



PROMISING FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITION PRACTICE

Youth Transition Action Teams Initiative Leveraging Community Resources to Ensure Successful Transitions for Foster Youth

Humboldt County Peer Counselors Help Foster Youth Navigate Employment Referral Options

Submitted by: Humboldt County Department of Social Services

Community: Humboldt County, California

Key Partners: Thirty to Forty people are participating in efforts to improve career preparation and employment supports for foster youth through the Humboldt County Youth Transition Action Team (YTAT). Beverly Morgan Lewis, Director of the Social Services Branch of the Humboldt County Health and Human Services Department, is leading the effort. Members of the YTAT include the Chair of the Humboldt County Youth Council, the District Attorney, the Director of Public Health, and the Chief Probation Officer, as well as youth.

Subject: Work Preparation

All Youth – One System Element: Career Preparation

Function: Improve Program Practice

The Challenge:

The Job Market in Eureka, the county seat, is the focus of workforce development services in Humboldt County. It serves as the One-Stop Center for the largest area of the county. "We try to focus all employment efforts through the One-Stop," said Stephen Hughes, Employment and Training Program Coordinator with the County. Seven partners are co-located in the One-Stop, and it has proven to be a very effective model for employers and for adult job seekers. The weak area was serving youth. Youth were not finding the Eureka One-Stop to be friendly, and the self-service model wasn't effective. As a result, "We weren't serving the numbers of youth that we wanted to," noted Hughes. Some youth are being served through Workforce Investment Act (WIA) programs in the schools - operated by 5 local education agencies throughout the county - but the services offered at the five sites were not always comprehensive.

The Practice and Evidence:

The Practice: The Humboldt County Department of Health and Human Services, Social Services Branch, made two changes that are helping to make the Eureka One-Stop more youth friendly. First, responding to a suggestion from young people themselves, the partners decided to have youth counselors automatically meet with any youth who walk into the One-Stop and help them get connected to services. In addition, the partners decided to describe the available services along a continuum, from the least intrusive self-service options through peer counseling and on to high intervention services. A brochure for youth to highlight these options has been developed.

The Evidence: The plan has been in process for several months, and "officially" in place for three months, and the numbers of youth aged 14 – 18 has risen 50% over the 1st quarter of

PROMISING FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITION PRACTICE

2006. Hughes said that people think it's working well, and other foster youth-serving programs are including the One-Stop in their trainings. "We've been included in Independent Living Skills (ILS) trainings and school curriculum, said Hughes. "The One-Stop center is now a piece of the ILS training as a result of this paradigm shift. People come and take tours and teach classes on site. "On the whole", said Hughes, "this adjustment improved services to youth quite a bit."

Staff at the One-Stop have also responded positively to having youth counselors meet with youth customers. "This model where youth serve youth is also better for the adults working at the One-Stop," added Hughes. Adult staff sometimes don't know what to do with the youth [who may come in looking and talking differently]. It's great to have the youth "ambassadors" intervene and help everyone get to know one another."

Hughes noted that while the number of youth they are serving has risen during the past three months, more specific evaluation will be forthcoming. (See *Evaluation Approach* under **The Details** as well as *Next Steps*, below, for more information about evaluation.)

The Details:

Process used to establish the practice: "Oddly enough it was very simple," said Hughes. The solution came from the youth themselves. The Humboldt County YTAT had formed a subcommittee on youth employment to ask what are the [employment] services for youth? The young people serving on the subcommittee said the One-Stop was not youth friendly. They knew some youth who would not go there because the word was out that it was not welcoming. The adults on the subcommittee then asked the youth serving with them why the One-Stop was not a place they would go. They also spoke with youth in the Independent Living Skills (ILS) program and elsewhere, asking them the same question. Everything was considered, including the way the One-Stop looked.

The most significant barrier turned out to be the fact that nobody was really speaking "youthspeak." As soon as this problem was identified, the Youth Employment Opportunity Program (YEOP) counselors, who were on the subcommittee, suggested they be the ones to talk with youth coming into the One-Stop.

The YEOP is a state program run by the Employment Development Department (EDD) to serve youth at risk of dropping out of school through youth employment, peer counseling, and referrals to supportive services and training. It involves recruiting and training youth to serve as mentors to other youth in county employment development programs. Peer counselors, who are themselves at risk youth, receive intensive EDD training that enables them to perform career development and job placement services for participants. They are trained to be mentors and an experienced job representative mentors them.

Strategy and practice: Hughes noted that in all the successful strategies for serving youth they reviewed, a common element was the idea that youth often find it easier to talk with other youth. Based on the subcommittee's findings, the partners decided to use the YEOP peer counselors who were already working at the One-Stop Center to meet with any youth who comes to the center. "We have particularly good YEOP counselors, and they are willing to accept new clients," said Hughes. Emilia Bartolomeu, EDD Manager, agreed it was a good idea to have them meet with any youth that drop in. "Emilia has been a staunch supporter of the YTAT", said Hughes, "we could not have done this without her". When youth come in to the One-Stop, they are guided to the YEOP person, who helps them get connected to services.

PROMISING FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITION PRACTICE

As part of the effort to improve outreach, a *Youth Brochure* of the services was put together. It highlights three main, consistent levels of service: 1) self service information and workshops open to everyone without any counseling; 2) YEOP peer counseling for youth ages 15-21 at risk of dropping out; and 3) WIA programs with intensive case management that also includes individual planning and basic skills remediation when needed. "Those three levels of service need to be linked, and we hope we've done that through this approach", Hughes said. "People move through the system until they get a job. People who don't get a job at the WIA level should be involved in a case review between WIA and the original referring agency." Hughes pointed out that some youth don't need the intensive level of intervention provided by WIA, which "is generally intended to be a long-term program."

The *Youth Brochure* is part of the effort to link foster youth to the level of service they need and also to make sure youth don't fall through the cracks if the level they first enter doesn't entirely meet their needs. The YTAT is keeping the brochure "dynamic" by printing only a small number of copies at a time so they can make changes as needed and can include new programs and training providers. Social Services is providing funding for the brochure and is willing to adjust it to meet changing needs.

Evaluation: Humboldt County's Social Services Branch will be working with the Independent Living Skills (ILS) program and with Probation to identify youth interested in employment. The tracking of these cases will help to determine what is working well and what needs to be changed. Customer satisfaction surveys, already in use at the One-Stop, will also be used to assess effectiveness.

Lessons learned:

Hughes identified four lessons:

1. Having decision makers at the table makes all the difference. Interagency cooperation is essential at the top level. No matter how well meaning your staff is, unless the person who holds purse strings is engaged, things won't happen.
2. Youth must be involved in youth services to make them more effective.
3. Improving outcomes doesn't necessarily cost a lot of money because a lot of the services are already available to youth.
4. Any youth who are interested in participating in leadership or in youth services have lots to offer. Youth don't necessarily have to be foster youth or emancipated foster youth.

What's Next for this Promising Transition Practice?

Three steps are planned:

1. Monitor and refine the practice, finding and fixing weak links.
2. Implement the tracking (see *Evaluation*, above).
3. Marketing the peer counseling. When they are ready for a full roll out, they will market it to the schools, social services, juvenile justice, and community-based organizations by distribution of the *Youth Brochure*, email, website links, etc.

There are also future plans (hopes) for an electronic connection, which will consist of real time online access to counselors.

PROMISING FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITION PRACTICE

Where to go for more information

HUMBOLDT COUNTY HEALTH AND HUMAN
SERVICES

Social Services Branch
Employment Training Division
930 Sixth Street
Eureka, CA 95501

Joe Davey
Program Manager
Employment Training Division
930 Sixth Street
Eureka, 95501
(707) 441-4607
jdavey@co.humboldt.ca.us

Links:

Web site for The Job Market, Humboldt County's system of One-Stops
www.thejobmarket.org

October 2006 Youth Employment Resources brochure
www.newwaystowork.org/documents/ytatdocuments/HumboldtBrochure.pdf

YEOP web site
www.edd.ca.gov/jsrep/jshow.htm#YouthEmploymentOpportunityProgram