

# Supported Training and Employment Programs for Emancipated Foster Youth

SAUNDRA PEARSON

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Foster youth are at extreme risk for poverty, and are likely to experience negative outcomes such as homelessness, victimization, illness, low educational attainment, criminal justice system problems, and teen pregnancy. When foster youth reach age 18, or 21 in some states, they “age-out” of foster care. In contrast to children who are raised by their families, the population of emancipated foster youth often transitions into independence without access to any formal system of support.

San Mateo County provides a *Supported Training and Employment Program (STEP)* that focuses on the vulnerable population of current and former emancipated foster youth who have transitioned from the care of the state to independence. San Mateo County’s STEP program is considered to be successful since 80% of the program’s active participants were employed in the last year.

Similarly, *Beyond Emancipation (B:E)* is Alameda County’s primary provider of services for former foster youth. There is no limit to the number of eligible youth who can apply. *B:E* services are rooted in a coaching model, and the program is also considered to be successful since 80% of active participants are also employed.

All emancipated foster youth are not participating in available programs because of the youths’ negative perception of the foster care stigma. In order to increase the level of participation, it is recommended that Alameda County should reach out to foster youth as early as age 14, to assist and encourage them to overcome their resistance to participation in transitional programs.

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## Introduction

On January 2, 2014, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported that the number of foster children at any one point in time in the United States is over 400,000. Every year, over 250,000 children are removed from their homes. In California, there are more than 80,000 youth in foster care, which is approximately 20 percent of the foster youth in the nation. Foster youth in California live in the care of the state until their 18th birthday. Foster youth can remain in the foster home after age 18 if they are still in high school or are waiting to start college. Foster children can also reside in a foster home if the foster parent agrees to let them stay; however, these families may only continue to receive payment from the state for the care of the foster youth if they meet eligibility requirements. Some of the eligibility requirements include completing high school or the equivalent; enrolling in college; participating in vocational education, at least 80 hours per month employment, or employment training; or qualifying for a medical condition exemption. In the United States, an estimated 18,000 to 20,000 youth will emancipate, or “age-out” of the foster care system. In California, 2,300 to 4,000 foster youth emancipate from the foster care system annually. Youth aging out of foster care or transitioning out of the formal foster care system are one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged populations in our society.

## Background: Foster Care Challenges and Impact

The cause behind a child’s placement into foster care can generally vary from parental abuse or neglect, parents unable to care for the child, parental incarceration, desertion, or placement under

the jurisdiction of the juvenile court system. Foster youth are often legally emancipated from foster care at the age of 18, which results in the foster parents giving up control of guardianship to the youth at emancipation. Once youth emancipate from the system, they are essentially set adrift. These once fostered individuals are expected to participate and function in mainstream society immediately, despite lacking the emotional well-being and skills necessary to cope with every day requirements and challenges. These young individuals lack the propensity to perform the fundamentals of life such as preparing for college, managing money, being independent, handling responsibilities, and having morals, discipline, and structure. These deficiencies lead to lack of basic education, high rates of unemployment, homelessness, and dependence on public assistance programs. Emancipated foster youth also face challenges such as obtaining a safe and affordable place to live, a high school diploma, medical care, access to higher education, and quality employment opportunities in order to become self-sufficient and productive adults.

Having experienced the many challenges and impacts as noted above, and the negative perception of the foster care stigma that foster care children develop, it is not unusual for emancipated youth to fail or refuse to participate in the programs for transition that are offered by the counties. The bottom line is that many youth are ashamed of the fact they are a product of foster care, and this causes them to miss the opportunity for valuable transition program assistance.

## Landmark Legislation

Two key landmark laws assist foster “emancipatees” in achieving success. The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 aims to assist youth aging out of foster care in the United States in obtaining and maintaining independent living skills, as does the Fostering Connection to Success Act for the State of California (AB12). Due to AB12, many youth have chosen to stay in foster care until age 21. Foster care children are important members of our society and our future. Counties are responsible for providing access to the social safety net that youth aging out of foster care need to be successful in their lives and in their communities. While foster youth have been physically cared for until emancipation, many are not mentally or emotionally ready to take on responsibilities for their own life achievements. Children who “age-out” of foster care are at a high risk for mental illness, including posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and attachment disorders.

## San Mateo County's Supported Training and Employment Program (STEP)

San Mateo County has developed a *Supported Training and Employment Program (STEP)* for emancipated foster youth. The *STEP* program is an internship program sponsored by the Human Services Agency and the Human Resources Department. The purpose of the program is to introduce the world of work to former foster youth who otherwise have limited exposure and opportunities, and are at extreme risk for underemployment. *STEP* youth are paid \$12.00 per hour while being trained and coached during the course of their employment with the county. The program includes four primary components for interns:

- *Job Readiness Skills Training Orientation*—Participating youth receive at least 8 to 12 hours of job skills training through *Peninsula Works*. Training topics include completing job applications, resume writing, job leads, interviewing and presentation skills, as well as appropriate on-the-job behaviors.
- *Job Shadowing and One-to-One Job Coaching/Mentoring from a County Employee*—Each intern is paired with a county department supervisor who can best meet their needs. Supervisors/coaches help prepare the interns for their new job duties by exemplifying and teaching appropriate behaviors and skills, as well as orienting them through the process of gaining work experience. The interns and coaches receive training through “*The Mentoring Institute*” and “*Arm of the Friends for Youth Program*.”
- *Hands-On Work Experience in a County Department*—Each participant is matched to an entry-level internship with a county department.
- *Transition Planning through Children and Family Services*—Program staff and interns create an individual transition plan that identifies lessons learned, sets new goals and objectives, delineates steps to take, and identifies available resources for employment, such as referrals for housing, mental and behavioral health, education/vocation planning and permanency programs. In addition, the Recruitment and Selection Division provides training on how to successfully seek, apply, and interview for county employment.

## Alameda County Beyond Emancipation Program

Several Alameda County programs and services assist youth in transition as they become independent self-sufficient adults. Alameda County takes a lot of pride in being named the best in the state for supporting foster youth, and assisting youth in transitioning and functioning in society. Alameda County has clearly established capacity to handle all emancipated foster youth who apply for the program.

*Beyond Emancipation (B:E)* is Alameda County's primary provider of services for former foster youth. There is no limit to the number of youth who can apply. Over 100 youth emancipate each year in Alameda County. On an annual basis, *B:E* provides support and serves over 1,000 of Alameda County's current and former foster and probation youth ages 16-24. This program is designed to help foster youth become successful in their transition to adulthood

and in living independently. *B:E* services are rooted in a coaching model that provides youth critical opportunities to be creative, resourceful, and whole. *B:E* assists youth with:

- *Transitional Housing*—Services are provided throughout the year for emancipated foster youth. It is important to note that the Foster Youth Alliance, which is a coalition of community-based organizations and public agencies, rates Alameda County as the front-runner in providing supportive transitional housing placements for foster youth.
- *Education*—*B:E* actively provides support for youth to ensure they are able to complete high school, secure their diplomas or obtain GEDs. *B:E* also actively supports youth on multiple post-secondary educational pathways, including community college, vocational, four-year degree, and career and technical programs. *B:E* assists youth in accessing the financial aid and other resources they need to pursue their educational goals.
- *Employment*—*B:E* partners with community-based businesses and professionals to offer job training and work opportunities for youth, providing them with incremental opportunities to work toward achieving a sustainable living wage employment. Additionally, *B:E* provides resume review, job search assistance, and connections to job training programs throughout Alameda County. Internships of six months duration at the pay rate of \$12.00 are provided throughout Alameda County Departments.
- *Case Management*—*B:E* provides wraparound support on an individual basis to help identify and work toward youth goals, and implement a substantiated plan with incremental steps toward achieving those goals.
- *Information and Referral Services*—*B:E* partners with programs and agencies to help connect youth to basic resources such as food, shelter, and public services. *B:E* also publishes a resource guide for transitioning youth.

In addition, Alameda County assists emancipated youth with clothing, baby supplies, obtaining driver's licenses, monthly transportation reimbursements from bus systems and BART, and up to \$100 per month for gasoline reimbursements.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to evaluate emancipated foster youth programs in Alameda County in comparison to a neighboring county, San Mateo. San Mateo County offers broad services to a limited number of emancipated youth, while Alameda County has established comprehensive programs, and no eligible youth who apply for the program are turned away. Many foster youth reach the age of emancipation with years of troubles behind them already, and, for many, new trouble is just beginning. While both programs are successful, all emancipated foster youth are not participating in available programs. Without skills, life experience, direction and goals, the future can be very grim. Countless youth remove themselves from available help and leave foster care before they are introduced to independent living services. Many are ashamed of the fact they are a product of foster care and it is not unusual for emancipated youth to fail and refuse to participate in the programs for transition that are offered by the counties. This is an unmet need for potential participants in the foster care transition to independence program.

## Recommendations

There is an unmet need for potential participants in the foster care transition to independence program. In order to help maximize the fullest potential of emancipated youth, there is a need for more attention focused on the individuals who would otherwise fail or refuse to participate in the programs because of the stigma of being a foster child. A recommended strategy for Alameda County is to increase focus on outreach and counseling, perhaps as early as age 13 or 14. Alameda County should consider intensifying its current outreach programs for pre-emancipation foster youth by developing coordinated

strategies to increase program enrollment such as: establishing informal meetings in various locations (e.g. group homes, schools, etc); youth focus groups; psychological and technical assessment to determine which children are in need of counseling; programs to build self-esteem; one-on-one sessions with the children; and opportunities for youth to hear former foster care participants who can express to them how the program was of great assistance; and team building and training for the county child welfare workers along with Independent Living Skills Program workers.

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