

DRAFT

POLICY FOCUS AREA I: Prioritize Career Development and Employment for Every Foster Youth

1. THE ISSUE

Ensuring the safety of the young people in their care has, for many years, been the primary focus of the courts, government agencies, professionals, and other caregivers that are responsible for foster youth in the child welfare and probation systems. More recently, child welfare practice has evolved to include promoting the overall well-being of the youth, providing for permanency, and preparing them for their future. Education and success in school, usually indicated by a high school diploma, has become a focus for the adults charged with caring for foster youth, as well. With the exception of a few model initiatives and some entrepreneurial Independent Living Skills programs, there has traditionally been little focus on workplace exposure and career development activities for foster youth prior to emancipation, leaving many youth inexperienced and unprepared for life as working young adults. Unemployment is a significant contributor to the high rates of homelessness and poverty among emancipated foster youth.

2. THE GOAL

In order for foster youth to make appropriate career choices and achieve success in both employment and financial sustainability, it is essential that career exploration and employment be supported as a critical part of development and preparation for adulthood for all youth in care. The goal is to have all the systems that support foster youth, and the caregivers with whom they live, prioritize and support a continuum of career development opportunities for foster youth over time.

3. THE SITUATION

Adolescents who live in foster care have the same need as all adolescents to develop career plans and experience the workplace as part of their development. Like all young people, they need support and guidance in this process, as well as opportunities to explore and prepare for life as a successful working adult. Foster youth, and the systems that govern their lives, face some special challenges in meeting these developmental needs. Historically, many youth in foster care have faced constant changes in their living arrangements, which have resulted in disruptions in their education, home, school, and community life. These disruptions can have a negative impact on the development of certain life skills and the ability to meet educational goals. Only about half of foster youth graduate from high school before they leave care. The findings of the Casey Family Programs Alumni Study show that “among the risk factors

facing youth in foster care, low educational achievement may have the most adverse effect on long-term adjustment.” This same study found that “*youth with extensive employment experience are over four times more likely to graduate than youth with no experience.*”¹

Given the many and varied issues facing foster youth, it is important that multiple strategies be in place to help them achieve educational success at the highest level possible, which will assist them to succeed in developing a successful and sustaining career. Whether or not they have college goals and aspirations, it is often difficult for foster youth to graduate high school with the full college preparation course work needed to take advantage of all the opportunities available to them. Many foster youth are funneled into getting their GED, while other options, such as charter schools, partnership academies, alternative education, adult education and community college can often offer a stronger foundation and more opportunities for the future.

Reforms in California’s child welfare system are beginning to address the need for greater stability in foster placements and school assignment, as well as the need for each young person to develop permanent connections with caring adults. To date, there has been less focus on addressing specifically the need for career awareness, exploration, and preparation opportunities for every foster youth, including the need for employment experience prior to leaving care. The Child Welfare system itself has begun to recognize the need for career development and workplace experience for youth in care, but need support, guidance and assistance in designing and implementing approaches to provide these opportunities to the youth they serve.

There are other barriers that inhibit a young person’s ability to prepare for and experience the workplace prior to emancipation. Despite recent legislation that makes it possible for foster youth to get a driver’s license, by the age of 18 only a third of California foster youth have done so. In many cases, this creates a barrier to successful job placement and retention. Employment is often viewed by some as either as a privilege (rather than an expectation) for each youth or as being in conflict with educational other transition goals and activities. Even for youth assisted by caregivers and/or professionals to find jobs during high school, these jobs are generally not connected to a long-term career plan, or part of a sequence of developmental activities delivered over time. Furthermore, caregivers are free to use attendance at a job as an incentive for good behavior – a privilege that can be taken away as punishment for any behavioral infraction. These situations often work together to either prevent or disrupt employment preparation and experience for youth before they leave care.

¹ Pecora, Peter J., Jason Williams, Ronald C. Kessler, Chris Down, Kirk O’Bien, Eva Hiripi, and Sara Morello. Assessing the effects of foster care: Early results from the Casey National Alumni Study. Casey Family Programs. <http://www.casey.org>

4. THE CHALLENGES

1. **System priorities do not currently focus on career development and employment outcomes for foster youth** – Along with existing priorities on safety, permanence, and well-being, the foster care system needs to prioritize education, career development, and employment as key measures of success for youth in care. The research is clear about the importance of education and employment to adult success, but there is currently no systematic way of assessing a youth’s needs and interests, providing meaningful preparation activities for them, or holding the system accountable for timely attention to these issues.
2. **Caregivers and youth often lack awareness of the importance of career preparation and employment experiences, or the supports and opportunities available in their community.** Caregivers do not always understand that they can provide the foundations of critical job readiness skills and career exploration through everyday experiences and expectations.
3. **Those parts of the system that do focus on preparation for and experience in the workplace, often do so too late.** Multiple career-related opportunities exist for youth in high school settings, but often the decision point to attend a particular school with special offerings occurs at the transition from middle school – long before caseworkers and/or care givers are focused on transition issues.
4. **The instability of foster youth placements, which affects school placement, is a major challenge for youth and creates barriers of many kinds.** Lack of continuity in school affects academic achievement, gaining enough credits to graduate, relationships with school counselors and other advisers who might assist with access to programs or career planning, and peer and other relationships that can provide information about opportunities. A Casey Family Programs study found that more than 30% of youth in foster care had eight or more placements with foster families or group homes. Sixty-five percent experienced seven or more school changes from elementary through high school.²
5. **The systems responsible for the care and support of foster youth don’t share a common understanding of adolescent development.** Although research and best practices are becoming more available in the fields of adolescent development, resiliency, and pathways to successful adulthood, many caregivers and professionals who come in contact with youth in the child welfare and probation systems do not have ready access to them.

² Erbes, Karissa MSW, 2007, *Southern Area Consortium of Human Services Emancipating Foster Youth Literature Review*, Southern Area Consortium of Human Services and San Diego State University.

6. **Caregivers and youth cite transportation to programs and jobs as a barrier to facilitating participation.** Although foster youth are eligible to get driver's licenses, the manner in which this option is implemented varies widely across the state. For example, local policy on car insurance for foster youth differs. Some counties use ILP funds to help pay for insurance, some do not. In some instances, group homes do not allow youth to drive or take public transportation to work because of liability and mental health concerns
7. **Liability concerns restrict the activities made available to foster youth,** such as traveling alone on public transportation to and from work, or in some cases working or visiting workplaces or attending career focused classes or programs in non-school hours. The "prudent parent" standard needs consistent definition and implementation to allow youth to engage in employment preparation and experience while in care.
8. **Youth do not have access to necessary documents.** All youth need certain documents in order to navigate in the world of work or to access specialized programs that are designed to prepare them for the world of work. When a public system has taken jurisdiction as the parent of a young person, it is the system's responsibility to ensure that their papers are in order so that they have full access to opportunities for which they are otherwise eligible. Unfortunately, many foster youth have difficulty furnishing to employers their social security card, birth certificate or immigration papers.

5. THE OPPORTUNITIES

A number of conditions are in place that makes it timely to address this issue in California, including the following.

1. Current efforts focused on improving outcomes across the state offer opportunities in a growing culture of reform and improvement in the child welfare field, including the Breakthrough Series Collaborative and reform and redesign of ILP in the state.
2. Several pieces of progressive state legislation have been passed and new dollars have been appropriated to help implement them.
3. There is an increase in general public awareness of the needs of and challenges facing foster youth.
4. In many areas, cities and counties are collaborating to improve employment opportunities and outcomes for foster youth without state guidance or support.
5. Public and private child welfare providers have increased their collaborative work and their understanding that support from other systems is essential to effectively prepare youth for the future.

6. The Juvenile Justice Reform passed in 2008 means that non-violent juvenile offenders will now be kept in the community instead of being sent to the State system. This may increase the need and resources for foster care probation placements and offers opportunities to support a new group of youth in communities.

6. THE SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

Culture and mandates of Child Welfare and Probation Systems:

- a. In addition to the federal outcome priorities for all foster youth of safety, permanence and well-being, for youth 14-18, education, employment and permanence should be prioritized. All funding sources and outcome measurement for youth in this age range need to prioritize and support the primary outcome focus on education (including career development), employment, and permanence. At the practice level, there should be clarity on roles and expectations so that CWS and Probation staff, and the caregivers with whom foster youth live, know that their interactions with youth should be leading to these outcomes. Caregiver training should emphasize that this relationship makes them important teachers, advisors, and mentors in the life of the youth.
- b. Job descriptions, training, and expectations for Child Welfare and Probation need to include the duties of ensuring and facilitating foster youth access to available opportunities to explore careers, build skills, and experience the workplace. High quality career development and pre-employment preparation can be accessed through a number of avenues for these youth. Awareness of, and access to, career development and preparation activities in the K-12 system, WIA programs, and other public settings must be included in training for foster youth, their care providers and other professionals serving them.
- c. The state should mandate certain aspects of the system so that they are implemented uniformly across the state. For example, foster youth should have priority for certain funding sources, such as WIA, CTE, etc; certain training and information should be made available to all caregivers and staff; and the prudent parent standard should be implemented using the same definitions across the state. In addition, a focus on transition issues including career development and employment preparation needs to begin early in a young person's life, and continue through their experience in care
- d. As research and best practices become available on adolescent development, resiliency, and pathways to successful adulthood, these topics must also become part of the expected skills and training for all caregivers. Particular attention should be given to providing caretakers the tools needed to assist youth in overcoming the developmental impacts of the trauma and disruptions that they may have experienced.

Transition Plans:

- a. The transition services plans of all foster youth should include career development activities, such as internships in their area of career interest, and meaningful employment experiences prior to emancipation. Transition plans should be youth-led

and coordinated across all of the systems that touch a youth's life.

- b. The process of developing a transition service plan should be youth driven and empower youth to make decisions about their life.
- c. All foster youth should have all necessary documents (birth certificate, immigration papers, social security cards) by age 15. Each caseworker should be responsible for ensuring that youth have these documents and can access them as needed.

Independent Living Programs

- a. The eligibility age for both Chaffee Act and state ILP services should be lowered to age 12. Currently it is at 16. Youth must be in foster care on their 16th birthday to be eligible for ILP. If the age is lowered to 12 the necessary resources must also be provided to extend these opportunities to more youth.
- b. Independent Living Services Programs should be evaluated for their efficacy and funding should be connected to outcomes, including career development and employment preparation.

Connections to other Systems

- a. Each county should create a collaborative and comprehensive plan to use Medi-cal, Mental Health Services Act, and other funds to meet the mental and behavioral health needs of youth through age 24, who are either in care or who have lived in care.
- b. Use of existing career development resources such as the free and low cost resources of the California Career Resource Network (CalCRN), a California state agency created to develop career exploration resources should be encouraged. Anyone working with youth should be aware of this agency and promote use of its resources as broadly as possible. Young people (and the adults who work with them) could benefit from the use of these resources starting the day they hear about them.
- c. CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) should be expanded to include trained volunteers to work specifically with older youth and ensure career development and employment are priorities.
- d. Information and data sharing issues across systems must be addressed.

7. POCKETS OF INNOVATION/SUCCESS

Glenn County Youth Employment Services Program (Y.E.S.)

The Glenn County Y.E.S. Program (Youth Employment Services) is a semester-based after-school program which includes both a classroom portion (teaching pre-employment and work maturity skills) followed by a "real-life" paid work experience with a local employer. The classroom portion is an ROP course which affords students academic credit. The paid work experience (typically 100 hours) follows only upon successful completion of the classroom portion of the program. Special accommodations (priority enrollment and

late entry) are afforded to foster youth. Funding for the limited number of slots within YES represents a collaborative effort from multiple Glenn County agencies, including the HRA, Office of Education, Probation, and the Health Services Department.

For more information, see the Glenn County Promising Practice online at www.newwaystowork.org/initiatives/ytat/promisingpractices/GLENNYES.pdf.

Kaleidoscope of Employment for Youth Success (K.E.Y.S)

K.E.Y.S. is a collaborative contract with the Placer County Office of Education, Foster Youth Services, Department of Rehabilitation, and PRIDE Industries. K.E.Y.S. helps address some of the issues facing foster youth in Placer County by providing specialized employment services for youth ages 16 to 19. K.E.Y.S. helps youth develop job skills and job retention through: comprehensive employment assessments, job-specific tours, search techniques, resume development, interviewing techniques, paid work experiences, job placement, money management, and peer support.

Contra Costa County Foster Youth Services Program

The Contra Costa County Office of Education convenes a countywide foster youth service providers in order to better address educational and employment outcomes for group home youth. The strategy that was developed centered on the co-location of Education Liaisons, who are employed by CCCOE and housed at Employment and Human Services offices as well as Probation. Having Liaisons on-site provided social workers with easy access to educators familiar with school processes and procedures and created an environment that fostered collaboration. Each school district in Contra Costa County identified a Foster Youth Services Liaison who works with the County Liaison to assist with enrollment, record location, and school success. The Education Liaisons also participate in the Team Decision Making process. All transitioning youth meet with a team of professionals prior to emancipation to help them plan for a successful transition. EHSD partially funds the Education Liaisons.

For more information see the Contra Costa County Promising Practice online at www.newwaystowork.org/initiatives/ytat/promisingpractices/ContraCostaFYServices.pdf.

Shasta County Independent Living Program (I.L.P)

Shasta County ILP has restructured their program to provide personal support as a main function of the Independent Living Program. The goal of Shasta County ILP is to assist them by providing resources and skills that will enable these young adults to succeed in their daily living after they have left foster care. The long term, one-on-one relationship between the caseworker and the youth is central. In each young person's initial transition plan, the ILP staff establishes a support network as they help him or her plan short- and long-term goals. The active support system includes employment skills as well as other critical life skills. Opportunities exist for youth to participate in a paid work experience programs and receive preparation for employment from the Smart Center. Their interactive program gives them the

tools to not only survive, but to become successful at living independently.

For more information, see the Shasta County Promising Practice online at www.newwaystowork.org/initiatives/ytat/promisingpractices/ShastaILP.pdf.

San Diego County Joint RFP between County ILP and Youth WIA System

San Diego County has developed a joint RFP between county ILP services and the youth WIA system. Two providers have been selected to jointly run these programs and offer ILP services to all eligible foster youth in the county and WIA services to those that need and are ready for more intensive employment services.

Alameda County CASA Group Homes Project

In 2003, Alameda County CASA determined that it was imperative to advocate for and address the needs of group home youth and improve emancipation outcomes. Grant from The *California Endowment and Zellerbach Family Foundation* funded the conception and implementation of the Group Homes Project. As a result of this project, Alameda County CASA became the first County in the nation to formally appoint volunteers to group homes, rather than to individual children. By assigning volunteers to group homes, they could advocate for all Alameda County youth residing in the group homes, even those not on the CASA waitlist.

8. WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE TO IMPROVE YOUTH OUTCOMES ACROSS THE STATE?

Legislative/Statutory Remedies

1. **Support AB 184**, a 2 year bill to extend ILP to youth living with non related legal guardians.
2. Existing legislation needs to be fully funded and implemented cross the state. This includes AB 490, THP+ and all others directly related to transition issues, career development and/or employment.
3. Shift the age of eligibility for Chaffee Act and ILP services to 12-24.
4. Foster youth and former foster youth should have high priority for all WIA, after school, CTE, housing, mental health, and other programs that can increase their probability of success.

Comment [st1]: Shouldn't there be an statement here about a legislative solution to include employment related outcome measures for all youth in care?

Policy and Regulatory Changes

1. Assign accountability for providing each youth with the “Guaranteed preparation list”, including all needed documents by age 15.
2. Formalize MOU’s between state departments regarding data collection, information sharing, incentives and priority for foster youth, and common outcome measures.

3. Require mandated and reprioritized professional and caregiver development focused on career development and employment preparation with youth input and engagement.
4. Clarify definition and implementation of “prudent Parent” standard for caregivers and group homes and advocate flexibility for job opportunities.
5. Ask State Interagency Team and Child Welfare Council to examine conflicts in eligibility requirements and design ways to leverage and coordinate across systems that help to prepare youth for financial success. Recognize the overlaps in immigrant, homeless, disabled, teen parent, domestic violence, and foster youth populations
6. Accountability – incorporate common employment measures into data collection systems.
7. Ensure that both ILP Redesign and Residential Based Services Reform efforts include attention to career development and workforce preparation for all foster youth.
8. Clarify that Career Development and Employment experiences in high school are not in conflict with high academic achievement, earning a high school diploma or meeting the A-G requirements.
9. Ensure that transition plans developed within CWS and Probation are aligned with all other plans developed for an individual youth.

Local Practice

1. Create a timeline of graduated responsibility for youth age 12 – 18 that is incorporated into early and continuing transition planning and caregiver training.
2. Provide one-on-one opportunities for youth to impact, and provide feedback on the system, including their opportunities
3. Shift the thinking of caregivers, providers and caseworkers to view career development and employment, a right, not a privilege.
4. Clarify who holds the education rights, and provide education surrogates for youth in middle school and above.
5. Begin transition planning early and provide a range of career development and employment experiences throughout a young person’s life in care.