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## North Star Community: Housing and Support Services for Emancipated Foster Youth

**Youth Council:** Merced County Youth Council

**Element:** Youth Development and Support

**Function:** Coordinating Youth Services, Convening Local Leadership to Take Action

**Subject:** Serving Special Populations

**The Challenge:** Foster care youth who have been removed from their homes due to abuse, neglect, or abandonment become wards of the county and are placed in the foster care system until their 18th birthdays when they are emancipated. Oftentimes, many of these vulnerable young adults leave the system without adequate skills and are unprepared for life's challenges. Without a firm plan for success, which includes housing and employment, these young people often end up unemployed, homeless, and without those permanent, lifelong connections that are critical to a healthy life. In order to facilitate successful transitions for these young adults, adequate housing with inclusive, supportive living structures must be in place. The challenge is to design a transition support program that is time limited, with established goals, and with the outcome of a healthy, successful, independent transition to adulthood.

**The Practices and Evidence:** The Youth Council, through the efforts of Mark Gregory, Staff Services Analyst II for the Merced County Human Services Agency, has designed a program that will provide housing, supportive services, and permanent connections to a caring adult. This solution is a unique collaborative operating under the name of "North Star Community" and is aimed at meeting the critical needs presented each day by the emancipating youth in Merced County.

**Details:** The North Star Community is being created through a collaboration of a group of local business leaders, non-profit organizations, and government agencies. Each collaborator fulfills a unique and vital role in the overall development and success of the project and the residents. The business leaders bring particular expertise in the identification and development of housing resources as well as the financial means to make this project a reality. The Central Valley Coalition for Affordable Housing is the connecting point for the development of the community. Government agencies will provide counseling, transportation, ongoing financial commitments, and administrative expertise to the North Star Community and its residents.

The location for the North Star Community has yet to be determined, largely due to the lack of available property. However, they are currently working with the City of Merced and the Housing Authority on a 5-acre parcel within the City limits of Merced. The Community will consist of approximately 72 four-unit complexes that are primarily one-bedroom apartments with a few two-bedroom units for young women with children. The Community will be designed

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for expansion to allow for future growth. There will also be an on-site Administration building with classrooms, a medical area to conduct physical examinations and deal with routine medical emergencies, a day-care area for small children residing in the Community, and a recreational complex that will also serve as the Community's social area.

Young adults who are accepted into the North Star Community become part of a caring program where they work with a case manager who will assist them in developing and managing a plan to achieve their goals; receive an apartment, which must be maintained as though the resident were in a non-subsidized environment; match with a trained mentor; and receive assistance in finding a livable-wage job. Once employed, residents will place 30 percent of their earned income in a trust fund that will be available to the resident to access permanent housing upon preparing to leave North Star Community. Each resident may live in the community for up to two years; during this time, they will have access to professional counseling resources. Residents will be provided with the opportunity to participate in spiritual life development workshops and become a part of the North Star Community by participating in regular meetings, meals, outings, and trips.

Housing is a key component of making the North Star Community program work. The North Star Community has developed a unique strategy that creates affordable housing opportunities for young adults and provides a funding stream to help support the program. Each four-unit complex will house a low-income senior mentor who will be contributing monthly rent that will be used toward the operational costs of the Community. Additional operational costs will be borne by the collaborators, either through direct contributions or services provided through their regular allocations; fundraising by the non-profit and community business leaders, or grants. Effective property management, savings on financial costs, and a partial exemption from property taxes will also decrease the operational costs of the Community.

**Breakthrough Moment:** The breakthrough moment came when the Youth Council was able to partner with the Central Valley Coalition for Affordable Housing and developed the partnerships with the business and non-profit communities to buy in and commit to participating and supporting this project.

**What's Next for this YCidea?** The next stage in the process is to finalize the site, set the date for the groundbreaking, and begin the build which they anticipate will occur in early 2006.

## Where to Go for More Information

Merced County Youth Council

Mark R. Gregory

Merced County Human Services Agency; Child Welfare Services

Staff Services Analyst II

Phone: (209) 385-3000 ext. 5456