

Prepare for Leaving Care: commitment and action +18

5 years training professionals and empowering youth to improve their exit from the care system.



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Child Protection Policy
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1 PREPARE FOR LEAVING CARE, AN INDISPENSABLE PROJECT

In Spain there are more than 49.000 children and adolescents growing up under some form of care or protection, be it a foster family or residential care. For them, coming of age means the end of these measures and the beginning of a new lack of care which leads them to a process of transition to adult life that is very different from that of the rest of their peers.

In addition to being early, this emancipation usually lacks the necessary planning. It is often brief and rushed, which contributes to the alienation of these young people from the educational system and the labour market, making them one of the most vulnerable groups in society.

The process of leaving care is transcendental for the young people, but it is also very important for the professionals responsible for their care and development, and should reflect the skills and capabilities of the latter, as well as the effectiveness of the State's investment.

To try to facilitate such a process and adapt it to the real needs of these boys and girls, in SOS Children's Villages we launched in 2017 the project *Prepare for Leaving Care*, which during its first three years of running was implemented simultaneously in ten European countries: Spain, Croatia, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary and Romania.

Over the course of five years, we have worked to guarantee a gradual transition to adulthood for careleavers, in which the professionals accompanying them have the best possible training and the necessary tools to ensure the success of their emancipation and integration into society. And we have done this by relying on the participation of young people who have lived under the system care and can therefore provide the most valuable experience.

Within the framework of *Prepare for Leaving Care*, we have offered professionals training based on four guiding principles: forging lasting relationships based on care and respect between foster carers and fostered youth; achieving greater participation of young people in the decision-making that affects them; promoting and protecting the rights of children and young people; and strengthening intersectoral coordination to ensure the collaboration of all stakeholders involved in the process of emancipation of young people.

In the creation and implementation of this project, SOS Children's Villages has received invaluable support. The European Union and the Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030 have contributed to its funding. For the development of the materials and methodology we have had the expertise of CELCIS, a centre for excellence in child care. And, in 2019, *Prepare for Leaving Care* received the European Social Services Network Innovation Award, an award recognizing its successful approach and best practices.

In this report we gather the results and lessons learned from an essential project to move towards a comprehensive protection model that guarantees the rights of children and adolescents under care, a model which will not push them into the void when they come of age.



"I grew up in the care system and I know first-hand that we can change things so that all young people going through the same experience I went through can do so with much more guarantees for their future"

2 TWO KEY OBJECTIVES

Prepare for Leaving Care identifies and addresses the shortcomings and challenges associated with the process of exiting the care system with a two-fold objective:

- Training professionals on how to embed child rights based approach into their work in preparation for leaving care, equipping them with new tools, skills and knowledge necessary for their daily work.
- Strengthening the support networks of young people leaving the care system and empowering them.

To achieve these goals, we have developed several lines of action throughout the five years of the project:

- Design and implementation of trainings for professional trainers, based on materials specifically created for this purpose. In them, emancipated young people play a key role and participate as co-trainers.
- Awareness-raising and political influence. The young people participating in the project have debated, reflected and formulated recommendations that contribute to correcting the deficiencies inherent in the system and to guaranteeing comprehensive support that ensures better results for boys and girls preparing for independent life.

In addition, we have called for the commitment of stakeholders and partners at national and European level from different political and administrative levels, as well as other social entities.

- Building a support network for young people leaving the care system through a digital platform previously created by Children's Villages, YouthLinks, so that they can more easily access those benefits to which they are entitled, receive support from other young people and professionals, as well as favouring relationships between them.

In all actions, the meaningful participation of young people has been a fundamental axis, making them protagonists not only of the decisions that affect their lives, but also of a social change that will benefit the next generations.



“The success of the Prepare for Leaving Care project lies in considering ourselves experts of our own emancipation process, allowing our vision to be present in each of its phases”

3 A LONG ROAD. IMPLEMENTED INITIATIVES

Report

The starting point for Prepare for Leaving Care was the development of a scoping report on the level of development and training needs of professionals in each of the participating countries. It contains information on care and welfare services in relation to exiting the care system and a questionnaire for peer interviews.

Publications

From the scoping report and with the collaboration of CELCIS, we published three essential documents: (i) *Prepare for leaving care practice guidance* (translated into 6 languages), (ii) *Training methodology* and (iii) *Training manual*. These publications have served as the basis for the training of 1.205 professionals (social workers, foster carers, caregivers, psychologists, pedagogues and decision-makers). They constitute support tools for the training and implementation of learning by professionals, enabling them to adequately address the needs of those leaving care.

The assessment of the materials used in the trainings has been extremely positive due to their immediate practical usefulness for professionals and in view of the improvement in the emancipation processes of young people.

Training of trainers

Aimed at professionals and young co-trainers. A total of 70 sessions were held in the ten participating countries with the support of the authorities in each of them. We trained professionals with a long work record and experience in the care system (some of them also as trainers) and care leavers.

97 % of the participants rated the training as very good or good. The majority stated that they were much better prepared after the training and it was also described as a very positive experience of participation.

The highest rated elements were the materials provided, the teaching methodology, the availability and attitude of the trainers and the structure of the course. All participants felt that they had been well trained to deliver their own training to national professionals on the process of leaving care, considering that they had increased their knowledge and skills to do so.

The participation of care leavers in the team of trainers and in the national trainings was particularly appreciated, especially in highlighting the importance of emotional and other support they may need in the emancipation process.



“The participation of young people is not only important for the project itself, but also for ourselves, who acquire new skills and abilities, and for the professionals who attend the trainings, since according to them it has had a very positive impact on their work”

Training of the national teams

The training of the national teams was carried out by those who previously were trained to become trainers. It was divided into two blocks of three days each and 1.205 professionals with different functions, profiles and responsibilities participated.

The training provided was very positively rated, which is reflected in particular in the improved relations between professionals and those leaving the care system. Progress was noted in the ability to listen, to pay attention to emotions and feelings, and to respond more adequately to their concerns. The improvement of interpersonal relationships, which were part of the training program, also contributed to promoting empathy towards young people leaving the care system.

The results of the focus groups show that the participants in the national trainings delivered the learning outcomes, methodology and materials to their own professional practice and that this was all thanks to the training they had previously received. Once again, the inclusion of young experts as co-trainers was considered very timely and positive.

A significant lesson learned was the importance of multidisciplinary work. The participation of different professional profiles made it possible to enrich the trainings by learning from each other on issues that affect them in common and to value the role that others also play in these processes.

Development of the YouthLinks digital platform

YouthLinks is designed to make it easier for those leaving the care system to access the services they may need.

This platform offers peer-to-peer support, coaching and mentoring by professionals and entities, as well as networking tools and opportunities. It was designed as a social network similar to Facebook, so that it was intuitive to its users, while ensuring a space of privacy and security in which questions could be asked anonymously, or at least with some discretion. The project thought of it as a space where young people could:

- Speak and ask questions freely about issues they are unfamiliar with and which may cause them some embarrassment.
- Find information on practical matters, such as housing or basic bureaucratic procedures.
- Receive job offers from strategic partners.
- Offer training and capability building initiatives.
- Hold small group discussions with mentors and peers.
- Build a community.

The assessments made on YouthLinks showed room for improvement, for example, it was pointed out that it could be tailored to the individual needs of each young person and they could be made aware of the security and privacy guarantees associated with the platform, so that they feel comfortable using it and benefit from all its advantages.

Youth participation and organization of round tables

A total of 447 young people participated in the project activities, 79 of whom were trained as co-trainers.

In addition, in 2021 the young experts began to participate in advocacy actions, holding meetings with senior officials from different administrations to whom they presented their recommendations and demands. Among them:

- The general director of Children's and Adolescents' Rights of the Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030, Gabriel González-Bueno.
- The general director of the Youth Institute (INJUVE), Teresa Pérez Díaz.
- The general director of Youth of the Community of Madrid, Nikolay Yordanov.
- The managing director of the Aragonese Institute of Social Services, Noelia Carbó.
- The head of the Child and Adolescent Care Service of the Government of Aragon, M^º José Bajén.
- The managing director of the Aragonese Youth Institute, Adrián Gimeno.
- The Councillor of the Madrid City Council, José Aniorte.
- Representatives of the Regional Government of Andalusia and the Provincial Council of Granada.

We also organized national and international round tables with relevant parties involved in the project.

The participation of young people who have gone through the care system is central and integral to all project activities, including its design. It has brought about a change in the perceptions of the other participants and has been valued as one of the most powerful and long-lasting aspects of the training received.

It has allowed professionals to better understand the impact that trauma and loss have on the behaviours of young people and the decisions they make. It has also shown that the process of leaving care is a loss in itself and can be a traumatic experience.

The young participants themselves have highly valued the articulation and impact of their participation in the project.

Being part of the training received by the professionals has helped to make it possible for the young people to take ownership of their own plans to leave the care system, something very necessary and important for the success of the process.

Development of recommendations

In five of the participating countries, we developed a series of national policy recommendations and sustainability roadmaps. Below we list the recommendations developed by the young participants from Spain, which can be grouped into four blocks:

1. FOLLOW-UP OF EMANCIPATION SUPPORT PROGRAMS.

a. Development of participatory training programs for professionals

Development and approval, by the Administration and relevant entities, of continuous participatory training programs for professionals working with young people in the process of emancipation. Such training must be homogeneous in all the autonomous communities.

b. Supervision of the emancipation support programs

Promotion of the processes of intervention, evaluation and accountability of the emancipation support programs, in which the points of view of young people and professionals are valued.

2. ATTENTION TO INDIVIDUALITY

a. Flexibilization of the age limit for leaving the care system

Offering the possibility of increasing the time spent in the care system according to the specific characteristics of each young person (disability, health, maturity...).

b. Development of individualized intervention plans

The support plans must take into account the characteristics of the young person and make the support to emancipation compatible with other specific aid for people living in circumstances which make them more vulnerable (disability, physical or mental health problems, being unaccompanied migrants or young mothers, among others).

3. INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

a. Creation of a commission for the standardization of support for young people formerly in the care system.

Development of a commission among the General Governments of all the autonomous communities to standardize support so that the quality of life of young people formerly in the care system does not depend on the place where they live and they have the same opportunities.

b. Increase support for young people formerly in the care system

Extension and standardization of the period of support for young people formerly in the care system to at least 21 years of age.

c. Simplification of processes in the Administration

Commitment of the administrations to adopt one-stop-shop models in the care and accompaniment of young people formerly in the care system in a comprehensive and holistic manner.

4. PARTICIPATION

a. Promotion of joint participation

Promotion of joint participation processes at the regional and state level that include young people, organizations and administrations.

b. Formation of Autonomous Youth Councils

Creation in each autonomous community of a representative council of young people from the care system and those who formerly were in the care system to make proposals and gather their opinions, incorporating their point of view in the work models of professionals.



"We young people are a part of the whole system, and our opinion counts, if anything, as much as the most important one. We must become actively involved and committed, because many decisions are made based upon our opinion"

4 RESULTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

4.1 THE NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK. A RIGHTS-BASED AND COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

All the countries that have implemented the *Prepare for Leaving Care* project point to the inadequacy of national legislation to properly address the processes of preparation for independent living and exit from the care system in accordance with international standards. One of the main results of the project is the commitment shown both by professionals and public authorities towards the development of training with a focus on children's rights and comprehensive protection.

In the training given to professionals and young *co-trainers*, they pointed out the need to modify the legal frameworks to ensure that all professionals in the care system have the required initial training and also receive continuous training. There is also a need for these professionals to have a good knowledge of the legal frameworks and the rights recognized to young people leaving the system, both in the development of the emancipation process and in the access to services and benefits they may be eligible for.

From the analysis of the results of the project and the training sessions, it can be concluded that the legal framework should be the first aspect to be modified so that the shortcomings and difficulties encountered by professionals and young people can be fully addressed from a rights-based approach and correlative obligations in the processes of leaving the care system.

This shows, in practice, the need to have a regulatory framework with a scope and content on par with international standards in order to be able to provide the correct response to young people leaving the care system, as we stated in the report *The beginning of unprotection. The reality of children in foster care when coming of age*.



"I think that before letting me go, they should listen to my needs, especially my educational needs. When I leave the care system I have to work and I can't study. We should have the possibility of adequate housing and protection in general, we shouldn't be just let go"

The following are the aspects that legislations should include on the processes of transition to independent living, as shown by the training and activities carried out in the *Prepare for Leaving Care project*:

(a) Full incorporation of the rights-based approach and the concept of comprehensive protection.

The applicable regulations and public policies on the subject are insufficient and inadequate, among other reasons due to the existing gap between them and the lack of common standards. All of them should meet the international standards set by the United Nations General Assembly and endorsed by the Committee on the Rights of the Child. Above all, the legislation must embrace the concept of comprehensive protection of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which responds to a human rights approach as a way of overcoming the welfare approach that was limited to covering their needs.

Consequently, the legal framework regulating the exit from the care system must be modified, imposing obligations and responsibilities, recognizing rights and guaranteeing a minimum common set of features in force for the entire national territory that overcomes the current territorial differences, largely unjustified in a model with a rights-based approach.

b) The participation of young people in the design and implementation of their exit process is key to ensuring that it is in line with their best interests and that they are involved in making decisions that affect their lives. It should, therefore, be configured as a right in legislation.

As revealed in the peer to peer interviews conducted by care, 30% of them stated that they had not participated in the process of preparing for their exit from the care system, which usually takes from 12 to 24 months.

It is worth noting the very positive effect of the young person's active participation in the design of their own transition and exit plan. They are not, however, the only people who should be involved in the process.

The levels and degrees of participation of young people vary enormously and on many occasions this participation is purely symbolic or formal, but not real or effective. There is a lack of knowledge, skills and strong commitment to the participation of young people in their emancipation processes.

c) The participation of parents in the processes of leaving care and transitioning to independent living should be assessed from the point of view of the best interests of the child. Parents should offer emotional support and stability for the children. This would help young people not to feel like they face the abyss when they come of age. However, there is a great lack in the system in terms of reconstruction work with the family of origin and with the extended family.

Consequently, legislation should include **the obligation to work with the family of origin** to ensure the return of the child or adolescent to it, whenever their best interests so require, as soon as possible and, in any case, when they reach the age of 18. The child's right not to be separated from their parents remains intact even when they are subject to foster care measures. It is essential to work with the family to rebuild the relationship with the young person.

On the other hand, the **extended family** can serve as a bridge between parents and children in cases where there is conflict. It also provides a sense of belonging and unconditionality in a suitable environment.

Regarding the **participation of the foster caregivers** in the plans and processes, the answers are diverse. However, their role is important in strengthening the child's emotional relationships with the family of origin. They should, therefore, also participate in the preparation and implementation of emancipation plans, and should receive adequate support for this purpose.

d) It is necessary to regulate a planning for leaving care that guarantees the rights of young people. This is a tool for the realization of the best interests of the child in alternative care, since the emancipation plan must include all the determining elements surrounding the young person and which must be taken into account so that these interests are properly addressed.

In the activities developed in the project, a lack of uniformity was noted as to how the planning of the young people's emancipation is carried out, sometimes even within the same country. In practice, it depends on various factors such as the geographic location of the young person, the type of care under which they are living, the care entity and the scope of the care that they may be entrusted to, the will of the responsible administrations and the real capacities of the professionals. Even when legislation imposes the obligation to design a plan to leave the care system, this is not always done or is not always done properly.

The legislation should make explicit the right of each child entering the system to have an individualized emancipation and exit plan taking into account their best interests, i.e., not only the fact of having reached the age of 18, but also other individual factors: gender, disability, mental health, special needs, nationality, etc. The assessment and determination of the best interests of the child should be predominant in the approach to the process of transition to independent living and to the process which will lead to full emancipation.

The design and implementation of the plan should be carried out by a **team of experts from different disciplines and fields**, such as social workers, public workers, and professionals or young people of reference in their process of transition to independent living, in order to comprehensively address the needs of the young person.

Emancipation plans should be **supervised and monitored** in a regular and pre-established manner. It is important to take into account when planning the exit from the care system that it can occur at any time if the work with the family of origin is successful. Likewise, accompaniment and monitoring should be extended beyond their leaving the care system, for example, during the year following the exit.

Exit and emancipation plans **should be flexible and open to possible changes**, precisely because the circumstances and relevant elements in the young person's life are changing. Youth exiting the system ask for flexibility in the emancipation process and recognition of their individuality in the design of the exit plan and in the support that each one requires.

In any case, the time during which young people leaving the system must receive support should be extended. There are great differences between countries and even between autonomous communities in terms of the extent of support.



"Prepare for Leaving Care has made me learn new things and meet people who were in situations similar to mine"

e) Extend the obligation of the right to protection beyond the age of 18. In all the countries participating in the project, the age for leaving the system is 18 years. All of them, except one, stated that it was too early and should be raised to an age between 20 and 25.

Furthermore, age should not be the only factor to take into account when deciding when to leave the care system. There are other aspects that should also be decisive, such as maturity, capabilities, desires and the individual's own circumstances.

Young people believe that the possibility of increasing the time spent in the care system should be given according to individual circumstances. Most of them do not feel prepared at 18 years of age to live without support.

f) The guarantee of support after leaving the system as a condition for achieving independent living.

Legislation should include the obligation to continue providing support (and not only financial support) to those who leave the care system. This support should consist, among other things, of access to a minimum set of services and benefits that will allow them to adequately transition to independent living. To this end, access to services and benefits that guarantee a common minimum treatment must be guaranteed by law and not be made dependent on the will or resources of the corresponding regional or local authority. These resources, services and benefits refer mainly to housing, education, health, economic support, employment, legal assistance and psychosocial support.

It should also establish how long such support is to be extended, which may be determined by analogy with the jurisprudence on child alimony and parental obligations, a maximum legal age or a combination of both criteria.

g) The education and training of professionals is a key to the success of emancipation processes and exit from the care system. This has been demonstrated by the training courses carried out in *Prepare for Leaving Care*.

Having qualified professionals is a requirement covered and included in the Quality4Children quality standards, in the Guidelines for the alternative care of children, in the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child and Adolescents (2016-2021), and in the United Nations Resolution on children without parental care (2019).

Specifically, the current legislation rightly contemplates the obligation for all professionals working with children to accredit having had an initial training that must be incorporated in the curricula, as well as to their commitment to receiving continuous training in the development of their professional tasks (Article 5 of the Comprehensive Law for the Protection of Children and Adolescents against Violence). This precept should be required for professionals involved in the care system, so that all of them are aware of the peculiarities of young people and the unique circumstances surrounding them.

h) Emotional support and attachment role models not only with the professionals of residential care, but also with the foster family, siblings and their friends. Maintaining the relationship with them is an important support mechanism for these young people.

The boys and girls interviewed consider that for the accompaniment they receive to be satisfactory, the professionals should have the following skills: empathy and understanding, patience, kindness, closeness and affection, good communicative skills with experience and problem-solving skills. 70% of the young people interviewed currently continue to maintain contact with their professionals of reference.

Forging a relationship of closeness, trust, sincerity, availability, effectiveness in meeting their needs and affection between the professional and the young person (secure attachment relationship) is the basis for helping young people in this process.

i) It is necessary for young people to receive training and information on their rights and on the services, resources and support they can access during the emancipation process, as well as on basic skills and abilities for life outside the care system.

Youth exiting the system are not well aware of their rights or the regulatory framework of the process in which they find themselves. The national trainings showed that it was vital for young people to know the legal and juridical aspects of their exit from the care system.

Their training has a very positive impact. Not only do they receive information on their own emancipation process, on their rights and on the services and benefits they can access, but they also feel more confident to approach their own life process.

j) The definition of competencies and co-responsibility in the design and accompaniment of emancipation processes is another pending issue.

There are important differences in the circumstances in which emancipation processes take place depending on the type of foster care and the type or nature of the caregiver. Consequently, a new legal framework is required that establishes the responsibility of administrative supervision over the placement and permanence of children in the care system.

Some legal body (perhaps a children's ombudsman) should also be given the task of ensuring that the rights of children and young people in care are in fact respected and should make professionals and caregivers aware of the importance of preparing them for their emancipation process. Uniformity in intra- and inter-organizational decision-making should be improved.

4.2 LACK OF COMMON TECHNICAL STANDARDS

In order to concretely implement the legal provisions and public policies approved on the processes of transition to independent living for young people leaving the care system, it is necessary to have technical standards that ensure the exact translation of international standards on children's rights in the daily practice of the care system and, in particular, in the exit processes.

Such standards, which do not exist in our country, should be elaborated by technical experts in various disciplines relevant to the process in question and approved by a body with sufficient competence and rank to ensure their general applicability. It could also be necessary to create a national coordination team in the central government for the exchange of good practices, knowledge and experiences on emancipation processes.

In addition, the current system suffers from a lack of a multi-sectoral and collaborative approach. It is important to ensure multidisciplinary and coordinated work, so that all people, especially professionals, act in the same direction. Unity and co-responsibility are essential and this requires common minimum standards that are known and generally applicable.

In short, it is up to the national governments to develop and promote minimum guidelines and requirements in relation to the exit from the care system and the supports required in the subsequent process towards independent living. New laws, standards and regulations are required because they will make it possible to monitor and supervise compliance and, therefore, to know and evaluate the degree to which the exit processes are in line with international human rights standards.

The trainings conducted in Prepare for Leaving Care highlighted the importance of regular monitoring and review of the situation of each young person, as well as the way in which the exit plan is being implemented. Professionals now conceive planning as a process and not so much as the result of a decision that is made when the young person is going to leave the system and, therefore, they must be accompanied until they reach their full independence.

It is also important to have a monitoring system for foster care service providers, which will be more effective when there are mandatory quality standards. Administrations should promote assessment and accountability processes for programs supporting the emancipation of young people.

4.3 NECESSARY SUPPORT FOR LEAVING CARE

The processes of exiting the system must include the possibility for young people to access different types of services, aid and benefits that favour their progressive autonomy and allow them to achieve the independence they could not have if they lost the protection they had been receiving until they were 18 years old. Often these supports have been reduced to financial aid, but those that do exist are insufficient, unequal and are not guaranteed by law. In addition to economic support, it is necessary to be able to access many other services that allow these young people's rights to health, education and housing, among others, to be satisfied.

The **economic support** available to young graduates is insufficient and, moreover, varies greatly depending on the responsible authority, which does not seem to be consistent with a minimum of equity in the treatment they should receive. It would be necessary to determine the allowance that should correspond to the young graduates to meet the expenses they have according to the plan that has been drawn up based on their personal circumstances and to guarantee it legally.

Financial support for caregivers or guardians who continue to take care of young people after the age of majority should also be established, for example by setting a 24-month limit for this purpose.

NGOs can be an important asset in these processes and the necessary funding should be granted so that they can continue helping in this regard.

It is also **necessary to extend the social service networks**. The availability and accessibility of different services and benefits is not unified and differs from one place to another depending on resources, skills, capacities or current regulations. Clear and precise **information** is often not provided about the services and benefits to which young people leaving the system are entitled and can access. If access to these services was configured as a legally guaranteed right, this unjustified disparity should disappear, or at least there would be a minimum that is always guaranteed. In addition, young people in the system should be supported to develop a whole range of practical skills that will be useful to them when they leave public care.

The policy and institutional framework should ensure access to housing, education, health, financial support, employment, legal assistance and psychosocial support. Standards and deadlines should be imposed on the providers of these services and, if necessary, positive discrimination provisions should be included to favour and facilitate access to them.

Support in finding work is a fundamental aspect of achieving a truly independent life. It is therefore necessary to facilitate **access to employment and internships**, to provide training and support to young job seekers in preparing their curriculum vitae and to provide them with letters of recommendation. It is also important for them to be informed.

Professionals from care and social services should establish contacts to collaborate with companies that can employ young people leaving the care system and with the public employment service, both before leaving, so that they can gain experience, and also after leaving, to consolidate their emancipation process. It would also be advisable to implement a system of **mentors** to support young people in terms of vocational guidance.

It is also necessary to improve and facilitate access to **education**, training, scholarships and In addition, financial benefits are insufficient and vary from one place to another. Financial assistance should be guaranteed according to the market situation.

The groups pointed out that frequent budget cuts mean that young people can only access the minimum required by law, which is insufficient to meet their needs and satisfy all their rights. In addition, a much more individualized approach to each case is required, and the training helped professionals to incorporate this perspective.

It was also pointed out as well the need to improve coordination between the protection services and the other services involved in order to improve the accompaniment of young people as they leave the system.



4.4 TRAINING OF PROFESSIONALS

The main responsibility in the emancipation processes corresponds to the professionals of social and care services, both public and NGO related. The quality of their work differs, but is generally perceived as improvable. It is therefore necessary to improve the skills, capacities and knowledge of all these workers. But other professionals are also involved and they should receive training and qualification so that their role helps in the emancipation processes: educators, health professionals, judges, law enforcement officers, lawyers, children's ombudsmen, psychologists and pedagogues, among others.

The professionals value very positively the training provided in Prepare for Leaving Care, which is made clear especially in improved relationships between them and those leaving the system (listening skills, attention to emotions and feelings, and better response to their individual concerns). They claim to have improved their way of listening and relating to the young people (more open and less formal) and to understand that the exit plan is the young person's and not the professional's, giving greater autonomy and responsibility to the young people in their decision making.

The **impact assessment** carried out by 52 of the 211 professionals who have attended the different editions of the training courses in Spain has shown the usefulness of our training program, evidencing that:

- 94 % have become more aware of the rights of young people to participate in their transition process to adulthood.
- 86% considered the proposals for planning the emancipation process learned in the training program to be relevant or very relevant for their work.
- 65% acknowledged that, as a result of the trainings, the young people have been more involved in the implementation of the plans or planning tools.
- 92% have improved their skills in relating to other young people and peers.
- 96% say that the trainings have had a positive impact on their organization.

It is important to develop training programs for professionals involved in young people's exit and emancipation processes. Such training must necessarily be based on a rights-based approach and not on welfare criteria. Specifically, on the priority of the best interests of the young person who is about to leave the system.

They must also be trained in the concept of **meaningful participation of young people**. Professionals should be able to help young people to express their feelings and decisions and to understand the specificities of adolescence. They should inform them and let them make their own decisions, giving them appropriate responsibility according to their level of independence and their skills and abilities. They should also support young people in everyday tasks and formalities. In short, professionals should have sufficient skills and awareness to support learning processes, help young people to evolve, mature, work with them on self-esteem, help them discover their potential and face the changes they will necessarily have to live through.

More necessary content has been suggested in their training: resources available to young people, knowledge of the system to show them where to go, labour market needs, knowledge of the difficulties of young people leaving care to become independent, career planning, financial and economic issues, psychology, how to motivate young people, conflict management, planning skills, knowledge and development of attachment theory and organizational skills.

They must also have personal skills: empowerment, empathy, communication, patience, active listening, cooperation, respectful attitude towards other people's problems – especially those at risk –, ability to build genuine and authentic relationships with young people, stress control, conflict management, limit setting, social awareness, self-awareness, relaxation, persuasion and coordination. Teamwork is also important.



"In addition to gaining a better insight into the situation of care leavers and their emancipation process, the tools used will be incorporated into my daily work and will hopefully help me and the youth I work with"

4.5 TOWARDS GOOD INSTITUTIONAL TREATMENT: COOPERATION AND REFERENCE PROFESSIONALS

For those leaving the system it is not only important to know that they will have the services and benefits they need to live; they also value as essential that those who have been accompanying them during their time in care and in preparation for their exit from the system continue to support them beyond their coming of age, that they continue to respect them and take their opinions and wishes into account, and that they are well trained for this purpose.

In order to improve their exit processes, it is important that reference professionals are trained not only in content and practical knowledge, but also in the skills to build and maintain a good relationship with those who leave the system.

However, the professionals of the care system cannot be the support for these young people indefinitely. It is therefore very necessary to work in parallel with the foster caregivers and with the young person's own or extended family, so that the young person has someone to rely on at least for a sufficiently long period of time.

The reference professional should be someone the young person trusts. After leaving the system, they could act as a "mentor". This continuity would ensure better support in the exit and emancipation processes. It should be contemplated in standards and it should be assessed whether it should be supported normatively. Forging a relationship of closeness, trust, sincerity, availability, effectiveness in meeting their needs and affection, between the professional and the young person (secure attachment relationship) is the basis for helping young people in this process.

It is important to create a multi-sectoral approach, establish responsibilities and shared practical experiences.

Young people are of the opinion that joint participation processes should be promoted at the autonomous community and state level to include young people, organizations and administrations. They suggest the creation in each autonomous community of a representative council of young people in the care system and in foster care to make proposals and gather their opinions, incorporating their point of view in the working models of professionals.

4.6 DATA COLLECTION

The collection of quantitative or qualitative data on exit from the care system process is neither rigorous nor systematic. Poor quality data impedes evidence-based decision making, whether in passing laws, designing and implementing policies, regulations, standards, organizing services, or providing resources. Unreliable or poor-quality data means that the capabilities and skills of professionals will not be able to meet the needs of those leaving the system.

Those who participated in the trainings propose to improve qualitative and quantitative data collection and data analysis in relation to all aspects involved in care system exit processes. For example:

- Requiring statistical information from social services on young people exiting the system who have started independent living.
- Improving the collection of quantitative data on the number of young people leaving the system in relation to their age group, on young people between 19 and 24 years old (differentiating those who are in emancipation processes and those who have continued studying), how many remain in foster care (depending on the educational level of the families and the geographical location) compared to residential care, young people with special needs (intellectual disability, functional disorders, etc.), number of transitional homes by region and number of members in each, and number of young people helped by each social worker two years after starting the emancipation process.

"My emancipation process has been generally pleasant. Although in many moments it was difficult for me to take everything in, since it was something new for me. I think it's all a matter of maturity, although your level of preparation also plays a role"



5 RECOMMENDATIONS

1st) The **legislative framework needs to be amended** to adapt it to the international requirements stemming from the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the General Comments of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children and the 2019 UN Resolution on the Rights of the Child. All these texts fully embrace the child rights-based approach and the concept of comprehensive protection governing young people preparing their exit from the system and their emancipation process.

The legislation must therefore regulate the preparation for independent living and the post-exit process by incorporating the following aspects:

a) The **best interests of the child** must govern the entire process. Inseparable from this, the right to participation of young people in the design and implementation of their emancipation plans and processes must be guaranteed. Such plans should seek the highest degree of development of the young person, taking into account their individual circumstances, without discrimination under any circumstances.

b) Every child or adolescent subject to any alternative care measure should have the **right to plan their exit from the system**, either when they come of age or even before. The extent of the participation of other stakeholders in the process, such as caregivers, foster carers, parents or extended family, should also be regulated.

c) The **professionals** who accompany these young people must be accredited as having **adequate initial training** and must also receive **ongoing training** to ensure that the process is carried out with a rights-based approach. Likewise, the law should guarantee a multidisciplinary and comprehensive approach to these processes, always placing the young person at the centre. The regulations should specify the contents that such training should include, not only in terms of technical competencies, but also in terms of other skills necessary for adequate accompaniment.

Other key aspects are improving their technical knowledge of the regulatory framework and having soft skills and abilities that allow them to attend to the emotional aspects of the young person. The trainings carried out in the Prepare for Leaving Care project prove this.

d) The legislation should make explicit the obligation to **work with the family of origin** in order to achieve the return of the young person to their family nucleus, whenever it is in their best interests. The reason for this is that the right of the child not to be separated from their family remains fully in force even after separation, which, moreover, is always conceived as a transitory measure.

e) The legislation should also recognize the right of young people leaving the system to have **access to educational, social, housing and health services**, as well as to certain benefits and financial aid, at the very least, to ensure the success of the transition to independent living. Likewise, their rights to be informed about all this and to receive the necessary training to be able to exercise them should be recognized.

f) Given the complex composition of our system of public administrations, the exclusive attribution to the autonomous communities of the protection of children and adolescents and the role that the municipalities must play in the integration of these young people into independent life, it is crucial that the legislation clearly establishes the responsibility of each of the territorial levels and, at the same time, configures effective cooperative formulas among all of them to align efforts in the desired direction.



“Each person needs a different amount of time; we should stay in the care centre until we finish our studies or find a job”

“I didn't have the necessary resources. My care centre didn't have protected flat or professionals who could help me with my emancipation process. I felt that I was lacking at a psychological level and at a social integration level”



2nd) It is necessary to **elaborate and approve common technical standards** on emancipation processes that guarantee minimum rights to all young people leaving the system, regardless of their geographical residence or any other condition. These standards should be defined by a multidisciplinary technical body or working group and approved at the highest political level (Sectorial Conference on Childhood and Adolescence). These standards would guarantee a homogeneous application in accordance with internationally agreed minimum standards. The participation of young people in this process is essential if a rights-based approach is to be adopted.

Consequently, the regulations must contemplate adequate supervision and accountability mechanisms for possible inadequate compliance with the standards.

3rd) It is essential to have a **system for collecting updated data** on all aspects of the emancipation processes of young people leaving the system. Only in this way will it be possible to design evidence-based public policies that are effective in providing the support to which they are entitled. The recent approval of the Unified Registry of Social Services on Violence against Children (abbreviated RUSSVI in Spanish) in the Organic Law for the Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents against Violence may represent a great opportunity to incorporate the thousands of young people leaving the care system into the national strategy on the protection of children and adolescents, better coordinating public processes and actions.

Likewise, as demanded by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in its General Observation Number 5, minimum indicators should be approved and applied to measure the impact of the protection measure, both in terms of effectiveness and economic and social efficiency.

4) The fact that each young person can count on a **reference professional** who knows their case, is trusted by them and is specially trained to provide support with a comprehensive and integrated approach to their needs can represent an enormous step forward in terms of the **good institutional treatment** of the care system. This comprehensive approach implies cooperation and coordination that should be required by law and incorporated as a normal mode of operation of the system, creating, if necessary, organic formulas to materialize it. General administrative legislation, and more recently the Organic Law for the Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents against Violence, establishes the legal duty to cooperate. In the reform of the legal framework proposed in this report, it would be advisable for this duty to be made explicit in particular for the processes of leaving the care system

6 COMMITMENT AND ACTION

At SOS Children's Villages, we understand the transition to independent living of young people in care and subsequent support as another phase of the comprehensive protection to which they are entitled. It is not enough to feed, educate and protect the child or adolescent during their foster care, it is necessary not to lose sight of the fact that the goal is their full integration into society.

Therefore, in our foster care programs we prepare children for their transition to adult life long before they turn 18, enabling them to become autonomous, successfully emancipate and integrate socially and in the workplace. In addition, we accompany them with our Youth Programs after coming of age.

This experience shows that preparation prior to coming of age and subsequent support and accompaniment make the difference for these boys and girls with weak or no social networks between a life of hardship and a life of dignity and independence.

Our commitment to them is absolute, but insufficient, because it only reaches a few. It is necessary the commitment of the whole society and, in particular, that of the administrations so that the opportunity to opt for this dignified and independent life is not a matter of luck but the exercise of a right.

We know what their needs and shortcomings are (we have documented them in this report). And we have specific recommendations to provide them with tangible answers. All that remains is for us to act.

The National Youth Strategy 2030 recognizes young people leaving the care system as one of the vulnerable groups in our society who need support to build their life project. It has among its objectives to guarantee them access to housing in line with Article 34 of the Charter of Rights of the European Union, as well as to ensure the fulfilment of their rights and their full inclusion in society. It is, undoubtedly, a step forward, but it remains to be specified how these goals are materialized so that this new and necessary social contract with the youth of our country gives boys and girls who have grown up deprived of parental care the priority place they should hold.



"The difference of being in one centre or another seems a little unfair to me. It's a lottery, we should all have the same opportunities and resources that we need."

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"I think it would be good if we were taught to do things for ourselves, not have things done for us"



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**ALDEAS
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SOS Children's Villages bolsters the good treatment towards children and adolescents via Child Protection Policies. We take an active role in promoting a safe organization, we firmly condemn any case of child abuse or defencelessness and we respond accordingly within our scope and sphere of influence.