The COVID-19 pandemic caused unexpected campus closures in mid-March. With the Fall 2020 school year approaching, some campuses have decided to resume in-person classes with heavy safety precautions to enforce social distancing, some are going completely remote, and some will be a hybrid of the two. Students need to make many decisions about if and how they want to resume their education in a way that is safe and meets their needs. Planning for the school year is complicated and young people need our help to make the best decisions possible.

This document includes tips for advocates working with youth who have experience in foster care or homelessness as they prepare for the coming school year.

1. Work with students to get clarity on how their campus or program will resume in the fall.
   - If classes are only being offered remotely, go to tips 3, 5, and 6 to make sure they are ready for remote learning.
   - If classes will only be offered in person, discuss how you can make sure they feel comfortable attending classes in person.
   - If classes will be offered both remotely and in person, talk through with the students what meets their needs at this time and how they can stay safe and healthy.
2. Help students think through and plan for their housing options.
   - If the student planned on living in the residence halls, determine the following:
     ○ Do students experiencing homelessness and foster care get priority housing, or can arrangements be made for them to remain in the dorms, even if they are closed to most students?
     ○ Do students feel comfortable living on campus?
     ○ What safety precautions and policies are in place to ensure health in the dorms? For example, are there policies for social distancing, and rooms set aside for students to self-quarantine if needed?
   - If the student needs to find off-campus housing options, discuss the following:
     ○ If the student is in extended foster care, or eligible to re-enter foster care, make sure the child welfare agency is providing a placement, housing, or funds for housing.
     ○ If the student aged out of foster care, or was in foster care at age 16, find out if there is a local FYI program or FUP program that could provide a housing voucher.
     ○ Find out if there are any options for subsidized housing.
     ○ Utilize off-campus housing search engines offered by the school and encourage students to contact the rental assistance center if there is one on campus
     ○ See Tip 10 and explore whether coronavirus relief funds are available through the student's school to pay for housing.

3. Help students access campus support both in-person or remotely to help with their success.
   - If the student had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or accommodations plan in high school, help the student request an accommodations or disability plan from the office of disability.
   - Find out if there is a foster care specific student support program or homelessness support program on campus that you can connect your student with.
   - Find out if there is a foster care higher education point of contact (POC) or higher education homeless liaison on campus to help find resources, find out about support services, and provide assistance with financial aid.
4. Make sure students have contingency plans if COVID-19 cases increase and campuses that opened decide to close during the semester.
   - Make sure students have the equipment needed if they need to go remote quickly. See tip 5.
   - Make sure students have a back-up housing plan if they are in the residence halls and they close and if the campus offers housing refunds.
   - Make sure students have plans for moving or storing their belongings if needed.
   - Find out if prorated refunds are offered in the case that University Housing must close do to COVID.

5. Make sure students have the technology they need to do remote learning.
   - Help students get a computer if they do not have one, and make sure the computer is equipped for online learning, i.e. has a web camera and high-speed processing.
   - Make sure students have reliable internet access.
   - Make sure students have a printer.
   - See whether the students’ schools offer laptop or hotspot loans.

6. Help students identify supports they may need if they are attending school remotely.
   - See if students would benefit from academic support, such as tutoring or time management resources, and connect them with the tutoring or writing program on campus.
   - If students would benefit from additional social or emotional support, consider the following actions:
     - Making a plan to check in with them more frequently.
     - Identifying and helping students make an appointment for behavioral health services or teletherapy services.
       - Be sure to check to see if out-of-state telehealth related to COVID-19 is permitted.
   - Identifying and helping students arrange peer supports through programs or affinity groups.
7. Help students determine how their living costs may change based on whether campus opens, or if they are attending school remotely.
   - If needed, work with students to create an updated budget reflecting expenses for their anticipated living situation and course load.
   - Discuss with students whether their financial aid package will change (especially if they are considering part-time) and help them contact the office of financial aid if needed.
   - If applicable, discuss with students whether they can cut costs by taking courses online at community college and transferring them into their “home” 4-year institution.
   - Discuss with students whether they will have changes in other costs such as food, transportation, and child care and help them identify additional resources to help them meet these needs.

8. Make sure students have what they need to complete the FAFSA, and understand decisions and deadlines that could impact their financial aid.
   - Assist youth experiencing homelessness or from foster care with any documentation necessary to complete the FAFSA.
   - Make sure that students understand that if they drop below part-time student status, they may not be eligible for financial aid and may enter early federal student loan repayment.
   - Make sure that students know and understand the dates to withdraw from classes, so they will not have financial penalties (typically either the first week of school or last week of the withdrawal period).
   - If students are having trouble proving their income if they did not need to file taxes, help them advocate with their school to make sure the school is following new federal guidance that allows several alternative means to prove income (other than Verification of Non-Filing from the IRS.)

9. Advocate for students in foster care to make sure their decision about school enrollment does not impact their eligibility for services.
   - Help students in extended foster care maintain their eligibility by:
     - Helping them stay enrolled in school.
     - Asking for an exception to the extended care eligibility requirements due to COVID-19.
     - Helping them change their eligibility category (for example, from school to work, or participation in a program to promote employment).
     - Confirming that the state has requested a suspension of the work or school requirements from the Children’s Bureau and that the youth does not need to meet the criteria to remain in extended care.
10. If students have unmet financial needs related to returning to or continuing in school due to COVID-19, check if the school has Coronavirus Relief (CARES Act) funds or emergency aid that the youth can apply for.

As part of the CARES Act (the federal COVID-19 package) higher education institutions were awarded funds to be disbursed to students who face challenges related to COVID-19. Grants can be made to students for things such as food, housing, course materials, technology, health care, and child care. The costs must be related to COVID-19. Funds can be used for the fall semester if schools still have funding available.

General Resources

- Student Loan Information: https://studentaid.gov/announcements-events/coronavirus
- Navigating College During and Post COVID-19–A Tool for Young People: https://thinkofus.gitbook.io/command-center/resources
- Self-Storage for Impacted Students: https://www.uhaul.com/Articles/About/20625/College-Students-U-Haul-Offers-30-Days-Free-Self-Storage-Amid-Coronavirus-Outbreak/
- Low Cost Computers/Laptops: https://pcsrefurbished.com/sales/salesHome
- Studying During COVID-19: https://www.bestcolleges.com/blog/study-tips-at-home/
- Education Discounts for Students: https://www.bestcolleges.com/blog/coronavirus-student-discounts/
- Coping with Stress and School: https://www.bestcolleges.com/blog/how-to-cope-with-covid19-stress/
- Various Resources for Students with Foster Care History: https://www.togetherwerise.org/covid-19/resources/