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## PROMISING FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITION PRACTICE

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

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#### **Merced County Hires Extra Help Foster Youth Assistance Worker**

**Submitted by:** Merced County Human Services Agency

**Community:** Merced County

**Key Partners:** Merced County Human Services Agency (HSA) and Merced County Board of Supervisors

**Subject:** Career Preparation, Transition Support, Youth Leadership

**All Youth – One System Elements:** Career Preparation and Youth Leadership

**Functions:** Ensure youth participation throughout the system and implement a strategic communication plan

**The Challenge:**

Merced County witnessed foster youth aging out of the system with little to no work experience. A communication barrier existed between foster youth support services and foster youth being served. The human services staff recognized the problem and knew they had to create a better link between foster youth and foster youth support services, in order to better prepare foster youth for the transition to adulthood.

**The Practice and Evidence:**

***The practice:***

HSA decided to create two Extra Help Foster Youth Assistance Worker positions to serve as the link between foster youth and their support services. The Assistance Worker provides support services to participants preparing to transition out of the foster care system. The position is only offered to former foster youth, who know and understand the needs, challenges, and attitudes of youth who have been touched by the foster care system. The department has a strong belief that to truly understand foster youth, workers need to have experienced the foster care system first hand.

The Assistance Worker works closely with social workers and community contacts to aid in the effective communication between Independent Living Program (ILP) eligible youth, foster care participants, and youth receiving ILP aftercare services. The Assistance Worker also helps participants prepare applications for housing, utilities, school, and employment. Through the position, the Assistance Worker learns valuable work readiness skills by supporting general clerical work, and gathering and compiling data.

### ***The evidence:***

Two Foster Youth Assistance Workers began their positions in July 2007. These workers helped HSA to offer foster youth a better connection to support services. In particular, it offered former foster youth an opportunity to gain work experience and to become advocates for other current and former foster youth. The position has also given foster youth a stronger voice in Merced County.

### **The Details:**

#### ***Process for establishing the program:***

Merced County has been using effective strategies to support foster youth for a long time. The Human Resources Department, whose support was crucial in creating the position, has always been supportive of work being done with foster youth. A newsletter is sent out once a month to agency partners that highlights foster youth issues and spotlights the work being done by foster youth. Patricia Evans, Program Administrator, believes that the newsletter builds awareness of foster youth issues, which makes them a top priority in the county. The position is funded through the county general fund, and received final approval from the Board of Supervisors, who has been very supportive.

#### ***Strategy and Practice:***

The Extra Help Youth Assistance Worker serves as the link between foster youth and support services. To develop the concept, the county looked for existing classifications within the county with similar duties and researched positions within other counties. The position was then presented to the human resources department, who agreed that it was an excellent way to help former foster youth gain work experience, while helping other foster youth as they transition out of care.

The county agreed to hire two youth workers who are paid \$8.00 an hour. Referrals are received from the Independent Living Program, Transitional Housing Program, Workforce Investment Act Programs, and the Merced County Office of Education, along with other foster youth programs within the county. The position is classified as extra help and is meant to be used as a stepping stone rather than permanent employment. In this way the county is able to hire more foster youth over time.

#### ***Evaluation:***

Too soon to tell.

### **Lessons Learned:**

Patricia Evans, Program Administrator, stated “you need to have a staff that really believes in youth services. The monthly newsletter that Merced County sends to all of their staff has really helped elevate foster youth issues within the county.”

### **What’s Next for this Promising Transition Practice?**

Although the county hasn’t approved specific next steps, they are exploring other options to support foster youth as they transition into adulthood. The county would like to begin a work experience program using the stipends foster youth receive for attending ILP classes, to pay them for working. This would result in even more students having the

opportunity to experience quality work based learning. The County is also researching other options which would provide students with the chance to learn in a real world setting.

**Where to go for more information:**

Daniel Nielson, Deputy Director at [dnielson@hsa.co.merced.ca.us](mailto:dnielson@hsa.co.merced.ca.us), or at 209/385-3000 extension 5200; or Patricia Evans, Program Administrator at [Administrator@hsa.co.merced.ca.us](mailto:Administrator@hsa.co.merced.ca.us) or call her at 209/385-3000 extension 5232.

**Links:**

<http://www.co.merced.ca.us/hsa/index.htm>