



PROMISING FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITION PRACTICE

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

Merced's North Star Community Housing and Transition Support Services

Submitted by: Merced County Youth Council

Community: Merced County, California

Key Partners: Merced County Youth Council, Central Valley Coalition for Affordable Housing, the Merced County Human Services Agency and a collaboration among a group of local business leaders, non-profit organizations, and government agencies

Subject: Transition Supportive Services, Transitional Housing

All Youth – One System Element: Community Services and Supports, Career Preparation

Function: To provide housing and needed supportive services to youth aging-out of the Foster Care System

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 supportive services must be in place. The challenge is to design a transition support program that is time limited, with established goals, and with the outcome to be healthy, successful, independent transitions to adulthood.

The Practice:

The Youth Council, through the efforts of Mark Gregory, Staff Services Analyst II of 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 foster youth in Merced County.

The Details:

Process used to establish the practice: The North Star Community is a collaboration among 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 central point for the development of the

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community. Government agencies will provide counseling, transportation, ongoing financial commitments, and administrative expertise to the North Star Community and its residents.

The breakthrough moment came when the Merced County Human Services Agency 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.

When this article was written (May 2005), the location for the North Star Community had yet to be determined, largely due to the lack of available property. Several offers on property have been submitted but were turned down largely due to the prospect of placement of the facility near other properties currently owned by the sellers. It is hoped that with falling land prices some developers may be looking to sell their property rather than build on it and that this project will become a reality.

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 for expansion to allow for future growth. There will also be an on-site Administration building with classrooms for providing the necessary real-life training to the residents, 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 may include a recreational complex that will also serve as the Community’s social area.

The strategy and practice: Young adults who are accepted into the North Star Community will 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 up to 30% of their earned income in a trust fund that will be available to the resident to access permanent housing upon preparing to leave the North Star Community. Each resident may live in the community for up to two years; during this time, they will have access to a broad range of professional supportive services. Residents will be provided with the opportunity to participate in civic work 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 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; and grants. Effective property management, savings on financial costs, and a partial exemption from property taxes will also decrease the operational costs of the Community.

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What's Next for this Promising Transition Practice?

As of December 2006, the funding and partners were in place, but they had yet to find a suitable property near the college and other services. The partners are committed to creating the North Star community, and are continuing in their efforts to secure property.

Where to go for more information

MERCED COUNTY HUMAN SERVICES AGENCY

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