Check for Us Initiative:
Key Takeaways

January 2022

Introduction

In December 2020, Congress released more than **$400M in emergency funds** for current and former foster youth in response to the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. States were tasked with eligibility verification and distribution to young people.

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“We did something that was supposedly impossible.”

- Sixto Cancel, TOU

44 states

and D.C. had data transferred to them effectively

24 states

used the ‘Check for Us’ application as part of their official verification process

30k+ alumni

found and connected via the ‘Check for Us’ campaign*

87.5%

of applicants applied from a mobile phone

95.5%

application completion rate for those who specified their state

*35+% of eligible population in CA where we had official state contract

The timeline was short: federal program instructions were issued in March 2021 and young people had to apply for funds by the end of September 2021.

The **immediate challenge was finding eligible young people,** given the lack of a national, or in most cases statewide, database of former foster youth.

Think of Us (TOU) worked with Revolve Impact to design and implement 'Check for Us,' a national outreach campaign to **find and connect** as many former foster youth as possible with their state to apply for funding.

This unprecedented initiative demonstrated a new approach to streamlining government support.

TOU worked in **close partnership with state agencies**, sharing the contact information of young people who applied through the 'Check for Us' portal and establishing a feedback loop around challenges and best practices.

This report documents key takeaways for the benefit of the child welfare ecosystem.

Executive Summary

Four Phases of Action

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Phase 1
Anticipate

Laying the Groundwork:
The funding was passed & TOU evaluated the best course of action.

Phase 2
Build

Planning the Infrastructure:
TOU, states, & partners began putting processes in place.

Phase 3
Activate

Operationalizing the Program:
The campaign launched & marketing tactics continually evolved.

Phase 4
Deliver

Seeing It Through:
TOU provided ongoing support as states processed applications & distributed funds.

2021

Dec | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov

Five recommendations for future initiatives emerged:

1. Be worthy of young people's trust.
2. Build marketing expertise around this population's unique behaviors.
3. Accommodate for variation among states.
4. Collaborate with youth-serving organizations.
5. Build data infrastructure to support long-term impact.

I.
Recommendations

1.

Be worthy of young people's trust.

The foster youth population has been consistently failed by the systems meant to serve them, and will not automatically trust a program unless it has clear timelines and expectations, and is endorsed by a trusted source. Integrity and quality customer service must be prioritized.

> **We got many inquiries from young adults saying, 'Oh, I heard this, but this can't be real.'...a lot of them felt it could have been a scam.**
>
> **- Myrei Edwards, Monarch Family Services**

Be worthy of young people's trust (cont.)

- **Design with Lived Experience.**
  Everything created should be designed with - and by - those with lived experience.

- **Provide non-conditional support.**
  Youth should not have to jump through hoops to access resources and services allocated for them. Providing up-front assistance to young people who may be eligible builds trust.

- **Provide ways to confirm program legitimacy.**
  Young people need ways to distinguish the campaign's outreach efforts from potential phishing schemes.

- **Engage trusted sources.**
  Buy-in from trusted sources working with young people, such as front line workers or fellow foster care alumni, is essential. A direct message from a trusted source was the most effective method for getting a young person to apply. TOU conducted a National Town Hall with the Children's Bureau to build credibility and empower trusted sources to take action.

- **Craft an application that is clear, transparent, and honest.**
  Application design should be vetted with those with lived experience and be fully transparent about how collected information will be used. For example, in early research young people sometimes wondered whether answering certain demographic questions would affect their eligibility, and so language was added to clarify.

- **Follow up early and often.**
  Applicants need the ability to check the live status of their application and assurance that it will be successfully received and processed. TOU did not have access to this information from states and offered overestimated timelines so as not to disappoint young people.

- **Identify clear, accountable points of contact.**
  Applicants need ways to address questions or concerns. For this funding, their point of contact transitioned from TOU to the states, yet many young people still contacted TOU later in the process.

- **Manage expectations whatever the outcome.**
  The reputation of a campaign depends on clear communication and a successful outcome for as many applicants as possible. Even those deemed ineligible should receive a follow-up and explanation.

2.

Build marketing expertise around this population's unique behaviors.

The child welfare ecosystem is not accustomed to marketing to former foster youth, and what works for general youth marketing might not work for this population. The ecosystem needs to continue to experiment to establish best practices. Here are some rules of thumb:

> We felt super proud that the brand resonated with young people. Young people finally got to see themselves in a campaign.
>
> - Mike De La Rocha, Revolve Impact

2.

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Build marketing expertise around this population's unique behaviors (cont.)

- **Be relatable.**
  Young people appreciated the "for us, by us" tone of Check for Us branding. Some Lived Experience Advisors thought it could go even further in speaking their language, relating to their lifestyles and struggles.

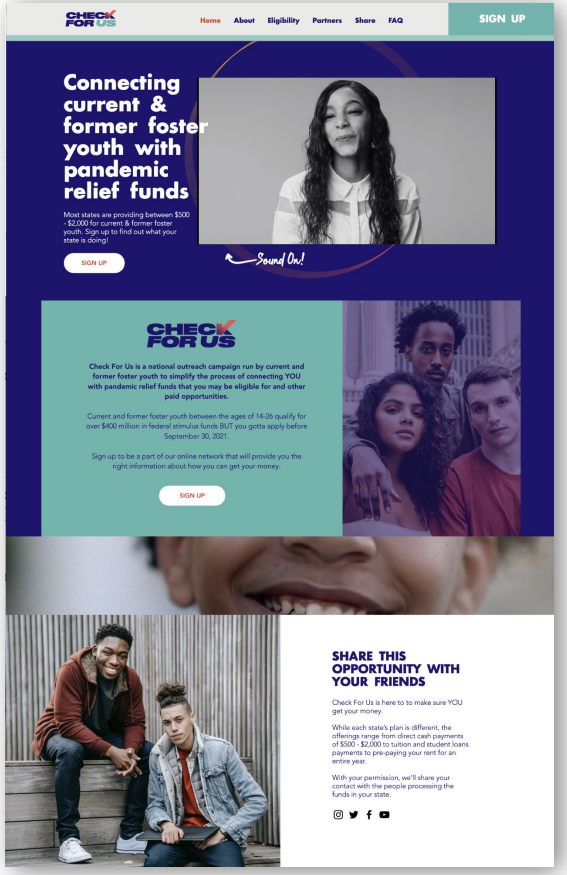
- **Prioritize representation.**
  This population resonated with seeing themselves in the branding. Check for Us used a wide representation of faces, cultures, bodies and gender identities in the website and social media materials to reflect this population's diversity.

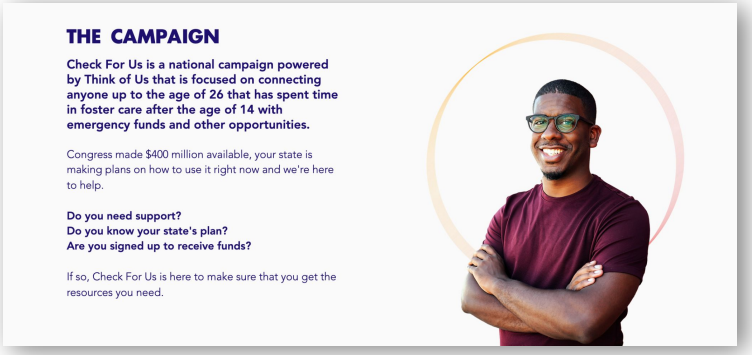
- **Empower those with lived experience to design the process**.
  TOU integrated those with lived experience as both formal and informal advisors, providing guidance and flagging potential issues. Advisors provide input at every stage of the process (i.e. on strategy and not just feedback after the fact).

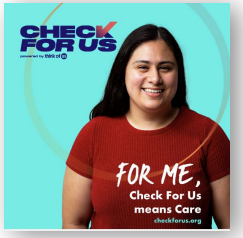
- **Leverage the strengths of social media.**
  Social media demands investment and iteration to have impact. While TOU found that direct texts and emails were more effective than social media for getting young people to apply, social media played a role in building campaign credibility. It has potential to communicate in a relatable way to young people.

- **Reach the unconnected.**
  Those already in TOU's database were the easiest to find again. It is more challenging to find young people not associated with the child welfare ecosystem. Outreach focused on specific populations like those experiencing homelessness or incarceration might have found more former foster youth.

- **Separate messaging to young people from messaging to partners.**
  Marketing to young people should speak purely to them, undiluted by the more formal tone of the child welfare ecosystem. Establish a separate site for partners to access information.







Check for Us Marketing Campaign

3.

Accommodate for variation among states.

The funding was structured in a way that each state created and executed their own plan. Creating state-specific marketing and outreach presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Future efforts should explore regional-, state- and local-specific customization even further:

> **We were trying to make a national campaign for every state, but every state was different. So I had people tell me, what do you mean you can't guarantee it?**
>
> **- Sabrina Abong,**
> **Lived Experience Advisor**

3.

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Accommodate for variation among states (cont.)

- **Share or co-create marketing materials with states.**
  States should have access and ability to utilize and brand marketing materials for their own purposes.

- **Build state-specific eligibility processes.**
  This would eliminate the need for some states to require a separate application or supplemental information as well as meet any criteria governed by policy at the state or local level.

- **Clarify state-specific program considerations for applicants rather than a standardized national message**.
  Program details should include eligibility guidelines that are clear to applicants before they apply. TOU embedded a spreadsheet of state specific considerations into the Check for Us website as a workaround.

- **Build infrastructure to support each state individually.**
  With each state building its own plan, efforts to provide centralized information sharing and support are highly complex and largely ineffective. Future efforts should include state-specific support from the start and/or long-term investment in data infrastructure to build a foundation for state-by-state planning to be more successful.

- **Programs with short timelines should be one size fits all.**
  When time is of the essence, it is ideal that federal instructions allow for minimal, if any, variation in eligibility and implementation from one state to the next. This will allow for more time-efficient program roll out through centralized information sharing, problem solving, and capacity to measure impact.

- **Share best practices and challenges.**
  States benefit from having the specific details of other states' plans and learning how their proposed tactics compare to what has worked for others. These are best shared one on one, hearing about what a state is most interested in and/or needs and then sharing the most relevant information.

4.

Collaborate with youth-serving organizations.

Youth-serving organizations tended to work in isolation, sometimes duplicating efforts. We can achieve more with greater collaboration:

> We don't want to step on someone's toes so much that we don't actually get to the result.
>
> - Sixto Cancel, TOU

4.

Collaborate with youth-serving organizations (cont.)

- **Publicly report and track**.
  To demonstrate transparency, strengthen partnerships, and expand opportunities for learning across the ecosystem, work in partnership with other youth-serving groups to better document the program and conduct surveys.

- **Align to support one overall strategy.**
  Youth-serving organizations can work together to develop the infrastructure for a national strategy that can be customized for specific geographies. Effective collaboration better leverages resources, for better overall results.

- **Canvas organizations serving intersecting communities.**
  Cross-sector collaboration to reach more young people is critical. Foster youth overlap significantly with people experiencing homelessness, human trafficking, hunger, receiving WIC or SNAP, engaging in faith communities, and accessing public schools. While time-intensive, methodical investment in relationships across sectors will open doors to more effectively reaching foster youth in future programs.

- **Pool human capital as a resource.**
  Youth-serving organizations represent a broad array of funding bases and depth of expertise. One may have a key player skilled in tech infrastructure, another excellent creative, and another effectively elevate the voices of people with lived experience. Tap into the resources, strengths, and expertise of collaborating organizations and frankly address organizational limitations. This will reduce duplicative efforts, scarcity mindset, and engagement fatigue.

5.

Build data infrastructure to support long-term impact.

Marketing and outreach are invaluable in reaching foster youth, but only as effective as the critical data infrastructure that allows for streamlining services and supports to eligible young people. Practical steps to build foundational data infrastructure include:

> It was a little hard to communicate that...we can't even guarantee that you qualify to get this money, but we want you to apply anyway.
>
> - Justina Burton,
> Lived Experience Advisor

5.

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Build data infrastructure to support long-term impact (cont.)

- **Establish national and statewide databases of former foster youth.**
  Build technological and cross-system infrastructure to collect specific, structured, individual and aggregate data on people who enter the child welfare system. This should, at minimum include personal identifiable information, but also health, education, placement, employment, social and other critical information to analyze and improve necessary services and supports for this population. This should align with data infrastructure across systems to address the needs of intersectional groups (i.e. HUD Point in Time Count).

- **Create tools to determine eligibility upfront.**
  Build infrastructure that enables a young person to enter their information and determine eligibility for support before submitting a formal application.

- **Establish secure methods to collect verifying information.**
  Build appropriate infrastructure to collect sensitive data like social security numbers. Data safety concerns present a real barrier to collecting the necessary information to verify eligibility.

- **Troubleshoot data errors.**
  States struggled with errors or omissions submitted in applications that did not match state records as required. Future programs should include capacity building for states to resolve discrepancies on a person-by-person basis and ensure eligible young people receive the support for which they quality.

II.
The Storyline

Phase 1
Anticipate

Dec 2020 - Apr 2021

Laying the Groundwork:
The funding was passed & TOU evaluated the best course of action.

Context

Congress authorized $400M in funds and tasked states with deployment.

No federal program instructions issued to states yet.

- Funds were linked to the Chafee Independent Living Program, but it was unclear how they would be implemented under that umbrella (e.g. new flexibilities, would states need to change their historical approach, etc.).

State-level implementation unknowns.

- Many states were waiting to determine what services, programs, and/or funds to offer.
- States had different requirements, some of which state legislatures would need to approve.
- Many voiced early concerns related to marketing, eligibility verification, technical infrastructure, and staffing.

Think of Us action

With young people

Met with Youth Boards upon request to support state-level planning.

- Co-organized youth planning in select states, including Virginia and Indiana.
- Started designing the Lived Experience Advisors.
- Identified leading youth advocates and campaigns focused on marginalized young people beyond child welfare to identify and learn best practices.

With the ecosystem

Identified gaps and opportunities for technical assistance.

- Informed states' relief planning by sharing data on the direct, realtime needs (as of November 2020) of current and former foster youth in their state, broken out by age, demographics, zip code, etc.
- Explored strategies to simplify processes for requesting and distributing aid.
- Pursued partnership with tech, campaign, and marketing firms in preparation for campaign.

Phase 2
Build

Apr 2021 - Jun 2021

Planning the Infrastructure:
TOU, states, & partners began putting processes in place.

Context

Federal program instructions were released, allowing for variability by state.

Each state developed its own distinct:

- Per-youth funding allotment and service offerings
- Timeline
- Communications and outreach strategy
- Application and eligibility verification

Implementation looked different - and there some consistent themes:

- Some states planned up front, while others had waited for federal program instructions
- Distributing funding (for the first time) in a compressed timeline was a challenge
- Marketing to find former foster youth was a completely new scope of work
- Eligibility verification at scale was time consuming
- The technical infrastructure, including processing applications and payments, was inadequate for the task

States that integrated lived experience into planning were more aware of what young people needed, and had more buy-in.

Think of Us action

With young people

Identified top priority: finding former foster youth and connecting them with their state to apply for funding.

Planned and built Check for Us outreach campaign.

- Designed a secure application that could be used nationwide and allowed child welfare agencies to identify eligible youth, understand their needs, and reach out to them to provide assistance.
- Created a brand, website, and extensive marketing materials co-designed with, tested by, and targeted for young people.
- Established a group of Lived Experience Advisors who weighed in weekly.

With the ecosystem

Developed marketing assets for the ecosystem to utilize.

- Hired national campaign experts (new to child welfare) to design and lead this work.
- Created youth-led campaign, including marketing materials and outreach strategies targeted to young people.
- Built campaign website as a hub of information about assistance in states, how to apply for aid, and communication materials.
- Developed customizable text message, email, social media, and website templates.

Provided technical assistance, support, and collaboration.

- Conducted 35 meetings with individual states to understand their needs.
- Developed a Community of Practice on a standalone app to support state and county child welfare agencies and provide up-to-date information to aid with implementation.

Phase 3
Activate

Jun 2021 - Sep 2021

Operationalizing the Program:
The campaign launched & marketing tactics continually evolved.

Context

States struggled with timeline, capacity, and know-how.

- Inadequate time to hire vendors, technical infrastructure shortfalls, lack of staff to carry out program operations, and more.
- Some states were still deciding offerings as the campaign ran. Some never launched a program.
- Hope for rich state-to-state communication via the Community of Practice didn't materialize; time-strapped states preferred to contact TOU directly.

Some states managed the process independently, some partnered with TOU, and some delegated implementation to other organizations.

State application processes varied.

- Some leveraged the Check for Us application, others created their own. Some asked youth to contact a generic email address or phone number.

Youth-serving organizations jumped in:

- Contracted for a range of roles; Hosted webinars and identified best practices across states.
- Advocates connected with state leaders and called out delays.
- Some cross-organizational dynamics were competitive rather than collaborative.

Think of Us action

With young people

Launched Check for Us campaign.

Leveraged social media like Instagram Live with influencers from both inside and outside of child welfare.

Hosted a national Town Hall with the Children's Bureau.

- Created a platform to hear and share the real time experiences of youth applying for funding.
- Activated state agencies and frontline workers for outreach.

Initiated a national Day of Action, which rapidly doubled the number of connections.

- Engaged the broader ecosystem and community with a clear call to action.
- Conducted a prep call with frontline staff led by CEO Sixto Cancel.
- Developed and shared a Day of Action Toolkit.

With the ecosystem

Shared high-quality marketing materials

- State-specific text message, email, social media, and websites.
- Developed with and for young people with lived experience in foster care.
- Provided guidance on outreach strategies and deployment of marketing assets.

Updated campaign website frequently to include FAQ and state offerings as state programs rolled out.

Transferred youth contact information data to states.

- Utilized secure methods that were within technical capacity of most states
- Some states didn't have experience or comfort with digital tools for data-sharing, such as Box.
- Youth provided consent to share this information through the Check for Us application.

Phase 4
Deliver

Sep 2021 - Nov 2021

Seeing It Through:
TOU provided ongoing support as states processed applications & distributed funds.

Context

Youth experienced delays or no follow-up after submitting an application.

- Many young people expressed a drop in confidence.
- Young people sought customer service wherever they could, including through TOU, who didn't have access to application status.

Eligibility verification proved time consuming.

- Errors, inconsistencies, and incomplete information created complications.
- There were barriers to sharing information across state systems.

Payment methods varied across states, with varied outcomes.

- Some payment methods were problematic, such as virtual cards that didn't allow cash access or paying for rent.
- Some states successfully paired funding distribution with voluntary classes and/or specific assistance in areas such housing or financial management.

Think of Us action

With young people

Provided state-specific follow up information.

- Sent text messages to applicants about their state's offerings or links to additional documentation to submit.
- Continually updated the Check for Us website with FAQ and state-specific eligibility information.
- Conducted state-specific outreach campaigns where applicable.
- Hosted webinars to inform about the process and answer questions.
- Lived Experience Advisors provided insight to other organizations and states - and leveraged their networks to continue to spread the word.

With the ecosystem

Partnered with Youth Law Center to publish an implementation report with the aim of influencing Congress.

Refocused attention on the September 30th deadline for benefits and the expiration of the moratorium on aging out.

We knew from day one that states needed help building the infrastructure to provide aid to young people. We launched this initiative to help them with this work. We co-designed everything with young people and implementation staff and created concrete tools that were able to reach 30,000 young people.

- Sixto M. Cancel, Founder and CEO, Think of Us

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