

Transitional Housing Placement Program for Emancipated Foster Youth: The Next Step in Building the THP+ Support System

SCOTT W. WALTON

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Created in 2001, the Transitional Housing Placement Program for Emancipated Foster/Probation Youth (THP+) serves emancipated foster youth with safe, affordable housing and wrap-around supportive services. The 2005 legislation that established 100% state funding increased support and allowed for program expansion. The THP+ programs are a direct response to the poor outcomes in education, employment and housing stability for young adults who age out of foster care. The programs in Alameda, Contra Costa and San Francisco counties each have several years of experience and are currently working to expand their combined capacity by more than three times. A review of these programs for lessons, challenges and successes supports continued advancement in improving the lives for these young adults and reducing costs to the community.

Key Components

To address the challenges of this population, providers have developed specific program components that:

- start from the first participant contact,
- support improved economic stability,
- strengthen adult relationships, and
- offer aftercare.

With the demands of program development and growth, the involved agencies have adjusted and improved but these experiences are not regularly shared throughout the Bay Area.

Recommendations

The logical next steps in development of better THP+ programs involve improving linkages between the funded providers and the county agencies and nonprofits that serve the youth prior to and during THP+ placement. With THP+ programs established and expanding, a method to share lessons learned across individual providers and counties will strengthen these programs throughout the Bay Area. Regular meetings of the network of THP+ providers, other participant-serving agencies, and county contractors will support the development of best practices, collaborative problem-solving and uniform evaluations. This low-cost addition will further fortify vital THP+ programs.

Scott W. Walton is a Supportive Housing Program Manager for Housing and Homeless Programs Division, City and County of the San Francisco Human Services Agency.

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Between 1998 and 2005, California's foster care caseload decreased by 26%, but the number of youth emancipating from foster care increased by 38%. 4,255 young adults emancipated from foster care in California during 2004. In 2005, 23% of the state's emancipating foster care youth were located in the Bay Area. The lack of stability, employment, education and poor life outcomes for foster youth in the years following emancipation have pointed to a need for housing, skill-building services and support programs. The creation of the Transitional Housing Placement Program for Emancipated Foster/Probation Youth (THP+) in 2001 by the California State Legislature began the development of a safety net for this population. Additional legislation has expanded the THP+ program by increasing the maximum age of eligibility and eliminating the need for local matching funds. The resulting expansion within existing county programs and new county THP+ entrants offers an opportunity for the development of a Bay Area perspective regarding program structures, lessons learned, and successes. This case study helps initiate a shared perspective among local counties with THP+ experience by surveying the programs in Alameda, Contra Costa and San Francisco counties. The review has also prompted recommendations for building upon the lessons learned by the THP+ programs in these counties.

Background

The outcomes for emancipated foster youth underscore the need for THP+ programs:

- 65% exit foster care without permanent housing.

- 40% experience homelessness within 18 months of exiting care; in Alameda County, 50% are homeless within 6 months.
- The percentage failing to complete high school is more than three times greater for foster youth. Less than 5% will complete college.
- 51% are unemployed within 2 to 4 years; those employed average lower wages than other low-income youth.

Beyond the devastating challenges that result in housing and life instabilities for emancipated foster youth, the statistical history also shows the impact on the communities that provided for these youth while in foster care and the generations that follow.

- More than 50% receive government assistance.
- More than 70% of all State Penitentiary inmates have spent time in foster care.
- 65% of children in foster care were born to a parent with a foster care history.

Alameda, Contra Costa and San Francisco counties have all been participating in THP+ programs for a number of years. Initial THP+ programs used two housing models for these young adults between 18 and 24 years old – single-site/group settings and scattered-site models. In 2006, a third type was initiated; the host family model which builds on an existing permanent adult connection and, in some cases, continues the previous foster family placement after emancipation.

Emancipated youth are eligible to participate in THP+ programs for a maximum of 24 months from emancipation until reaching 24 years of age. Among current Alameda County THP+ participants, about 60% enter the program directly upon emancipation

from foster care and/or exit from Transitional Housing Placement Programs (THPP programs serve 16 to 18 year olds). The other 40% have a break between emancipation and entering THP+, often having faltered in their initial efforts with respect to housing, education and employment.

The 2005 legislation that ended the required local funding match and provided 100% state funding for basic THP+ programs has allowed for building greater capacity. The counties in this review are in the process of considerable growth in total program slots: Alameda County is going from 24 to 97 units, Contra Costa County from 15 to 50 units, and San Francisco County from 31 to 80 units. Each of the counties is funding multiple nonprofit providers. The First Place for Youth program is involved in all three counties.

Key Program Components

A review and comparison of the THP+ programs in Alameda, Contra Costa and San Francisco counties identified a number of significant program elements worth sharing.

PARTICIPANT INTAKE

Although a Transitional Independence Living Plan (TILP) must be in place for eligibility in THP+ programs, several providers noted that potential participants come to the program without well-defined and/or realistic plans. Project Independence of the Tri-City Homeless Coalition in Alameda County uses the initial intake and the waiting time for a program opening to help counter this challenge. The initial interview and early contact with program staff help identify specific efforts the youth can take before placement.

BUILDING TOWARD ECONOMIC STABILITY

Supporting THP+ participants to develop understanding and skills related to maintaining housing stability begins at intake and continues throughout. The First Place for Youth program uses a required economic literacy class for all participants. This course covers program orientation, the basic eco-

nomics and budgeting related to housing, and skills for dealing with family and friends.

The economic literacy class of the First Place for Youth intake has participants collect and prepare “loan documents”, including identification, resume, and work/education plans. These are reviewed and approved by fellow classmates in order to secure the initial placement loans to cover deposits and initial rent in this scattered-site program. Project Independence uses the minimum weekly one-to-one meetings between the young adults and case managers to review pay stubs, bills and budget to help the participant with money management.

Subsidizing the housing costs is a critical component of THP+ but needs to be structured to strengthen the participants’ ability to exit the program. Several providers gradually increase the participant’s responsibility for rent. Project Independence begins with participants responsible for 19% of actual rent and increases this by 5% a month starting in the second year. First Place banks initial loan repayments made by participants in an innovative savings program to create a fund that is returned upon exit.

Programs have developed a menu of responses to the money issues of emancipated foster youth. Participants are referred to credit counseling organizations when the choices made after emancipation have resulted in debt. Incentives are designed to expand limited incomes with grocery vouchers as rewards for timely rent payments and family “night out” vouchers provided to host placements when both participant and host maintain consistent attendance. Scattered-site programs work with landlords to support transition from master-leases to participant leases at the point of timing out so that rents remain unchanged post-program.

MENTORING

Most programs have explored efforts to augment support for THP+ tenants with mentors. Experience so far has not supported this as an effective resource. Young adults who have experienced disruption in and loss of connections with adults during their histories of family and foster care are reluctant to wel-

come and trust a mentor. Potential mentors are difficult to identify and require a great deal of staff time to support. One program manager reported that only one in ten mentorship pairings proved productive.

CREATING A FAMILY OF SUPPORT

Although mentorship efforts have not proven effective, all the providers and county contractors look for ways to build supportive relationships into every aspect of the THP+ programs. The addition of the host family model offers a way to continue an existing relationship between the emancipated youth and a permanent adult connection. Most placements are with the former foster parent or family member. Even with the existing relationship, the host is screened and both host and young adult are actively involved with case management.

The host family placements provide built-in role models. The stipend paid to the host for room and board is below foster care rates so being a host family is not a financial draw. Hosts are recruited based on the existing bond that has developed with the participant. Additionally, host family programs invest part of the case management into family counseling efforts to build upon placements that involve children and other adults.

Case managers and advocates who are paired one-to-one with THP+ participants become key in the family of support. Weekly individual meetings, observations of the participants in housing, review of budgets and plans, awarding incentives and problem-solving create a linkage with the case manager that serves as part of the support network that non-foster care youth generally find within their families. Advocates also serve as a person who can celebrate successes with the participant. The First Place for Youth advocates can award one youth in their caseloads the "Golden Broom" award each month for keeping the tidiest apartment. Being aware of the critical nature of this relationship, nonprofit providers have allowed these connections to exist from the first intake through some aftercare options.

Project Independence reported resolution of roommate conflicts as a major aspect of case man-

agement. Scattered-site and group housing programs experience the largest percentage of participant complaints concerning roommates. First Place for Youth gets a request to move from 60% of youth who share a placement. The pattern may have been established in foster care where a disruptive placement can result in relocation. Rather than transfer, THP+ programs place the focus on learning how to get along. Success in maintaining these shared situations results in the development of valuable skills regarding functioning with others. Young adults can further use these skills to stabilize employment, social situations, and future housing.

AFTERCARE

THP+ programs provide up to 24 months of critical support to emancipated foster youth. Professionals from both nonprofit and county partners in these programs are aware that some of the young adults need support beyond this time frame. Individuals who graduate and those who exit the programs early have returned for support via groups, individual sessions and phone contact with case managers and program advocates. Considering the staff's role during the program, allowing for this level of aftercare is cost-effective support for youths' continued advancement and success. Having those who have "graduated" from THP+ continue with some activities also provides current participants with peer role models.

Additional aftercare is provided through the program linkages related to education and work plans that extend beyond the term of THP+. This is important when Project Independence reports the two thirds of the participants are not done with their degrees when exiting THP+. In response to this and other issues that often continue beyond the 24 months of THP+, the Tri-City Homeless Coalition has negotiated a local city contract to support an additional six months of subsidy to assist with post THP+ transitions to full responsibility for rent.

Challenges

This review found a number of challenging issues that are shared across the counties.

- Medi-Cal is available to emancipated foster youth until age 21. Health care following age 21 is a concern for many THP+ participants. Furthermore, Medi-Cal requires youth placed outside the county due to host or school location to return to the program's county for health care.
- Some of the THP+ housing models require exiting youth to identify new housing and relocate. Housing options for the very low-income individuals are quite limited.
- Employment opportunities that pay better than minimum wage are a major challenge due to levels of participant education and experience. Two providers identified the need for a wage of \$12 to \$18/hour to support THP+ graduates in maintaining stable housing.
- Issues related to exploitation and abuse in their childhoods continue and resurface as some of these young adults struggle with domestic violence, prostitution, and drug use.
- THP+ youth who begin to stabilize with housing, full- or part-time jobs, and/or having a car can see the return of members of their families of origin that may not be doing as well. One participant allowed his mother to shower at his home and she stole his television.

Evidence of Success

Research developed to support the continuation and expansion of THP+ programs has compared the annual cost per participant, \$20,000 to \$25,000, to community costs related to other outcomes. For example, incarceration will cost between \$55,000 and \$115,000 per year and a residential mental health facility can be more than \$200,000 per year. The ultimate goal for THP+ participants is achieving education and work outcomes that support self-sustained housing. These outcomes may not be achieved within the two-year time limit of the program for each youth. Evaluation of program success requires interim measures that mark progress toward goals.

Tracking completion of program components and steps within the individual TILPs are valuable measures, such as percentages of participants who

remain current with their rent and rates of employment. Celebrations and incentives based on achievements provide critical participant support. Markers, such as completion of program courses, passing a vocational or college class, getting a job or the first paycheck, elevate peer role models within the program.

Comparing the statistics for THP+ participants against those of emancipated foster youth in general is another method for measuring outcomes. Housing retention during and following the program, employment rates, income levels and educational achievements can be tracked. When California statistics show that emancipated foster females are three times more likely to have a child by 19, First Place for Youth reports a pregnancy rate of less than 2 % for females in the THP+ program. This is less than a quarter of the rate in the general population. Such a drastic change in pregnancy rate has an effect on the individuals served and long-term social costs.

Recommendations Going Forward

Improving the linkages between THP+ agencies and the programs serving currently placed foster youth is a next step in supporting a more direct transition between programs. Several of the providers reported that youth who enter THP+ without a break after foster care get oriented rapidly having more time to work through their individual plans. Developing awareness of program options before youth exit foster care and early identification of permanent adult connections as potential host families will improve the effective use of THP+ resources. Having current THP+ clients interact with foster youth prior to emancipation would provide peer recruitment efforts.

The need for employment opportunities with sufficient earning potential to maintain housing is challenged by levels of educational and limited work histories. Based on San Francisco's successful initial efforts with recruitment to workforce development for formerly homeless clients, employment services can create direct links with THP+ programs by providing outreach and orientations onsite. Workforce Development agencies could participate directly in THP+ activities producing an enhanced environ-

ment for youth to advance their employment plans. Such efforts would make it easier for youth to connect with the services located elsewhere, such as One-Stop centers. Additionally, development of customized employment options, such as Contra Costa County's efforts to hire participants to do research regarding THP+ programs, could help overcome the barriers to employment when need for income cannot wait until education goals are met.

These initial recommendations could be accomplished by adjustments to the current delivery of services. Beyond the improved internal county linkages supporting early access to THP+ and generation of better employment options, the providers and counties involved in THP+ programs would benefit from Bay Area THP+ meetings two to four times a year. The nonprofit agencies participating in this review expressed great interest in opportunities to exchange program and problem-solving methods related to common obstacles. Connections and collaborations among programs that serve this population prior to, during and post THP+ are significant next steps to fortify this system of care.

A Bay Area THP+ collaborative would be a low-cost way to unravel difficulties, solve problems and quickly distribute best practices. With all the partners and agencies serving THP+ youth meeting together, minor program adjustments and service integration can be designed to address challenges. Starting with the THP+ partners, other related partners can be encouraged to join on either an as needed or on going basis.

Two initial meetings over a six-month period would allow the group to identify initial issues, create a communication network via email and explore ways to share uniform measures and outcomes. The evaluation of programs would have greater validity with uniform measures. Several counties already supporting THP+ programs could have a hand in hosting and facilitating the first meetings. Even if San Francisco County took the lead responsibility for hosting the first meetings, the cost would be primarily in staff time. The initial meetings would provide sufficient results to support seeking founda-

tion funding or corporate support for an on going network. Continued support, evaluation and development of THP+ programs are critical to counter negative outcomes and break the generational cycles seen among emancipated foster youth.

Acknowledgements

This review was possible thanks to the generous time, expertise, and information from the following individuals and agencies:

- Peter Bush, Project Independence Director, and Mary Beth McCarthy, Director of Supportive Housing Services, Tri-City Homeless Coalition—Alameda County;
- Sam Cobbs, Executive Director, The First Place for Youth—Alameda, Contra Costa and San Francisco Counties;
- Neely R. McElroy, Division Manager and Jim Paulsen, Social Work Supervisor II, Contra Costa County Children and Family Services;
- John Murray, Senior Analyst, City and County of San Francisco Human Services Agency;
- Ken Shaw, Child Welfare Supervisor, Alameda County;
- Tony Thurmond, Executive Director, Beyond Emancipation—Alameda County;
- Catholic Charities of the East Bay Care Collaborative—Contra Costa County; and
- the Mi Casa Program of Lutheran Social Services—Contra Costa County.

Resources

10 Facts Every Foster Youth Should Know.

<http://www.fosteryouthhelp.ca.gov/10facts.html>.

California Youth Connection.

<http://www.calyouthconn.org/site/cyc/>.

Supporting THP+ for California's Emancipating Foster Youth: A Compilation of Statistics.

<http://www.ballantinesbiz.com/everychild/emancipatingfosteryouthstatistics.htm>.

THP-Plus: Housing California's Former Foster Youth. California Alliance Winter Executive Conference, 2/22/2007.

