



Project HOPE: A County-wide Partnership Extends Services to Emancipated Foster Youth

Youth Council: Alameda Workforce Investment Board

Elements: Career Preparation, Youth Development and Support, Youth Leadership, Comprehensive Approach

Function: Coordinating Youth Services

Subject: Serving Special Populations, Youth One-Stops, Staff Development, Youth Involvement

The Challenge: Alameda County is home to some 700 foster youth who were receiving basic skills and job training through the Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP). However, the 200 to 250 youth who emancipated each year at 18 were unaware of Alameda County's WIA employment services for youth and its One-Stop Career Centers. The Alameda County Workforce Investment Board (ACWIB) saw an opportunity to offer foster youth employment information components that were not part of the Children and Family Services Department or ILSP, and believed that interagency services could be coordinated more effectively. In September, 2002, Program Finance Specialist Rosario Flores requested \$75,000 to fund an Employment Consultant who would act as a liaison between agencies. The objective was to share and extend supportive services and employment lists to emancipated foster youth, and to increase WIA youth enrolment for youth with barriers.

The Practice and Evidence: After meeting with all departments in order to understand what each had to offer, the ACWIB established a framework of monthly meetings for information sharing. They then brought in key partners in addition to the ILSP – Pivot Point (a community-based youth services organization), the Casey Family Foundation, the National Youth Law Center; the EDD, CASA (court appointed services), and several youth advocacy groups – and created Project HOPE (**H**elping **O**ur **Y**oung **P**eople with **E**mployment and **E**ducation). The program provides each foster youth with in-depth career assessment, work readiness skills, financial management counseling, short-term paid work experience, enrollment in various apprenticeship and training programs, support service payments for work clothing, training, and connection to the One-Stop system. Setting Project HOPE apart from other programs is the direct communication between the WIB and the Children and Family Services Department, along with an ongoing commitment to target the foster youth population.

Since its inception in September, 2003, Project HOPE has had excellent outcomes. It has reported 100 percent enrollment and placement across the whole time period, through April, 2004.

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The Details: The Employment Consultant’s mandate was to get at least 60 emancipated youth referred to One-Stops in Oakland and Alameda Counties within the calendar year (September, 2002-2003). Just as the position was being approved, the state offered the WIB a \$400,000 15 percent discretionary fund grant to serve 40 youth under WIA and 40 under Welfare to Work. Many older youth were paid a stipend to attend a pre-apprenticeship training in the construction trades. The project found apartments for those without homes, paid their rent, and asked for job placement assistance from the State Construction Building Trade Council when the youth had completed the pre-apprenticeship program. “Lo and behold. Many are now getting jobs,” Flores reports, emphasizing that “the main word here is collaboration.”

Flores has found that having a full-time paid staff person to make the liaison work and to conduct the necessary publicity campaigns has been essential. So are roundtable discussions with key individuals and organizations, on at least a monthly basis. Flores refers to the employment consultant as a “change agent” who puts a working system in place before moving on. “When the consultant leaves, you have an ongoing referral process and communication network in place, with the question of getting resources to youth always at the center,” she explains.

A key component of Project HOPE was a campaign to educate foster care social workers, many of whom were unaware of what the WIA and the One-Stop Career Centers had to offer. “Caseloads are so large, and it’s hard for youth to understand that they have to start employment planning as early as 16. So it starts with educating the social workers,” Flores points out. To that end, the ACWIB worked with Pivot Point Youth Services, which completed the case management, following through with career assessment and internships. Along with other partners, Pivot Point also educated foster parents, working to inform the whole family unit about resources and job opportunities.

A goal of the state pilot project was to identify former foster youth who could serve as peer educators. The WIB hired three youth who had to go through an interview process and be enrolled in college at least part-time. These peer educators are paid \$12/hour and are assigned to a One-Stop 20 hours per week in order to guide incoming foster youth through the WIA application process, and also make presentations at foster care group homes. “It’s great procedure and publicity,” says Flores.

Breakthrough Moment: Shy when she was hired, one peer educator is now making presentations to the State Legislature about the hardship she endured as a foster emancipated teen trying to find employment, then housing, then trying to assist her peers. “She has truly blossomed,” says Flores, “and it made me realize that the collaboration can work, the networking, that changes can be made, and that foster youth can be reached more effectively.”

What’s Next for this YCidea? The initial program cycle has come to a close, but Project HOPE is continuing. A priority is to educate probation judges in much the same way as social workers have been educated, encouraging them to mandate youth to an employment services

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program. “We want to prevent youth from entering the probation system by doing preventive education and getting them involved in community services and employment education,” Flores explains.

Another goal is to develop an Employment Resource Binder for foster care social workers that profiles each Alameda County One-Stop Career Center and how to access their services. The ACWIB is also working with the National Youth Law Center to establish a confidentiality agreement with WIA employment contractors and with Children and Family Services. Youth information must be handled very carefully and evaluated from a legal perspective. “We want to make sure that criteria that could make that youth eligible for WIA services is expedited to the employment contractor and/or the employer,” says Flores. “We’re going through all the fine print and establishing a boilerplate to share with other counties. It’s not glamorous, but it’s essential.”

Where to Go for More Information

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Tools

To read more about Project HOPE, please see [“Project HOPE”](http://www.nww.org/yci/ycideabook/alamedaprojecthope.pdf) by Thou Ny.
(<http://www.nww.org/yci/ycideabook/alamedaprojecthope.pdf>)

To read the WIA closeout report, please [click here](http://www.nww.org/yci/ycideabook/alamedacloseoutwiapilot05.pdf).
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