

Tell Us What You Need: Napa County's Approach to Youth-Directed Services for Transitional Age Youth

ELIZABETH HARRIS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

San Francisco invests well over \$3.5 million a year in contracts with programs that help foster youth transition successfully into self-sufficient adulthood. Some of these programs are underutilized; however, and youth who need help are not being served. In this paper, I explore the history and structure of the Napa County Voice Our Independent Choices for Emancipation Support (VOICES) program, with a goal of considering whether adopting the VOICES model could increase youth engagement and participation in comparable programs in San Francisco. The cornerstone of VOICES is that the youth

themselves administer, staff, and manage their own program, with adults working in the background as coaches. I recommend that San Francisco work to shift its current transitional age youth programs to incorporate youth into every aspect of management and staffing. I project, based on the experience of Napa County, that shifting to a youth leadership model will decrease the costs of administering these programs, increase youth participation, and provide a valuable opportunity for youth to develop their career and leadership skills.

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Background

Youth who exit from the foster care system earn relatively low wages compared to their peers of the same age, and tend to be underemployed (Urban Institute, 2008). Housing outcomes for youth exiting the foster care system are equally grim. Larkin Street Youth Services, a San Francisco-based non-profit, reported in 2011 that there were almost 6,000 homeless youth in San Francisco between the ages of 12 and 24 whose dominant pathway into homelessness was a history of involvement in the foster care system. The San Francisco Child Welfare Department seeks to address these problems by encouraging youth who are in the system to focus on developing the social connections and independent living skills they will need after they exit care. To support this effort, the Human Services Agency of San Francisco County funds a number of community programs to help transitional age youth develop their educational, vocational, and independent living skills. These programs include, among others, four different transitional housing programs with independent living skills components and a standalone independent living skills program—a total of \$3,623,747 worth of services per year.

Given the risks that young adults exiting from foster care face, and San Francisco's considerable investment in services to these young adults, the county is eager to make sure that the community services it offers to youth are effective in helping them become independent. No matter how well

administered the community services programs are, however, they are essentially useless if the youth do not choose to partake in them. In my interviews with three of the Transitional Housing Program-Plus (THP-Plus) providers, each of them made it clear that getting youth in the door is the biggest obstacle to their agency's success. Moreover, some of the youth who do enter the programs find the rules intolerable, as per a San Francisco child welfare supervisor, and tend to leave the programs. Thus, San Francisco has an unusual problem: it has community agencies that are ready to house, case manage, and mentor transitional age youth and eligible youth who face homelessness and poverty in exiting the foster care system; but somehow, only a percentage of those youth find their way into these funded services. Something about San Francisco's program models for serving transitional age youth is not appealing to all of the youth the county intends to serve.

Pizza and Charisma: The Founding of the Voice Our Independent Choices for Emancipation Support (VOICES) Program

One hundred representatives from the Napa County Health and Human Services Agency and its partner agencies in the community faced much the same question I asked above: What do youth emancipating from systems of care (such as the mental health, foster care, and probation systems) want, and what programs will they actually use? The representatives came to a consensus that services for emancipating

foster youth were insufficient, but they wanted to conduct a careful planning process before trying to put something new in place. Eventually, the Napa County Health and Human Services Department and its community partners, including a non-profit named On the Move, took the most straightforward approach to finding out what youth want. In 2004, they ordered a pizza and invited foster youth to share their thoughts.

Although a number of the people interviewed in Napa mentioned the pizza; it was the charisma of one particular social worker that was the real draw. That social worker had a long history of working with foster youth in Napa County—as a Court Appointed Special Advocate, as an independent living skills program coordinator, and today, as a social worker for non-minor dependents. She recalls that she had known some of the youth on her independent living skills caseload since they were two years old. Her desire to give youth a real voice in planning their own services, and her ability to motivate youth, put Napa in a strong position to develop a new model of services for transitional age foster youth, a model that relied on youth direction.¹

The social worker was initially able to identify a handful of youth to participate in focus groups. The youth came to the focus groups angry and full of mistrust for “the system.” The social worker reminded them that they had repeatedly said they wanted to determine the direction of the services they received and she encouraged them to recruit their friends. The youth took her up on the challenge, and their group grew to twenty young people from the local foster care system. The group members took field trips to see other youth center program models, but even the ones that looked ideal to the professional social worker staff did not pass muster with the youth, who felt alienated by the age of the staff. Instead, the youth wanted a youth center staffed by

their peers, a program that they would eventually name VOICES. The founding members of VOICES became the youth who had done the original planning in concert with local non-profit agencies. Under the auspices of the On the Move non-profit umbrella, VOICES secured a \$200,000 seed grant from the Gasser Foundation and opened its youth center doors in 2005.

The VOICES Model

VOICES is housed in a spacious, inviting building in Napa. The building is owned by the Gasser Foundation, which provides it to VOICES at below market rent. The youth who use and staff the VOICES program have built the facility themselves and transformed the space to fit their own needs. My first impression of VOICES was that it felt like a home. As I entered, on my left was a line of computers that youth can use to do activities like apply for jobs or play games. The middle of the space is dominated by a large kitchen, which is well-used at youth events. There is also a backyard where they can barbecue. Small, intimate offices dot the corridors, each offering specific services like help with employment or medical care. There was even a friendly dog roaming the building, owned by the founding member. In short, VOICES is designed to feel inviting and to attract young people through the doors.

Although VOICES was started by foster youth, they are willing to work with any young person who wants help and they end up working with an array of foster youth—lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth, young parents, and other youth who have been in systems of care. Youth do not have to pass an eligibility screening to get services. Although 75% of what the VOICES program does is not focused on recreation, the availability of recreational activities makes the space more inviting. Their approach to attracting young people has worked, and some 1,000 young people between the ages of 16 and 24 come to the program each year.

Other than having youth activities, the VOICES center is a one-stop shop for youth to get medical care, housing help, employment counseling and

1. Napa County's child welfare agency is well-structured to enable close relationships between youth and their social workers. Napa enjoys relatively low caseloads per worker. At the time of data collection, in late March of 2014, there were 19 case-carrying social workers in child welfare and 105 youth in care. Napa also has an explicit commitment to building relationships through its social work.

placement, independent living skills services, and immigration help. The center also hosts the only gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender program in the area for people of any age.

The idea of a friendly, one-stop community center is not new—similar models exist in many communities, targeting many different populations. What makes the VOICES model unusual is the fact that the staff, including those doing complex, senior-level work, are youth from the same population that they serve. Everyone who uses the center on a regular basis is expected to be an active member of the VOICES community, which includes contributing in some way to the center, such as by helping with remodeling and fixing up the building. Youth who wish to become more involved can become interns and receive intensive job development training. Some of the interns move onto more senior youth staff positions, where they participate in intensive leadership development. The youth self-assess their own skills and are given the chance to do high-level work. The main role of the adults who work for the program is to provide extensive performance coaching. The adults hold the youth to the same standards to which they would hold any other working professional in a comparable organization. They specifically do not relax expectations because the youth have had traumatic lives or because they are young. Remarkably, the youth rise to these expectations and run a professional organization.

The use of youth staff has distinct organizational advantages. Given the number of youth served, the program is remarkably inexpensive to operate. In Napa, the total budget for VOICES is \$760,000, or about \$760 per youth served. The youth are also effective at fundraising. The message of youth advocating for themselves is more powerful than listening to adults speak about youth needs; as a result, the agency has a diversified funding base including corporate/foundation money (45% of revenue), individual donations (20% of revenue) and government grants (35% of revenue). The County of Napa spends less than \$100,000 a year on the independent living skills program.

Youth are able to socialize their peers in a way that adults sometimes cannot. Youth maintain rules about drug use, for example, that keep the center safe and inviting. Youth can also support each other in learning norms about adult living, such as expectations around appropriate personal hygiene. Youth are also committed to the center because they built it and run it with their own hands, so they are respectful of the space.

Most impressive of all is the on-the-job vocational education that the youth get through staffing the VOICES program. Youth staff members use their time at VOICES to build an array of professional job skills with the help of expert and thoughtful coaching. They then can go on to other careers. The program prepares a generation of young people who have been in systems of care to become leaders in the non-profit and social services world.

The VOICES program has, according to the people I interviewed, changed the culture of the county's service provision to young people. As a case in point, Napa County is now working with a non-profit agency who wants to get a THP-Plus Foster Care license to serve non-minor dependent foster youth. In the planning meeting I attended, the non-profit told representatives of child welfare and probation that they would next ask the program-eligible youth to come in to tell them what they wanted in housing and services. The child welfare supervisor who took me to the meeting told me that early youth involvement in planning is so routine in Napa that it has become automatic.

Challenges

The VOICES program has been partially or fully replicated in other counties, including San Jose, Monterey, and Sonoma, with varying degrees of success. Although VOICES sounds appealing in theory, the actual reality of letting young people administer a program and using county funds does not always sit well with non-profit and county agency directors. One social worker said that inevitably the youth will sometimes "step in it." An adult administrator with VOICES warned that anyone who wants a VOICES

program needs to anticipate that their high-profile director might end up on the front page of the local paper after, say, driving under the influence. In another county that considered opening a VOICES program, 70 non-profits expressed initial interest in creating a coalition to operate a VOICES center. By the end of the planning process, all 70 had dropped out of the process. The VOICES model assumes that youth can do a better job in running their own programs than can a group of trained, credentialed adults, which is an unsettling thought for many in the social services profession.

How VOICES Compares to Similar Programs in San Francisco

When I interviewed the current, contracted providers of San Francisco's transitional housing and independent living programs, I asked them how they went about getting youth input. All of the programs had a strong commitment to service improvement and sought to get youth input through surveys, focus groups, and community meetings of one stripe or another. Getting youth input, however, is far from the same thing as letting youth run their own programs. Nor is getting youth input the same thing as getting youth, at the ground level, to do the hard work of designing programs and figuring out how to administer them. Although San Francisco currently has an Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP), which has many of the same types of services for youth as VOICES, such as goal planning, life skills training, community events, housing referrals, and vocational planning assistance; the San Francisco ILSP does not offer youth the kind of youth leadership development opportunities that youth working for VOICES gain.

Rather than starting a VOICES program from scratch, San Francisco County should look into strategies for strengthening youth voice and youth direction within its existing transitional age youth programs. These strategies would aim to shift the management of the ILSP and THP-Plus programs to more closely align with the VOICES model, but would also honor the fact that the services that

are currently available are important to youth and should not simply be upended. Unlike Napa, where the community identified a general lack of services for transitional age youth exiting systems of care, San Francisco has such services but lacks the management and youth development structure of VOICES.

Action Steps for Incorporating VOICES Values into Services for Transitional Age Youth

The principle behind the VOICES program is that youth should develop their own plans for how to run youth programs. For this reason, it would be out of keeping with the VOICES model for me to presume to list exactly what steps the youth should take. What follows is my list of proposed action steps for beginning the process of giving the youth leadership. What happens next is at their discretion.

1. San Francisco should hold a preliminary meeting of interested child welfare workers, managers, court officers, school staff, and community agency social workers with transitional age foster youth on their caseloads. The goal of the meeting will be for the adults with strong youth connections to commit to identifying transitional age foster youth who could become planning leaders. The group should agree on an initial time and location for a meeting of the proposed youth planning leaders. A member of the staff of the VOICES in Napa County should be invited to the meeting to be the facilitator.
2. At the first meeting, a high-level member of the San Francisco County leadership should invite the youth, including members of the VOICES staff from Napa, to develop a plan for gradually restructuring the management and staffing of the foster youth transitional age services in order to create a management ladder for youth and to shift the role of the adult staff in those programs to that of youth coaches.
3. San Francisco should work with the youth to incorporate its plan into existing service contracts with the transitional age housing and

independent living skills providers or, if existing providers are uninterested, should incorporate the youth vision into future requests for proposals, with a goal of identifying new providers who are open to youth leadership.

Budget Implications of these Recommendations

In the early planning phase of this project, San Francisco County expects to incur \$30,000 in costs for youth stipends and \$20,000 for early operational expenses, such as shared office space and supplies.

In the long run, it is anticipated that this would be a cost-saving approach to youth services because the VOICES model relies heavily on engaging youth to volunteer to support their own space. The VOICES model also has the potential to appeal to private funders in a way that more traditional youth programs do not, because the VOICES youth can advocate for themselves. The VOICES program; to the degree Napa's program is typical, also tends to be fully utilized and so San Francisco would not waste money on contracting for services that youth elect not to use. On a larger level, to the degree that the VOICES model actually teaches youth marketable, managerial and leadership skills, the program has the potential to reduce welfare dependency, homelessness, and other social and economic ills in the population exiting foster care. For a relatively small initial investment, the VOICES program holds significant potential for improving youth lives and for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of San Francisco's services to transitional age youth.

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