement programs and resources to provide comprehensive services to foster youth.

Effects of Workforce Turnover

Over the last several decades, child welfare agencies experienced a major problem with employee turnover (Kim, 2011; Schwartz, 2011). The high turnover rate poses a major challenge to children in care because new workers struggle to provide quality care when positions remain unfilled (Schwartz, 2011). The Louisiana Office of Community Services Job Task Force launched in 2000, revealed the learning curve for a child welfare

worker to develop the knowledge, skills, abilities, and dispositions to work independently is approximately two years (Kim, 2011). This professional development period represents a significant time for welfare agencies to minimize preventable turnover and build strong working relations (Kim, 2011). Building these relations requires commitment from the child welfare organization and their employees. In this light, Kim (2011) and Schwartz (2011) research revealed a more comprehensive picture of turnover among child welfare workers by examining conceptual models linking organizational factors, worker characteristics, and turnover intention. This linking highlighted the concerted efforts needed to design organizational interventions to improve the work environment for child welfare workers (Kim, 2011).

Job conditions, unmet expectations, high casework, emotional exhaustion, and burnout are the top reasons for welfare workers' turnover (Kim, 2011; Lietz, 2010). Despite these job conditions, many child welfare workers take on the most difficult cases with limited resources, while making important decisions affecting the lives of vulnerable children (Kim, 2010; Lietz, 2010). Furthermore, if injury or death occurs to a child in care, they experience harsh criticism from the media and public scrutiny (Boyas & Wing, 2010). Due to the high turnover, Lietz (2010) noted administrators must make an effort to provide continuous training.

Methodology

Quantitative methodology dominated the 1960s and 1970s (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). Social scientists recognized the limitations of quantitative methods because it primarily focused on measurements of interventions and outcomes (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). Historical changes began to take precedence as researchers embraced qualitative

forms of investigation, which documented the experiences of those involved in the process (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). Approaches such as interviews, observations, and focus groups captured the experiences of the study participants (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). Researchers attempted to understand the lived experiences of people with disadvantages such as homelessness, divorce, substance abuse, addiction by inquiring about people's thoughts and behaviors (Brown & Wilderson, 2010; Dworsky et al., 2013). Qualitative methods explore phenomena to gain a deeper understanding of the individual's feelings, emotions, and thought processes (McLean, Riggs, Kettler & Delfabbro, 2013).

Glaser and Strauss (1967) made incredible contributions in their respective roles as qualitative researchers (Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1987). Although, they came from different philosophical backgrounds, they had some shared features allowing them to collaborate and bring to light the vital link between theory and method (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987). Strauss's emphasis on fieldwork to examine the complexity of the human action and Glaser's comparative analysis of data to identify, develop, and relate concepts brought clarity to qualitative methodology (Glaser, 1978, 1992: Glaser & Strauss, 1967: Strauss, 1987).

Over the years, researchers developed an increased interest in qualitative research due to improved technology based on the success of past researchers (Chaney & Spell, 2015; Jang, 2015). In the past, it was difficult for graduate students to convince their research committee qualitative research produced the same sophisticated results as quantitative research (Chaney & Spell, 2015a). Fortunately, the belief has changed to the point some universities embraced qualitative methods openly. Qualitative methodology

used by Chaney and Spell (2015) examined the perspectives of African-American women who aged out of the foster care system. By utilizing this method, the researchers developed a deeper understanding of each participant's experiences (Chaney & Spell, 2015). The findings from the study provided crucial insights into ways to improve the foster care system (Chaney & Spell, 2015).

Notwithstanding, Metcalfe, and Sanders (2012) believed researchers utilizing qualitative methodologies take into consideration the potentially emotionally draining and extremely time-consuming process. However, qualitative studies can yield rich information not obtainable through quantitative study design. Qualitative research is more visible in the 21st century, and specific approaches and strategies are now available to help researchers explore and understand the social or human problems individuals' experience.

Qualitative research design explores the reasons why individuals or groups act in certain ways (Chaney & Spell, 2015; Creswell, 2009). The process and procedures to gather data in a qualitative design study include observations, interviews, focus groups, and follow-up sessions (Smythe, 2012). Utilizing this form of inquiry supports learning about the lived experiences of the participants involved (Chaney & Spell, 2015). Many researchers utilize qualitative method through posing open-ended questions to establish how patterns of behavior develop over time (Chaney & Spell, 2015; Onwuegbuzie, Leech & Collins, 2012). Additionally, researchers use qualitative design to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomena and the experiences of participants (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012).

Additionally, researchers utilizing qualitative design focus on a single phenomenon or concept for in-depth investigation (Chaney & Spell, 2015; Curry & Abrams, 2015a). The qualitative approach with the social stress theoretical framework provided insights assisting researchers to unveil experiences, expand knowledge, and offer options ensuring the stable housing for youth after they have aged out of foster care (Chaney & Spell, 2015). A need exists to understand the experiences of foster youth alumni relating to homelessness, but also to identify the effects of social stress on youth in transition to adulthood.

Conceptual Framework

Children placed in foster care, suffer from the complex interplay of vulnerabilities and inabilities of their parents to meet their needs (Boldis, 2014). The ecological framework at the macro level and the social stress framework at the micro level guide this study with the aim of illustrating the relational dynamics, which contribute to varying outcomes for foster care youth. The ecological framework first introduced by Bronfenbrenner in the 1970s focused on the interrelationship of the individual and his/her environment (Cowen & Devaney, 2011). It provided a new way of thinking about the many environmental influences affecting human development (Gauvain & Cole, 2004). Subsequently, Cowen and Devany (2011) extended Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework with an emphasis on the importance of early social relationships on later development. According to Cowan and Devaney (2011), an ecological framework recognized the fundamental role of foster parents/caregivers and foster care professionals in proactively building and sustaining relationships and facilitating the development of appropriate relationship skills.

While the ecological collaboration holds intuitive appeal, it also explained how people interact with their environment in general (Cowan & Devaney, 2011). Specifically, a social stress framework promotes the usefulness of a deeper understanding of the potential synergies existing between familial, social, and physical environments. Dworsky et al. (2013) found foster youth who become homeless after aging out of the foster care system, appear to experience some of the same challenges as other homeless youth (Dworsky et al., 2013). Since homeless youth experienced stressors associated with their disadvantaged circumstance, many of them engage in negative behaviors due to the lack of strong supportive networks (Dworsky et al., 2013). The daily struggles of trying to secure a place to live, along with independent living responsibilities, forces foster care youth in a spiral of negative behaviors (Dworsky et al., 2013). These negative behaviors prevent foster youths from developing strong ties to their caregivers or supportive relationships with other adults (Dworsky et al. 2013). It may also limit their ability to connect with community-based resources, including programs offering assistance with housing.

Summary

Overwhelmingly, the literature provided insights into factors which facilitate successful transitions for foster youth (Collins& Ward, 2011; Dworsky et al., 2013; Jones, 2013, Richards, 2014). A clear understanding of youth perspectives is important in the development and implementation of appropriate programs and services. The consensus of the authors is collaborative efforts of family, community, agencies, and government are fundamental components to promote and support network services for youth in care (Richards, 2014). When foster care youth experience successes, they

encourage their peers to get involved, acquire the necessary skills to be self-sufficient and become advocates for social change (Dworsky et al., 2013; Krebs & Pitcoff, 2012).

As young people leave foster care, the literature suggested they experience multiple problems adjusting adult life enormously challenging (Davis et al., 2014; Dworsky et al., 2013, Jones, 2013; Krebs & Pitcoff, 2012). At the same time, the research recommended providing networks of supportive services promoting a successful transition to adulthood (Blakeslee, 2011; Hedin; 2012; Richards, 2014). Although the development of social services and programs aid youth in their quest for independence, there is considerable room for improvement (Krebs & Pitcoff, 2012). Inadequately promoted services result in youth remaining unaware of valuable support available to them (Jones, 2013). Furthermore, none of the programs equips families and caregivers to support youth during transitions (Krebs & Pitcoff, 2012). The literature makes it clear families are a key support for their children, and the outdated assumption is youth can live independently without support services after they leave care (Dworsky et al., 2013). While the costs of support services are substantial, it is clear; doing nothing will cost society more in homelessness, unemployment, health problems, and criminal activities (Blakeslee, 2011, Dworsky et al., 2013, Jones, 2013; Krebs & Pitcoff, 2012).

This research has significant practical implications for transitioning foster care youth's well-being. Engagement in social support networks provides a basis to link foster youth with all the services and support needed for successful transition (Richards, 2014). Although foster care youth continue to experience multiple negative outcomes including homelessness, the literature captures one important factor, helping to reduce negative outcomes. The social support networks provide needed resources while buffering

unexpected obstacles. Sarason, Levine, Basham and Sarason (1983) along with Jones (2014) posited the availability of social support bolsters the capacity to withstand the challenges of life. Maintaining contact with family members and friends, belonging to an organization, accessing available services, and resources, and maintaining a relationship with social workers are critical components to developing effective strategies to nurture social support networks for foster care youth.

Chapter 3:Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences that African American foster care women had with social support services in finding social services after they aged out of foster care. Many African American women do not have family or dependable support after they age out of foster care and confront a high risk of becoming homeless in their quest to secure affordable housing (Collins & Ward, 2011; Dworksky et al., 2013; Knott & Giwa, 2012). Additionally, they experience problems finding employment, accessing health care services, and navigating financial aid services.

This study involved a qualitative design with a case study approach (Anderson & Holloway, 2014). I used a semistructured interview protocol to capture the experiences of four emancipated African American foster care women, one foster care parent, one social worker, and one leader of a social services organization in Miami-Dade County. Throughout this chapter, I provide a detailed discussion of the research design and method, research question, the problem statement, purpose of the study, data collection, targeted population, informed consent and confidentiality, qualitative validity and reliability, and ethical standards.

Research Questions

The guiding question leading this study centered on exploring the contribution of social support services for African American women who aged out of foster care and became homeless in their quest for stable housing. The question raised was the following:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of African American foster care women in seeking help for social support services after aging out of foster care?

Research Method and Design

I determined that a qualitative method using a case study approach was the best design to explore and provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of African American foster care women as they perceived factors supporting or hindering their efforts to secure stable housing after they aged out of foster care. According to Anderson and Holloway (2014), qualitative inquiry provides researchers an opportunity to explore and understand the complex, multifaceted phenomena. Furthermore, qualitative researchers develop an understanding of the complex interactions between individuals, their environment, and how certain phenomena influences outcomes (Anderson & Holloway, 2014). Given qualitative researchers assume that social reality as a human creation, they interpret the meaning of people's beliefs and practices as it relates to the lived experiences of participants involved (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Researchers using qualitative methods pose open-ended questions to establish how patterns of behavior develop over time (Yin, 2009).

Yin (2009) defined a case study as a descriptive and exploratory analysis of a person, event, policy, or group. Anderson and Holloway (2014) and Baskarada (2014) agreed that qualitative researchers use case studies to explore a program, event, or one or more individuals. Furthermore, Baskarada (2014) noted that researchers use case studies to explore in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information to identify descriptive themes. Potential benefits to the case study include benchmarking best practices, providing rich descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation, and gaining a better understanding of the research problem (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012). The case study approach provided a deep holistic view of the research problem.

Qualitative research is effective in obtaining information about the values, opinions, behaviors, and social contexts of particular populations (Suri, 2011). Through the qualitative design, a scholar can gain a rich and complex understanding of a social context or phenomenon (Baskarada, 2014). I posed open-ended questions during interviews with participants. Baskarada (2014) and Haahr, Norlyk, and Hall (2014) noted that open-ended questions are rich and explanatory in nature and have the ability to evoke meaningful responses, which are culturally salient to the participant. Using a qualitative case study approach, I provided insight into the experiences of African American foster care women who aged out of the system and had problems with social services in finding stable housing. The intent is to get a deeper understanding of the factors that supported or hindered their efforts in finding housing after they aged out of foster care.

Broader Exploration

Expanding the exploration to include one foster parent, one social worker, and one leader of a social services program provided a clearer understanding of the phenomenon under study and gave a broader view in multiple context (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012). Baskarada (2014) and Yin (2013) stated that a case study approaches includes multiple sources of evidence, such as personal experiences, documents, policy, and procedures to understand, explain, and provide a holistic view of the research problem. Furthermore, Yin (2013) argued that interviewing people with different perspectives can be a valuable approach. The broader exploration can be used to articulate how the intended audience may be able to use the findings of this study to improve social support services for all youth exiting the foster care system.

Rationale for the Study

I employed a qualitative methodology with a multiple case study approach to answer the research question, achieve the purpose of the study, and explore the lived experiences of four emancipated African American foster care women experiences with social support services in finding housing. Additionally, I interviewed one foster parent, one social worker, and the director of Fostering Panther Pride program separately.

According to Herriott and Fiestone (2014), a multiple case study approach is regarded as being more robust. Yin (2014) argued that academics respect case studies, and the approach is popular in qualitative research as it offers theory-building potential. Therefore, a qualitative methodology with case study supported my ability to provide an understanding of the lived experiences of African American foster care women with social services in finding stable housing after they aged out of the foster care system.

Some approaches used by qualitative researchers include narrative, grounded theory, phenomenological, ethnographic, and case studies. I did not select a narrative inquiry study because I did not wish to collect answers to questions or depict a life story relating a person's experiences (Chilisa, 2012). A researcher uses a phenomenological design to identify the essence of human experiences (Gerring, 2012). Researchers use grounded theory to determine if there is a theory related to a phenomenon (Patton, 2014). Ethnographic study provides insight into a participant's behavior through observation and interviews (Patton, 2014). Researchers use the case study approach to explore a program, event, or one or more individual (Yin, 2014). Through the case study inquiry, the researcher collects data over a specified timeframe using different procedures (Yin, 2014). This approach added strength to the study and provided information that can be

used to inform policy makers and foster care professionals. I provided explanations of the above approaches to document why I intended to employ a case study approach.

According to Anderson (2013), qualitative methodology is instrumental in understanding the interaction between individuals and their environment. Chaney and Spell (2015) and Hung and Smith (2012) revealed that they used a qualitative research design with case study approach to explore the reasons why individuals or groups act in a certain way or have a problem or concern. The results of the studies provided an understanding of a phenomenon and helped the researcher gained a new perspective and more in-depth knowledge of the problem. A qualitative design with a case study approach is the best methodology and approach to shed new light on social support services, while bringing innovative voices to the discussion table (Bieda, 2015; Hung & Smith, 2012).

Although researchers use quantitative methodology, for the purposes of my study, it does not capture the lived experiences of my intended participants, nor would it assist in understanding the complexity of their circumstances (Anderson & Hollowway, 2014). Qualitative studies using a small sample size is commonly viewed as a factor limiting transferability. However, Pearson, Parkin, and Coomber (2011) advocated for the use of small sample sizes when attempting to reach challenging populations. Researchers can gain insight into social phenomena while contributing to the body of knowledge vital for informing policy makers. Furthermore, qualitative interviews and discussions provide opportunities to discuss questions and themes in greater depth. Bieda (2015) argued that qualitative interviews uncover intimate details, while collecting data to provide a clearer understanding of the participants under study along with rich details and insights into their lived experiences. These tenets assisted me in providing insight into the contribution

of social support services for African American foster care women who established stable housing after aging out of foster care.

Role of the Researcher

In this study, I served as the instrument in collecting data and interviewing participants. Xu and Stoor (2012) advised qualitative researchers to develop skills to collect rich data effectively. When asking probing questions, I listened, considered the information they provided, and then asked more probing questions to get a deeper understanding of the experiences they had with securing stable housing after they aged out of the foster system. My role also included interpreting and analyzing the collected data and finally documenting and disseminating the findings.

To establish trustworthiness, I engaged in member checking and reflexivity to ensure adherence to ethical obligations and monitored my biases. Kornbluh (2015) discussed how member checks establish trustworthiness, rigorously assessing the researcher's analysis by providing an opportunity for participants to review the findings and offer input on whether the themes accurately reflect their personal experiences. Being aware of the importance of trustworthiness, I articulated my expectation of a follow-up phone call with each participant at the time of interview. Participants were contacted 2 weeks after initial interview. This telephone meeting was used to present the results of the transcription. Participants validated the content and context of the data (Chan, Yuen-ling, & Wai-tong, 2013). In addition, Berger (2015) noted that reflexivity allows researchers to self-monitor the influence of biases and beliefs. Reflexivity is the continuous process of self-reflection and self-evaluation for researchers to generate awareness about their actions, feelings, and perceptions (Berger, 2015). Similarly,

Darawsheh (2014) noted employing reflexivity in research helps improve transparency while collecting and analyzing data.

Because the research involves data collection from people concerning their experiences, I addressed trust, credibility, and authenticity (Haahr et al., 2014). I adhered to my professional code of ethics to identify and address any conflict issues, which may arise during the study (Haahr et al., 2014). Additionally, I respected the research sites and the participants involved, while protecting the privacy of all interviewees.

Methodology

Participants and Recruitment

I recruited four African American, foster care women, between the ages of 18-25 who have aged out of foster care in the last 3 years to participate in my study. I also recruited three supporting adults (foster care parent, social worker, and director of a social services program) through referrals. I used purposeful sampling to select participants who fit the study criteria. Lee-Jen, Suen, and Hao-Hsien (2012) suggested using purposeful sampling in qualitative studies with a small sample size. Researchers who use this technique select subjects based on the reasons for the study with the expectation that each participant will provide unique and rich information responsive to the questions posed (Rees, Holland, & Pithouse, 2012). Rees et al. (2012) explored the significance of food and mealtime practices relating to the transition of foster care children into foster care families. Rees et al. employed a qualitative study with case study approach using in-depth, semistructured interviews. Rees et al. interviewed foster parents with the aim of gaining the perspectives of all members of the foster families. The

interviews provided rich information about issues of central importance to the purpose of the study (Rees et al., 2012).

Selective criteria included African American foster care women who aged out of foster care, between the ages of 18-25, in the Miami-Dade, Florida area. I recruited participants from public places that included parks, supermarkets, laundry mats, and local cafés. The rationale for selecting these venues was in a part a contingency plan to ensure I had a large population to meet my sample size. My efforts included handing out and posting flyers at these locations. In the flyer, I explained the criteria for participating, the purpose of the study, the length of time required, and the type of information I intended to gather.

Once I made contact with participants, I explained and documented their informed consent, including permission to audiotape responses. I advised them about the confidential nature of the study including how I will protect their identity and store the information once I concluded the study. Every participant who agreed to be in the study completed each interview as scheduled. Each participant was cordial throughout the interview and appeared eager to share her experience. In order to be involved, the youth met three inclusionary criteria: (a) African American foster care women who aged out of foster care within the last 3 years, (b) between 18–25 years old when they aged out of foster care, and (c) live in the Miami-Dade area.

Richards (2014) explored how foster care youth who aged out of foster care presented challenges when service providers and researchers tried to engage them. They often sever relationships and do not communicate with foster parents and foster care workers. Additionally, emancipated foster youth frequently dissociate themselves from

the entire foster care system once they leave care (Richards, 2014). Based on this finding, I used snowball sampling technique to reach the targeted population. Sadler, Lee, Lim, and Fullerton (2010) and Heckathorn (2011) suggested the use of snowball sampling to recruit traditionally underserved or hard-to-reach populations due to sociodemographic characteristics. Heckathorn (2011) explained that initial participants serve as "seeds," through which they suggest others for further recruitment efforts. The sample expands like a snowball, growing until it reaches the intended number of participants. Furthermore, Crossman (2013) pointed out how the snowball sampling method successfully reached different populations, which may be difficult to engage. The supporting adults were recruited through referrals from participants. The first participant referred the director of the social services program, and the director referred the social worker who referred the foster parent.

Data Collection

I conducted four open-ended, face-to-face interviews with former foster care African American women. My intent was to identify perceptions of the factors that supported or hindered their efforts to secure stable housing. I also conducted three additional face-to-face interviews with a foster parent, a social worker, and a leader of one of the support services programs in Miami-Dade County. According to Dimond, Fiesler, DiSalvo, Damashek, and Fogarty (2012), open-ended, face-to-face interviews allow participants to express what is meaningful to them using his or her own words. Similarly, Anderson and Holloway (2014) highlighted how open-ended questions help researchers gain a broader understanding of the participant's lived experiences by probing for more in-depth responses. Furthermore, open-ended questions allow the

researcher to guide the line of questioning, opening the discussion for follow-up questions to obtain views and opinions from participants (Anderson & Holloway, 2014).

To ensure the privacy of participants, I conducted interviews in a secure location. Cridland, Jones, Caputi, and Magee (2015) suggested conducting interviews in an appropriate private space to ensure confidentiality, reduce distractions, and provide a quiet environment for clear recording. I was flexible with scheduling, selecting times that were suitable for participants and allow ample travel time to ensure punctuality. Punctuality portrays a professional attitude towards the research and is a sign of respect for participant's commitment to the research (Cridland et al., 2015). Additionally, I took the time to build rapport by using icebreaker questions. Building rapport places the participants at ease and allows the interview process to flow smoothly (Cridland et al., 2015).

Data Analysis

Initially, I hand transcribed tape-recorded interviews verbatim and studied the entire outcomes in-depth and then sentence by sentence. I highlighted emerging concepts that revealed similarities about the experience in each transcript using a rigorous process of searching for commonalities across participant's response (Cridland et al., 2015). This process enabled the systematic development of main themes (Gibbs, 2011). Additionally, I referred to the research questions posed during interviewing, while analyzing to maintain congruity of purpose (Gibbs, 2011). The purpose of the research guided my actions and interpretations throughout the process.

Saldana (2012) noted that first-time researchers should code by hand, as it will provide more control over ownership of the work. Touching the data gets additional data

out of memory into the record and helps explore data in new ways (Saldana, 2012). Using hand coding allowed me to become physically involved in the data while sorting through responses, identifying various concepts and words, and grouping them into different categories (Gibbs, 2011). I stopped reviewing here due to time constraints. Please go through the rest of your chapter and look for the patterns I pointed out to you. I will now look at Chapter 4.

Preparing and organizing the data makes it easier for the researcher to interpret the results and begin identifying themes (Gibbs, 2011). I organized the data in different categories. Utilizing two columns, I divided questions and answers. Next, I read all the data to get a general sense of the information and look at similarities and differences. During my analysis, and to get a sense of the totality of the data, I read the responses of participants several times. Nayeri and Khosravi (2013) discussed how repetitive reading of the data provides a broad and general understanding of the content. They referred to this method as constant comparative analysis because it compares one segment of data with another to identify similarities and differences (Nayeri & Khosravi, 2013). I used the prepared questions as a guide. During this process, I also jotted down ideas and thoughts as they came to mind. Yin (2009) noted the importance of writing thoughts in the margin to guide the coding process. Also, I used the codes to document emerging themes.

During data analysis, I employed Saldana (2012) five-step process. In the first step, I organized and prepared data for analysis (Saldana, 2012). In step two, I organized data on a sheet of paper in different categories, placing questions on the left column and answers from participants in the right column. To get a general sense of the information and to look at similarities and differences, during the third step, I read all the data several

times. Through this step, I identified repetitious words. The coding process began when I initiated the fourth step. Basit (2003) succinctly states coding is a crucial aspect of analysis. Saldana (2012) further noted coding organizes and groups similar data into categories. Researchers use categories to recognize trends, identify similar words, and discover new themes (Gibbs, 2011).

Techniques to identify codes include word repetitions, keywords, comparison, metaphors, analogies, and connectors (Gibbs, 2011). During this process, I jotted down ideas and thoughts as they came to mind. Everett (2013) made the point that it is important to write thoughts in the margin to guide the coding process. In step five, I separated the information into two columns; inductive category and participant's responses. Once I categorized the information, my objective was to identify similar concepts from the information the participants provide. I developed specific codes to categorize responses. I identified subcategories to allow assimilation of new information into the findings and continue until I reached saturation. Kolb (2012) noted saturation occurs when no more new information, themes or patterns emerge from the data.

Trustworthiness

Cridland et al. (2015) reiterated the point made by Agre and Rapkin (2003) that obtaining informed and voluntary consent is an important component of all research. It ensures participants understand the aim of the study, the commitment of being involved in the study, potential risks, and benefits of being involved in the study. I explained to participants the study is in partial fulfillment of a Ph.D. program in Human Services. While explaining the purpose, benefits, and any anticipated risks, I addressed terms of confidentiality, indicated the length of time required and advised participants of how to

contact me after completion of the study. Additionally, I asked participants if they have any question before the interview, obtained permission to record, articulated expectation of a follow-up phone call two weeks after initial interview to validate data and finally, thank participants for their time and contribution to my research. I explained the study is voluntary and respected the decision of whether they agreed to complete the study. The informed consent included a copy of the Walden University's Internal Review Board approval to conduct this study. I provided gift bags filled with toiletries to participants regardless of whether they completed the process, to demonstrate my appreciation for their time and willingness to share their personal stories.

I provided a clear outline of confidentiality guidelines. Cridland et al. (2015) advised researchers to develop a clear outline of confidentiality issues to ensure participants are aware the information provided during interviews will remain private. The informed consent also included details on who will have access to their information, which included my committee and Walden University's IRB, upon request. Furthermore, this awareness encouraged openness and reduced stress during the interviews (Cridland et al., 2015). Being aware of these important issues, I did not use participant's personal information; rather, I assigned a letter and a number, which excluded their name or anything else that could identify them in data collection. As required by Walden University, I stored all data and audiotapes in a secured, locked location in my home office where it will remain for at least five years.

Ethical Procedures

At the core of the research process is the importance of ethical practice, which includes integrity, honesty, trust, credibility, and authenticity. Karcz & Papakados (2011)

posited trust and integrity are essential components of research and requires researchers to adhere to standards of intellectual honesty throughout the process. I have a good understanding of ethical guidelines in research and I adhered to my professional code of conduct, which requires me to protect the privacy of all participants.

I have an ethical commitment and responsibility to know the fundamental research principles (Haahr et al. 2014). They are to have respect for the person, beneficence, justice, and respect for communities (Haahr et al., 2014). It also includes having an awareness of the commitment, dedication, and energy required to complete the study (Haahr et al., 2014). I did not coerce the participants in any way and kept the well-being of all participants as the number one priority. In that same light, Paulsen (2011) suggested wisdom and an understanding of the phenomenon should guide ethical decision-making. Haahr et al. (2014) urged researchers to undergo formal research ethics training, to prepare for any ethical issue, which may arise in the study and also complete the National Institute for Health's Protecting Human Research Participants certificate program

Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity are two factors concerning qualitative researchers while designing their study (Noble & Smith, 2015). Reliability refers to the consistency of results over time, including a high degree of stability, which produces the same or similar results when repeating the data collection procedure using similar methodology (Baskarada, 2014; Noble & Smith, 2015). In other words, other researchers should arrive at comparable results if they follow the same procedures.

Validity determines whether the research measured what they intended, confirming the reliability of the results. Noble and Smith (2015) noted validity concerns the integrity and application of the methods undertaken and the precision in which the findings accurately reflect the data. Assessing the validity of the study is important as it demonstrates rigor in the research and provides consistency, applicability, and credibility (Noble & Smith, 2015). Ensuring credibility in the research findings involve several strategies, which include acknowledging biases, keeping a meticulous record, along with demonstrating clarity in thought processes throughout the data collection and analysis (Noble & Smith, 2015; Yin, 2009). Utilizing multiple sources of evidence, maintaining a chain of evidence and providing rich verbatim descriptions of participant's experiences also assists in ensuring integrity (Noble & Smith, 2015; Yin, 2009). The credibility of the study depends on the ability and effort of the researcher. Therefore, trustworthiness, credibility, and authenticity are important attributes for the researcher (Yin, 2009).

Summary

Throughout this chapter, I presented the methodology for this study with specific data collection techniques. I selected a qualitative design with a case study approach. I collected the data using semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions. By choosing this approach, participants had the opportunity to share their experiences on the factors, which supported or hindered their efforts in securing affordable housing and other social services after they aged out of foster care. I explained the steps involved in conducting semi-structured interviews, particularly, interview protocol, recruitment of participants, and data collection. I also discussed my role as the researcher, how I obtained informed consent and assured the confidentiality of the data collected and

analyzed, along with other ethical procedures. In chapter four, I provided the findings from interviews and highlighted themes as they became available.

Chapter 4: Results

Throughout this chapter, I present my data analysis and findings relating to the experiences of African American foster care women who aged out of foster care, a foster parent, a social worker, and a leader of a social services program. A key focus of this case study was to get a broader understanding of the access to social support services relating to housing for foster youth who aged out of foster care. Each case provided information in its context and helped me to gain a holistic view of the phenomenon under study (Abma & Stake, 2014). The findings from the study provided information that can assist foster care professionals and policy makers to improve housing services. In this chapter, I also present the research setting, ethical considerations, participant's demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and results from findings. I conclude with a summary of the chapter.

All ethical guidelines were adhered to as discussed in previous chapters. Barton, Chun, Abbott, and Siau-Teng (2016) noted that researchers have the responsibility to adhere to the ethical code of conduct, protect the privacy of all participants, and know the fundamental research principles: respect for the person, beneficence, justice, and respect for communities. The Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted approval for data collection for this study on September 14, 2016 (IRB Approval No. 09-14-16-0026902).

Research Question

The research question guiding the study was the following:

RQ1. What are the lived experiences of African American foster care women in seeking help for social support services after aging out of foster care?

Setting

I conducted the research in Miami-Dade County, Florida, collecting the data between September and October 2016. Flyers were hand delivered and posted at laundry mats, supermarkets, and churches where foster care youth congregate. In making every effort to ensure the meeting place was convenient for participants, all interviews were held in a private room at a library in close proximity to the participant's work locations.

Subsequent to IRB approval, I provided participants with information to help them decide if they wished to participate in the research study. Once the participants agreed to the interview, I forwarded an e-mail containing the informed consent form for their review. I kept a log with the participants' code names to ensure confidentiality in a secured placed in my home office. After reviewing the informed consent document, I requested that they return it to me, indicating on the form "I consent to interview." Prior to conducting the interviews, I again revisited the form with each participant to ensure that they had a clear understanding of the expectations and processes. I also informed the participants of their ability to stop the interview at any time for any reason without any reprisal and provided contact information for free and low-cost community resource agencies in case participants experienced stress or anxiety during or after the interview.

Participants' Demographics

I interviewed a total of seven participants, four African American foster care women who aged out of foster care and three African American supporting adults: one foster parent, one social worker, and one leader of a social services program. Table 1 summarizes the participant's demographic information. I assigned a letter and a number

combination to each participant to protect her identity and honor the confidentiality agreement and use this reference throughout this document.

Table 1

Participants' Demographics

Participant	Gender	Age	Education	Employed	Length of time in Care
B1	F	23	College	Yes	10 years
B2	F	25	Juris Doctor (JD)	Yes	6 years
B3	F	22	College	Yes	7 years
B4	F	25	GED	Yes	12 years
D1	F	56	Master	Yes	Director of local program
D2	M	49	Bachelor	Yes	Social Worker
D3	F	59	Ph.D.	Yes	Foster Parent

All African American foster care women were between the ages of 22 to 25 years old and currently employed. Educational levels spanned from advanced degrees to those enrolled in GED classes at a local college. The number of foster care placements varied from 4 to 18 over the span of their care. Their entrance in foster care ranged from 6 to 11-years-old, with each expressing unique experiences while in care. Of the other volunteers, the foster parent had her own business, the social worker worked for the Department of Children and Families, and the director of a social services program worked at a local university.

Recruitment

I used purposeful and snowball sampling to select four African American foster care youth who fit criteria for this study (between 18-25-years-old and live in Miami-Dade area). The purposeful sample assisted me in securing the first participant. All other participants became involved using snowballing techniques (Heckathorn, 2011; Sandler et al., 2010). Lee-Jen (2012) suggested that purposeful sampling is best employed when engaging smaller sample sizes. I noted the criteria for this study on a flyer posted at sites including bulletin boards in local parks, laundry mats, supermarket stores, and cafes where foster care youth normally congregate (Appendix G). I anticipated the loss, misplacing, or discarding of some flyers and increased the number I distributed to approximately 30 flyers. My hope was that at least one person would make contact, agree to be involved in the study, and refer other participants who met the study criteria (Heckathorn, 2011; Sandler et al., 2010). I achieved the goal of recruiting four African American women who aged out of foster care, one foster parent, one social worker, and one director of a social support services over a 3-week time frame (from September 14 to October 31, 2016). Recruitment of foster parent, social worker, and director of social services program were done through referrals from participants.

Data Collection

The first candidate to contact me was a foster care alumnus. All other participants came by way of referral. During the initial moments of the interviews, I asked each participant to review and sign the informed consent form, giving me permission to conduct, take notes, and tape record the meeting. I asked the participants if they had any questions or concerns before I started the interview. Before beginning, I gave the

participants time to ask any question. I had two sets of 10 open-ended questions, one set for the African American foster care youth (Appendix A) and the other set for the foster parent, social worker, and leader of a social services program (Appendix B). Based on the participants' responses, I asked additional probing questions to get a deeper understanding of their experiences. The interview times ranged from 30 to 45 minutes. I took notes during the interview to cross reference tape-recorded data. At the end of each interview, I thanked them for their time and for sharing their experiences. I offered each participant a bag of toiletries as approved by IRB (Appendix G). Following each interview, I retrieved the data from the recording device, uploaded into my computer, and transcribed within 48 to 72 hours as suggested by Tessier (2012).

One issue occurred when I scheduled a meeting with a social worker referred to me by another participant, because after she had read the informed letter of consent, she canceled the interview. She confirmed she did not work with foster care youth, therefore, would not be a good candidate for my study. She agreed to refer a colleague who does work with the population. However, I followed up with her via phone call and e-mail, and she did not respond.

Data Analysis

Beginning with myself as an instrument, I used the inductive, naturalistic inquiry approach of collecting data. Abma and Stake (2014) noted that the naturalistic approach concentrates on the particularities of the case. The central task is to explore the uniqueness of each case (Alma & Stake, 2014). Simons (1980) stated that case study constitutes "the science of the singular" (p. 3). It provides a clearer understanding of the distinctiveness of each case from multiple perspectives, leading to the meaning and

context of that particular case (Abma & Stake, 2014). Recognizing that I did not know enough about the complexity and particularities of the case in advance, the naturalistic approach helped me to identify issues that emerged from the answers to the interview questions (Abma & Stake, 2014).

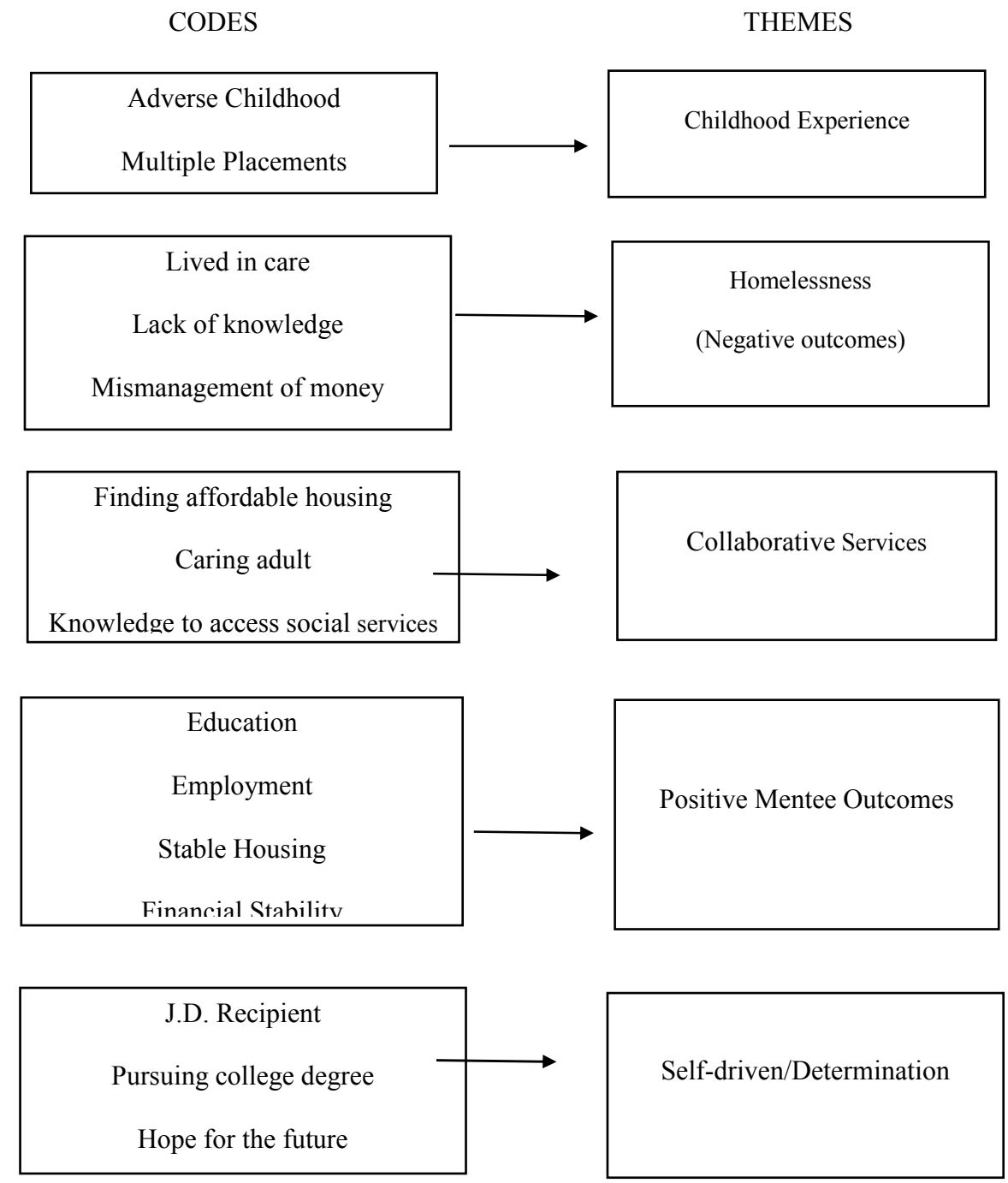
I used the five-step approach suggested by Saldana (2012) to analyze the data gathered. The approach included preparation, coding, member checking, interpreting results, and presenting the data (Saldana, 2012). I conducted a verbatim transcription of the data from the tape-recorded interviews. Saldana indicated that the coding process organizes and groups similar data into categories. Gibbs (2011) noted that researchers use categories to recognize trends, identify similar words, and discover new themes. I generated the codes by asking the same 10 questions to participants B1, B2, B3, and B4 (African American foster care women) and a different set of 10 questions to the other group. Using a comparative analysis, I identified similarities in the responses of participants.

In the process of analyzing the data from the four African American participants, I identified 36 words. I wrote each word on a piece of paper and placed them on a table. After reviewing the words, I realized that some did not fit into any identified categories. Following a review of Saldana's (2012) data analysis procedure, I reviewed recorded interviews a second time and captured phrases to identify codes and categories in context. Alma and Stake (2014) explained that placing data in context provides a clearer understanding of the meaning of the experiences. I reviewed tape-recorded interviews to establish first cycle coding and identify second cycle coding, using the 36 words as points of reference.

I identified codes through word repetitions, keywords, comparison, metaphors, analogies, phrases, and connectors (Gibbs, 2011). I coded open-ended responses by taking the exactly phrased comments to derive the semantic context sentiment. This process allowed me to code open-ended responses categorized and develop them into themes by the level of relevance and frequency. The relevant categories aligned with the interview questions and their relationship to each theme.

During the second cycle of coding, I identified 15 phrases that captured the four African American women's lived experiences in context. I wrote them on pieces of paper, highlighted the phrases in yellow, and laid them on a table. Throughout this process, I looked at similarities and differences to get a general sense of the data. When I identified repetitious words, I grouped them together in categories in context. During this process, I jotted down ideas and thoughts as they came to mind. Yin (2012) stated that it is important to write thoughts in the margin to guide the coding process. I categorized the information and identified similar concepts from the information the participants provided. Linking themes and patterns created five overarching themes as noted in Table 2. I allowed assimilation of new information into the findings and continued until I reached saturation. Kolb (2012) noted that saturation occurs when no new information, themes or patterns emerge from the data.

Figure1: Coding – Thematic Outcomes



In Step 3, I made every effort to ensure that I maintained the quality of the empirical research. To establish credibility, I member checked the outcomes I had

determined with the participants. Saldana (2013) suggested that member checking increases credibility of the study. I e-mailed a summary to them to review and verify the validity of the content of their responses, as well as the results of the coding process. Each participant confirmed that the outcomes reflected the thoughts and experiences they wanted to convey.

In the fourth step, I looked at one category at a time and focused on the content of each. In order to interpret the results and draw meaning from them, Saldana (2012) noted that the researchers could compare, contrast, and cluster patterns and themes. They are also able to use metaphors and look for negative and discrepant cases (Saldana, 2012). The last step culminated the findings of my research and provided recommendations to support foster care youth in accessing social support services related to housing in their transition to independent living.

Thematic Outcomes

Five emerging themes emerged from the second set of coding, which included childhood experiences, homelessness, collaborative social services, positive mentee outcomes, and self-driven/determination attitude. The overarching research question guiding the study was the following:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of African American foster care women in seeking help for social support services after aging out of foster care?

I developed 10 interview questions from the research question to understand the lived experiences of African American foster care women had with social support in their quest to find housing after they aged out of foster care. To provide a deeper

understanding and capture participants lived experience, I interjected additional probing questions.

Theme: 1 Childhood Experiences

By design, foster care should be a short-term solution to keep children safe until resolution of family concerns occurs. Unfortunately, many children remain in foster care placement for many years because the family fails to complete their assigned treatment programs (Smith, 2011). Generally, children enter the foster care system involuntary because of their biological or legal guardian's inability to care for them (Smith, 2011). Child welfare workers place children into involuntary care if they witness or experience physical or psychological harm by family members or caregivers (Smith, 2011). Children in foster care live in a variety of placement settings, including individual family, group, or residential homes (Smith, 2011). They can move among multiple settings while in care. To compound the difficulties, foster care children often experience abuse, neglect, abandonment, learning disabilities, instabilities, limited life skills, academic and social skills while in care facilities (Casey Family Programs, 2010).

Each participant's entry into the foster care system was unique. All four participants reported abuse or neglect perpetrated by their biological parents, led to their placement in foster care. Some participants responded to open-ended questions in detail, while others required additional questions to elicit more information (Appendix B).

Participant B1 is a 23-year-old college student. She was born and raised in Miami. She entered the foster care system at 8 years old and experienced a total of 18 placements. She entered foster care because of her mother's deportation to Haiti and her

father's neglect in taking care of her and her siblings After she aged out of foster care, she wanted to get away from her environment, so she relocated to Tallahassee, Florida. She enrolled in college and shared an apartment with another student. Her monthly stipend from Florida of $1,256 covered her bills and living expenses. She moved out of her apartment after she had an argument with her roommate. Subsequently, she became homeless. After sleeping in her car for several weeks, she decided to move back to Miami. She felt that there were more resources for foster care youth in Miami. She became involved with the Panthering Pride Program while attending Florida International University. Currently, she is a full-time student at FIU, where she is pursuing a degree in communications. She is proud of her accomplishments and is a role model for her younger sister and brother.

The foster care women reported that they entered foster care at different ages and had several placements while they were in care.

B1, participant stated,

> I had a total of 18 placements throughout my foster care years. That may sound a lot, but I know foster youth with 30 plus placements. Oftentimes, it would be the foster parent that causes us to leave…if they didn't like something that we did…they wanted us to leave and in some cases, if it was me then I would let my social worker know and depending on the circumstances, the social worker would find another home.

Participant B2 is 25 years old. She was born and raised in Miami to a drug addicted mother and an absent father. She entered foster care at 12 years old and had 4 placements. She remained in care until she aged out at age 18. She stated that she did not

have the best experience in foster care. However, she tried to make the best of her situation as she worked to develop proper life skills. After she graduated from high school, she relocated to Tallahassee, Florida, where she attended Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU). The counsels from her judge in juvenile court propelled her interest to pursue a law degree. She felt that the judge went above and beyond for her and she wanted to give back to children in foster care. She received a scholarship to attend law school. She graduated with a Juris Doctorate degree in May 2015 and passed the bar examination in February 2016. Currently, she works in a local organization in Miami as counsel for foster youth with dependency and delinquency cases.

B2 responded to the same question,

> I had three placements in the foster care system and in between I had a brief stay with some cousins. I was still in foster care…it was relative care…so with that it would be four placements.

Participant B3 is 22 years old. She was born in Washington, North Carolina and grew up in Miami, Florida. She entered foster care at 11 years old and had a total of 5 placements. Her mother neglected her, and her father was absent from the home. She has a 5-year-old daughter and is currently a senior at Florida International University (FIU) where she is pursuing a degree in criminal justice. She is grateful that she did not experience homelessness because her mentor referred her to Casa Valentina (an affordable housing and life skills program for at-risk youth and youth transitioning from foster care) after she aged out of foster care. She learned many skills that she is using today. Currently, she works at an agency that supports children in foster care.

B3 offered,

> I have been in foster care from 11 years old. I aged out when I was 18 years old. Prior to that, I was in and out of foster care. I had about 5 placements while I was in care. I entered foster care because my mother would leave me and my 8 siblings in our home at nights. My mother and my step-father were on drugs. My mother wanted to leave him, so he called the police and told them that my mother was leaving us at nights in our home. It was difficult… my youngest sister and I were placed in the same home. My other siblings were split up. I am thankful that my aunt adopted my 4 younger siblings. They live with her in North Carolina. So 5 of us went through the foster care system. We all aged out now and on our own. They all are doing very well.

Participant B4 is 25 years old. She was born and raised in Miami. She grew up in an abusive home. She entered foster care at 6 years old when her mother went to prison for murder. She aged out at the age of 18 and had multiple placements while in care. She felt like she was always on the move. Over the years, she has developed a close bond with her brother. They are best friends and now share an apartment together. She is currently working on her relationship with her mother. She has forgiven her for not being there for her and her brother. She is taking one day at a time to mend the broken relationship. She is currently enrolled in a GED class at the local college and works at a local agency (Appendix A). In response to the same question, B4 said,

> I grew up in a very abusive, neglectful, everything you can basically think of in that type of housing situation with my biological family. I went through everything…hmmm….from foster home to foster

> home. I had about 9 placements. At about the age of 12…I went to a group home. Actually, the group home was one of the best things for me. I stayed there until I aged out….until I was 18. I was a run-away, very troubled as they would say…hmm...that was the reason for me moving around so much.

The foster care women had strong feelings about their intake into the foster care system. Notwithstanding their challenges, they were extremely open with their responses and happy to share their experiences. They were happy that someone took the time to sit down and listen to them. They hope this study will provide information that will help enhance services for youth aging out of care.

B1 reported that she did not have a good relationship with her biological parents which resulted in a strained relationship. B1 reported that during her foster years she did not have contact with her biological parents until she was 17 years old. B2 discussed how she did not have a relationship with her biological parents. "I could hold a grudge…and I held a grudge…I felt like my parents let me down. It is a work in progress now with my mom…with my dad…we don't have much of a relationship…we are cordial…that's about it." B4 said,

> I have a relationship with my mother…I am in contact with her now…I take care of her now…you know how the tables turn…but at the end of the day, you only have one mom. I was too young to understand so now I do. I forgive her for not being there for me and my brother. She is out of prison…we have been through a lot together. I do not have a relationship with my father.

Theme 2: Homelessness

Youth exiting foster care system are an exceptionally vulnerable group of young adults (Spencer, Collins, Ward & Smashnaya, 2010). The literature revealed foster care youth experience a myriad of negative outcomes after they exit the foster care system (Collins & Ward, 2011; Jones, 2013; Krebs & Pitcoff, 2012; Richards, 2014). Although agencies developed programs to assist foster care youth after they age out of the system, many continue to experience negative outcomes such as homelessness, incarceration, unemployment, and welfare dependency (Collins & Ward, 2011; Krebs & Pitcoff, 2012; Smith, 2011). Researchers suggested more focus on transitional living services will help to eliminate some of the negative outcomes.

Three out of four participants (B1, B2, and B4) experienced homelessness after aging out of foster care. They expressed that they became homeless because they mismanaged funds or did not maintain at least a 2.0 GPA. B1 stated,

> I became homeless for about one month because my roommate and I had an argument and I moved out of the apartment. It was difficult…I showered at school, ate at Dunkin Donuts where I worked at the time and slept in my car…. behind a building adjacent to the Dunkin Donuts building. No one knew I was homeless.

B2 responded

> I became homeless for a brief time….It was for about 10 days. Part of it was my fault….mismanaging money. So going into my sophomore year I moved off campus and I would get my stipend ($892) that Department of Children and Family (DCF) would give us… and I loan some money to

> someone…expecting to get it back in time to move into my apartment.…well, that didn't happen…so what I did was…I slept in my car for about 10 days...during the days I hang out with my friends at their home…it seems like I was there visiting…hanging out but literally at nights I would park my car behind the apartment complex and sleep in my car.

B4 said,

> I lost my RTI (housing stipend) because I did not go to school…also I did not provide the paperwork in time…everything is time sensitive…and you have to have cooperation with the person you are living with. For example, if the caseworker said she needs a lease…then the person you are living with must provide lease in a timely manner. In my case, it didn't work out…my half-sister put me out because of money issues. I became homeless again…for a very long time…about 2 years.

Looking back, the foster care young women stated that they did not have to become homeless because the stipend they received was enough to pay their rent. However, they were not responsible or accountable to themselves, or they did not have the skills and knowledge on how to prioritize.

B1 added,

> 1 did not have to become homeless because I had enough money to get another apartment…I wanted to do things my way. I wasn't accountable to myself. I wasn't sure what to do; should I stay in Tallahassee with limited resources for aged out foster care youth or should I return to Miami where

> there are more resources. I knew I had to be accountable to myself. I had to look out for me because no one else would do it….so I made the decision to move back to Miami and was directed to the Fostering Panther Pride Program at Florida International University (FIU). This program has been a blessing. I am doing well. I hope to graduate next fall with a Bachelor in Communication.

B4 had a similar response in that she lost her stipend because she did not maintain the 2.0 GPA. She offered,

> I became homeless a couple of months before my 18th birthday. Luckily, my house parent took me in. I was fortunate enough to have them help me with a place to live...but you know….around that time that I was aging out ….a lot of things changed…people changed and everything went sideways…so once that didn't work out…I eventually became homeless. I didn't have anybody to talk to nor did I attend school. I am raised in Over-town, Miami …I knew all of the homeless shelters in that area…so I put myself in a shelter. From there I was given a couple days to get straight…they asked me what are you going to do with your life…and it is up to you…it is your life…you have to take control of it. When you are in a shelter, they give you specific days to leave. They give you 14 days to stay there… or if you are lucky you may get 3 months. In my case, the most I had was 14 days.

Two foster care women stated their motivation caused them to seek social service programs to help them with their housing needs. They also said the stigma of being in

foster care prevented foster care youth from seeking access to social services. In their narrative, B1explained,

> I was motivated to get my own place to live. …I was attentive to what the social workers had to say. I asked questions about the Independent Living Program. I got the information I needed to receive stipend for housing. I am also motivated to complete my Bachelors and pursue my Master's degree.

B2 said,

> The Independent Living Program helped me find housing. They help foster youth find housing typically in the range of the stipend. My stipend was $1,256 per month. If you ask for help you will get it, if you don't ask for help then you won't get it. You have to be accountable to yourself. You are pretty much on your own…you learn the hard way if you don't listen. But I think people don't ask for help because they feel the stigma of foster care…they have been in foster care all their life and now they aged out and just want to get away. I am not afraid to ask for help. I ask where can I go to get these resources. No-one is going to ask for you…you have to take the initiative to do it.

B3 who now works in the social system added that her current work with foster care youth revealed the system is not necessarily responsible. The youth purchase expensive clothing before they pay their rent. In addition, many lack motivation to attend school. Prioritization is an issue for them resolve. B3 suggested, "it behooves them to do well.. I try to motivate them from my own experiences".

Theme 3: Collaborative Social Services

There is an emerging consensus on the importance of collaborative services and resources for youth aging out of care (Blakeslee, 2012; Jones, 2014). Engagement in social support network provides a basis to link foster youth with all the services and support needed for successful transition (Richards, 2014). Although foster care youth continue to experience multiple negative outcomes including homelessness, the literature captures one important factor that will help reduce negative outcomes. The social support network provides needed resources for buffering unexpected challenges and obstacles. Jones (2014) suggested the availability of social support network bolsters the capacity to withstand the challenges of life. Maintaining contact with family members and friends, belonging to an organization, accessing available services and resources, and continuing relationships with social workers are critical components to developing effective strategies to nurture foster care youth as they transition to independent living.

The aforementioned theme of collaborative social services for foster care is an important part of achieving stable housing for foster care youth (Curry & Abrams, 2014). Social support networks will also help foster care youth pursue educational and career opportunities (Curry & Abrams, 2014). The foster care women felt linkages to collaborative services would help foster care youth achieve their educational, housing and employment goals. B1discussed,

> The Panthering Pride Program at my local university assists foster care youth in accessing all the services they need. For example, when I first came to the university, I needed help with budgeting and other life skills. I

> was referred to other services that helped me to secure housing and health care services.

B2's response was,

> In my current job as counsel for foster care youth. I ensure they have the services they need by connecting them with different agencies. Each foster care needs are different. Collaborative services are extremely important as each foster youth receive the needed services. After counseling with them, I identify their needs and immediately make contact with the agencies. My goal is to ensure they receive the services they need so they can focus on their educational goals.

Theme 4: Positive Mentee Outcomes

Recent researchers identified mentoring as a critical element that foster care alumni needs (Jones, 2014). Foster youth with an adult mentor for at least 2 years prior to age 18 and after they aged out of foster care experienced positive outcomes (Jones, 2014; Spence et al. 2010). Avery (2011) took it further, pointing how the process of connecting youth to an adult as they enter care is advantageous. At a minimum, making this connection should be part of any youth's independent living program since it helps to bolster social support (Avery, 2011; Jones, 2014). Providing mentorship care will help foster youth achieve skills needed to cope with the stress of independent living. Previous studies revealed family members, and caregiver's support is crucial for a successful transition into adulthood (Collins & Ward, 2011; Hawkins, Catalano & Miller, 2010; Smith, 2010). Without this support and guidance, foster care youths run the risk of negative outcomes.

Jacobson et al. (2013) stated foster care children who experience stable well-functioning foster homes tend to develop strong social and emotional connections. Research conducted by the Casey Foundation revealed children living in healthy environments experience physical and emotional stability (The Annie Casey Foundation, 2012). These experiences contribute to building strong coping mechanisms that continue to support foster youth when they leave the system. Conversely, foster children who experience unhealthy environments tend to have challenges coping with life after they exit the foster care system. All four AA women described their positive outcome due to having a mentor. B1 replied,

> My social worker was my mentor. He checked in frequently to see how I was doing. Just a few words to the heart, that is what stuck out to me. I was depressed at times, he would talk to me...he told me to write what I was feeling on paper…that really helped me. The workload of case workers is high… so they don't get to spend the time with each foster youth. My mentor encouraged me to remain focus on my dreams and goal. Her interest to see me succeed made me pay attention. I was attentive to what my mentor had to say. I was able to apply some skills in real life situations. I didn't realize I had these skills until I used them. I think foster care should have something in the school system so we could learn it.

B2 responded,

> At that time, the agency that I was with was Charlie, they are no longer around but my caseworker…she was awesome. Whenever I needed any type of funding, she made sure I got it. She was always ready to listen and

> provide advice. What I tried to do...I treated it like a reciprocal relationship. I would go to school, study hard and get good grades and in return when I needed help I wouldn't have any problem with the help I needed. That worked out well Also, through a local organization in Miami, I had a local mentor but when I went to Tallahassee because he was still in Miami, he referred me to a mentor in Tallahassee. She took me under her wings. She helped me find a job…she knew many people. During Thanksgiving break, she invited me to spend time with her family. Up to this day, we still keep in contact. She is a great person. I am happy I had her in my live when I needed someone to look out for me.

B3 stated that her mentor was a therapist. At first, she was not happy with having a therapist because she felt that only people who were crazy need a therapist. The relationship they developed helped to prepare her for independent living. B3 stated,

> I am glad you ask that question. Growing up in foster care, I always wanted a mentor. I was a new mom…with a new apartment…I needed some guidance. My case manager at the time suggested that I get a mentor. My group home did not agree with us having mentors. I guess they did not want anyone strange in the group home. So when I aged out of foster care I received a phone call from a local organization…this is the company I am working at now. They asked me if I wanted a mentor. They said they saw my name on a waiting list and wanted to know if I was still interested. I was like yes….I am still interested…so they matched me with

> a mentor. She was awesome. She is now my best friend. I can call her anytime for advice.

B4 added,

> Well, in foster care I had a therapist. I said…I don't want a therapist…I am not crazy...that's what I said…you know I was young. The therapist was very tough on me but I am thankful. for the values she taught me. I believe I began to look at things differently. She had me go to a life skills class every Thursday at a church. After class, we went to Pizza Hut….that was cool because we never got out the house where I lived. The life skills class taught me several things. I was in 9th grade at the time…sadly, they stopped it because of limited funding. Other than that, I was not prepared for life beyond the system. I did not know how to cook. My foster parent did not allow me in the kitchen…she said…get out the kitchen…so I never learned to cook. I did not know how to budget. They had a class for budgeting…but you know when you are young you don't really care or pay attention to things like budgeting and writing a check. I think they should teach us things like that at about 16, 17 years old not 11 and 12 years old…. or if they begin at 11 years old continue with life skills class.

B4 described the local organization she works for as having a mentorship program to help foster care children. They have a keen interest to see foster care youth succeed. Their caring attitude has helped foster care youth succeed. B4 stated,

> …when your own family doesn't treat you like family you can go to the local agency and feel comfortable. I wish there were more organizations like this…but it is not…but we try to get there. Thank God that we are in a position in this organization to help anyone who walks through the doors. Every staff member can help with different issues that foster care youth has. We have been through similar experiences so we can empathize and let them understand that we have been there and we know what they are going through and that we are there to help them.

Theme 5: Self-driven/Determination

Developing one's own voice and acting in their best interest can become challenging for a transitioning foster care youth if they remain unable to learn self-advocacy skills. Previous studies suggested that acting as a self-advocate may enhance educational and housing choices and familial relationships (Day et al., 2012; Jones & Gragg, 2012; Krebs, Pitcoff & Shalof, 2013). Krebs et al. (2013) described self-advocacy as "the process of analyzing a problem or situation critically; identifying one's goals; planning a strategy that addresses the needs of every party involved; and, based on this analysis and planning, taking action to achieve one's goals" (p.2). The principles of self-advocacy remain the same in simple and complex situations from seeking affordable housing, applying for a job, negotiating a contract, obtaining a scholarship for school, navigating the complex health care system or disputing a bill (Krebs et al., 2013). Foster care youth who develop self-advocacy skills have a better sense of self-reliance, take advantage of social support services, and have clear plans for self-sufficiency (Krebs et al., 2013).

B3 replied,

> Before I had my baby I was very shy. I did not speak up for myself. I did not know how to advocate for myself. I felt like self-advocacy should be taught early because it really helped me. In fact, I am trying to train my daughter to speak up for herself. I think…if I knew how to advocate for myself maybe I wouldn't had so many bad experiences. When I learned to express how I feel and demand respect then I began to receive respect. Self-advocacy is very important. In fact, I am teaching my daughter to speak up and not be shy…I told her…you have to say exactly how you feel.

B4 has been with a local organization since she was 15 years old. She stated that the goal of the organization is to help young people aging out of foster care mature into successful members of their community. She is happy that she can give back to young people in foster care. Her goal is to work hard every day and advocate for herself and foster care youth. She is currently enrolled in GED class at Miami Dade Community college. B4 responded "My goal is to provide support for foster care young people. This is a great opportunity for me … Although it is difficult, I am making steps every day to a brighter future".

Good Experiences in Group Homes

I asked the foster care women about their experiences in their group home. Three women reported experiencing a loving and caring environment. They all stated that the group home had a house parent, a case worker, and a counselor/therapist. The women felt

they developed many life skills there. B4 stated that the group home prepared her for independent living.

> I am thankful that I had a house parent who actually treated me like her own. I am really glad I met her. She showed us how to cook, clean, budget, write a check…all type of things like that. The case manager told us about the Independent Living Scholarship and all that stuff like that. That is how I knew about the scholarship. I had a good relationship with one of the social workers. I trusted her because she cared about me. I did not felt that love or care in the different foster home I was placed in.

When I inquired about their quest to find affordable housing, subsequent contact with social support services, B3 answered,

> …in terms of access to social support services in finding affordable housing, I did…but did not have good support from foster care. After I had my daughter at 16 years old…. I was referred to early start program name Young Parent Project (YPP). I liked them because they had a social worker, a therapist and a nurse. I was young…I did not know what to do as a new mother. They taught me several things…how to nurture my baby…how to take care of her…how to teach her motor skills. They gave me diapers. It is not just about having a baby but how to take care of her, how to love her, how to care for her and balance everything else in my life. It is a great program. That program still exists, however, funding was reduced. I am not sure how it is now. Through that program, my social worker referred me to a new program for foster care young people who

> aged out and did not have a place to live. It was at Casa Valentina. I was the first mother who went into that program. I was like a guniea pig. They never had a foster care mother there. I was still in high school. My stipend was $892 per month. My new 2 bedroom 2 bath was $350 per month. I was very excited. I stayed there for about 21/2 years. I am thankful for the people who helped shaped my life.

Broader Exploration

Abma and Starke (2014) suggested that within its context, each case is singular, but it has parts. For example, foster care youth have relationships with foster parents, social workers, and leaders of a social services programs. These groups are of such significance they each require additional study (Abma & Starke, 2014). The ecological framework described by Brofenbrenner (1979) promoted the idea that the child, their environment, and the interaction with one another influence their outcomes. Schwandt (2001) suggested this understanding comes from an interpretivist tradition that all human beings are active and engaged interpreters of their world. The phenomenon under study does not happen in a vacuum, but endows meaning to the study, while bringing to light a shared understanding of the phenomena under study.

Interviews with Supportive Adults

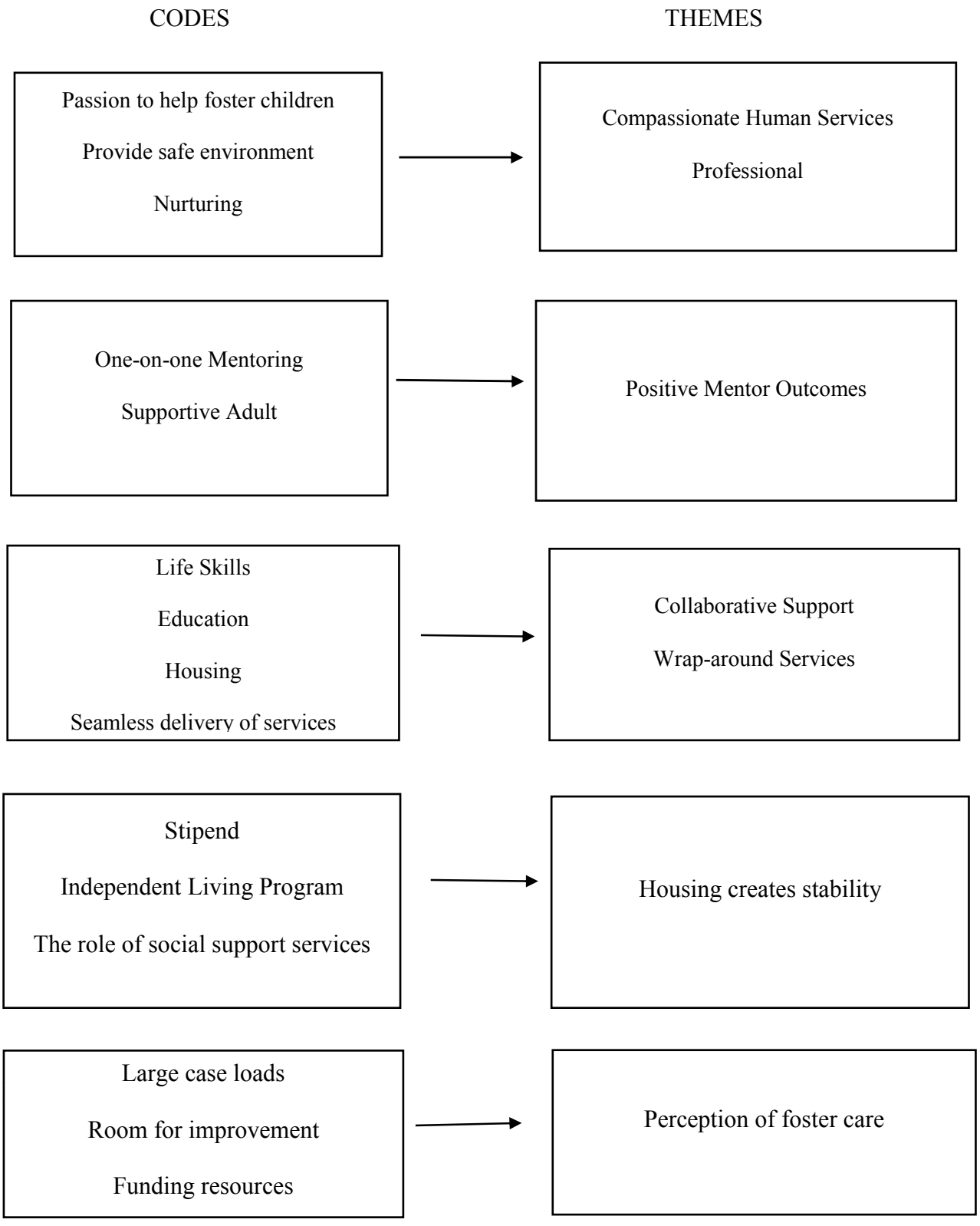
Lastly, I conducted interviews with three supporting adults; a foster parent, social worker, and director of a social services program, who scholars identified as instrumental in their transition to independent living. The aim was not to check the validity of what the four women said, but to complement the case from different standpoints (Green, Krider & Mayer, 2011). I based the selection of the foster parent, social worker, and the director of a

social services program on the paramount role each one played in the life of a foster care youth. I interviewed these adults with the hope to get a deeper understanding of their role in assisting foster youth in the transitional process and identify potential changes in policy and procedures to improve positive outcomes for all children in foster care.

From Coding to Emerging Data

I generated codes by asking a set of ten questions (Appendix B) to participants D1, D2 and D3 (director of social services program, social worker, and foster parent, respectively). Using a comparative analysis, I identified similarities in the responses of participants. Below diagram shows codes and themes:

Figure 2. Codes and Themes



Theme 1: Compassionate Human Service Professionals

I asked the director of a local social support program, social worker, and foster parent why they selected a career in the field and what they would like to accomplish in their roles. The responses were similar, as each person spoke with passion about their career and the role they played in improving outcomes for foster care children. Participant 5, DI, is a program director of a social services program at a local university. She is 56 years old and has a Master's degree in social work. Her role as a program director is to help foster care alumni navigate the university's resources and empower them to accomplish their academic goals using tailored support services. In her role, she helps foster care youth navigate the university's policies and procedures pertaining to admissions, financial aid, registration, and housing.

D1 responded,

> I selected the field of social work because I like to help people and I like to see results. I really have a passion helping this population. I completed both of my internships within the child welfare system and that developed my passion even more. I am now the director of a local program at the University. My team's main goal is to help young people beat the odds. We focus solely on helping students navigate the myriad services inside and outside the university. It gives us great joy when we have a success story. For example, a young lady came to our university from Miami-Dade Community College. She felt alone and scared. She lived in six different foster homes after the state removed her from her home when she was in elementary school. Both parents were in jail for drugs. She met with our

> team. We wasted no time. She is doing very well. Having that extra support…someone you can call on is very important.

Participant 6, D2 is a social worker with over 27 years' experience. He has a Bachelor's degree in social work. He works with foster care children and youth during and after they aged out of the foster care system. His passion is to see foster care children succeed. His main goal is to assure other involved parties hear their voice. He connects foster youth to critical services for successful transitions. Also, his objective is to blend his voice with foster care youth voices to bring about changes in the overall system.

D2 responded,

> Well, I started in the social services system ever since high school. Really, I volunteered at this group home program. I really liked the experience with the kids. I developed a special love and desire to work with them. Many of these children were abused and neglected. I felt that they needed a voice to echo their experiences. I became one of those voices. After I graduated high school I began to work at the Elaine Gordon program which took care of sexually offended youth. Subsequently, I went to work for CERTs, an alternative program for kids with mental health status as well as foster care kids. I have been working with this population since 1985. I keep an open relationship with them after they age out of care. We have a program specific for young people after they aged out of foster care. It is called the Independent Living Program (ILP).

D3, Participant 7 is a foster mother. She is also the owner of a school, which takes care of children and youth with developmental disabilities. She has a Pd.D. from a local

university. Her goal is to provide a loving and caring environment for the children in her care. The mission of her organization is to offer a full array of support services including tutoring, counseling, food, and clothing. Her goal is to build positive relationships through equity and compassion, which enhances the self-esteem, safety, and well-being of children in her care. D3 spoke about the passion she has for children in her care and her role as a foster mother. She stated,

> I am a former teacher and a reading specialist. I moved into (Exceptional Student Education (ESC) during my career. Fortunately, through my work, I became the administrator of the year for Miami-Dade County. While working as an ESC teacher, I found several foster kids who were trying to make it through school, but they just did not have the support and the foundation that they needed. So it led me into that area of foster care. I left the school system in 2003, and I became the director of a foster care agency. I became their grant writer, and from there I began to write and study the challenges of foster care children. Subsequently, I left the foster care agency, and I began working with the developmentally disabled students, and from there I began transportation service…transporting them to school. There was a lack of transportation providers for them to get to school… so in transporting them, I went to a lot of agencies that provided their education, and in the back of my head, I would always say…I have a license as a school principal…but I would never exercise it. It was my 81-year-old mom that said one day… "stop complaining and do something about it". So, I opened an agency for students with disabilities, and today

> we are a school for developmentally disabled students. In addition to all of this, I am a dedicated foster mother. My goal is to see these young people be a successful adult after they aged out of foster care."

All three participants stated that one-on-one mentorship with an adult during and after transition would help reduce negative outcomes. In their narrative, they spoke about the positive impact of having a mentor. They stated that the one-on-one mentorship is essential in achieving successful outcomes for foster care youth. A study conducted by Spencer et al. (2009) revealed mentoring programs matching youth with caring adults is a major step in promoting stability and self-sufficiency.

Theme 2: One-on-One Mentoring

One of the major themes, which emerged from the data as predictors of a positive outcome is a mentorship program. D1 replied,

> Well, because education is crucial to life-long fulfillment for foster care youth, it must receive a great amount of attention. My university is an educational setting. My goal as the director of the social services program is to provide an open access for youth with foster care background and homeless youth to pursue their educational goals. When I say open access, I mean support within the university, not an extension of the foster care system. An emphasis on education is vital to future success, sustaining independence and developing intellectual skills. Foster care youth should be expected to graduate from high school and pursue higher education if they wish. They should be given all the support they need to make an informed decision. Another critical element is working with different

> agencies to ensure all the resources are available to the foster care youth when they need it. Having access to these resources is essential to the well-being of the foster care youth.

D2 stated that foster care youth needs tools to help them navigate the challenges of independent living.

> Linking foster youth with a mentor support specialist would be one of the best ways to help foster youth navigate the challenges of independent living and help diminish negative outcomes. The mentor would educate the youth and help prepare them by providing the tools they need to succeed. For example, educate them about their rights, teach them how to become a self-advocate, teach them how to access funds for college, how to access housing services and how to find a job. I believe these things will help prepare youth for lasting independence. Preventing negative outcomes should be the number one priority for these youth. None of these youth should age out to homelessness. The Independent Living Program (ILP) provides a stipend for housing, however, many of these youth are not aware of the services of ILP. To educate or train youth for independence, workshop should be offered at least once per month, one year before the youth aged out of foster care. Attention to planning for higher education, careers, employment, and housing are important to discuss. It may be difficult at first to engage youth in preparing for their future, however, finding creative ways to get them involved is important.

Along those same lines, D3 agreed that a mentor is an incredible benefit to foster care youth. Spencer et al. (2010) found that foster care youth tend to fare better when they have a mentor than foster youth without mentors. Furthermore, foster care youth with mentors experience good health, educational attainment, housing stability, improvements in emotional and behavioral functioning and other positive outcomes (Spencer et al., 2010).

Theme 3: Collaborative support/Wrap-around Services

Another important element to improve positive outcomes for foster care youth is collaborative support from foster parents, caregivers, social workers, school liaisons, and agency advocates (Zetlin, Weinberg & Shea, 2010). The group would bring all their resources and expertise together, in an effort to improve the educational and housing programs for youth. Agencies that work together can accomplish great things (Zetlin et al., 2010). D1 highlighted the need for more communication and collaboration among participating agencies.

> I think this is a key approach in solving the problems that youth face. Children in foster care experience a myriad of challenges that include, abuse and neglect along with mental, social, and behavioral problems. they added, "Working as a team will allow agency liaison to focus on assessment of children when they enter care; caregivers will ensure that education opportunities are available to children in care, social workers will ensure youth receive the right support, and school liaison will identify the academic problems and implement solutions. The goal is to focus on the overall well-being of the foster care youth. For example, The Fostering

> Panther Pride program collaborates with other agencies such as Educate Tomorrow, Casa Valentino, and Camillus House. We talk to foster youth and find out what their needs are. We contact the different agencies that provide programs to satisfy those needs.

D2 stated,

> Fostering partnership with other agencies is a win-win for everyone involved since we all share in the same goal of the well-being of the foster child. The One-Stop Delivery System for foster youth is a good program. The system is designed to collaborate with different entities in a seamless process of delivery to ensure foster youth receive the services they need. Some of the entities that work together include Job Corps, Educate Tomorrow, Casa Valentina, CERTs and Elaine Gordon Program. I believe this collaboration is for the betterment of foster care youth because they can get the assistance they need by making one contact. The collaboration of different services improves efficiency and helps the applicant enhance their skills for employment. The pursuit of stable employment for foster youth would benefit them as they transition from foster care to independent living.

Along those same lines, D3 gave an example of how her agency collaborates with other agencies to provide services for foster care youth.

> Collaborating with different agencies that provide services for these youth is the key to successful transition. For example, my agency connects with other local agencies. We have a food pantry at our agency. We go to the

> local agencies and give out cards letting foster care students know of our food pantry program…when they are out of food for the month, they can come to our agency. Also, we let them know that they could come to our agency when they are out of school (like school holiday) and get packages of food for the whole month. You know what they say…"it takes a village to raise a child" well, that is so true…It takes a continuum of services…everyone working together to provide the services needed for successful independence. Foster care youth may have aged out physically, however, they are not mentally prepared to live on their own. They need help…they need a go to person for advise…a mentor…someone who can steer them in the right direction…someone that can share with them how things can be done.

This point made by D3 resonates with a point made by Esaki et al. (2012) that foster parents who do not have a clear understanding of their role and responsibilities in relation to the agency's mandates, experience communication problems with caseworkers. Youth in foster care, like any other young person, has dreams for a better future. They have the potential to become a contributing member of society. Krebs et al. (2013) noted that empowering foster youth to take on more responsibility and utilizing current resources is an approach that does not require additional funding. This will create a great impact for youth to essentially reduce homelessness and incarceration and increase the chance of successful independent living.

Many of the foster care youth have the potential and the will to become contributing members of society and even effect social change (Krebs et al., 2013).

However, the lack of support prevents them from advocating for themselves and taking on more responsibility for a successful independent future (Jones, 2013). Until foster youth receive the support they need, most young people aging out of the foster care system will not be ready for college or successful careers (Krebs et al., 2013).

Theme 4: Housing creates Stability

Studies have shown that foster youth continue to experience challenges in their transition to adulthood in several domains, including housing (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Curtis & Collins, 2011; Dworsky et al., 2013). Youth making the transition from foster care benefit from stable housing as it allows them to focus on their educational and employment opportunities while mastering self-sufficiency skills (Berzin, Rhodes & Curtis, 2011). Scholars are interested in the role social support services play in preparing youth as they age out of the foster care system. They have found the receipt of social services promotes positive connections that build lasting relationships (Curry & Abrams, 2015). Without stable housing, foster youth run the risks of incomplete educational goals, forced onto welfare, employment challenges, and financial dependency.

Although 30 % of Chafee Independence Living Program funds housing initiatives, foster youth continue to experience bouts of homelessness after they age out of foster care (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Jones, 2014). In response, participants shed some light on housing for emancipated foster care youth, D1 said,

> The Independent Living Program (ILP) has helped foster care youth make strides in a positive way. They learn life skills such as money management, budgeting, maintaining housing, access to healthcare services, cooking and nutrition, fitness, and recreation. It also helps

> participants seek a high school diploma or its equivalent, pursue higher education or appropriate vocational training.

She noted, “Although, it may need some tweaking, it has provided needed services for foster care children”. In response to the same question, D2 stated that he refers foster care youth to the ILP program. The feedback he receives from students is positive. “I try to walk through the process with the youth. I counsel them on what to do and what to expect. My goal is to connect them with all the services based on the needs. They need the life skills to help them in the transition process.”

Theme 5: Perception of the Foster Care System

In their narratives, each respondent spoke about their personal perception of the foster care system. Their views relate that they all felt the foster care system needed to place more focus on transitional services for foster care youth. The data suggested that there are many structured programs during the foster care years; however, the lack of structured transitional programs to help foster youth move from foster care to independent living promotes failure (Krebs et al., 2013). Jones (2013) posited youth in foster care have little knowledge of career goals, educational opportunities, housing, and budgeting. A successful transitional program would help foster youth develop skills to reach their full potential through programs such as career training, mentorship, life skills, and internship (Krebs et al., 2013).

D1 believed that although foster care provides many services, there is room for improvement. She thinks that the support for foster care youth after they aged out of foster care exists, however, lack of access to information is a major problem. Additionally, social workers carry heavy caseloads, oftentimes they are overwhelmed

with the process, and do not have the right resources. D1 stated, "providing information to this population is the key factor to help move foster care youth to successful independent living. There is definitely room for improvement in the foster care system. I believe if the people in charge of the foster care system focus on some of these key components, there will be an increase in positive outcomes and it will improve the overall perception of the foster care system."

D2 agreed with D1 that there are a number of social services available, however, foster care youth may not be aware of the services, therefore every effort must be made to connect them to available services. He suggested,

> There are many social support services available for foster care youth, however, a lot of them do not take advantage of the services. When they get to age 18, they just want to leave…they want to get out of foster care and do their own thing…and then they are lost, then when they want to get back in ...it is difficult. The foster kids are made aware of the available services…we make sure they are aware. We have a program for foster care youth who are aging out. Every department in Children and Family in the State of Florida has that opportunity that they can get that information at which they start at age 15. They can go into the extended foster care program or aftercare program, however, like I said, many of the youth don't take advantage, or they are not prepared by their foster parent... and the case workers have a big influence, however, their case loads are high, so they really deal with the kids that look like they have potential. Most of

> the kids just want to age out…they just want to move away…they want to cut ties and have nothing to do with foster care.

D3 highlighted how the foster care system has improved over the years. Foster care officials have listened to foster care youth and caregivers and implemented programs and services to improve the well-being of children in care. She added,

> D3 believes that the foster care system has improved over the years.

For example, they provide forums where young people can express themselves and talk about the challenges they experience D3 stated that "Maybe reducing caseload, improving working conditions and providing incentives will help to improve their relationship between foster care youth and social workers."

Research has shown transitional programs provide critical support during this important period (Curry & Abrams, 2015). Without such supports, foster care youth face immense challenges in navigating their move to independent living (Curry & Abrams, 2015). Although federal and state policies have improved the scope of services, decision makers need to continue to reduce negative outcomes for youth exiting care (Curry & Abrams, 2015).

Motivation and Accountability

D3 stated foster care youth need motivation and accountability to themselves.

> Many of them are eager to reach emancipation age so they can leave the foster care system…yet they do not pay attention to the important things to help them transition to successful independent living. One of the things I tried to do with the children I had…I tried to build a team for them…I always took them to church… so there are people there who is going to

> help…we went to the foster care forum together…. I went to all the meetings that had to do with my kids…I always went to court with my children. It is important for me to know what is going on…. I try not to create a disconnect between me and the system by not knowing what's going on. I can't help if I don't know. So that is important to have people…in fact, I think it should be a requirement that foster parent are in court, attend counseling sessions and attend all meeting with the kids. You can't parent a child if you don't know what is going on. I think being involved with the child will improve their motivation and make them more accountable for their actions.

In response to the question concerning their thoughts on the current social support services available and whether any social support service focuses on affordable housing for youth after they aged out of foster care, D1 stated that "there are a number of social services available. There have been improvements in social support services for youth exiting the foster care system. The collaborative efforts of different agencies promote job placement, career training, internship, and apprenticeship."

> The Independent Living Program (ILP) provides a stipend for housing to foster care youth as long as they are in school. The foster care youth must maintain at least a 2.0 GPA to receive a stipend. If GPA is not maintained, then they will lose their stipend. Without the stipend, they will not have enough funds to pay for housing. It is, therefore, imperative to talk to them about the importance of maintaining a good grade. Many of the former

> foster care youth I work with are trying their best. For the most part, they understand that they have to stay focus to do well.

D1's goal is to empower foster care youth to reach new heights. The university's Fostering Panther Pride program provides scholarships, grants or tuition exemptions to foster care youth who have "aged out" of the system and want to go to college. Jones (2014) noted that foster care youth had endured setbacks because of their past circumstances. To that point, the Fostering Panther Pride Program' director understands and provides a holistic solution that includes academic, physical, emotional, and mental needs.

D3 offered,

> you know when you have a young person who has been mistreated, neglected, abused with multiple placements, you have got to provide them with a supportive community so they can succeed. I also think that the wraparound services are important. I think that we need to follow them a little bit longer…. the students aged out at 18 or 21 years old and they are on their own receiving their RTI stipend and that just wasn't working because many of the youth doesn't follow through going to school…they were using the money in the wrong way. A lot of these youth fall through the crack…if they have bills to pay, they chose to spend money on pleasurable things as appose to paying their bills because they didn't understand the importance of paying their bills…so they eventually become homeless.

She articulated the need to teach youth how to prioritize, how to budget and how to focus on the things that are important.

Of the three supporting adults, D3 was a model case as she confirmed the ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) which reflects the interplay of multiple factors to support foster care youth; foster parents, social workers, case managers and other professional child welfare workers. D3 case was the most informative and provided substantial information to improve outcomes for foster care youth in their transition from foster care to independent living.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Data management is one of the core areas of responsible conduct of collecting data in a consistent, systematic, and ethical manner (Cridland et al., 2015). I maintained data on a password protected computer to ensure confidentiality and safe record keeping and kept a journal to track of all notes to maintain consistency throughout the project. Also, I stored the written data in my journal and tape recorder in a locked file cabinet in my home office. and I was the only one with keys to file cabinet. During this process, I upheld the integrity of the data gathered by adhering to all policies and procedures of IRB. Being aware that theft and hacking of electronic data are concerns with electronic data, I used a unique password that could not be easily guessed, maintained a firewall, and periodically updated anti-virus protection on my computer.

The qualitative researcher must be trustworthy, credible, and authentic (Elo, Kaariainen, Kanste, Polkki, Utriainen & Kyngas, 2014) These components are critical to the soundness, validity, and reliability of the study (Maxwell, 2013). In pursuit of a

trustworthy study, I considered five criterion, trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

As I engaged in the research process, I kept a journal to document my thoughts, refine ideas, express feelings, share experiences, and track the data. Everett (2013) suggested journaling helps to identify emerging themes, create transparency, document the research processes, and maintain a critical self-reflection on the research design. Utilizing these strategies helped to improve my thinking and reflection patterns and provided a clearer understanding of the different steps in the research process. I also noted the importance of staying focus and ensured my research question aligned with interview questions.

Also, I engaged in member checking and reflexivity to ensure adherence to ethical obligations. Kornbluh (2015) noted member checking assists in establishing trustworthiness. It helped me assess my analysis by providing an opportunity for participants to review the findings and offer input on whether the themes accurately reflected their personal experiences. I used reflexivity to self-monitor my biases and beliefs (Darawsheh, 2014). According to Berger (2015), reflexivity is the continuous process of self-reflection and critical self-evaluation for researchers to generate awareness about their actions, feelings, and perceptions. Reflexivity helps improve transparency during the collection and analysis of the data (Darawsheh, 2014).

Credibility

To establish credibility, I reviewed the significance of the study, the methods used, and if the purpose aligned with the research questions. Within the paradigm of the qualitative method, I engaged participants in in-depth interviews as they shared their

lived experiences. Second, I probed by asking additional questions to get a deeper understanding of participant's experiences and perceptions. Morse (2015) noted credibility refers to the truth or believability of the findings from participant's responses. Third, I abided by all ethical guidelines. Fourth, I ensured the theoretical framework guided my study. I hoped that my knowledge and skills could yield quality data producing good information to foster care professionals to improve the well-being of all foster care youth during and after the transition phase.

Dependability

I remained focused throughout data collection, interpretation, and findings. The process used for selecting participants for interviews and collecting data was consistent with what I articulated in chapter three. Elo et al. (2014) suggested the more consistent the researcher is in this research process, the more dependable the results. A colleague reviewed the activities as recorded in my field notes to ensure I followed the techniques for credibility and transferability standards.

Transferability

Tracy (2010) noted that it is unpopular, inefficient, and unethical to study whole populations. Thus, this study drew on a representative sample from the population to generalize back to the population. African American foster care women who aged out of foster care shared experiences they had attempting to access social support services relating to housing. The study results can benefit foster care youth who aged out of foster care and sought stable housing. Importantly, foster care professionals can motivate, inspire, and strengthen their relationship with foster care youth to support them in this process. Tracy (2010) stated transferability describes the process of applying the results

of research in one situation to other similar. The findings could contribute to the social change dyad and edify foster care professionals. In addition, a collaboration with multiple ecological forces (e.g., family, community, agency, and government) can promote healthy outcomes for foster youth.

Confirmability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) discussed confirmability as a degree of neutrality occurring when participants shape the findings of a study. It excludes researcher's bias, motivation, or interest. I employed three strategies to ensure my biases, motivation, and interest did not interfere with the study. They included journaling, member checking, and reflexivity.

Summary

I contribute to the body of knowledge by providing strong evidence that foster care agencies should focus on collaborative efforts to assist foster youth with the transition to independent living. Three out of the four African American foster care women felt they were unprepared for independent living after they aged out of foster care. They believed a strong support system with a mentor would help mitigate some of the negative outcomes they experienced. They also emphasized motivation and accountability for their actions were two major components to successful independent living. Despite the challenges and setbacks they experienced after they aged out, they feel they are moving forward in the right direction. More importantly, they are creating social change by working with other young people in the foster care system**.** Cusick et al. (2012) called attention to the years leading up to the transition to adulthood requiring interventions focusing on preventative measures to reduce risks and improve outcomes

for foster care youth. Support from the social ecology surrounding foster youth may be instrumental in developing a comprehensive approach to building protections for all children in care.

In Chapter 5, I provide my interpretation of the findings. In addition, I address implications, practical applications, limitations and made recommendations for future studies. I conclude with suggesting how the outcomes of the study may contribute to positive social change and a call to action by engaging all stakeholders to work together to improve the well-being and future for youth aging out of foster care.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

Introduction

Focusing on factors to improve outcomes for African American foster care women, in particular access to housing, was applicable to all youth aging out of foster care. African American emancipated foster care youth experience challenges, such as a lack of familial support, housing instability, inadequate educational opportunities, and unemployment after leaving foster care (Boldis, 2014; Dworksky et al., 2013; Jones, 2013; Turpel & Lafond, 2014). Researchers claimed that all stakeholders need to be accountable to the needs of youth in foster care (Boldis, 2014; Dworksky et al., 2013; Jones, 2013; Turpel & Lafond, 2014). The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of African American foster care women in seeking social support services to secure stable housing. The naturalistic case study approach was best suited for me to pursue an exploration of the phenomenon from multiple perspectives (Abma & Stake, 2014). I asked participants whether social support services supported or hindered their access to housing after they aged out of foster care.

African American young women experience problems securing housing, employment, educational opportunities, and health care services and disproportionately represented in the foster care system with respect to other emancipated youth transiting from foster care into independent living (Chaney & Spell, 2015; Cox, 2012). Despite the laws and policies to improve social services, African American foster care women continue to experience difficulty in finding a place to life after leaving foster care and encounter more challenges in becoming more self-sufficient (Chaney & Spell, 2015).

The findings of this study aligned with the ecological framework (Coman & Devaney, 2011). Chaney and Spell (2015) found that a support network in the form of mentors (principals, teachers, pastors, counselors, and social workers) improved the well-being of youth aging out of foster care. The African American women in the study felt that supportive connections served as bridges to a successful life after foster care. Given this potential, more discussion with foster care professionals and policy makers will help to identify programs and services to improve positive outcomes for transitioning youth. Policymakers, child welfare workers, and foster care youth can collaborate to bring about changes.

Overview

The participants in the study included four African American foster care women who aged out of foster care, one foster mother, one social worker, and one director of a social services group. I used face-to-face, semi-structured interviews to collect the data. The main research question guiding the study was the following:

RQ1. What are the lived experiences of African American foster care women in seeking help for social support services after aging out of foster care?

I used two sets of questions: 10 questions for the African American foster care women to get a deeper understanding of their lived experiences with access to social support services in finding housing and 10 questions for the supporting adults (foster mother, social worker, and a director of a social services program) to explore the role they played in assisting foster youth in their transition to independent living.

The lived experiences of foster care youth shed a light on the abuse and neglect they experienced before they entered foster care, the challenges they encountered while

in care, the negative outcomes they experienced after care, and the hope they have for their future. These African American foster care women were motivated, encouraged, and inspired to become contributing members of their community, an outcome also documented by Krebs et al. (2013). Three out of the four women worked with foster care children, advising them of available resources and how to access them. In addition, the supporting adults provided information on the role they played in promoting social services and making sure that children in foster care received all the benefits they needed.

Interpretation of the Findings

Each case served to provide a rich description of the participants' lived experiences and the role that supporting adults played in providing services for foster care youth in their transition to independent living. I made efforts not to sensationalize their stories, but rather to echo their personal experiences. I found that the foster care system had limited collaboration of services to provide to foster care youth. The African American women in this study understood that their time in foster care was temporary and that they would leave foster care without the support of family. However, by the time they recognized that they needed to make plans for their future, it was time for them to leave care. Without supportive connections, foster care youth continue to run the risk of housing instability, unemployment, financial challenges, and a lack of educational opportunities.

Engaging Youth in Decisions about their Future

Dworsky (2013) and Richards (2014) found that foster youth find it difficult to overcome previous challenges and increase their chances of having fulfilling, independent lives. B1, B2, B3, and B4 mentioned that they did not have a relationship

with their biological family, and the foster care system failed to provide them with the appropriate skills to succeed as an adult. The supportive adults (D1, D2, and D3) noted that all children in foster care should engage in discussions about their future several years before emancipation. Krebs et al. (2013) stated that the foster care system is not helping foster care youth when they focus on past traumas and present problems. Instead, they should actively involve youth in planning their future. Furthermore, engaging youth in the decisions of their own future serves two purposes: first, it increases the chance of successful transition, and second it increases the youth's opportunities to use their own intellectual abilities (Augsberger, Lens, & Hughes, 2016).

Self-Advocacy Skills

In preparing for independence, foster care youth should develop self-advocacy skills to help them fight the daily struggles they encounter. Young people living in a supportive, intact family learn self-advocacy skills from their parents (Jones & Gragg, 2012). In contrast, children living in foster care typically lack self-advocacy skills as some foster parents do not promote these behaviors (Jones & Gragg, 2012). Krebs et al. (2013) stated that "self-advocacy is the process of analyzing a problem or situation critically; identifying one's goals; planning a strategy that addresses the needs of every party involved; and, based on the analysis and planning, taking action to achieve one's goals" (p. 2). Jones and Gragg (2012) suggested that transitioning adolescents who develop their voice and the ability to act in their own interest do better pursuing their goals in life, meeting their own needs, and effectively interacting with other people.

Additionally, self-advocacy is a component in preparing foster care youth for independent living (Chekoway, 2012; Jones & Gragg, 2012). Furthermore, acting as a

self-advocate may enhance the educational choices and familial relationships of transitional foster youth (Jones & Gragg, 2012). Checkoway (2011) found that young people want to participate in decision making that directly impacts them. B2 described her feelings as, "the moment I began to assess my own strength and engage the help and advice from others, I began to develop a plan of action to achieve my educational goals." B2's plan of action and motivation from her judge helped her to pursue a law degree. She remained focused throughout her academic work and graduated with a juris doctoral degree from a local university. She represented foster care children in child dependency proceedings in juvenile court. One of her goals was to teach these children self-advocacy skills to help them navigate the challenges they are experiencing and will experience in the future.

Jones and Gragg (2012) stated that youth with self-advocacy skills are more likely to contact social services agencies, legal services, and other sources for help and less likely to sit back and wait for help. B1 reported that she developed advocacy skills on her own: "I plan things out in my diary. I wrote down my goals and how I would achieve those goals. If I need help, I call different agencies until I received the help I need." Jones and Gragg found that many foster care youths do not receive information on self-advocacy skills; rather, they learn it on their own through trial and error.

B3 stated,

> I was shy and did not talk up for myself, however after I had my daughter, I had no choice but to speak up for myself. I try to teach my daughter these skills. I tell her, you must talk up, don't be shy.

Individuals use self-advocacy skills in every facet of their life from applying to college, obtaining a job, completing an application for housing, negotiating a contract, navigating the complex health care system, applying for assistance for their child, and disputing a bill (Krebs et al., 2013). Whether the issue is simple or complex, the principle of self-advocacy is the same, no matter the context. Jones and Gragg (2012) found that self-advocacy is one of the most beneficial life-skills that emancipating youth can develop to shape their lives for adulthood. Self-advocacy provides the motivation to pursue higher education, secure housing, find employment, plan for their future, analyze and synthesize information to make better decisions, and become participating citizens. In addition, self-advocacy reduces the risk of problem behaviors and poor social relationships (Jones & Gragg, 2012; Krebs et al., 2013).

Mentoring

Using the present study's findings, I revealed the importance of mentoring for African American foster care women. Mentorship enhances growth and helps foster care youth become economically and mentally self-sufficient (Spencer et al., 2010). Because the representation of African American in foster care women is disproportionate to other ethnic groups, there is a need for a one-to-one mentoring program to help foster youth navigate the challenges of independent living (Knott & Giwa, 2012). Chaney and Spell (2015) found that youth with at least one positive and significant naturally occurring mentoring relationship tend to fare better in the transition to adulthood. Mentorship program should include education, employment, housing, health care, and legal services for African American foster care youth (Chaney & Spell, 2015; Krebs et al., 2013).

B2 and B3 shared the same sentiment. B1 shared, “Having a mentor was extremely important for me.” Both stated that their mentor helped them to stay focus on their goals. B2 stated,

> without my mentor, I am not sure where I would be today. My mentor had a keen interest in my future. She told me that that the sky is the limit. She checked on me weekly to make sure I was staying on track. If I needed help with support services, she would go on and above the call of duty to connect me to the services I needed. Even though I aged out of foster care and she relocated to another state, we remained friends. I think a mentor is extremely important for foster care youth.

B3 shared,

> My mentor made me felt like family. He helped me with my math classes and encouraged me by instilling in me that I could become anything I want to…I could become a doctor, an attorney, a teacher, a scientist…it was good to hear those things. It encouraged and inspired me to do my best. I thank God for her being in my life. Even though she does not have a child, she would Google things late at nights and told me to try it. She was great…she got me enrolled in Miami-Dade Community College. She went on and above the call of duty to help me. Having a mentor is one of the best things for me. I really trusted her…like I say she was my friend. I wanted someone to listen to me…I wanted someone to show that they cared…I wanted someone to motivate me…and she did.

Spencer et al. (2010) found that mentoring programs for youth aging out of foster care have enjoyed unprecedented growth. Despite the growth, limited mentoring

relationships for foster care youth exists. Mentorship provides permanent, supportive, and emotional connections that help youth navigate the challenging transition to adulthood. Spencer et al. suggested that the key factors that create more effective mentoring relationships include consistency, duration, stability, and close emotional connections with caring adults.

Transitional Housing Plan

Since October 2008, the federal law requires that child welfare agencies to help youths develop a personalized transition plan that includes options for housing (Collins & Ward, 2011). However, not much is known about the specificity of those plans (Collins & Ward, 2011). Foster youth are at a high risk of becoming homeless during their transition to adulthood (author, year). Ensuring that all youths have a plan to address their housing needs after they age out of the foster care system is important. Zlotnick et al. (2012) noted the use of transitional housing programs might reduce homelessness among emancipated youth. Homelessness prevention programs introduced in San Francisco, California, like Larkin Extended Aftercare for Supported Emancipation (LEASE) and Holloway House, create stability through planned transitions from foster care to independent living.

Supporting adults (D1, D2, and D3) stated that providing housing for foster care youth in their transition to independent living requires additional resources. Zlotnick et al. (2012) found that transitional living programs operating on a prevention model as part of a planned transition may protect youth against negative outcomes in their movement to adulthood. Although it the prevention model is successful in supporting and preparing youth for the transition to independent living, it is not reaching all the youth who need

this support (Zlotnick et al., 2012). Youth disconnected from families and social workers are at the highest risk of becoming homeless (Zlotnick et al., 2012). Researchers recommended increasing efforts to reach youth who are at high risk of homelessness.

Social Support Services

African American children makeup approximately two-thirds of the foster care population and remain in care longer (AACAP, 2013). Social support networks critical to foster care youth's well-being increases the challenges for emancipated foster care youth to succeed. These obstacles further compound access to housing services (Steen & Harlow, 2012). Without collaborative efforts, African American youth continue to struggle with homelessness after they age out of foster care system (Steen & Harlow, 2012).

As young people leave foster care, they experience multiple problems that make adjustments to adult life challenging (Jones, 2013). Researchers suggested that providing a network of support services promotes successful transitions to adulthood (Blakeslee, 2012; Cox, 2012; Farmer et al., 2012). Although special services and programs aid youth in their quest for independence, there is room for improvement. Youth are unaware of many of the beneficial services offered to them (Jones, 2013). Furthermore, none of the programs equip families and caregivers to support youth during their transition.

Families are a key support to their children, and the outdated assumption that youth can live independently without support services after they leave care requires redress (Dworsky et al., 2013). Biological parents are often the most influential people in a child's life. When that relationship is strained, it is difficult to reinstate (Monahan et al., 2013). Although the costs of support services are substantial, doing nothing will cost

society more in homelessness, unemployment, health problems, and criminal activities (Blakeslee, 2012).

There is an emerging consensus on the importance of collaborative services and resources for youth aging out of care (Blakeslee, 2012; Dworsky et al., 2013; Jones, 2013). Blakeslee (2012) explored the impact of interconnected relationships of caseworkers, foster parents, and other providers. D1 stated,

> The collaboration of services is extremely important to the foster care youth. One of my goals as the director of the program is to ensure all foster youth connect with every agency that they need to succeed. They are already in stressful situations and they need support to focus on their education.

The support network includes an interconnected web of relationships (biological parent, foster parent, case worker, social worker, and child welfare professionals (Blakeslee, 2012).

D1 stated,

> The foster care youth who come to our program need multiple services as they transition to independent living. My team's goal is to ensure these students connect to all the agencies they need. They do so much better academically when they don't have to worry about housing. The goal is to ensure they succeed in their academic endeavors. They can accomplish this when they stay focus.

D2 echoed,

> When social workers and other welfare workers work together, they promote seamless delivery of services for foster care youth. What I mean is, all foster care youth need housing after they leave foster care, with that fact, we must ensure

> they understand the Independent Living Program's criteria…what they need to do to maintain stipend as they try to make it on their own. Also, what they need to do to access agencies that provide educational opportunities, life skills and access to health care.

D3 asserted that each foster care youth should have a support network. Social support is vital during their transition. African American foster care youth can succeed when thy have supportive, caring adults. Greeson et al. (2015) found that African American foster care youth use social support services as coping mechanisms to help them in time of stress and help them break barriers to access needed services to establish and maintain their independence.

There is a need for social change. The first of these changes is the rethinking of the politics and family policies affecting those aging out of foster care. The cutting social programs will only mean denial of resources, including aid to find housing and social support after leaving foster care, which might cause the youth to end up in the system again, albeit in the criminal justice system. A focus on collaborative, supportive networks is crucial to the success of African American foster care women.

Ecological Theory

Children entering the foster care system become vulnerable by virtue of their precare experiences of maltreatment (Coman & Devaney, 2011). According to Coman and Devaney (2011), the interplay between foster care children and their environments requires additional attention. The ecological perspective can aid target interventions more effectively and efficiently through collaborative support. For example, bringing about a change for a foster youth requires the intervention of the caregiver, the birth family, or a

peer group or social work team to make adjustments in their placement or to provide social services (Cowan & Devaney, 2011). This interservice collaboration provides a holistic approach to assessing the child's needs, providing the right intervention techniques while advocating for the need for interpersonal, as well as intrapersonal approaches to promote better outcomes (Cowan & Devaney, 2011).

The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 shifted its focus from a policy perspective toward a family-centered perspective (Thoburn, 1988). The shift from the child as an isolated entity into the child being a member of a larger network supports the ecological perspective. The seminal work of Bronfrenbrenner (1979) revealed the ecological framework improves the well-being of children in care. The interplay between systems is a requisite for the successful development of the child (Bronfrenbrenner (1979). The collaboration provides resources, which can strengthen foster parent's skills and directly or indirectly influence children and families over time (Abrego & Abgrego, 2010). These systems are critical components in understanding the impact each has on the developing child. Focusing on these components brings greater clarity to areas targeted for modification, along with what services facilitate and support the desired changes (Cowan & Devaney, 2011).

Social Stress Theory

The other theoretical framework used to understand African American foster care youth was social stress theory (SST). Because foster care youth experience many challenges after they aged out of foster care; housing instability, educational and vocational challenges, incarceration, and victimization (Berzin et al., 2011; Courtney et al., 2011; Day et al. 2011; Havlicek, 2011). I selected SST, as it explores stressors

associated with negative outcomes (Tyler & Melander, 2010). SST is useful for understanding the process linking numerous stressors experienced by former foster care youth as they struggle to make it on their own. The stressors increase the likelihood of them becoming distraught or emotionally imbalanced (Aneshensel, 1992).

The internal conflict experienced by African American youths in the transitional process lends itself to the psychological and cultural dynamics, which exacerbate the crisis for them and create dilemmas as they transition to independent living (Farmer et al., 2013). In that same vein, Tyler and Melander (2010) made the point that homeless individuals confront stressors associated with their disadvantaged circumstance. Because each youth brings his or her cultural perspective and tries to understand the world and their place within it, as a condition of their dynamic cultural experience, it is important to make sufficient provision to harness and compensate for all the changes taking place (Tyler & Melander, 2010). These changes have a significant effect on their mental and emotional abilities. Furthermore, the cultural style in relation to one's ability to adapt to their new environment and the degree to which these dynamics create internal dissonance are very important to administrators, foster caregivers, and social workers to understand.

Essentially, supportive adults must be aware the resource allocations through the current social programs have not worked for youth exiting care. Therefore, to help mitigate these challenges requires a call for collaborative efforts. When foster care youth age out of foster care without the support they need, they often experienced negative outcomes (Chaney & Spell, 2015; Knott & Giwa, 2012; Jones, 2013). In addition, they lack the adaptive alternatives due to emotional and psychological problems. The daily struggles of finding food, securing a place to stay for the night exasperate the situation,

which often leads to other social problems. Thus, homeless youth experience increased levels of stress for meeting their daily survival needs.

Limitations of the Study

The findings of this study are based on a small sample size of four African American foster care women who aged out of foster care and three adult supporters; one foster parent, one social worker and a director of a social services group, for a total of seven participants. While my findings are based on this small sample size in the South Florida area, it is not a true representation of all African American foster care women who experience challenges with finding stable housing after they aged out of foster care. Notwithstanding, Pearson et al. (2011) along with Baskarada (2014) suggested that a small sample size can provide a rich understanding of participants 'experiences.

A second limitation is that participants when recalling their experiences may forget critical details that are important to the study (Yin, 2009). Thirdly, throughout the face-to-face interview sessions, my facial expression, head nodding, and body language may cause participants to lose their train of thought, influence their responses, or produce inaccuracies due to personal biases. Despite these limitations, this study has numerous strengths and contributes to the understanding of the strong need for collaborative social support services for all foster care youth during and after their transition to independent living

Recommendations

The growing phenomenon of African American young women aging out of foster care and living independently in the wider community is an important social trend. Consequently, researchers cannot overstate the demand for a support system to help them

buttress against their disparate needs. Any such system should include foster parents, social workers, health departments, therapists, and all child welfare professionals (Jones & Gragg, 2012). As indicated earlier, the study discussed the extent to which African American youth lack the social support network crucial to the success of their amiable transition. By focusing on this aspect, it shows social workers, and other child welfare professionals may have a more significant role to play in promoting collaborative services with supporting agencies to make the transition to independent living a pleasant one. Indeed, this study found social support as a crucial predictor of good mental and physical health, life satisfaction and reduced risk of homelessness (Jones, 2013).

Overall, the findings in the literature revealed foster care youths empowered through different services and programs become self-sufficient through encouragement from caring adults (Cox, 2012; Jones, 2013). They will be able to function as empowered, independent, contributing members of society and prepare for the transition to independence by focusing on education. These elements are major steps in promoting stability and self-sufficiency (Jones, 2013).

Therefore, a need exists to improve collaboration among African American families, social services, and state representatives. Too often the agencies allocating resources are not in collaboration with others agencies to satisfy the needs of children in care. A concerted effort from supportive adults may highlight the need for better social support services for African American women.

Collaboration and support networks can lead to diverse institutional goals, each with different aims and outcomes. Both are necessary to achieve the goals of the corporation and assure frequent communication. According to Wallace, (1994), shared

values in pursuit of larger societal goal bind networks together. Furthermore, there has never been a better time for the state, social services, and the social work profession to address housing needs for foster care youth. Underscoring the urgency of the matter is the over-representation of African American youngsters living outside their homes, both in foster care homes and detention centers.

Implications

As researchers embark on their studies, one of their main goals is to acquire knowledge that can disseminate in practice to effect social change. The current study is consistent with this goal, as it sought to explore the experiences African American foster care women had with social support services in finding housing. The results from this study provided substantial information to help both federal and state agencies implement services to improve access to housing for foster care youth.

First, social change efforts influence policies and procedures to reduce negative outcomes for youth aging out of care. Second, human services professionals, foster care youth, policymakers, and other stakeholders can collaborate to promote services for foster care youth. Third, foster care youth can get involved and become advocates of change. For instance, they can get involved in the discussion; talk about the challenges they encounter after they leave care, express the goals they have for their future, and promote positive change for all children in foster care.

Positive Social Change

One of the main goals of conducting research is to create positive social change. The outcomes of social change efforts will contribute to healthy transitions for foster care youth. Social policies like Workforce Investment Act (WIA), Fostering Connection ACT

(FCA) and programs like the one-stop career centers resulted from research studies (Courtney, 2009). More in-depth research contributed to amended laws. In fact, Courtney (2009) revealed the amending of laws three times over 25-year time frame to address foster care youth who age out of the system. A shift in understanding and accepting these policies is a good indication that research is important in promoting social change. These programs are known to promote and provide access to social services, improve skills, encourage youth to pursue their educational goals, and promote economic self-sufficiency.

Information gained from this study could possibly assist social workers and policy makers in producing more effective methods of continuous supportive connections for foster care youth. Such connections could prevent homelessness among not only with African American foster care youth but all youth in foster care youth. It may also help develop collaborative efforts between agencies to promote housing services and provide easier access to programs.

Researcher's Reflection

I entered my dissertation with some apprehension as previous students referred to it as a daunting task, mainly because it is the largest piece of work in fulfilling a doctoral degree. Notwithstanding, the challenges, I made a plan to do a specific proportion of my study every day. Understanding that this is a rigorous research project, I followed the dissertation outline at Walden University to ensure I stayed focused on selecting relevant literature, ensured the research question, statement of the problem and purpose of the study aligned. As I delved into the first three chapters, notably, the extensive literature review, I recognized the passion I had for my topic. This passion propelled my energy,

sustained my efforts, endured frustrations that arose and generated new insights for myself and my audience.

These elements have challenged my thinking and contributed to my learning. The dissertation journey has provided substantial information on qualitative research guidelines and how to explore and understand more clearly the social problem of interest. As a novice researcher, I embraced the unique opportunities to be a change agent, to identify a problem that merit research, gathered data by utilizing recommended strategies, analyzed the data, identified emerging theme, be a contributor to the body of knowledge in an effort to become an advocate for young people in the foster care system.

Because societal problems will continue to be a part of our lives, I have a duty and a responsibility to create a better, safer, and secure environment for the most vulnerable of our population. Finally, I owe a debt of gratitude to the participants that took the time to sit with me and shared their lived experiences and the role they played in improving the well-being of children in the foster care system. This experience has motivated, encouraged, and inspired me to become a mentor for not only African American foster care women but all children in the foster care system.

As I completed this journey, I cannot help but think of the lessons I have learned from my participants. Although each African American foster woman experienced challenges beyond their control, they have embraced a new chapter in their life that revealed a brighter future. The hope they have for their own future, the passion to help fellow foster care children and their commitment to become a change agent in their local community is truly amazing. Although this dissertation journey was challenging, I take pride in the awesome experience that this has made an incredible impact on my life, the

life of my participants and the untapped potential of all the children in the foster care system.

Conclusion

Researchers established that transitioning youth's perspectives on social support services are a critical area of research (Collins & Ward, 2011; Jones, 2014; Seawell, Cutrona & Russell, 2014). Social support networks are collaborative interactions or relationships that provide individuals with actual assistance and support (Jones, 2014). The collaborative efforts between foster youth, foster parent, social workers, and foster care professionals provide critical elements for health, well-being, a sense of belonging, and other important facets of interpersonal relationships (Jones, 2014).

Youth in foster care experience many challenges in the foster care system. It is difficult for them to cope and overcome obstacles to becoming independent adults, living on their own. Despite the challenges and setbacks, I agree with Krebs and colleagues (2013) analysis that foster care teenagers can overcome these barriers if they receive the right support, resources, encouragement, and programs to teach and educate them on becoming contributing members of society.

Providing a continuum of services in a collaborative dyad promotes richer and better programs and services for foster care youth. It is possible to achieve these programs and services through the blending of voices and efforts of all stakeholders. The first step for a call to action is to create a core group of advocates that include social workers, attorneys, administrators, mentors, policymakers, healthcare workers and all child welfare professionals. Second, this core group will develop an open forum where foster care youth can discuss ways on attaining and maintaining stable living arrangement

before they aged out of foster care. Stakeholders must be aware of the risks of homelessness and develop concrete plans to mitigate housing challenges.

Third, a committed group can find solutions to the identified problems by inviting government representatives who have had success in advocacy efforts to participate as they are aware of the ins and outs of the system. They can have a stronger effect on the process and help achieve the required results. Finally, training other interested participants about social change will create motivation for others to get involved.

Ultimately, this process will create a solid framework in finding housing solutions for foster care youth. As stakeholders develop and recommend policies to states and local governments, they must prioritize the goals of stable housing, recognize the importance of collaboration, which is essential to the overall well-being and success of African American foster care women as they pursue employment and educations goals. Following this call to action will help to reshape the independent living program to increase social support services in helping young people navigate the challenges in finding housing and other social services before and after they aged out of foster care.

Overwhelmingly, the literature and findings from the study provided insights into the factors that may provide successful transitions for foster youth (Collins and Ward, 2011; Curry & Abrams, 2015b; Henig, 2009). A clear understanding of the benefits of collaborative support services is critical in addressing stable housing for foster acre youth. The consensus of the authors is that staff in welfare agencies must be aware of the risk of homelessness and other negative outcomes and develop programs and policies for seamless transition to independent living for foster youth. The collaborative efforts of family, community, agencies, and government are fundamental components to promote

and support network services for youth in care (Curry & Abrams, 2015b; Seawell et al., 2014).

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol for Former Foster Care African American Women

Name _____

Date of interview _____

Start time _____ End time _____

First, I want to take this opportunity to thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. The interview will be providing important information about the support services available to foster care youth who aged out of foster care and seek housing. The interview will take approximately 45 minutes. Everything discussed will be strictly confidential so please feel free to speak openly and candidly. I will be recording our conversation so I can later transcribe it accurately. The recording will not be shared with anyone else. Please let me know if you become uncomfortable during the interview.

The sample guide below indicates the type of questions that will be asked to former foster care African American women.

For each interview, the researcher will ask open-ended questions to gain a broader understanding of the participant's lived experiences by probing for more in-depth responses. The in-depth responses will allow the researcher to guide the line of questioning, opening the discussion for follow-up questions to obtain views and opinions from participants.

Appendix B: Interview Questions for Former Foster Care African American Women

1. Please tell me about yourself

   (Probes)

   - Where were you born?
   - How long were you in foster care?
   - Did you have multiple placements while in care? (If so, please describe experiences with placements)
   - Did you have contact with your biological parents? (If not, Why?)

2. How did you prepare yourself for life beyond foster care

   (Probes)

   - Did you have access to social support services for housing?
   - Do you feel that foster care prepared you for independent living?
   - What programs or services should be implemented to prepare youth before they aged out of foster care?
   - Did you have a support person that you could go to after leaving foster care?

3. Please describe your living arrangements right after leaving foster care?

   (Probes)

   - What are some of the obstacles and barriers you experienced with a place to live?
   - Did you become homeless in your quest to secure affordable housing? (If so, please share your experience).

- If homeless - what risks did you encounter and where did you live?
- How did you provide food and clothing for yourself?

4. Please describe your perception of foster care transitional program and how it prepared you to secure affordable housing?

   (Probes)

   - Describe your perception of the transitional program?
   - Describe any areas of the program that need to change that will help prepare foster youth for independent living?
   - Do you feel that the foster care transitional program adequately prepare foster youth to be self-sufficient after they leave care?
   - Looking back on your time in foster care, how would you describe your overall experience?

5. Describe your perception on the role social workers should play in helping foster youth secure affordable housing before they leave foster care?

   (Probes)

   - Did you have a good relationship with your social worker?
   - Can you describe the relationship with social worker?
   - Did social worker influence you in any way?
   - Did your social worker empower you to develop self- advocacy skills to prepare for independent living
   - Do you think social workers have the training and resources to do their job?

6. Please describe support you had from your biological family before and after foster care?

   (Probes)

   - Were your biological parents involved in your years in foster care?
   - Please describe the support you received from your biological family after you aged out of foster care?
   - Who in your family served as a role model to you?
   - Looking back, can you describe if you would have done anything differently?

7. In your quest to find affordable housing, did you contact social support services?

   (Probes)

   - Describe social support services
   - Did you know how to access social support services?
   - Did you become homeless at any time after you aged out of foster care?
   - Please identify some factors you believe led to your homelessness?

8. Who helped you to get you where you are now?

   (Probes)

   - Do you have foster care siblings
   - Did you have a support system to help you?
   - Did you receive guidance from any social services program?

- Can you name one specific individual who made a positive influence on your life?
- What impact did this individual made on your life?

9. Please provide some suggestions you have that may improve the outcome of emancipating youth?

   (Probes)

   - What specific programs would you recommend that foster care should have?
   - What programs are available to help foster youth become self-advocate?
   - How do you view social support network?
   - What is your perception of the services foster care offer for transitioning youth?

10. How did you cope with stress during and after foster care?

    (Probes)

    - Who did you talk to when you have a difficult decision to make?
    - Does spirituality help you to cope with stress?
    - Do you often get stressed if things do not work out how you anticipate?
    - Do you have an advocate who you can talk to when things get difficult?

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol for Foster Parent, Social Worker and Leader from a Social Services Program

Name _____

Date of interview _____

Start time _____ End time _____

First, I want to take this opportunity to thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. The interview will be providing important information about the support services available to foster care youth who aged out of foster care and seek housing. The interview will be approximately 45 minutes. Everything discussed will be strictly confidential, so please feel free to speak openly and candidly. I will be recording our conversation so I can later transcribe it accurately. The recording will not be shared with anyone else. Please let me know if you become uncomfortable during the interview.

The sample guide below indicates the type of questions that will be asked during an interview with you.

For each interview, the researcher will ask open-ended questions to gain a broader understanding of the role you played in assisting foster care youth with social services pertaining to housing before they leave foster care. The in-depth responses will allow the researcher to guide the line of questioning, opening the discussion for follow-up questions to obtain views and opinions from participants.

Appendix D: Interview Questions for Foster Parent, Social Worker and leader from a Social Services Program

1. Why have you selected a career in your field/what do you hope to accomplish in your role?

2. What improvements do you feel will help diminish negative outcomes for foster care youth?

3. Describe your perception of the foster care system?

4. Describe how you motivate foster care youth to become self-advocate as they prepare for life beyond the foster care system?

5. How do you think culture impacts what you do?

6. Looking back, would you have done anything differently to prepare foster care youth for independent living?

7. Describe the training and support you receive from foster care to play your role effectively?

8. What are your thoughts on the current social support services available and are there any social support service that focuses on providing affordable housing for youth after they aged out of foster care?

9. Describe housing programs available for foster youth after they aged out of foster care?

10. How flexible are you in adapting to new ways of working with foster care youth to help prepare them (please provide an example)?

Appendix E: Recruitment Flyer

RECRUITMENT FLYER

A bag of toiletries for 45 minutes interview

Walden University

100 S. Washington Ave. #900, Minneapolis, MN 55401

Ph.D. Human and Social Services Candidate

Seeking

Former Foster Care African American Women who sought social support services in finding housing to participate in a research study

You are invited to be involved in the study if you are:

- **Former Foster Care African American Women**
- **Are willing to be audio taped in an in-depth interview with this researcher**
- **Must be 18 years of age or older**
- **Are willing to give 45 minutes of your time for an interview**

Interested volunteers may contact Donna Barrett

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that **Donna Barrett** successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants".

Date of completion: 07/13/2016.

Certification Number: 2110663.