

Supported Employment and Training Program for Foster Youth

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

San Mateo County began the Supportive Training and Employment Program (STEP) in 2009. The STEP is a 12 week internship that supports emancipated foster youth and non-minor dependents (NMD) between the ages of 18 to 24. The program pays youth to learn the basics required for successful employment. Youth are also paired with a coach who receives training on the specific issues and needs of foster youth. An intern coordinator, also a former foster youth or NMD, assists program staff monitor the youths' progress in the

program. The STEP has successfully employed over 100 youth and trained dozens of employees to coach foster youth. Foster youth who have completed the program have gone on to be college students and have found longer-term employment outside the county. The unique aspects of this program recommended for duplication in Santa Clara County are the training provided to youth to help them succeed in their jobs and the mentoring provided by volunteers who commit their personal time to work with foster youth.

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Background

Picture a teenager looking for a job. She asks her Mom to help fill out a job application and choose what to wear for an interview. Her father drives her to the interview and her mother consoles her when she does not get the first job she applies for. She tries again for a different job. Foster children aging out of the child welfare system are not as lucky as this girl. They do not have the support of a loving, nurturing family to help them navigate the world of employers who expect applicants to compete for the jobs they have to offer. Show up in the wrong attire, or say the wrong thing during the interview, and the job goes to someone else. Unemployment or under-employment of youth has long-term consequences, such as depression and repeated joblessness.¹ These consequences, when combined with the trauma experienced by foster youth who age out of the foster care system, can lead to poor outcomes for foster children. Honoring Emancipated Youth (HEY) published a report in 2010 that pointed to astounding data showing that 45% of emancipated foster youth in California were unemployed, 30% were on welfare.² Fewer than half of former foster youth are employed two to four years after leaving foster care and less than 38% of those remain employed a year or longer.³ Creating opportunities for foster youth to learn the skills needed to get and keep a job is critical to their success as adults. The San Mateo County Human Services Agency, in collaboration with the county's Human Resources Department, has created a program to do just that—help foster youth.

Supported Training & Employment Program

San Mateo County helps foster youth prepare for the world of work by providing them an internship opportunity, the STEP. This summer program employs foster youth for approximately 12 weeks and pays \$12 per hour to 20 interns each summer who work 20 hours per week. Eligibility requirements for the STEP are: 1) resident of San Mateo County 2) emancipated as a foster youth between 18 and 21 years old, and 3) low-income. The STEP began in 2009 and costs approximately \$50,000 annually to operate. The funding is currently secured through the San Mateo County General Fund and is used to pay for youths' wages. The program was originally funded through San Mateo County Workforce Investment Board utilizing American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funding. Staff from the Human Services Agency and Human Resources Department that support the STEP are not dedicated exclusively to the STEP, and their STEP related duties are not paid through the program.

Data are tracked by the Human Resources Department. Since 2009, 184 youth have applied for the program, and the program has made 102 duplicated and 80 unduplicated placements. Each year, 15-20 new coaches are trained. Of the youth placed in the program over the past five years, 76% have enrolled in college. This compares to 66% of youth graduating from high school who enroll in college according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, published in April 2014. The most recent data shows that in 2014, 82% of youth placed into the STEP

completed the program, and 64% of those who completed the program are going to college in the Fall following their internship. Additionally, when compared to the HEY data that show only 50% of foster youth are employed two to four years after leaving foster care, 69% of foster youth completing the STEP are employed within the same timeframe. The STEP has demonstrated its success through numbers and personal experiences.

An example of the relationships that develop over the years is one that developed between Mike Kotycianski and his coach, Stephen Kraemer. Mike returned to the program three times. He developed a relationship with his coach, came to rely on his advice, and eventually was hired into a seasonal position. Due to the skills he learned on the job, and the dedicated coaching he received, he recently signed onto the electricians' union and took a qualifying exam for a regular position as an electrician with San Mateo County. Test results were not yet published, but Mike says that having a dedicated mentor and being paid more than minimum wage were both critical to his success. He is currently advocating for adding more classifications to the program so foster youth have options to choose from a broader array of opportunities.

The STEP includes five primary components including: 1) Job readiness skills, 2) Job shadowing and employment coaching, 3) Hands-on work experience in a county department, 4) Transition planning and 5) Optional life skills coaching. Job readiness skills includes 8-12 hours of job skills training on how to complete a job application, write a resume, interview and present their skills. The training also provides them with basic guidance on acceptable behavior in the workplace. Job shadowing pairs each foster youth with a county department and supervisor based on his/her interests. This component provides an opportunity for jobsite tours as well as a chance to get supervisory coaching to learn the job duties and how to succeed on the job. Hands-on work experience provides youth the opportunity to actually do an entry-level job in the Human Services Agency, Human Resources, Health System,

Public Works, Parks, Library, or the County Manager's Office. Transition planning effort allows the foster youth to develop an individualized transition plan that identifies the lessons they learned, their new goals, and what specific steps they need to take to meet their goals. Youth are referred to mentoring opportunities, housing, mental and behavioral health services, educational or vocational planning opportunities, and permanency programs. Optional life skills coaching helps connect youth with a trained older adult who can provide guidance about other areas of life, such as safety, health, social well-being, budgeting, and stability.

The STEP utilizes some unique measures, specifically, a program coordinator and coaches' training that create a more robust offering for foster youth enrolled in the program. A full-time Program Coordinator (PC), who is an experienced former foster youth, assists with transitioning youth in and out of the program. The PC assists with placement of the foster youth with a department, and keeps track of the progress of the youth and coaches. The PC also develops the final transition plan. Coaches are provided training through a community based organization that helps them understand the specific needs of foster youth and how to most effectively help them succeed. The curriculum for coaches' training is comprehensive.

The coaches are county employees who volunteer to mentor foster youth. They have no special skills or background in the field of child welfare and are recruited from various departments in the county. The training curriculum is planned to help them understand the needs of the youth they work with and how to be most effective as a coach for the target population. They learn about mentoring basics, cultural consideration, and the social worker perspective. They are also taught key skills about the appropriate level and type of attention to give interns, how to communicate effectively, both verbally and non-verbally, and how to set limits with a youth. They are trained about how to motivate and encourage youth and how to set expectations. Mentors are given a clear set of responsibilities and are asked to

make a commitment to follow through before being assigned to a youth. This thorough training allows mentors to learn how to individualize their work with a youth based on the specific background and needs of that particular youth. This unique aspect of the STEP is recommended for replication in Santa Clara County.

Santa Clara County Emancipated Foster Youth Program

Santa Clara County's Emancipated Foster Youth (EFY) Program provides entry-level work opportunities for foster youth between the ages of 18 and 24, who are aging out of the child welfare system. The program is authorized by the Charter of the County of Santa Clara that allows for the hiring, either in the classified or unclassified service, of employees under a specially designed program to assist persons who are unemployed, disabled, or untrained. Foster youth apply for the program and are hired as unclassified into a permanent position. Once an unclassified employee, the youth must take and pass the qualifying examination for the classification he/she is employed in. Youth must pass this exam after three months of employment but before nine months in order to qualify for the classified code and get the job permanently. EFY Program participants take the written exam upon receipt of a positive recommendation on a promotional rating form completed by the department supervisor. A youth appointed to an unclassified position, or youth who successfully progress from an unclassified position to regularly coded position, may voluntarily leave the position and re-enter the unclassified program for Emancipated Foster Youth until they reach 25, unless terminated from the position for disciplinary reasons. This provision is in recognition of young adults' reasonable need to explore alternative options and opportunities. Youth terminated from county employment for disciplinary reasons will not be able to re-enter the unclassified program. The positions available to EFY Program applicants include Account Clerk I, Automotive Attendant, Custody Support Assistant, Food Service Worker I, Food Service Worker

II, Health Information Clerk I, Janitor, Kennel Attendant, Laboratory Assistant, Laundry Worker I, Library Clerk I, Library Page, Messenger Driver, Office Specialist I, Office Specialist II, Park Services Attendant, Stock Clerk, Storekeeper, Unit Support Assistant, and Utility Worker.

The EFY Program evolved from the original Unclassified Clerk Typist Program that was established in 1992. That program allowed foster youth to be hired into two classifications in the social services agency. In 2006, the program was expanded to all of the classifications that are available today. In September 2007, the EFY Program won the Challenge Award from the California State Association of Counties and was recognized statewide for the creativity and leadership demonstrated by the county.

The program is said to be responsible for the successful employment of over 40 foster youth into regular full-time positions throughout the county since 2006 when the Board of Supervisors authorized expansion of the program. The EFY program has led to the successful employment of staff in many departments including the Department of Child Support Services, the Department of Environmental Health, Employee Services Agency (the Human Resources Department), the Social Services Agency, and the Probation Department. However, no data is disseminated to determine the effectiveness of the program even though the Employee Services Agency has access to information related to the data.

While the EFY Program offers an opportunity for foster youth to get hired, it does not provide mentoring support for foster youth to access resources to address their unique needs while they participate in the EFY Program. Youth have a short window of time to take and pass the county exam or be released from employment. They work with employment counselors and access services available through the Independent Living Program, but no specific mentors are assigned to work individually with each foster youth.

Implications for Santa Clara County

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention identified mentoring as a key strategy to reduce the likelihood of an at-risk youth becoming involved in the juvenile justice system. Mentoring has also been identified as a key to academic success by the National Mentoring Resource Center that studies mentoring models to determine their effectiveness. Other models, such as the Career Academy, have been proven to increase occupational opportunities for youth by focusing on labor market prospects. Santa Clara County has an undeniable and award-winning commitment to create job opportunities for foster youth. This case study brings a chance to enhance the experience for foster youth by learning from the San Mateo County STEP.

Recommendations

1. Enhance the EFY Program by securing a non-profit vendor to provide recruitment and training of volunteers to serve as coaches and mentors for foster youth newly employed in the county. Other mentoring and coaching programs in Santa Clara County that serve youth cost between \$70,000 and \$90,000 annually. Coaching and mentoring services should be provided by a culturally competent organization that understands the dynamics of the populations most represented in the child welfare system, including Latino and African ancestry families. Mentoring and coaching services should be focused on increasing on-the-job success as well as addressing life skills issues that come up frequently for all youth, including how to make good decisions about money and how to work with others in a professional environment. The key components of training for coaches should include:
 - a. Recruitment of county employees and community members to serve as coaches.
 - b. Training of coaches that is based on a curriculum similar to the one utilized by San Mateo County.
 - c. Given that Santa Clara County's foster youth population consists of a disproportionate number of Latino and African ancestry families, additional training for coaches should include a module about common cultural differences in the communities represented in child welfare and how to have difficult conversations about culture.
2. Provide training to EFY Program participants that educates them about how to succeed on the job. Similar training programs provided by community based providers throughout the county cost approximately \$75,000 annually. The curriculum should include:
 - a. Basic workplace ethics
 - b. Effective communication skills
 - c. Effective interpersonal skills
 - d. Personal growth and development of long-term goals
3. Data collection and evaluation are key components of any successful program. Therefore, consistent data tracking and evaluation of the EFY program is recommended regardless of whether the coaching enhancement is adopted into the program.

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