

*Building A Foundation*  
**Successful Transitions For Youth  
Using Evidence-Based Practices**

FRANCINE CONNER

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A look at Successful Transitions for Youth through evidence-based practices begins as a case study about San Mateo County's Adolescent Transitional Services Program. San Mateo County's model helps transition older youth to become self-sufficient adults through a focus on job skills, career development, educational planning, life skills, and independent living. By utilizing the evidence-based practices of mentoring and case management in the areas of education and employment services, and incorporating a subsidized employment program to meet regulations for youth to continue to remain in foster care until 21 years old, we can continue to support and foster connections for youth.

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## **Successful Transitions For Youth Using Evidence-Based Practices**

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### **Introduction**

Foster care is intended to be a short-term solution for children until permanency can be attained. The first and preferable solution is to reunify children with their parents. Other solutions to permanency may be placement, adoption, or guardianship with a family member or closely connected adult in the child's life, such as a family friend or teacher. After prevent services have been attempted, as a last resort, children are placed in foster homes or group homes, depending on the needs of the child or the availability of homes. In some cases, children may spend their teenage years as a dependent of the county and age out of the system as a young adult. As a teen nears adulthood, there is the need to prepare the youth for transitioning to independence. Most counties do this by offering various services, including Independent Living Skills programs, employment services, case management, mentoring programs, and other programs designed to incorporate education and employment.

Even with the services and programs that are provided to youth, research shows that former foster youth are less likely to have educational credentials and youth who exit foster care from group homes lack adult ties to attain employment. Research also shows children who remain in care past the age of 18 benefit from continued adult attachment; thereby increasing employment stability.<sup>1</sup> The need has been established for an evidence-based program that is specifically designed to prepare foster youth for

transitioning from foster care to independence. Legislation has also been developed to try and address the unmet needs of transitioning youth. AB 12, the California Fostering Connections Act, allows foster youth, who continue their education or job training and who are employed at least part-time, to be eligible for benefits and remain in care until they are 21 years old.

### **Background**

A consistent historical demand for quality, effective programs has created a large body of research in the area of social and behavioral sciences to evaluate program effectiveness. The evaluated and proven programs are called evidence-based programs (EBP). EBPs are a product of extensive research and evaluation. Some characteristics of EBPs include: participants are evaluated over a longer period of time; the successes of programs are shown in different settings and sizes; and, the programs consistently produce the desired outcomes.<sup>2</sup>

One such study regarding best practices for successfully transitioning youth aging out of foster care to an independent adult life is *Employment of Former Foster Youth as Young Adults: Evidence from the Midwest Study*.<sup>1</sup> Over the last several years, federal policy has also begun focusing on the importance of emphasizing employment in the transition of foster youth to adulthood. The Fostering Connections Act of 2008 includes employment as one of the

<sup>1</sup> Courtney, M. and Hook, J. L. Chapin Hall Issue Brief, *Employment of Former Foster Youth as Young Adults: Evidence from Midwest Study*, March 2010, University of Washington and Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

<sup>2</sup> Cooney, S. M., Huser, M., Small S., and O'Connor, C. Evidence-based programs: An Overview, What Works, Wisconsin. *Research to Practice Series*, Issue #6, October 2007, University of Wisconsin-Madison and University of Wisconsin-Extension.

conditions for foster youth remaining in foster care beyond 18 years old. The Independent Living Initiative of 1986 and the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 both provide funding for employment services for youth.

Evidence-based programs, evidence-based outcomes, and evidence-based practices have quickly become common phrases among human services agencies. While the terminology is common, the conversion to practice is a bit more difficult. Developing programs or practices that are evidence-based takes a lot more work on the front end; it takes forethought, planning, and time.

### **San Mateo County Adolescent Transitional Services**

San Mateo County's model for transitioning foster youth demonstrates their understanding of the needs of youth in preparing for adulthood and of the importance of the county's role. As in most counties, youth in foster care have a social worker dedicated to providing services to that child, including referring them to Independent Living Programs (ILP). ILP supports and assists foster youth in becoming successful, self-sufficient adults by providing education designed to teach youth about basic life skills, such as banking, shopping, budgeting, and more. When youth turn 17, their social worker begins working on an Initial Transitional Plan with them. The plan covers educational advocacy and support, assistance in pursuing college or other training, and job readiness. It also covers public benefits, bank accounts, building a social support system, the housing system, and the payment of utilities, telephone and rent. It also provides the youth with important documents and contacts. The social worker provides the youth with a binder called *Stepping Stones to My Future: My Plan for Transitioning to Adulthood*, filled with community resources and information on health, housing, education, employment, and relationships. The social worker and the youth utilize this binder as a workbook or tool to assist the youth in being an active participant in planning for his/ her future. (See Figure 1.)

**FIGURE 1**  
**San Mateo Foster Care Youth Services**

#### **Dependent Youth Case Management**

- Social Worker primary contact with youth 14-19 years

#### **Independent Living Program (ILP)**

- ILP Program Coordinator.
- Services provided by a contracted college.
- Bi-weekly classes for youth 14-18 years.

#### **Education and Employment Services**

- Employment Services Specialists work one-on-one with youth 18-24.
- Meet regularly to develop individualized employment and education plan.
- Assists with applications, resumes, interviewing skills, job seeking tips, leads and career exploration.
- Education assistance with information on financial aid and scholarships, exploring colleges, and supportive services, review courses of study and vocational training options.
- Referrals to training programs or other resources.

#### **Aftercare Services**

- Contract/partner with Youth and Family Enrichment Services (YFES).
- Assist former foster youth transition to adult living; have to be 18-24 and have been a dependent or ward in out of home placement on/after their 16th birthday.
- Assists with maintaining Medi-Cal, transportation, personal crisis and other services.
- Provide employment and educational services and case management.
- Coordinates the county's Family Unification Housing Voucher Program (FUP), pays rent for 18 months for youth that meet program criteria.
- Transitional Housing Program Plus (THP+) and run a single-site housing program.

When youth become seniors in high school or turn 17 years old, they are automatically referred to work with an Employment Service Specialist (ESS). The ESS positions are funded through Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF); their focus is on education and employment services. While the youth is still a dependent, the ESS works in collaboration with the social worker and provides education and employment services in addition to the services

**TABLE 1**  
**Areas of ESS Focus**

| <b>Job Skills and Career</b>  | <b>Educational Planning</b>   | <b>Life Skills for Independent Living</b>  |
|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resume writing</li> <li>• Filling out job applications</li> <li>• Interviewing techniques</li> <li>• Professional appearance</li> <li>• How to talk to employers</li> <li>• Job advancement</li> <li>• Career exploration</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial aid and scholarships</li> <li>• Exploration of colleges and majors</li> <li>• Applying to college</li> <li>• Transfer preparation</li> <li>• Vocational training options</li> <li>• Internships</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Goal setting</li> <li>• Mentoring</li> <li>• Conflict resolution</li> <li>• Savings and budgeting</li> <li>• Time management</li> </ul> |

and case management that the social worker is providing. Former foster youth may continue to receive employment and educational services through the age of 24. The ESS' role is to provide personalized employment and educational services to both dependent foster youth and aged-out foster youth who are enrolled in the After Care Program. The ESS focuses on the areas indicated in Table 1.

Aged-out youth entering the After Care Program who are in need of housing may be referred to Youth and Family Enrichment Services (YFES). YFES is contracted by the San Mateo Human Services Department to provide three housing models within the Transitional Housing Program Plus (THP+): host family, single site or scattered site. The host family option is for youth who choose to live with an adult other than their biological parents. The host family is paid a monthly rate for rent and the youth is provided with a monthly stipend for other costs. The single site option is an apartment complex. The youth who live at the single site complex are expected to attend group house meetings, complete community service, and be in school and/or working; additionally, they receive a bi-weekly grocery and transportation stipend. Youth who qualify for the scattered site option receive rental assistance and live independently in their own apartment. To qualify the youth must be at least 20 years old. Rental assistance amounts decrease monthly to transition the youth to independent living. All three housing options provide case management and employment and educational ser-

vices through the After Care Program. When youth are referred to THP-Plus, the ESS and the youth meet with the YFES case manager to facilitate a smooth transition. The YFES case manager and ESS may still confer regarding the case plan and services for the youth.<sup>3</sup>

### **Strengths of San Mateo's Adolescent Transitional Services for Foster Youth**

Three areas of San Mateo's employment and education services program stand out as strengths that could benefit Sonoma County: evidence-based practices; the transition between services; and, having an ESS work with youth specifically on the areas of education and employment. Mentoring and case management in the areas of education and employment have both been found to be effective techniques for improving youth outcomes. Mentoring is effective in the areas of education, employment outcomes, and decreased delinquency. Case management has been shown to be effective with youth in the areas of education and employment outcomes, attendance, earnings, and reduced welfare dependence.<sup>4</sup> San Mateo has put into practice a system for transitioning youth to adulthood that incorporates direct employment and educational services with an ESS.

<sup>3</sup> Youth and Family Enrichment Services (YFES) Successful Transitions: Helping Emancipated Foster & Probation Youth on the Path to Independence, *Brochure 2011*.

<sup>4</sup> A. Hadley, K. Mbwana, E. Hair, What Works for Older Youth During the Transition to Adulthood: Lessons from Experimental Evaluations of Programs and Interventions, *Child Trends Fact Sheet*, March 2010.

Case-carrying social workers have many areas to cover with each child. Assisting a youth in their transition to adulthood with a focus on employment and education is a portion of what social workers must cover with each child in their caseload. They also must cover placements, therapeutic services, school, family visits, and more. An ESS who can focus on employment and education and handhold, mentor, and help pave the way for youth, can make a huge difference in their success. In San Mateo County, the ESS position was originally funded through a Workforce Investment Act (WIA) grant. When the grant funding ended after 3 years, San Mateo was able to keep the two ESS positions by transitioning them under the CalWORKS allocation.

In the last two years the two ESS staff added a new component to their scope of work: the Summer Training and Employment Program (STEP). STEP was funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). The program placed 15-16 After Care youth (18-21 years old) in extra-help county positions and paid the youth \$12 per hour. The entire \$12 per hour went to the youth as wages. The additional costs, staff supervision, and time were contributed as the required ARRA funding county match. The ESS workers recruited county employees from several departments, including Parks & Recreation, Library, Medical Center, Human Resources, Administration, and the County Administrative Office (CAO), to be trained as mentors and to act as job coaches.

### **Sonoma County Subsidized Employment Program (SEP)**

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 provided funding for many programs throughout the nation in an effort to stimulate the economy. Through ARRA, social service agencies were charged with administering the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families—Emergency Contingency Fund (ECF), including SEP. Sonoma County provided SEP to SonomaWORKS participants as one of the Welfare to Work activities. Participants had to be “work ready” in order to be considered appropriate for SEP.

Employment & Training counselors met individually with participants to evaluate them for referrals to SEP. Two Employment & Training counselors specialized in determining eligibility for the program and in completing “work ready” assessments for participants applying for SEP through the “Needy Family” application process (low income families within 200% of the Federal Poverty Level). The contracted partner, The Employment Group provided employment services, job development, job placement and retention services for participants referred to SEP. Over 100 businesses and organizations participated in SEP, employing a total of 269 participants in Sonoma County. For public and non-profit agencies, SEP paid 100% of the wages. For private, for-profit employers, SEP paid 100% of the wages up to \$8 per hour and 50% of any wages above \$8. For example, if the wage at a for-profit position was \$12 per hour, SEP paid \$10 per hour, and the employer was responsible for the remainder.

ARRA funding ended in September of 2010 and Sonoma County Human Services could not sustain the program; however, 176 participants retained permanent positions with the participating employers at the employers’ total expense. While Sonoma County considered this a great success in itself, other unexpected results emerged. Clients reported that this program changed their lives: they gained self-esteem and self-worth, they felt a connection not only to the workforce but to their co-workers, and they felt like they were making a difference and giving back to the community.<sup>5</sup>

### **Conclusion**

As social services move toward the implementation of AB 12, the California Fostering Connection to Success Act, we must consider what changes will best serve our foster youth. Under AB 12, foster youth may continue in the system until their twenty-first birthday. As a condition of remaining in foster care, youth will be required to continue their education or

<sup>5</sup> Conner, F., Alderman, S., TANF, Emergency Contingency Fund Final Report, January 2011, Sonoma County Human Services, Employment and Training Division.

job training or to work at least part-time. AB 12 provides a tremendous opportunity to positively impact the success of foster youth. The chances of youth who age out of foster care having a social support system in place for their transition into adulthood is not as great as for those young adults who are from intact families. Youth's chance of failure is higher when there is no support network or guidance for things such as how to negotiate the hoops of the education system or how to deal with the expectations of the work world and when there is no support, often what I need are just advice and words of praise during the rough spots as they mature. Based on the research of the San Mateo model, Sonoma County can develop a program designed to connect youth to their future by providing a mentored transition into independent living

## Recommendations

Emancipated foster youth often feel disconnected and lost, and lack life goals. AB 12 provides the opportunity to continue to foster youth through their transition to early adulthood. It also provides the time youth need for development and maturity to occur. After completing the above research and evaluation, I am recommending the following for Sonoma County:

- Develop a program for foster youth ages 16–21 that models evidence-based practices, such as:
  - Engaging youth at an early age (16 years old)
  - Mentoring
  - Providing case management
- Develop a process for youth to be referred to an Employment & Training Counselor (ETC). The ETC job assignment would be modeled after the ESS position in San Mateo and would specifically work with foster youth on job skills, career development, educational planning, life skills, and independent living through mentorship and case management.

- Develop a component of the program based on the Subsidized Employment Program in Sonoma County:
  - Youth would be eligible at age 18
  - The ETC would be responsible for developing job positions within the county and for partnering with departments to develop a mentorship program for youth. The program would have the following characteristics:
    - Youth would be paid between \$8 and \$12 per hour
    - Employment hours could be part-time or full-time
    - Placements would be for 6 months at a time
    - There will be a focus on developing job skills
    - A department mentor would be assigned to each youth
  - A department mentor would complete a monthly evaluation on the youth's progress in their position, including strengths and areas for improvement.
  - The ETC, department mentor, and the youth should meet monthly to discuss the monthly evaluation and to triage any issues that arise.
- Develop a youth program that should include no more than 20 youth to allow for effective case management.

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