

SAN FRANCISCO'S TEEN CENTER FOR FOSTER CARE YOUTH

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Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

This case study focuses on the Teen Center of the Independent Living Program (ILP) in San Francisco. I selected this topic because of my interest in exploring services that are available to this vulnerable population in child welfare. The areas covered in this paper are:

- The creation and function of the Teen Center
- How the Center is financed
- The Center's impact on foster care youth and staff
- The challenges
- The center's performance measure
- Other counties' teen centers
- Implications to Santa Clara County and recommendations

FINDINGS

The City and County of San Francisco's Teen Center provides ILP youth a convenient one-stop service center. The Center houses all ILP staff and contractors, a resource room, training facility, and a computer lab. All ILP services are done on-site. The resource room within the Center is equipped with computers, phones, a fax machine, a copy machine, and numerous resource materials.

The Teen Center's accomplishment includes providing a safe and resource-rich environment for the youth to "hang out" and stay off the street; a safe supportive environment where the teens can bond and talk to staff; a convenient location to receive multiple services; and a meeting place for tutoring and mentoring. Further, the Center motivates teens to participate from seeing what other teens do at the center as well as providing the teens with a sense of their "own place".

As training and workshops are done on-site, significant time is saved from finding a location and coordinating schedules. Cross-pollination of services is a major benefit of the Center. As a result of the Center's convenient multiple services and resource available to the teens, participation rate has increased.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SANTA CLARA COUNTY/RECOMMENDATIONS

Taking into account that Santa Clara is much more geographically disbursed than San Francisco, and given the political connection between the CBOs and the Board of Supervisors, San Francisco's Teen Center model would require modifications to tailor to the needs of Santa Clara. The following are presented as recommendations for consideration in Santa Clara County:

1. Evaluate the needs of foster care teens and ILP management for teen centers.

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2. Given budget constraint, explore utilizing existing space at the current four family resource centers.
3. Explore long-term plan of having a teen center at Social Services central office with future available space when the foster parent resource center is moved out.
4. Work with Family to Family to complement services. Explore co-locating or collaborate with any existing non-profit teen services.
5. Utilize TANF funding where possible.
6. Create teen centers that are in close proximity to the foster care teen population for accessibility. Be sensitive to the demographic of the population by establishing culturally competent services and resource materials.
7. Do outreach for the centers.
8. Evaluate for effective hours of operation for the centers, and measure of success of the centers.

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INTRODUCTION

This report focuses on the children services division of the City and County of San Francisco's Department of Human Services, and specifically on the Department's Teen Center for the Independent Living Program (ILP). I selected the Teen Center for this case study because I'm interested in exploring ways to improve foster care services, need for which is ever-increasing in Santa Clara County as well as throughout the State.

My visit to San Francisco's Department of Human Services gave me the opportunity to observe the daily activities of the Teen Center, as well as to interview the foster care youth, staff, and management of ILP. This case study addresses: 1) how the Teen Center was created and its function; 2) how the Center is financed; 3) how the Center impacts foster care youth and staff; 4) the challenges; 5) the Center's performance measures; 6) other counties' teen centers; and 7) a concluding section with implications to Santa Clara County and recommendations.

BACKGROUND

The City and County of San Francisco's public service is structured differently from other counties in that both county and city are under the jurisdiction of the mayor. The Department of Human Services has a budget close to \$450 million, with 1,780 staff, and serves over 100,000 San Franciscans each year.

Foster care youth is one of the most vulnerable populations in child welfare. These youth often struggle throughout their early years, moving from home to home, as they approach the age when they "age-out" of the system, to be on their own. As the lack of foster homes continues nationwide, these youth are often placed in group homes, live on their own, or are homeless, where they lack guidance and a family-setting. The ILP program provides workshops and training to prepare these teenagers for their independent adult life after leaving the system. The services include a college club, mentoring program, life skills training, tutoring, a vocational club, and computer training.

The foster care youth age-out of the system at 18, but remain eligible for ILP until the age of 21. Emancipated youth ages 18-21 are served by After Care services, also a part of ILP. San Francisco's ILP program currently serves foster care youth ages 15-21. The program will start serving youth from age 14 beginning August 2002.

THE CREATION OF THE TEEN CENTER AND ITS FUNCTION

Before the Teen Center came into existence, ILP was located at the central office of the department. The workshop and classes were held at local colleges, high schools, churches, or other varied places the program was able to rent for the training.

A new site at 225 Valencia was leased in order to provide a permanent home for the program. The two-story building provides a larger space to house the Teen Unit, ILP staff, along with the new resource center and training rooms to serve foster care teens. The new Teen Center was opened in February 2000. The location has easy access to most bus routes, BART, and freeways. The goal of the Center is to have all the staff in one location, have classroom space for training and workshops, and create a resource center where teens can relax, work, and obtain useful information to prepare for their independent adult lives.

One of the most significant aspects of the Center is the resource room; it is open between 8 AM and 8 PM, Mondays through Fridays. Available to the teens are numerous brochures and information including college enrollment, financial aid, job and career, counseling, health and sex education, college and GED preparation books, and numerous other helpful pieces of information. The resource room is equipped with computers, phones, a fax machine, and a copy machine. In addition to the computers available in the resource room, there is a computer lab that opens daily from 3 PM to 6 PM with lab assistance available. All computers have basic software for resume writing and some have internet access for job and housing searches. The Center also provides food and snacks for the teens at scheduled times.

Prior to the opening of the center, training and workshops for most ILP components were restricted due to limited space available at rented locations at high schools, colleges, or churches. The attendance rate for workshops now done at the Center is much higher. This is due to the fact that the teens are familiar with the location and the convenience of centralized services within the Center. The Center holds job fairs, vocational training, job searching workshops, college clubs, tutoring, mentoring, life skills training, and other training, all on-site.

HOW THE CENTER IS FINANCED

The lease for the building is part of the total agency overhead, which also includes a contract for a security guard. Added costs for the computer lab and resource room, including computers, refrigerator, and the furniture, were purchased using ILP ancillary money.

IMPACT ON FOSTER CARE YOUTH AND STAFF

The impact of the Teen Center on foster care youth is significant. My interviews with numerous youth and staff yielded a similar assessment of the center's value. Such value includes: providing the resources and tools the teens need, such as computers and job and college information; providing a safe and resource-rich environment for the youth to "hang out" and stay off the street; motivating teens to participate from seeing what other teens do at the center, such as attending computer classes; providing an environment where the teens can bond; providing a safe and supportive environment where they can see staff and talk to them; offering a convenient location to receive multiple services such as housing, college club, financial aid, and computer training; providing a meeting place for tutoring and mentoring; and providing the teens with a sense of their "own place".

To many of the teens, especially those who move from group home to group home, a sense of belonging is very important. The Center helps in creating an environment where teens are in a safe and supportive setting, where they can bond with other teens and staff. With the teens staying near the Center, the staff also have access to the teens to check on their needs and inform them of upcoming events, among other things. The exposure to the different training and workshops helps increase attendance. The staff, mentors, or tutors can also meet the teens at the center as opposed to meeting them at their home where the teens may be uncomfortable.

With on-site training and workshops, staff benefits from significant time saved from finding a location and coordinating schedules. Cross-pollination of services is a major advantage of a one-stop center. This is evidenced by the increased participation rate.

The Center has hired four former foster care youth. Serinity Enriquez, age 20, is a foster care youth ombudsman. She was a run-away at 16 and was a foster youth for three years. During her years in foster care, she came to the Center daily because it was a "safe" place for her to be, and because she was able to use the computers. The Center also provided her a support group where she bonded with other youths. She found her career interest through a Red Cross class paid by ILP. She wants to be a firefighter. She currently has a contract with the Teen Center as an ombudsman for youth, and is on a waiting list for firefighter training.

Israel Toro, age 21, and Sheila Mundine, age 20, are also former foster care teens, now working at the Center as Peer Counselors. Israel had been in foster care since he was 15 years old. Sheila had been in foster care since she was 9 years old. Israel used the Center three times a month to study and work on projects. Israel found the Center a safe place to rest and use resources. Sheila followed a friend to an ILP class and has been "hooked" on it ever since. She found the most useful thing about the center to be the people. She explained that when she had a bad day, she would come in to talk to people and use the resources.

Jovanda Higgs is the fourth former foster care teen contracting with the Center as a Peer Counselor. Jovanda is a teenage mom with two children and lives in transitional housing while working part time at the Center. She tries to utilize everything that is offered by the Center. She found out about the resources after coming to see the Housing Consultant at the center.

CHALLENGES

Part of the idea of the Teen Center is to create a friendly environment for youth. Maintaining the balance of how much access the youths have to staff, without interfering with the staffs work was a challenge initially. Changes were made to give staff sufficient privacy and quiet time away from the youth. Confidentiality was another reason for the limited access. Although, the initial idea was to put total trust in the teens to teach them honesty and integrity, it was eventually learned that there needed to be certain boundaries. For example, expensive items like computers needed oversight, and long distance calls needed to be controlled. The computers are positioned in the open where staff can easily monitor the internet activities.

As is common with new leases and renovation, it took one and a half years to obtain the lease and have the space renovated. Although the building is a good size, the ILP program does not have all the space they need, due to some of the rooms being used for family visitation. ILP management is looking to expand when the family visitation component is moved to another location. The extra space/rooms would be used for youth who need to meet with staff privately. Part of the new space would be converted to showers and lockers for homeless youth. The need to serve homeless youth is critical, as many of the Center's youth are referred from homeless shelters. The extra space also would enable the Center to have a kitchen where cooking classes could be added to the training offered. There are plans to extend the Center's hours to include Saturdays, requiring additional staff.

MEASURE OF SUCCESS

The Teen Center has been in operation for two years and the number of teens utilizing the Center has more than doubled, according to the ILP Coordinator. Currently, an average of about 20 teens use the Center for resources daily. One of the many challenges of a new program or service is to have a process in place for data collection to measure success. The Center is developing more thorough methods to better track the activities and utilization of the Center to measure the success of the program. Despite the needed adjustment to the data, the number of teen utilizing the services is increasing monthly, as reported in the Center's training and workshop attendance rate. This number exceeds the number of increased foster care teens entering the system. Additionally, the housing consultant who is contracted to meet with 40 youth annually has already seen 108 youth so far this year. The vocational workshop, normally given six times a year, has already been conducted ten times this year, as a result of the convenience of the location and the staff time saved from not needing to search for training locations.

TEEN CENTERS AT OTHER COUNTIES

Three other counties that have similar teen centers include Los Angeles, Alameda, and Contra Costa counties. I had the opportunity to look into Contra Costa County's Teen Center.

The idea for the Teen Center for Contra Costa arose from the need to have more space for staff, a resource room, and a place where workshops and training could be done at one location. Like San Francisco and many other counties, it was not cost effective or convenient to have training and workshops done at the limited space of high schools, colleges, and churches.

Contra Costa's Teen Center is in its developmental stage, in operation only since August 2001. Its 10,000 square feet space houses 22 staff, with half the space devoted to classrooms and the other half to the resource center. The Center is partly furnished and will have 25 to 35 computers for workshop and lab use to serve more than 800 youth, 16 to 21. Contra Costa was able to utilize the ILP funding surplus in 1999 to fund the Center. The County was also able to tap into TANF funds, because of ILP services for emancipated youth who qualify for CalWORKs.

CONCLUSION

The needs of foster care youth are often complex and unmet as there is a shortage of foster homes nationwide. This population of dependent children is most vulnerable as they reach the age where they will age out of the system to live on their own. San Francisco's Teen Center provides more than just workshops and training for these teens in preparing them for their independent living as adults. The Center provides a safe and supportive environment where teens can learn and bond with staff and other teens. It is a onestop center where they can pick up resources, use computers, do homework, meet with counselors, and attend workshops and training.

The Center benefits the youth as well as staff. As workshops and training are done on-site, the existence of the Center eliminates the time needed for finding a location and helps to increase the attendance rate. In addition staff are able to refer teens to one another on a moment's notice for different services. By providing the necessary tools, these teenagers can be prepared for an adult life that is less reliant on the welfare system, and one in which the teens are more likely to achieve self-sufficiency.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SANTA CLARA COUNTY/RECOMMENDATIONS

Santa Clara County's ILP Program is similar to that of San Francisco in terms of the services provided. However, staffing structure and service delivery are different in Santa Clara because five contractors provide most of the ILP services. San Francisco contracts out for staff who are located in one location and report to the ILP Coordinator. Santa Clara ILP contractors provide most workshops and training and they are held at different locations. The County's in-house workshops are done at multiple locations. There are no teen centers or resource centers available in Santa Clara County.

Recognizing that Santa Clara is much more geographically dispersed than San Francisco, the exact model that may work for San Francisco cannot be applied to Santa Clara. Further, given the political connection between community contractors and the Board of Supervisors, Santa Clara may choose to retain the current contracted services. However, Santa Clara would benefit from the concept of the teen center with modifications made to tailor to its needs.

In assessing the model that would best fit Santa Clara, there are issues to address and questions answered. Some of these include: the geographic distribution of ILP youth placement, the needs of Santa Clara youth, youth mobility and transportation accessibility, the availability of the sites being recommended, the staff resources, the flexibility of providers for co-location, and funding availability.

Establishing a task force with key staff from ILP, providers (i.e. WIA), contractors, Budget, and other affected Children's Programs and non-profit organizations would be a helpful beginning. This task force could provide progress reports to the Executive Team for review and input.

The following are presented as recommendations for consideration in Santa Clara County:

1. Evaluate the needs of foster care teens and ILP management for teen centers. This may include retaining the current contracted service, but may call for the creation of resource centers to include labs, training and workshop space, and resource materials.
2. Given budget constraint, explore utilizing existing space at the current four family resource centers (FRCs). Since these FRCs have existing training rooms and some have computers, the ILP workshops could be held at these locations if the FRCs' schedules permit. The locations of these FRCs would need to be evaluated against the geographic placement of the foster care teens for accessibility.
3. Explore long-term plan of having a teen center at Social Services central office with future available space when the foster parent resource center is moved out. (The Foster Parent Association has a strategic plan to have its own location in three to five years).
4. Work with Family to Family to complement services. Explore co-locating or collaborate with any existing non-profit teen services.
5. Explore alternative funding possibilities. Utilize TANF funding where possible for the implementation and maintenance of services for the centers, as some of these youth are eligible for CalWORKS.
6. Create teen centers that are in close proximity to the majority of the foster care teen population for accessibility. Be sensitive to the demographic of the population by establishing culturally competent services and resource materials.
7. Do outreach for the Centers. This is critical as many Santa Clara foster care youth waived ILP services.

8. Evaluate for effective hours of operation for the centers, and measure of success of the centers.

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