Keys to Your Success: Essential Documents

What are essential documents?

When leaving care, it's important to take an inventory of your essential documents. Documents such as your birth certificate, social security card, medical records, and identification card are essential to your transition to self-sufficiency. Here's a guide to help you navigate these important documents and answer any questions you may have in the process.

Section **1**

What are my essential documents? What documents should I exit care with and is there a timeline for getting my essential documents?

Yes, if you are in care there is a timeline for getting your essential documents. Your caseworker should begin your transition plan no later than 17.5 years old. The transition plan includes the collection of your essential documents to be given to you at the time of your discharge from care.

Section 1 (continued)

Your essential documents include your birth certificate, social security card, medical record, health insurance information, education records, identification card, and a letter stating that you were previously in foster care. If applicable, these may also include tribal documents or a green card.

In addition to your essential documents, you should receive a copy of your annual credit report while you're in care. If you haven't received a copy before preparing to exit care, be sure to ask for a copy.

You can reach out to your county at any time to request these documents while you're in care. Once you age out, you'll need to request these documents through the ways listed in section 3.

Section 2

Why are my essential documents important for my transition to self-sufficiency?

Your essential documents are important to your transition to self-sufficiency because many of these documents provide proof of identification, which may give you access to opening a bank account, getting a job, registering to vote, and/or applying for college or vocational training.

When renting an apartment, your landlord or rental office may ask for identification to verify your identity and check your credit history. Additionally, these documents can be used to secure benefits such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and/or Cash Assistance, Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP), NYS Disability Insurance, and NYS health coverage.

Section 3

Where do I obtain my essential documents? Where do I go if I need these documents after exiting care?

Advocate for yourself! If you are still in care, the first step is to ask your caseworker about receiving a copy of each of your essential documents. As part of your Transition Plan, your caseworker should provide you with your essential documents and/or provide you with information on how to access them. If you find yourself without any of these documents after care, there are resources available for you to acquire these documents.

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Next Section >

Keys to Your Success: Essential Documents

What are my essential documents? What documents should I exit care with and is there a timeline for getting my essential documents?

Your caseworker should begin your transition plan no later than 17.5 years old. The transition plan includes the collection of your essential documents to be given to you at the time of your discharge from care.

Your essential documents include your birth certificate, social security card, medical record, health insurance information, education records, identification card, and a letter stating that you were previously in foster care. If applicable, these may also include tribal documents or a green card.

In addition to your essential documents, you should receive a copy of your annual credit report while you're in care. If you haven't received a copy before preparing to exit care, be sure to ask for a copy.

You can reach out to your county at any time to request these documents while you're in care. Once you age out, you'll need to request these documents through the ways listed in Section 3.

Keys to Your Success: Essential Documents

Read below to learn a little more about each document.

- Your **birth certificate** is an official document that's used to record your birth using identifying information such as your name, gender, parentage, as well as date and place of birth.

- Your **social security card** contains your name and social security number. Your social security number uses nine digits to track your income and determine what benefits you may be eligible for throughout your lifetime. Those nine digits are referred to as your SSN, meaning your social security number.

- Your **medical record** is a documented account of your health history. It includes medications, diagnoses, treatments, tests, immunizations, and notes from your clinicians during your visits.

- Medicaid will remain your **health insurance** until the age of twenty-six, regardless of your income or resources due to the Affordable Care Act. Your health insurance is a contract that requires your health insurer to pay for some or all of your health care costs in exchange for a set monthly rate. Remember, your coverage comes at zero cost to you until the age of twenty-six. Upon turning twenty-six, you will need to apply for insurance through the state you're residing in or your employer.

- Your **education records** include but aren't limited to grades, transcripts, class lists, student course schedules, health records (at the K-12 level), student financial information (at the post-secondary level), and student discipline files.

- Your **identification card** gives identifying data about you such as a full name, address, age or date of birth, height, eye color and often contains a photograph. Your identification card can be a driver's license if you're a driver or a non-driver ID if you're not a driver. A student ID may contain this information, but it doesn't count as an official identification card.

- A **letter stating that you were in foster care** is written by your county. The letter states your name, the county you were in the care of, the dates you entered foster care, and when you were discharged.

If applicable:

- A **green card** is an identification document that shows that a person has permanent residence in the United States. It allows someone who has immigrated to the United States to permanently live and work in the country.

- A Native American **tribal document** is an official tribal or community membership document issued by a Native American Indian tribe, or an Alaska Eskimo or Aleut community, that is recognized by the U.S. federal government.

You can reach out to your county at any time to request these documents, but only until you age out of care. Once you age out, you'll need to request these documents through the ways listed in Section 3.

Keys to Your Success: Essential Documents

Resources

Tribal Documents

- **Tribal Documents:**
  https://www.uscis.gov/i-9-central/form-i-9-resources/handbook-for-employers-m-274/70-evidence-of-employment-authorization-for-certain-categories/72-native-americans

- **Office of Tribal Relations:**
 https://www.usda.gov/tribalrelations

Green Card

- **Get a Green Card:**
  https://www.dhs.gov/get-green-card#:~:text=A%20Green%20Card%20holder%20is,called%20a%20%22Green%20Card.%22

- **Green Card Procedure and Process:**
  https://www.uscis.gov/green-card

- **Applying for Citizenship:**
  https://www.uscis.gov/citizenship/apply-for-citizenship

Birth Certificate

- **What to Know About Birth Certificates:**
  https://www.webmd.com/parenting/what-to-know-about-birth-certificates

Transition Plan

- **24-OCFS-ADM-01, Revised New York State Transition Plan Form to Help Youth Plan for a Successful Discharge**
  https://ocfs.ny.gov/main/policies/external/2024/adm/24-OCFS-ADM-01.pdf

- **YIP Need to Know Series: Planning for Your Transition to Self-Sufficiency:**
  https://youthinprogress.org/sites/default/assets/File/WEB_NTK_Self-Sufficiency-030117-cropped.pdf
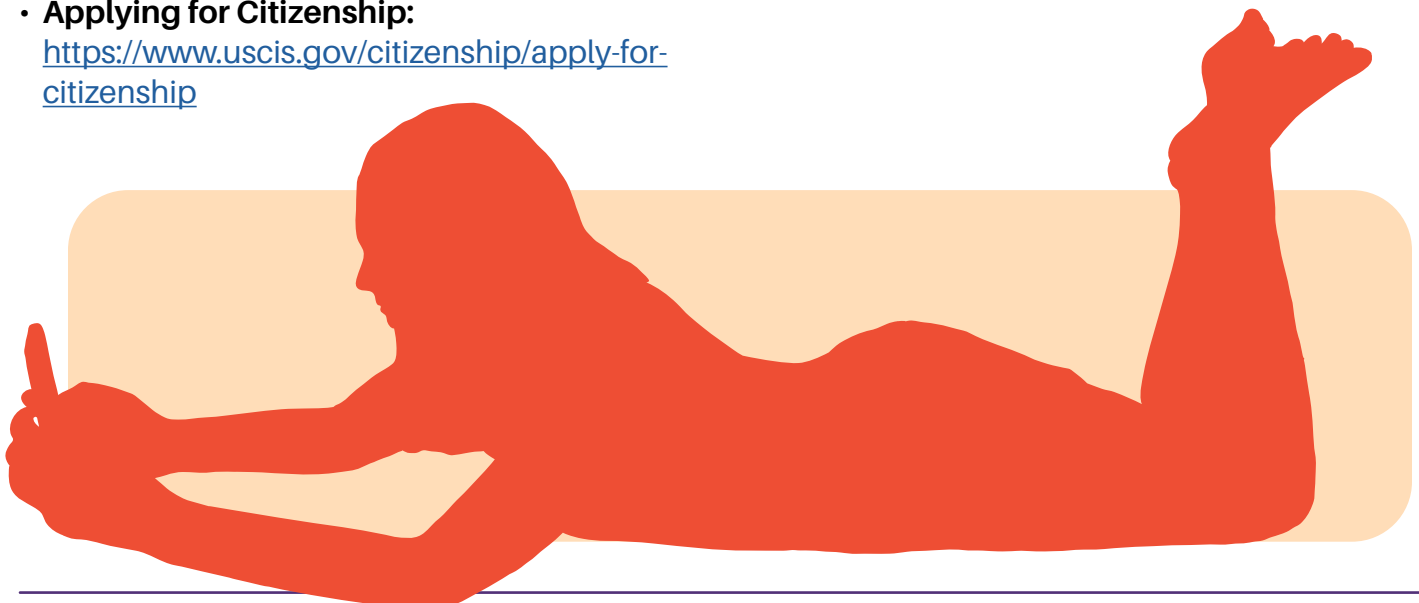
Keys to Your Success: Essential Documents

Why are my essential documents important for my transition to self-sufficiency?

Your essential documents are important to your transition to self-sufficiency because many of these documents provide proof of identification, which may give you access to opening a bank account, getting a job, registering to vote, and/or applying for college or vocational training.

When renting an apartment, your landlord or rental office may ask for identification to verify your identity and check your credit history. Additionally, these documents can be used to secure benefits such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and/or Cash Assistance, Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP), NYS Disability Insurance, and NYS health coverage.

Birth Certificate

Your **birth certificate** helps establish your identity. It's one of your most important documents, as it helps you enter school, get a social security number/card, get a passport, and get an identification card. Additionally, your birth certificate establishes your citizenship, therefore qualifying you for employment in the U.S.
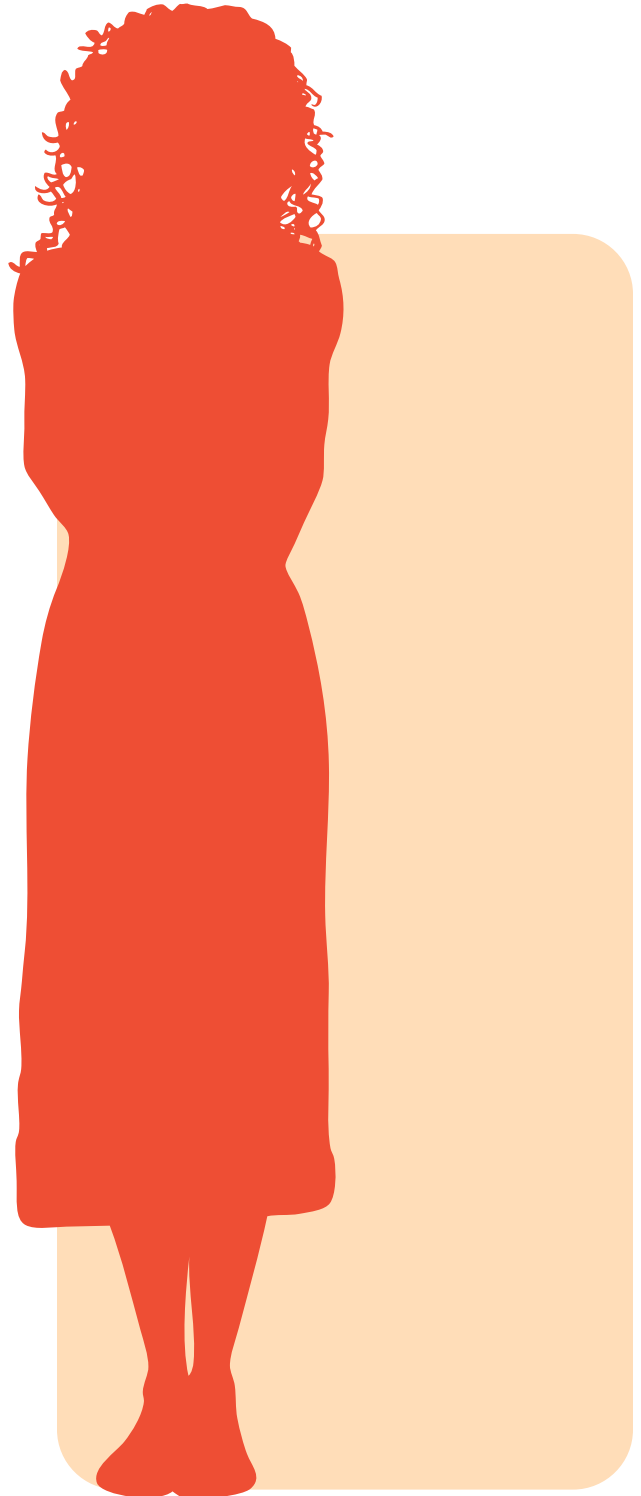
Keys to Your Success: Essential Documents

Social Security Number/Card

Your **Social Security Number/Card** often helps you obtain credit, open a bank account, get insurance, and acquire housing.

- When applying for a job, your employer will most likely ask you to share your social security number with them. By law they are required to report your income to the Internal Revenue Service and your social security wages to the Social Security Administration. Your employer will also use your SSN for state income tax reporting.

- There might be other situations where you are asked to provide your SSN such as applying for your passport, applying for a federal loan, applying for public assistance, enrolling in health coverage, preparing your tax return, or getting your driver's license.

- To prevent identity theft and to keep your information safe, remember to be mindful of who you share your Social Security Card Number with. Your Social Security Number cannot be reissued unless you have a valid reason and documentation of proof that you are experiencing significant identity theft or ongoing financial harm.

- If you change your legal name, you should contact the Social Security Administration.

Keys to Your Success: Essential Documents

Medical Record

Your **medical record** outlines your medical history and your current health status.

- Having your medical record helps you save time during your doctor's appointments by giving your clinicians information about any existing conditions, family history, allergies, medications, or diagnoses you may have.

- Using this information, your doctor may be able to recognize any patterns or trends that could pose a risk to your health in the future.

- Having an updated version of your medical history gives clinicians the opportunity to provide you with the best possible care and make informed decisions regarding your health.

Your medical record holds vital information such as:

- Your height, age, ethnicity, gender, weight, etc.

- A list of medications you're prescribed

- Any diagnoses and treatments you've been provided

- Detailed list of your vaccinations

- Allergies

- A history of any previous hospitalizations and surgeries

- Information on medical insurance and billing

Keys to Your Success: Essential Documents

Health Insurance

Your **health insurance** is important to your transition to self-sufficiency because it helps support your overall health and well-being. Health coverage improves your access to health care and reduces financial stress when it comes to the cost associated with maintaining your health.

While in foster care, you will receive the preventative, screening, diagnostic, and treatment services necessary to keep you healthy. Youth who age out of care can receive health coverage up to age twenty-six. To keep your coverage, you need to provide the local department of social services with your current address. Be sure to update them anytime you move!

Navigating your health insurance may be challenging, but understanding how your health insurance works is an essential component when it comes to maintaining your health. There are many areas that come up when discussing your health coverage, but here are three areas that come up often:

- **Deductible** is the amount of money that you must pay out of pocket (with your own money) every year before the insurance company starts to pay for some of the costs. This is now capped by federal law.

- **Copays** are set fees that the insurance holder must pay for specific services such as doctor visits and prescription drugs even after the deductible is met. For example, if you visit your doctor's office when you are sick, you may have to pay a copay just to see the doctor. These are usually no more than $25.

- **Coinsurance** is the percentage of healthcare costs that the insurance holder must pay even after they've met the deductible (but only until they reach their out-of-pocket maximum for the year). For example, only 75% of braces for your teeth are covered by your insurance, even after you have met the deductible. Which means you are still responsible for 25% of the cost of braces unless you have already paid the maximum amount of money out-of-pocket for the year.

Keys to Your Success: Essential Documents

Education Records

Your **education records** are important because you may need to provide them when applying for post-secondary education or obtaining employment. Institutions of higher learning may ask you to provide copies of your transcripts before enrolling in their programs. Additionally, employers may ask for a copy of your diploma or transcript upon hiring you for a particular role to confirm qualifications.

Identification Card (ID)

Your **identification card** (**ID**) serves as an official form of identification and can be used to prove your identity, age, and where you reside. In New York, you can have either a driver's license or a non-driver's ID. Having an ID makes it easier to access certain services such as registering to vote, housing, opening a bank account, applying for a credit card, and obtaining employment.

Credit Report

Checking your **credit report** and understanding how your credit score impacts your access to housing, loans, insurance, and lines of credit is very important.

Credit bureaus such as TransUnion, Experian, and Equifax gather financial information about you for lenders such as landlords, car dealerships, and credit card companies to determine your creditworthiness. Lenders use this information to determine whether or not you'd be a good fit to work with. Your credit report does not have information on your bills, income, or other things you own.

Typically, when you apply for a loan, apartment, or credit card, the lender will use your credit score, along with your social security number and other information, to determine whether you qualify.

- Credit reports include details on your credit accounts, public records such as bankruptcies, and a list of entities that have asked to see your credit report.

- The three major credit bureaus are Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion. They are each required to provide you with a free report at least once a year, but you must request it first.

Keys to Your Success: Essential Documents

Letter Stating You Were Previously in Foster Care

You should advocate for a **letter stating that you were previously in foster care** because you may find yourself in situations where you need to prove whether or not you were under the care of New York State.

Some of these situations may include:

- **Preparing your Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA):** When applying for financial assistance, post-secondary students are asked a series of questions to determine their level of financial need. Among these questions, students are asked about their experience with foster care and based on their responses they may be considered "independent". When a student is considered "independent" they may qualify for specific or additional financial resources.

- **Housing:** There are certain housing programs available for youth who are exiting care that may require proof that you were previously in foster care.

Keys to Your Success: Essential Documents

Resources

Social Security Card/Number

- **What is the Internal Revenue Service (IRS):**
https://www.investopedia.com/terms/i/irs.asp

- **About Social Security:**
https://www.ssa.gov/agency/

- **The Purpose of Having a Social Security Number:**
https://www.investopedia.com/articles/personal-finance/050615/purpose-having-social-security-number.asp#:~:text=In%20addition%20to%20Social%20Security,car%2C%20among%20many%20other%20pursuits

- **Is it Possible to Get a New Social Security Number:**
https://www.aarp.org/retirement/social-security/questions-answers/new-number.html

Medical Records

- **Department of Health Medical Records FAQ:**
https://www.health.ny.gov/publications/1443

- **How to Get Your Medical Records:**
https://www.verywellhealth.com/how-to-get-copies-of-your-medical-records-2615505

- **Importance of Medical Records in Patient Care:**
https://health-e.in/blog/importance-of-medical-records

Health Insurance

- **The Affordable Care Act:**
https://ocfs.ny.gov/main/sppd/health-services/affordable-care-act.php

- **The Importance of Health Coverage:**
https://www.aha.org/guidesreports/report-importance-health-coverage

- **The Official NYSOH Marketplace:**
https://info.nystateofhealth.ny.gov

- **Doctors and Insurance:**
https://growingupnyc.cityofnewyork.us/generationnyc/topics/doctors-and-insurance

- **15-OCFS-ADM-17 Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act and Medicaid to Age 26:**
https://ocfs.ny.gov/main/policies/external/OCFS_2015/ADMs/15-OCFS-ADM-17%20%20Patient%20Protection%20and%20Affordable%20Care%20Act%20and%20Medicaid%20to%20Age%2026.pdf

- **Health Insurance Deductible:**
https://www.investopedia.com/health-insurance-deductible-4773113

- **Health Insurance: Definitions and How it Works:**
https://www.investopedia.com/terms/h/healthinsurance.asp

- **What is a Copay:**
https://www.investopedia.com/terms/c/copay.asp

Keys to Your Success: Essential Documents

- **What is Coinsurance:**
  https://www.investopedia.com/terms/c/coinsurance.asp

- **What is an Out-of-Pocket Maximum:**
  https://www.investopedia.com/terms/o/outofpocket-limit.asp

Credit Report

- **What is a Credit History:**
  https://www.investopedia.com/terms/c/credit-history.asp

- **Guide to Understanding Credit Scores:**
  https://www.experian.com/blogs/ask-experian/credit-education/score-basics/understanding-credit-scores

- **What is a Credit Score:**
  https://www.consumerfinance.gov/ask-cfpb/what-is-a-credit-score-en-315

- **How to Understand Your Credit Score:**
  https://www.creditkarma.com/lp/free-credit-scores-1

- **What are Lenders:**
  https://www.investopedia.com/terms/l/lender.asp

- **Creditworthiness: How to Check and Improve it:**
  https://www.investopedia.com/terms/c/credit-worthiness.asp

- **Credit Report:**
  https://www.investopedia.com/terms/c/creditreport.asp

- **Free Credit Report Equifax:**
  https://www.equifax.com

- **Free Credit Report TransUnion:**
  https://www.transunion.com/get-credit-report

- **Free Credit Report Experian:**
  https://www.experian.com/consumer-products/free-credit-report.html

- **Identity Theft:**
  https://www.usa.gov/identity-theft

Education

- **What is an Education Record:**
  https://studentprivacy.ed.gov/faq/what-education-record

- **ACCES-VR:**
  https://www.acces.nysed.gov/vr

- **The New York Education and Training Voucher Program:**
  https://etv-nys.smapply.org

- **Federal Student Aid:**
  https://studentaid.gov

- **New York State Education Department: Foster Youth College Success Initiative (FYCSI):**
  http://www.nysed.gov/postsecondary-services/foster-youth-college-success-initiative

Keys to Your Success: Essential Documents

- **New York State Education Department: Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP):**
  http://www.nysed.gov/postsecondary-services/higher-education-opportunity-program-heop

- **The State University of New York: Educational Opportunity Program (EOP):**
  https://www.suny.edu/attend/academics/eop

- **YouthBuild:**
  https://youthbuild.org

- **Tuition Assistance Program:**
  https://www.hesc.ny.gov/pay-for-college/apply-for-financial-aid/nys-tap.html

- **Excelsior Scholarship:**
  https://www.hesc.ny.gov/pay-for-college/financial-aid/types-of-financial-aid/nys-grants-scholarships-awards/the-excelsior-scholarship.html

- **SUNY Educational Opportunity Centers:**
  http://www.ucawd.suny.edu/eoc.php

Housing

- **The New York Foundling:**
  https://www.nyfoundling.org/what-we-do/our-programs/behavioral-health/supportive-housing

- **ACS Housing Support (Applications need to come directly from your caseworker):**
  https://www.nyc.gov/site/acs/child-welfare/housing-support.page

- **New Destiny Housing:**
  https://newdestinyhousing.org/housing-help/nyc-rental-subsidies/acs-housing-subsidy

- **Finding an Apartment:**
  https://growingupnyc.cityofnewyork.us/generationnyc/topics/finding-an-apartment

Keys to Your Success: Essential Documents

Where do I obtain my essential documents? Where do I go if I need these documents after exiting care?

Advocate for yourself! If you are still in care, the first step is to ask your caseworker about receiving a copy of each of your essential documents. As part of your Transition Plan, your caseworker should provide you with your essential documents and/or provide you with information on how to access them. If you find yourself without any of these documents after care, there are resources available for you to acquire these documents.

If you find yourself in need of any of these essential documents after care:

- **Birth Certificate:** Visit your local Vital Statistics Office or online.

- **Social Security Card:** Visit your local social security administration office. You can receive no more than three replacement social security number cards in a year and ten replacement social security number cards per lifetime.

- **Medical Record:** Request a copy of your medical record from your physician. Many practices have online portals where you can submit your request or fill out a form to access your medical records.

Keys to Your Success: Essential Documents

- **Health Insurance Card:** Contact your Local Department of Social Services (LDSS) to order a new Medicaid Benefit Identification Card. You can call or visit your LDSS. If your Medicaid is with the NY State of Health and you need to order a new benefit card, you should call (855) 355-5777. If you reside in one of the five boroughs of New York City (NYC) you can call the Human Resources Administration (HRA) Infoline at (718) 557-1399 or the HRA Medicaid Helpline at (888) 692-6116.

- **Education Records:** Contact the institution where you received your high school diploma, GED, or the last place you attended.

- **Identification Card:** Visit your local Department of Motor Vehicles.

- **Credit Report:** Visit Equifax, Experian, or TransUnion.

- **Green Card:** Visit https://www.uscis.gov or call (800) 375-5283.

- **Tribal Documents:** Reach out to the tribal office at (202) 205-2249 or Tribal.Relations@usda.gov.

- **Letter Stating You Were Previously in Foster Care:** Contact the Department of Children and Family Services located in the county you resided in when you were in foster care.

Learning how to use these documents and how to access them if you need replacements is essential to your transition to self-sufficiency. Be sure to keep these documents in a safe and secure place to prevent identity theft.

Keys to Your Success: Essential Documents

Resources

Statewide

- **New York State Driver License:**
  https://dmv.ny.gov/driver-licenses

- **New York State Non-Driver ID Card:**
  https://dmv.ny.gov/non-driver-id-card

- **Passport Application:**
  https://www.usps.com/international/passports.htm

- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): Where to Write for Vital Records (Except New York City):**
  https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/w2w/new_york.htm

- **New York State Department of Health: Birth Certificates (Except New York City):**
  https://www.health.ny.gov/vital_records

- **New York State Department of Health Immunization Records (Except New York City):**
  https://www.health.ny.gov/prevention/immunization/locating_old_immun_records.htm

- **Adoptive and Foster Family Coalition New York: Finding Adoption Foster Care Records:**
  https://affcny.org/adoption-and-foster-care-records-in-new-york-state

- **Local Department of Social Service (LDSS):**
  https://www.health.ny.gov/health_care/medicaid/ldss.htm

- **Copy of Green Card:**
  https://www.uscis.gov

- **New York State of Health:**
  https://nystateofhealth.ny.gov

- **What is a Patient Portal:**
  https://www.healthit.gov/faq/what-patient-portal#:~:text=A%20patient%20portal%20is%20a,Recent%20doctor%20visits

Albany

- **Birth Certificate:**
  https://www.albanyny.gov/235/Birth-Records#:~:text=A%20copy%20of%20a%20birth,the%20same%20restrictions%20for%20release and https://www.albanyny.gov/231/Vital-Statistics

- **Social Security Card:**
  https://www.nyconnects.ny.gov/providers/social-security-administration-sofaalbaap431

Keys to Your Success: Essential Documents

New York City

- **Birth Certificate:**
https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/services/birth-certificates.page

- **Vaccine Records:**
https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/services/cir-parents-guardians.page

- **Social Security Administration Office Finder:**
https://www.ssa.gov/locator/?URL=%2Fapps6z%2FFOLO%2Ffo001.jsp

Buffalo

- **Birth Certificate:**
https://www.buffalony.gov/279/Birth-Certificate-Request

- **Finding and Locating Vaccines and Immunizations:**
https://www3.erie.gov/health/vaccines-immunizations

- **Social Security Administration:**
https://www.211wny.org/provider/6924

Rochester

- **Vital Records:**
https://www.monroecounty.gov/health-VitalRecords

- **Social Security Administration:**
https://www.nyconnects.ny.gov/providers/social-security-administration-ssa-rochester-900769

Syracuse

- **Vital Records:**
http://www.ongov.net/vital

- **Social Security Administration Office Finder:**
https://www.ssa.gov/locator/?URL=%2Fapps6z%2FFOLO%2Ffo001.jsp

Westchester

- **Birth Certificate:**
https://www.westchesterclerk.com/services/birth-marriage-a-death

- **Social Security Administration:**
https://www.socialsecurityoffices.info/co/ny-westchester

Long Island

- **Vital Records:**
https://www.nassaucountyny.gov/479/Vital-Records

- **Social Security Administration Office Finder:**
https://www.ssa.gov/locator/?URL=%2Fapps6z%2FFOLO%2Ffo001.jsp