

Starting (Again) Where They Are:
**San Francisco County's Service Delivery
Continuum for Emancipated Foster Youth**

MATTHEW RADISCH

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

In response to growing concern about the well-being of Emancipated Foster Youth (EFY), county welfare agencies have been required to develop a service delivery continuum that will meet these young adults where they are. This idea means facing the reality that not all of the youth that emancipate from foster care, including those that have had access to Independent Living Skills curriculums, will be equally prepared to live independently once they age out of foster care. San Mateo County Human Services Agency (HSA) is building a comprehensive service continuum for this population, and might benefit from looking at how this has been achieved elsewhere.

Findings

Larkin Street Youth Services in San Francisco is part of a non-profit/government partnership that provides a continuum of services to address the varying needs of EFY. Their Avenues to Independence (ATI) transitional housing program used defined service objectives, and met most of their outcome measure targets for their participants.

Summary of Recommendations

HSA has made significant progress in its effort to implement a comprehensive service continuum for EFY. Nonetheless, the agency should consider adopting certain program elements from the Larkin Extended Aftercare for Supported Emancipation (LEASE) and ATI programs. ATI would seem to be a particularly good source for program emulation at a time when HSA is on the cusp of purchasing a building in which to locate a transitional EFY housing program.

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Introduction

Over the last several years, there has been a growing chorus of criticism in California from the media, community-based organizations (CBOs), and state legislators about the failure of child welfare agencies to meet the special needs of youth who have emancipated out of county foster care systems. A sampling of the figures that instigated this outcry paints a grim picture. In 2001, of youth who emancipated from foster care, 75% were working below grade level, 50% did not complete high school, 45% were unemployed, 33% were arrested, 30% were on some form of welfare, and 25% were homeless.

At around the same time that these sobering statistics were coming to light, California's Department of Social Services (CDSS) issued a report, entitled "The Report on the Housing Needs of Emancipated Foster/Probation Youth," indicating that 65% who emancipated from foster care during the 2000-2001 fiscal year were in need of safe and affordable housing. Subsequently, AB 427 (Chapter 125, 2001) was passed, and the Transitional Housing Placement Program Plus (THPP Plus) was initiated to assist counties in their efforts to better serve this population. In the ensuing years, county welfare departments throughout the state have made finding new ways to address the challenges faced by Emancipated Foster Youth (EFY) a top priority.

In San Francisco, two divisions of the City and County's Department of Human Services (DHS), and one local non-profit agency, have worked together to ameliorate these issues. Larkin Street Youth Services (LSYS) serves EFY and other homeless youth with a variety of housing and other human service

programs. DHS's Division of Housing and Homeless Programs monitors and is currently updating a contract with LSYs to deliver a program that targets the housing and other needs of EFY. The Independent Living Skills Program's (ILSP) Aftercare Unit in DHS's Family and Children's Services refers EFY to this and other LSYs programs. These three partners provide a continuum of services that meets these youth where they are: at a new and critical stage of their transition out of the dependency system, and into self-sufficient young adulthood. This case study looks at what preceded this continuum in San Francisco, what the current program(s) do, how close one program came to meeting its defined outcome targets, and whether the County of San Mateo's Human Services Agency (HSA) would benefit from adopting any of the continuum's program elements.

Background

Although the needs of EFY have been known to child welfare professionals and academicians for years, relatively few resources were typically allocated to aftercare programs until recently. At the turn of the new century, San Francisco's ILSP Aftercare Unit consisted of only one social worker, and that one dedicated person had an overwhelming caseload to handle. With their current staff of three, the unit is better able to get youth plugged into the most relevant CBOs and programs sooner, and this has allowed the youth to benefit before they actually emancipate. With 800 children expected to emancipate out of San Francisco's foster care system in the next 5-6 years, the need for systems that work with youth in advance of their emancipation is as great as ever.

In addition to more staff, THPP Plus-funded programs, such as the targeted services provided by LSYS, have helped the Aftercare Unit prevent many EFYs from having to enter emergency homeless shelters. Before the implementation of Proposition N in San Francisco, otherwise known as the “Care Not Cash” initiative, a number of EFY used the cash aid they received as homeless adults to make informal housing arrangements with people they met on the street. Although this was not an ideal situation, there was some concern in the ISLP program that those EFY who had used the cash aid for this purpose in the past, might be left with no alternative once Care Not Cash was introduced. Perhaps because the development and implementation of THPP Plus-funded programs and Care Not Cash roughly coincided, this has turned out not to be the case.

Larkin Street Youth Services (LSYS) provides housing and supportive services to youth who are homeless, or at risk of becoming homeless, including EFY. Like DHS’s ILSP Aftercare Unit, LSYS has not always had the resources to meet the needs of EFY. By LSYS’s own reckoning, the agency had no targeted programs for EFY five to ten years ago, and with a single exception, their current programs have a mixed population of EFY and older homeless youth. According to LSYS, 2,187 18-24 year old youths were served last year, 434 of these self-identify as having had some experience with foster care systems, and there are 39 participants in the one program that is comprised only of EFY.

All of LSYS’s programs address the common needs that all homeless youth share, irrespective of whether they have been dependents of the Juvenile Court. These include stable housing, assistance in obtaining stable employment, being able to structure one’s day, acquiring good employment habits, increasing income, and developing a variety of life skills, such as budgeting, shopping, cooking, and setting goals and priorities.

Key Elements

San Francisco DHS’s ILSP program consists of three units: Early Independent Living Skills, Core Ser-

vices, and Transitional/Aftercare. The Transitional and Aftercare units were two distinct entities at one time, but have been streamlined into one. Children enter this unit at age 17 to prepare for emancipation out of the foster care system. Efforts are made to engage all of the Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) that provide services to EFY. The focus at this stage is on goal-setting.

As the youth that participate in this final stage near the termination of their legal dependency, unit staff have them fill out eligibility forms that convey their status to the CBOs whose programs they want to participate in. Additionally, they must have an active, updated Transitional Independent Living Plan (TILP). This document describes the educational / vocational or other goals related to self-sufficiency that has been mutually agreed upon by the youth and ILSP staff. Occasionally, youth that were dependents come in off the street, and are directed to the Aftercare Unit so that they can get a referral to enter one of the programs.

LSYS indicates that although the “housing first” model adopted by the Care Not Cash program is beginning to be embraced nationwide, and has much to recommend it to homeless adults 25 and over, for homeless youth age 18-24, and for EFY in particular, emergency and transitional housing programs are still necessary components of a service continuum. While older adults can benefit from going directly into supportive housing, there is still a push in a number of Larkin Street programs for youth to acquire basic life skills, such as goal setting, education, social skills, and budgeting. Nonetheless, some EFY and other participants opt for supportive housing programs that are not time-limited. Two LSYS programs that are particularly well suited to the needs of EFY are Avenues to Independence (ATI) and the Larkin Extended Aftercare for Supported Emancipation (LEASE).

ATI is a transitional housing program geared toward the needs of EFY, though its residents also include non-EFY participants. ATI addresses the perennial EFY issues of sustaining employment and acquiring, at minimum, a high school education by

requiring its participants to work 32 hours a week, while working toward their G.E.D. or high school diploma. This program is for those EFY and other youth who have not yet acquired a basic level of demonstrable self-sufficiency and need a structured environment in which to acquire life skills that will move them closer to self-sufficiency. Twenty one participants share bedrooms, kitchen duty, responsibility for shopping and cooking, and for keeping the site well maintained. With 24-hour on-site case management, the residents are frequently supported and challenged to consider the consequences of their actions or omissions.

LEASE is comprised exclusively of EFY, receiving all of its referrals from the Aftercare unit of DHS's ILSP. EFY who are referred to this program must show that they possess a basic repertoire of life skills and self sufficiency. Participants either work full time, and pay a portion of their income for rent, or go to school full time with a "scholarship", i.e., completely subsidized rent.

LEASE employs a "scattered-site" model, with studio and 2-bedroom apartments throughout San Francisco and other adjacent cities. As the master holder of the lease of these units, the program reserves the right to ask participants to leave if they are not abiding by the TILP, which is revised prior to entry into the program. In fact, some participants end up moving back to the ATI program to further solidify their basic independent living skills, and are permitted to be re-referred once they can demonstrate a basic level of readiness. The program provides support in the form of counseling, employment training, referrals, and case management to ensure that EFY retain stable housing beyond their participation in the program. The participants are eligible to stay for two years, or until age 24, whichever occurs first. Those who pay rent pay 30% of their income, and get it back when they leave. The percentage they pay increases as they stay longer in the program.

Successes and Obstacles

With their augmented staff, and with the presence of THPP Plus-funded programs, the number of youth

that the ILSP Aftercare unit has been able to serve has grown. The unit excels in education preparation, and over the last few years, has gotten more youth out of shelters, and into transitional and supportive housing.

Mental health for undocumented, monolingual Spanish-speaking EFY remains elusive. A key difficulty in meeting the needs of this burgeoning, underserved population is that they are not as likely as their English-speaking counterparts to interface with government institutions. It is the Aftercare Unit's hope that DHS will continue to monitor this trend, and expand the structure of the unit to include this vulnerable population.

ATI believes it has done a good job of preparing youth to get along and get employed. The program also fosters the participants' ability to live with others—a social skill that must be acquired, given the reality of the shared living housing situations they will inevitably encounter in the Bay Area housing market. ATI also makes a point of saying that they are not satisfied with having participants get just any job. They emphasize the importance of building a plan to progress with a career, not simply "get a job".

Although the overall picture at ATI looks good, the current Program Manager has been in her position for one year, and is just now starting to re-build a culture of consistency in the presence of staff, and of clear, consistent expectations of participants. The issues that youth come into the program with remain some of the most intransigent obstacles: trauma related to initial abuse, families of origin that are still unsupportive, the dynamics of families of origin that have been internalized, lack of boundaries, and no sense of structure are all prevalent issues that have to be dealt with.

Evaluation

Service Objectives and the corresponding outcomes for the ATI program were obtained for the first three quarters of 2005 (January 1–October 1, 2005). They are as follows:

- 1 *Stable housing will be provided for 15-20 unduplicated homeless young people annually.* Twenty-

- one unduplicated homeless young people were provided housing during the first nine months of the contract year.
- 2 *100% of program residents will participate in the life skills training curriculum.* 100% (21 of 21) of residents participated in the life skills curriculum during the first nine months of the contract year.
 - 3 *100% of program residents will participate in the HIRE UP Employment and Education curriculum.* 100% (21 of 21) of residents participated in HIRE UP during the first nine months of the contract year.
 - 4 *100% of residents will develop a written plan, outlining their educational, vocational, life skills, and housing goals within 30 days of entering the program.* 100% (21 of 21) of residents developed a written plan outlining their goals within 30 days of entering the program.
 - 5 *Of the residents who are not employed at entry, 75% will obtain employment within 6 months of entering the program.* 33% (1 of 3) of clients who were unemployed at entry secured a job within six months of entering the program. As six months had not yet elapsed for one of these residents, Larkin Street expects this percentage to increase at year-end.
 - 6 *75% of residents will increase their income within 1 year of entering the program.* 43% (9 of 21) of residents increased their income during the first nine months of the contract year. One year had not elapsed for all of these residents, and Larkin Street expects this percentage to continue to increase.
 - 7 *75% of residents completing the program will obtain permanent housing.* 73% (8 of 11) residents who left the program during the first nine months of the contract year transitioned into permanent housing.
 - 8 *70% of participants who obtain permanent housing will remain in permanent housing for at least 1 year.* 67% (10 of 15) of residents who left the program during the first nine months of 2004 maintained stable housing for one year. Staff ex-

pect this number to increase over the course of the contract year.

- 9 *100% of all youth assessed to be eligible for SSI benefits will receive assistance in applying for benefits.* 100% (1 of 1) resident who was deemed eligible for SSI benefits received assistance in applying for the entitlement.

Implications and Recommendations for San Mateo County

The County of San Mateo Human Services Agency's (HSA) Independent Living Skills Program currently has elements of a service continuum for EFY that is comparable to that of San Francisco's, albeit on a smaller scale. HSA is looking to bolster the comprehensiveness and quality of its continuum and should consider adopting the program elements of Larkin Street Youth Services programs that have proven to be effective.

HSA's Housing Stipend Program is roughly equivalent to LSYS's LEASE program in San Francisco. HSA is requesting that the Board of Supervisors approve an additional \$360,000 for Fiscal Year 06/07, due to an anticipated increase in participants (last year's allocation was \$180,000). By all accounts, the Housing Program Stipend has gotten a very good start. However, HSA should consider adopting two LEASE program elements: giving participants the option to either share a 2-bedroom apartment, or reside in a studio unit; and putting the percentage of rent paid by participant into a savings account to be used for a down payment on youth's own studio or apartment, post-exit.

Having participants share a 2-bedroom apartment or limit their single residence to a studio will better prepare them for the realities of the Bay Area Housing market—a market in which their options may initially be relegated to these two choices. Some might argue that requiring EFY to pay some portion of the rent is preparing them for having to pay for the entire amount once they start looking for an apartment on their own. A happy medium might be to reduce the percentage being taken, and put the balance in the aforementioned account.

HSA has set aside \$750,000 in seed money to fund the acquisition of an apartment building or small motel / hotel in South San Francisco for use as a residential, transitional housing program for EFY. The facility would consist of multiple shared living units, and would be geared toward EFY who are still acquiring basic skills for self-sufficient living, i.e., in the Housing Stipend Program. On-site support would come in the form of a resident case manager, and attempts would be made to replicate this model in two other locations in the county. Given that this model already resembles LSYS's ATI program in a number of ways, ATI's successes should be considered for emulation. These include procuring a residential building with a common kitchen area, rooms that could be converted to office space, and a recreation room. Additionally, the RFP that goes out to prospective service providers should articulate the need for service objectives that are similar to the ones referred to in the "Evaluation" section of this paper.

San Mateo County HSA is poised to build a continuum of services that will meet EFY where they are as they exit the foster care system, and with the example of the San Francisco's LEASE and ATI programs, the wheel need not be completely re-invented.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge the following professionals who gave their time and expertise: San Francisco Department of Human Services (DHS) Department of Housing and Homeless Programs—Dariush Kayhan, Joyce Crum, Dion Roberts, and Jane Johnson; John Murray, BASSC Liaison; DHS ILSP Aftercare Unit—Martha Zamora and Arlene Hylton; Larkin Street Youth Services—Lara Tannenbaum, Irma Dillard, Connie Handlin, and Ilsa Lund. Without their graceful accommodation, this case study would not have reached completion.

