



California Independent Living Program Transformation Breakthrough Series Collaborative

Project Overview

The Challenge

The transition to adulthood and economic independence can be challenging for any adolescent and generally occurs over many years, with substantial support from family and friends. In fact, about half of youth ages 18-24 in the United States live at home and nearly two-thirds of young adults in their early 20's receive economic support from their parents. In contrast, when youth in foster care turn 18, they transition out of the system, often with only minimal preparation for life on their own, without the ongoing supports that would support them in becoming happy, productive adults.

California has approximately 25,000 foster youth¹ who are 15 years and older in probation and child welfare-supervised foster care. Children and youth of color are disproportionately represented in this foster care population. These youth, who are Black, Native American and Hispanic, are placed in out-of-home care at rates that are higher than their numbers in the community, and at rates much higher than white youth entering the foster care system. In 2006 there were 9,988,199 children residing in California, and 74,508 in out-of-home care. Black children made up 6.3% of the child population, yet represented 27.7% of children in out-of-home care. Native American children made up 10.2% of the child population and represented 2.3% of the children in out-of-home care. Hispanic children made up 49.9% of the child population and 42.8% of children in out-of-home care. White children made up 33.1% of the child population and 25.9% of children in out-of-home care.¹

But these numbers understate the magnitude of the issue. National studies have shown that children and youth of color become increasingly over-represented in the foster care population as they progress through child welfare decision-making processes, staying in placement longer and achieving permanency with families at much lower rates. And research reveals that there are disparities in the services and supports these youth of color receive, including fewer and lower quality services, fewer foster parent support services, fewer contacts by caseworkers, less access to mental health services, less access to drug treatment services, and higher placement in detention or correctional facilities, contributing to poorer outcomes than white youth as they leave the systemⁱⁱ.

Once “emancipated” from the system, these foster youth will face daunting odds. Research has shown that over half of youth aging out of foster care have not graduated from high school, 25% have become homeless at least once, and nearly 60% are unemployed 12-18 months after leaving the system. Many suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, and too many leave the system without any connection to an adult, family or community.ⁱⁱⁱ

Counties and their Independent Living Programs (ILP) in California, aware that data indicates that many foster youth are not being adequately prepared for and supported into adulthood, have

¹ ILP serves youth in both child welfare and probation-supervised foster care; therefore, the term “foster youth” is used inclusively throughout this Change Package to refer to both populations.

been involved in a great deal of discussion on the need to provide transition services, including Independent Living Program services, in an effective and efficient manner. As a result of these discussions – along with the system improvement efforts of a variety of public, private, philanthropic, caregiver, and advocacy partners, along with foster youth themselves -- an impressive array of programs and services to improve foster youth outcomes has emerged at both state and county levels during recent years. These initiatives, programs, and services generally promote shared responsibility and integrated services across multiple systems touching the lives of foster youth, including Education, Workforce, Health/Mental Health, Child Welfare, Probation and Caregivers/Placement Homes. Though teamwork and cross-system service delivery is considered essential in improving outcomes and successfully preparing California foster youth for transition, these system improvements currently reach only a small portion of transition aged foster youth, and challenges to integration and statewide implementation remain.

Independent Living Programs have an important role to play in leveraging the resources and services of these systems, providing the leadership and operational support to provide connections between and the alignment of the services, supports, and opportunities available in a community – rather than attempting to provide a comprehensive set of services through ILP alone.

Background and Overview

California was one of six states chosen to participate in a National Governor’s Association (NGA) Policy Academy on Youth Transitioning out of Foster Care. The Academy, which ran from June 2006 through December 2007, provided a unique opportunity for teams of state leaders to work with national and state experts to help improve outcomes for youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood. California’s NGA team, under the leadership of the California Department of Social Services, brought together a broad representation of state leadership, partners and advocacy organizations including the Employment Development Department, California Workforce Investment Board, Education/Foster Youth Services, Mental Health, Community Colleges, County Welfare Director’s Association, Child and Family Policy Institute of California, California Youth Connection, Casey Family Programs, California Permanency for Youth Project, New Ways to Work, California Connected by 25, CASA, First 5, and others. Most importantly, the NGA team incorporated input and recommendations from youth through the advocacy of the California Youth Connection (CYC), recognizing that foster youth are the experts of how the system operates and whether or not their needs are being met. Change to the foster care system without input from foster youth themselves would drastically inhibit the positive outcomes the collaboration set out to create.

Through an inclusive inter-disciplinary process focused on addressing the challenges faced by transition aged foster youth, the NGA Policy Academy for Youth Transitioning Out of Foster Care provided an opportunity to assess current efforts in California, make recommendations, and implement change to systematically address key challenges and improve transition outcomes. This process resulted in a new vision for California’s Independent Living Program.

The NGA Team’s new vision for permanency and transition programs and services:

- Supports young people themselves are at the heart of the planning and decision-making process.
- Engages caregivers and service providers as critical partners to the success of permanency and transition services
- Emphasizes Permanency, Education, and Employment preparation that is integrated into every aspect of a youth's daily life, rather than offered as training in single session workshops and activities.
- Envisions a broad array of integrated, relevant, developmentally appropriate services, supports, and opportunities individually planned to meet each youth's needs.
- Provides that transition services are community-based, leveraging resources and opportunities and integrated across a range of public and private systems.

The Breakthrough Series Collaborative (“BSC” or “Collaborative”) methodology was identified as an effective approach that could help counties in California translate NGA’s recommendations and vision into action, with a goal of redefining and reshaping programs and services promoting permanency and preparation for adulthood that is developmental in nature and related to an age group much broader than the age range currently served by ILP programs in California.

Collaborative Mission

The mission for each participating team in this BSC is to ensure every foster youth achieves:

Permanency – every youth has lifelong connections with family and supportive adults;

Education – every youth receives a quality education, high school diploma, and support in pursuing postsecondary opportunities; and

Employment – every youth has work experience and training opportunities that prepare them for and place them in living wage employment and careers.

Participating teams will work to achieve these youth-centered goals by focusing intensively on the following system-level goals:

Youth-Centered & Youth-Adult Partnerships - developing relationships and partnerships with and engaging youth in all aspects of transition planning, decision-making and implementation;

Engagement of Supportive Adults and Community – caregivers, and other supportive adults and community members hold high expectations, provide opportunities, play meaningful roles in planning and supporting early and continuous preparation for and supported transition to successful adulthood for youth; and

Using a Collaborative & Integrated Approach in Practice – collaborative service, supports and opportunities for youth are provided early and continuously to provide successful transition to adulthood.

Partner with Youth in Shared Leadership – supporting youth in leadership and mentoring roles

Within this mission, service systems will take on collaborative responsibility to coordinate and integrate cross-system services and supports into the day-to-day case management, caregiving, education, and other community-based activities, services, and supports for foster youth. This approach will require that young people are consistently and meaningfully involved in developing and implementing individual plans to help them attain their goals, while simultaneously developing key life skills and strengthening community and permanency connections – not only beginning at the age of 15.5, but at an early age and as a continuous developmental process. As a result of this coordination and integration, youth will know that adults and organizations value and care about them, and that their input, goals and dreams are not only respected, but are fundamental in the planning of their own futures.

Framework

The ILP Breakthrough Series Collaborative Framework highlights a comprehensive set of changes that when packaged together will result in a system that achieves dramatically improved outcomes for the youth being served. In order for participating counties to ensure permanency, education and employment goals are achieved, there are ten key themes that must be addressed and serve as a framework for organizing and guiding the practices that will be tested as part of this BSC. Although these ten themes are presented as separate and distinct, they are intricately related and there is a synergistic effect when working across all of the themes. It is essential for participating teams to consider each theme in this framework independently, as well as to consider the framework as a whole and how each theme strengthens, is connected to, and supports the others.

There is no “one-size-fits-all” or “magic bullet” solution to this complex challenge, thus the framework is intentionally descriptive rather than prescriptive. This framework sets out merely to describe the quality and collaborative approach that is needed to achieve this transformation, while allowing participating teams to implement the approach using strategies that will meet the needs of local foster youth within the county context, partnerships and resources.

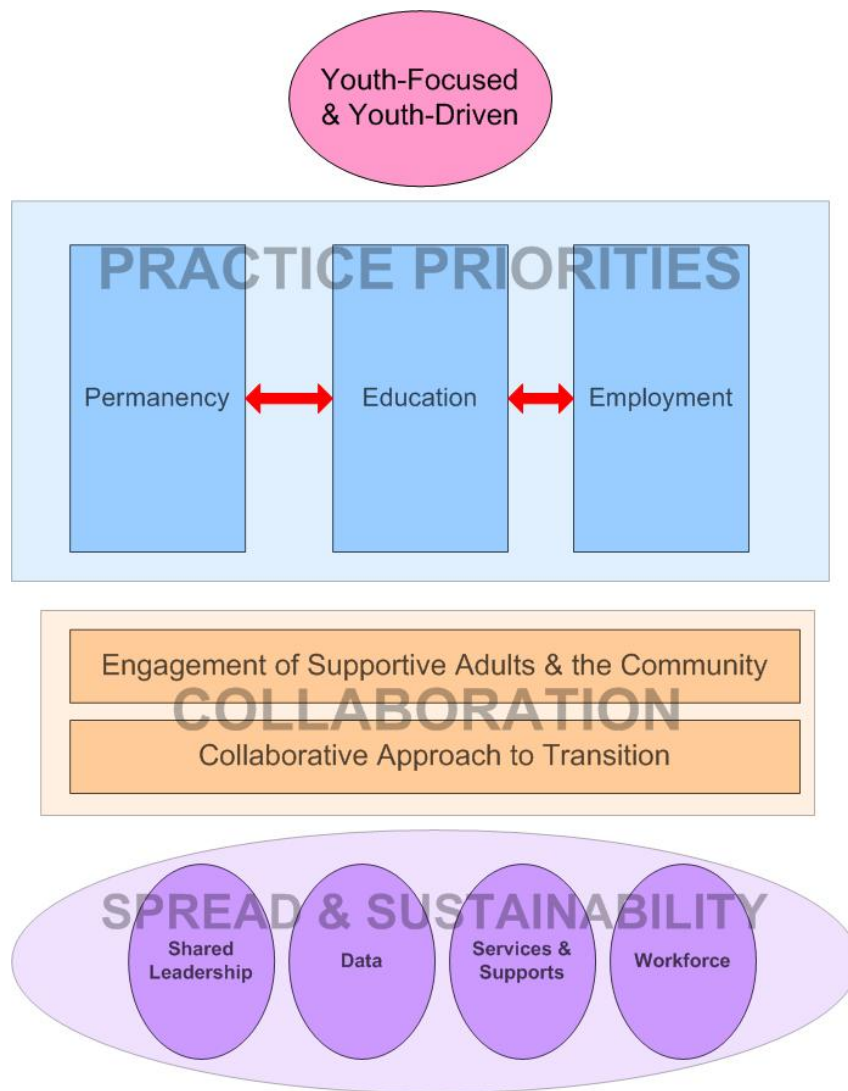
The first section, “Youth-Centered & Youth-Adult Partnerships”, includes the fundamental shift that “youth voice” brings to the table that our services and interventions focus on youth and be driven by youth. It further highlights that youth have and need from others high expectations and aspirations, that they are allowed the opportunity to develop lifelong relationships, and are engaged as partners in planning, decision-making and leadership.

The second section, “Practice Priorities,” includes the three fundamental themes for ILP transformation as identified by the NGA Policy Academy focused on specific practice priorities. Teams will test strategies specific to permanency, education and employment and implement new practices that encourage high goals and aspirations, provide experiential learning, community-based opportunities and an individualized, supported pathway to success.

In section three, “Partnership and Integrated Practice,” includes two themes that cross-over all of the other sections and focus on the interplay, integration, and coordination between them. These

themes intentionally focus on breaking down the silos that might otherwise exist. Teams will test strategies that focus on engaging and empowering those who are at the center of this work, coordinating planning, leveraging teamwork by child welfare and probation case-managers, caregivers, families, communities, agencies and youth themselves in order to offer a rich array of transition opportunities, experiences and supports to meet the individualized needs of children and youth in care and transitioning foster youth.

The final section, “Spread and Sustainability,” includes four themes that will be addressed by each team, the county, and the county leadership throughout this BSC. Each team will identify creative ways to ensure that local practice improvements developed through the practice changes tested in the first three sections (“Youth-Centered and Youth-Adult Partnerships” ”Partnership and Integrated Practice” and “Practice Priorities”) are fully implemented, spread throughout the county, and sustained over time.



1) Youth-Centered and Youth-Adult Partnerships

- 1.a Nurturing self-confidence and affirming youths' identities with focus on youths' individual race, culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity
- 1.b Addressing physical and emotional health
- 1.c Developing lifelong relationships and trust with youth including demonstrated respect and sensitivity(or responsiveness) to race, culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity
- 1.d Engaging youth to self-identify their goals and/or aspirations, then developing a plan to attain those goals
- 1.e Partnering with youth for planning and shared decision-making
- 1.f Identifying, recruiting, and supporting youth to play active leadership roles in staff training and system change efforts

Practice Priorities

2) Permanency: Developing and Supporting Permanent Connections with Family and Supportive Adults through Active Engagement with Youth

- 2.a Continuously exploring a range of options for permanency from reunification through adoption in culturally sensitive and responsive ways
- 2.b Finding and supporting culturally sensitive and responsive connections through active engagement of youth, caregivers and extended family or community
- 2.c Preparing youth for connection/reconnection to family, supportive adults and life-long permanent connections
- 2.d Engaging natural helping networks in order to form lasting connections to community and community supports
- 2.e Respecting race, culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity in the pursuit, development, and support of permanent connections
- 2.f Using the court process to reinforce efforts to accomplish these sub-themes

3) Education: Pursuing and Supporting High-Quality Education, High School Diplomas, and Post-Secondary Education

- 3.a Conducting early and ongoing high-quality and holistic assessments of strengths, challenges, needs, current level of achievement, and academic goals and dreams in culturally sensitive and responsive ways
- 3.b Promoting school stability and eliminating barriers (e.g. school transfers, transcripts, transportation)
- 3.c Providing quality in-school and out-of school interventions for youth based on self-identified and assessed needs

- 3.d Encouraging post-secondary plans, goals, aspirations, and preparedness from an early age and providing sustained support to achieve educational goals with a focus on youths' individual race, ethnicity, and culture
- 3.e Promoting access to, enrollment in, and retention/success in post-secondary education with a focus on youths' individual race, ethnicity, and culture

4) Employment: Preparing Youth for and Supporting the Transition to Living Wage Employment and Careers

- 4.a Conducting initial and ongoing assessments of skills, goals, career aspirations, strengths, challenges, needs, and employment goals and dreams in culturally sensitive and responsive ways
- 4.b Preparing and supporting youth in a developmental continuum of career awareness, exploration, and preparation activities within the community with a focus on youths' individual race, ethnicity, and culture
- 4.c Ensuring that youth participate in real world exposures and work experiences in areas of interest for all youth prior to leaving care, starting in the early teens and building a developmental sequence regardless of youths' individual race, ethnicity, and culture
- 4.d Promoting access to, enrollment in, retention/success in post-secondary education, occupational training, career technical education, internships, apprenticeships, and other career pathway education and employment opportunities leading to living wage employment and careers regardless of youths' individual race, ethnicity, and culture

Partnership & Integrated Practice

5) Engaging Supportive Adults and the Community

- 5.a Supporting all adults in holding high, accountable expectations with all youth and themselves
- 5.b Developing sustainable relationships and trust among partners through continuous demonstrated respect and responsiveness to each others' race, culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity
- 5.c Supporting caregivers and adults to function as transition mentors and guides.
- 5.d Providing opportunities, experiences, and supports for youth to engage in leadership/civic roles and volunteerism in the community
- 5.e Supporting older youth in care and former foster youth in serving as mentors and guides for children and youth in care

6) Using an Integrated and Collaborative Approach to Transition Reflected in Every Aspect of Practice, Including Permanency, Education, and Employment

- 6.a Effectively aligning caregiving activities, case-management activities, and life skills preparation and connecting services, supports, and opportunities across all appropriate agencies and programs to support successful transitions

- 6.b Identifying, coordinating, and integrating early and ongoing aligned assessments of interests, strengths, and needs
- 6.c Synthesizing assessments, information, strengths, needs, goals, and dreams into a single, integrated, coordinated youth-led and youth-centered case plan and approach across agencies and programs.
- 6.d Integrating permanency, education and employment values, services and supports through day-to-day case-management activities, inter-agency coordination and court interventions.

7) Providing Shared Agency and Community Leadership in Integrated Transition

- 7.a Creating a common understanding and language of transition issues and establishing a shared vision for youth with all partners, including youth, caregivers, community, courts, agency, and media
- 7.b Building community awareness of and investment in improving outcomes for transitioning youth
- 7.c Recruiting champions and assuming responsibility for adopting and implementing quality approaches within all levels of the organization
- 7.d Coordinating policies across systems to embed new practices, including issues of confidentiality
- 7.e Promoting a culture of innovation to support small tests of change

Spread and Sustainability

8) Using Data with Diverse Audiences to Ensure Improvement

- 8.a Collecting and sharing timely results based on youth outcome data, including permanency, education, and employment
- 8.b Actively soliciting, obtaining, and sharing data on youths' perceptions of being respected and valued by partners working together to assist in their transition
- 8.c Partnering with youth in the collection and use of data
- 8.d Sharing results with all involved partners and the community in ways that are meaningful and respect confidentiality
- 8.e Involving all partners, especially youth, in interpreting results and designing continuous quality improvements that are data-driven

9) Ensuring Appropriate Services and Supports

- 9.a Providing access to relevant services readily available and accessible in the community, including housing.
- 9.b Ensuring equitable access to services and supports to eliminate disproportionality and disparate outcomes in services/supports and outcomes

- 9.c Leveraging partnerships and resources, eliminating duplication, and improving utilization of available resources
- 9.d Strengthening the role of the court in promoting collaboration, shared responsibility and accountability for transition planning, services and outcomes
- 9.e Establishing policies and formalized agreements across systems to ensure sustainability and access to all appropriate services and supports.

10) Maintaining and Supporting a Qualified, Competent, and Well-Trained Workforce to Implement Practice and Culture Changes

- 10.a Recruiting staff from communities from which children, youth, and families come
- 10.b Training, supporting and supervising all staff, including case management social worker and probation officers, to ensure culturally responsive skills and competencies
- 10.c Training, supporting and supervising all staff, including case management social worker and probation officers, to ensure priority of youth permanency, education, and employment practices, systems and resources.
- 10.d Training, supporting and supervising all staff, including case management social workers and probation officers, to ensure transparent, cross-system partnerships, protocols, and integrated permanency transition practice.
- 10.e Training, supporting and supervising all staff, including case management social worker and probation officers, to ensure collaboration skills
- 10.f Training, supporting and supervising all staff, including case management social worker and probation officers, to ensure understanding of core practices such as grief and loss
- 10.g Partnering with current and former foster youth in a variety of roles including trainers, advocates, mentors, and staff

ⁱⁱ Robert B. Hill, ph. D, "Analysis of Racial/Ethnic Disproportionality and Disparity at the National, State, and County Levels," Casey-CSSP Alliance for Racial Equity in the Child Welfare System, 2007 Casey Family Programs.

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert B. Hill, PhD, "Synthesis of Research on Disproportionality in Child Welfare: An Update," Casey-CSSP Alliance for Racial Equity in the Child Welfare System, October 2006.