

The Importance of Youth Advocates in Child Welfare: Examining Alameda County's Youth Advocate Program

RACHELLE LYNCH

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of the Core Practice Model and Safety Organized Practice, social workers are required to elicit input from the youth on their caseloads regularly. The Continuum of Care Reform (CCR) mandates Child Family Team Meetings (CFT) to happen at regular intervals during the life of a child welfare case. Sonoma County has been challenged with not only holding CFTs for youth and Non-Minor Dependents (NMD), but also struggles to get the youth or NMD to the table when there is one.

Alameda County utilizes a Youth Advocate Program (YAP) in which an advocate attends CFTs with youth and NMDs as one of their primary responsibilities. Through this case study of Alameda County's YAP contract with WestCoast Children's Clinic, Sonoma County may glean ideas for how to improve youth and NMD participation in the CFT process and also incorporate former foster youths' perspectives into current practice in general through the use of youth advocates.

Rachelle Lynch, Child Protection Supervisor, Sonoma County Family, Youth & Children's Services

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Introduction

In approximately 2006, Alameda County's Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) embarked on a youth advocate program. According to former YAP Program Manager Sonya Frost, the beginnings of YAP cropped up around 2003, when Family to Family arrived on the child welfare scene. Family to Family promoted the value of incorporating the "voice" of the youth, parents, and communities in the child welfare process. Initially, the efforts were attempted on a smaller scale with a couple of advocates receiving a stipend from DCFS. After experiencing success, DCFS contracted with WestCoast Children's Clinic (WCC) in 2010, and together both agencies began helping Youth Advocate Fellows (YAF) become fulltime employees. Ms. Frost posits that DCFS chose WCC for the contract primarily for assistance with the clinical support they could offer young adults who had recently left the foster care system themselves.

Project Rationale

A review of the literature indicates that youth engagement and the use of peer advocates or mentors are effective ways of engaging current foster youth in their child welfare cases. For example, the My Life Model was studied in relation to self-determination enhancement for youth in foster care. Components of the My Life Model include:

- Implemented over 9–12 months,
- Features one-on-one, weekly or bi-weekly youth-directed coaching to support youth in identifying and pursuing goals they value, and
- Four complementary peer mentoring workshops where youth discuss transition topics,

share their knowledge and accomplishments, and receive support from successful slightly older "near-peers" and adults who also have lived experience in foster care (Powers et al., 2017).

"Given that research has found that at least 50% of youth from foster care struggle with serious mental health issues including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and eating disorders (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2012), it is critically important that foster youths' health and wellness needs are proactively identified and that youth are connected to quality health and mental health services and resources, as well as positive peer and 'near peer' relationships that promote feelings of social connection and belonging, both while they are in care and after they age out (Snow et al., 2013; Geenen et al., 2014)."

The Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services funded the Capacity Building for States' production of the Youth Engagement Blueprint (YEB). In February 2016, the group facilitated a meeting with key stakeholders to brainstorm an organizational framework for youth engagement. The group produced the YEB, which includes, "Viewing Youth People as Organizational Assets."

Family, Youth & Children's Services (FY&C), with its involvement in initiatives such as Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI), Safety Organized Practice (SOP), and CORE Practice Model understands the value of imbedding youth advocates

and 'near-peers' in all aspects of the child welfare system to promote better safety, permanency, and well-being. For example, recently a Transitional Age Youth (TAY) AmeriCorps Program Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) contract with iFoster and VOICES was developed for the timeframe of March 25, 2019 through December 31, 2019. One intended outcome of the contract is for advocates to increase the number of youth or NMD who participate in their CFT meetings.

TAY AmeriCorps is a Los Angeles and Bay Area program targeted at providing peer support to LA and Bay Area transition-age foster youth (TAY, ages 14 to 23) to help them achieve self-sufficiency and successfully transition to independence. It is a collaboration between the LA Department of Children and Family Services, Youth Services Division; LA Opportunity Youth Network; The Bay Area TAY AmeriCorps Collaborative of TAY-serving organizations; iFoster; and California Volunteers.

TAY AmeriCorps' goal is to deploy 100 trained current and former foster youth (ages 18–23 with case-by-case exemptions for foster youth age 17 and former foster youth up to age 26). They will receive a year-long stipend as AmeriCorps service members to partner with agencies across the county to enhance their capacity to support TAY achieving key life goals. Over the next three years, this program seeks to influence in a positive way the self-sufficiency readiness, employment outcomes, and educational outcomes for transition-age foster youth in both Los Angeles County and the Bay Area. If deemed successful after the three-year period, the program has the potential to be renewed and expanded. iFoster's vision is to develop a national service solution to increase TAY access to existing community resources, enabling them to achieve self-sufficiency and build career pathways into the public sector for TAY who serve as AmeriCorps members.

Key Elements of Alameda County's Youth Advocate Program

Alameda County DCFS has a contract with WCC for \$1,201,186. The contract includes 10–12 Youth

Advocate Fellows (YAF) working fulltime in the Youth Advocate Program (YAP). Employed by WCC, they provide DCFS with 20 hours of work per week. The bulk of the DCFS hours are spent in Child Family Team (CFT) meetings and various workgroups and committees [e.g., Safety Organized Practice (SOP), Katie A., Resource Family Approval (RFA) and Child Family Team (CFT) implementation committee] for the purpose of providing the youth's perspective on child welfare programs and initiatives. The remaining 20 hours per week are spent on ten hours of professional development (school, therapy, life coaching, etc.) and an additional ten participating in WCC trainings and meetings.

WCC provides oversight and management of the Alameda County YAP. WCC is responsible for recruiting and hiring up to 12 YAF. YAP will improve services, experiences, and outcomes for children, youth, and Non-Minor Dependents in Extended Foster Care by including the voice and perspective of current and former foster youth and NMDs. In collaboration with the Alameda County DCFS, the advocates are involved in direct and indirect advocacy, policy input, and training. Current NMD and former foster youth are supported through a fellowship program designed to develop their skills in advocacy, engagement, outreach, and policy and provide professional development experiences.

WCC hires current NMDs, former foster youth, and former probation youth ages 18 to 23 years old, who then lend their voice and perspective into the planning and evaluation of everything the county does for its foster care and extended foster care population. The ultimate goal is for the YAFs to assist the county in its overall mission of improving services and outcomes to current foster youth and NMDs.

WCC's Executive Director and the DCFS Division Director are the lead decision makers for YAP. Both parties enter into a contract with the understanding that the county directs 100% of the work. WCC provides the administrative structure and support services necessary to complete the work

assigned to it from the county. A YAP Steering Committee exists that acts as the forum through which any challenges and proposed changes in collaboration are addressed. The Alameda DCFS gives final approval of any recommended changes.

For the YAP contract, WCC agrees to provide services such as coordinated panel discussions, child welfare worker training, direct youth outreach, developing training materials on Permanency, assisting in Independent Living Program (ILP) recruitment and retention, facilitating strategic planning, surveys, conducting presentations, educating policy makers, and participating in Team Decision Making (TDM) meetings and in Transitional Living Conferences (TLCs).

WCC utilizes the experience and knowledge of current NMDs and former foster youth. Their perspectives are integrated into the work of the county as it strives to provide the best service possible to current foster youth and NMDs. Alameda DCFS consider YAFs recommendations to produce better outcomes for current Alameda County foster youth and NMDs. WCC also supports YAFs in order for them to provide the county with effective feedback. YAFs feedback can include comments about current programs, suggestions for the design of new programs, and advocacy for current foster youth during TDM meetings or TLCs.

The role of a Youth Advocate Fellow involved in YAP includes:

- Participation in as many TDMs and TLCs as possible to:
 - Increase the number of youth and NMDs in care that participate in their TDMs and TLCs to explore best placement options, and
 - Increase engagement between youth, NMDs, and child welfare workers.
- Participation in subcommittees, stakeholder groups, and policy meetings providing youth and NMD perspectives to increase the consumer voice present in decision making and policy implementation concerning foster youth.
- Participation in YAF facilitated trainings, workshops, events, and panels for professionals as directed by the county to increase professionals' awareness of the foster care experience and perspective.
- Participation in YAF facilitated trainings, workshops, events, and panels for youth as directed by the county to:
 - Increase youth awareness of extended foster care and other youth transitional services, and
 - Increase engagement between youth, NMDs, and child welfare workers.
- Participate in WCC's professional development activities to support and increase YAFs' job readiness, skills, educational goals, and career exploration. Activities include individual education, employment, and personal development related goals such as matriculation, tutoring, education counseling and planning, career exploration, external trainings, workshops and conferences related to developing job skills, therapy, life coaching, and housing stabilization.

The YAP contract states that WCC is responsible for providing the following:

- Weekly TDM/TLC debrief with county YAP Liaison to focus on YAF roles and responsibilities in working with foster youth and NMDs in care and building YAF professional development skills.
- Process groups with two facilitators, held twice monthly. Through discussion, role-plays, and other experiential exercises, group facilitators work with youth members to develop basic counseling skills (i.e. active listening, effective communication, boundaries, self-disclosure, etc.) in their work with foster youth.
- Two one-on-one professional coaching sessions with coaches who possess extensive experience in working with transition-age foster youth.

Coaches shall assist and provide support to each fellow with the work they are doing with foster youth and NMDs, identify challenges, and practice skills.

- Coaching Session 1: Meet with Professional Development Coordinator twice a month.
- Coaching Session 2: Meet with Program Coordinator twice a month.
- When needed, individual therapy on a weekly basis is available and shall be provided to YAFs by community clinicians with experience in working with foster youth.

This writer had an opportunity to interview two Youth Advocates, Micneisha Vaughn and Leosha Nelson. They are both part of the same cohort and have been YAF employees for over two years. The program is a three-year fellowship and small advocate groups are recruited continuously. Ms. Vaughn and Ms. Nelson describe a typical workday as arriving to WCC to check the CFT schedule and see whether there are any 14- to 21-year-old youths or NMDs who are on the schedule for a CFT. The CFTs that the advocates participate in are either a Placement Change Team Decision Making (TDM) Meeting or a Case Planning CFT for the youth or NMD. Youth or NMDs are not required to have a youth advocate sit in on their CFT but it is encouraged. Most youth and NMDs do not turn this resource away. The youth or NMD checks in with the advocate for a “Pre-15 (minute)” meeting to decide whether or not the advocate will participate and what his or her role will be in the context of the CFT. Because many youth and NMDs live out of the area, often times they participate via telephone and the youth advocate participates in person.

Ms. Vaughn and Ms. Nelson shared that in addition to accompanying youth or NMDs during CFTs, they make brochures, attend professional development trainings (which they both receive and conduct). The advocates also work closely with the Independent Living Program (ILP), such as participating in Career Night and sitting on a variety of

CFS committees. Advocates also sit on Pride Panels. These are part of the RFA training for resource families going through the approval process. The panel consists of a YAF, Parent Advocate, and Foster Parent, each providing various perspectives of the key roles in a child welfare case. Advocates also have opportunities to train social workers about effectively engaging with youth.

Success and Barriers

According to YAP Liaison, Avis Grayson-Johnson, effectiveness of the program can be difficult to measure as the feedback received is qualitative and subjective in nature. However, at a recent CFT Implementation Committee meeting, it was reported out that there seems to be greater youth and NMD participation in CFTs and less placement disruptions. One can only speculate that Youth Advocates contributed to this.

A concern or challenge to Alameda DCFS’s YAP program includes retention of the advocates. Former YAP Program Manager, Sonya Frost, shared feedback about how challenging it can be for some young individuals to be a YAF. This is due in part to the YAF over-identifying with the foster youth or NMD and blurring their personal experiences with the youth or NMD they are serving. In the past, she recalls issues related to YAF dating clients, YAF needing emergency psychiatric care after a client’s situation triggered the YAF, and the YAF not being as far along in their own maturity, thus failing to adhere to work policies. For these reasons, regular supervision, both individual and group, are critical to the program’s success.

Current YAP Program Manager, Meredith Samp, shared her impression from the perspective of the new Program Manager overseeing YAP. Ms. Samp would like to explore the possibilities for the advocates to have more involvement with the youth or NMD one-on-one, as opposed to being in meetings all day. She wonders if the existing model is stimulating enough for the YAF. However, Ms. Samp is aware of the concerns related to poor boundaries some YAF struggle with when YAFs and

clients are permitted to spend an increased amount of individual time together.

Recommendations

YAP has been part of Alameda County's child welfare landscape for over a decade. Though the need for continued improvements is inevitable, the program has stood the test of time. Including YAFs in CFTs and in DCFS workgroups is a regular part of the way Alameda County does business. DCFS is exploring ways to align the YAP with DCFS's Parent Advocate Program. Sonoma County can emulate YAP and influence outcomes for the TAY we serve.

In 2015, a cohort of TAY formed in Sonoma County to conduct a year-long study on AB12. The cohort published a report in May 2016 and the coalition of service providers and county agencies formed to ensure that the county implemented the recommendations. The coalition has continued as a way to bring the foster care community and service providers together in order to reach common goals for youth. The 2018 cohort recommendations include the following: provide peer support for foster youth (named Y2Y for youth-to-youth), increase clarity around eligibility for services, and create a resource website for Sonoma County youth.

FY&C began an MOU with iFoster/AmeriCorps and VOICES in late March 2019. The iFoster MOU will allow up to two former foster youth to work 900 hours within the next 10 months, to earn a living allowance stipend of \$13,500. The cost of living in Sonoma County exceeds a young person's ability to live on this amount. To date, the program has hired one former foster youth. In this particular former foster youth's case, she is able to participate in the program because she has low-income transitional housing and supplemental income to support herself in addition to the stipend.

It is this writer's recommendation that Sonoma County view the FY&C and iFoster MOU as a "pilot." If successful, Sonoma County could tighten existing, collaborative efforts with VOICES to implement Y2Y. The county could potentially allocate future dollars to youth advocate positions

within the county or contract with a nonprofit like VOICES to pay advocates, in the way that Alameda DCFS does with WCC. This arrangement is similar to the current contract between FY&C and Child Parent Institute for Parent Mentors. Tailoring a youth advocate program specific to FY&C's unique needs can serve to improve FY&C's overall outcomes related to safety, permanency and well-being for our youth.

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