



PROMISING FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITION PRACTICE

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

Napa V.O.I.C.E.S: A Foster Youth One-Stop Initiated and Run by Youth

Submitted by: Voice our Independent Choices for Emancipation Support

Community: Napa County, California

Key Partners: On the Move, Progress Foundation, Child Welfare, Probation, Behavioral Health, and Education

Subject: Youth Leadership, Community Services and Support, Friendly Youth One-Stop

All Youth – One System Element: Community Services and Support

Function: Improve Program Practice

The Challenge:

Many foster youth in Napa County were reaching age 18 unprepared for adulthood. Most were losing the support services they had received while in foster care, and they were not ready to take on full adult responsibilities without additional support. In 2005, the Napa County social service agency directors knew that something had to be done, and they established a task force to address the needs of transitioning foster youth.

The Practice and Evidence:

The practice: Voice Our Independent Choices for Emancipation Support (V.O.I.C.E.S.) Emancipation Center of Napa County, California, opened its doors on Tuesday, November 22, 2005, and became - as far as the leaders know - the first-ever youth-led emancipation center in the United States. The center provides a place for youth to gather and get connected to a range of services. The following description is offered at the center's website: "V.O.I.C.E.S. provides emancipating foster youth with a comprehensive array of individual support services, opportunities for leadership and community development and structured initiatives that require a commitment over time and are focused on meeting a specific set of needs."

The Evidence: The Center has been open for over a year, operated by youth and adults working together. One hundred and forty-five youth have been served. Partnering agencies have extended their commitment to co-locate staff there.

The youth staff have taken ownership of the center, and the inter-generational leadership remains strong. The following example of youth leadership was reported in the *Welfare Resource Center for Youth Development eUpdate* for March 2006:

On December 31, 2005, just over one month after V.O.I.C.E.S. opened its doors, the city of Napa was hit by a major thunderstorm. The Center was left flooded with at least one foot of standing water. The next morning the youth showed up at 8:00 am to begin removing

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furniture and carpet, saving what they could, and taking items that could not be salvaged to the dump. The youth then began working to secure donations to replace the items that had been destroyed.

Youth V.O.I.C.E.S. staff have been invited to speak throughout the country about their success.

The Details:

Process for establishing the program: The adult task force members secured support from the Gasser Foundation, Community Foundation of Napa Valley, and Auction Napa Valley to help fund their exploration of needs and possibilities in Napa County. Initially, the committee planned to open a service center designed and run by adults. However, they wanted to involve youth more. They formed a partnership with the nonprofit agency On the Move, which promotes the development of youth leaders working with adult allies. As a result, the committee shifted to a youth-driven process. In a *San Francisco Chronicle* editorial praising the V.O.I.C.E.S. youth, Leslie Medine, executive director of On the Move, explained the shift. "Until that point, the committee was going to create a service center, but there were no youth driving the process. We proposed that if they really wanted this to be innovative, what about putting the youth at the center of this and have them co-staff and co-lead the organization?" (November 28, 2005)

Ten current and former foster youth, along with adult partners, took on the work needed to create the center. As the committee proceeded, they and Medine recruited young people to join. The youth, all of whom were from the Napa Valley, included Nicole Felton, Matthew Knox, Katie and Mitch Findley, Richard Kyle Petrini, Forrest Miller, and Marissa Hawkins. On the Move located coaches who mentored the youth to raise funds and create the center. The coaches were recent graduates of On the Move's "On the Verge," an intensive leadership development program for people in their twenties and early thirties. The key elements of On the Verge are collective learning (teams of 15-20), continuous involvement (a one-year commitment), and contextual approach (hands-on work on a community project). Integration of personal, interpersonal, and professional development is also central to the program.

In order to gain input from more youth, task force members went to foster care group homes around Napa County and held focus groups. Based on this information, the task force identified the most needed services. Youth on the task force then approached agencies that could provide the services, asking them to place a staff member at the center part time. They were successful in making these arrangements. For example, the County Welfare Department has assigned one of its staff to the center to help young people with independent living skills.

Youth involved in establishing the center created a place where other young people want to go. "Lots of foster youth have lost hope in finding things," co-founder Marissa Hawkins was quoted as saying by the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "We just wanted teens to feel supported and know that people just like them are here to help." (November 28, 2005) They also developed strong leadership skills.

The Progress Foundation, a non-profit agency dedicated to providing alternative community treatment options to seriously mentally disabled individuals, also partnered. In all, the Center has made alliances with 17 funding organizations, engaged 50 business partners, and recruited 100 volunteers.

Strategy and practice: The committee focused on three interwoven strategies: 1) create a comprehensive, youth-friendly One-Stop, 2) have all efforts be youth driven, and 3) support youth through strong intergenerational partnerships. The goal was to create a center where

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current and former foster youth could not just come for help but where they would feel comfortable and meet other youth in the same situation. Second, the task force decided that the most empowering—and effective—approach they could adopt was to support youth in making decisions about the center and taking the steps needed to develop and run it.

Youth staff members help transitioning foster youth get connected with the supports and services they need to establish a viable life after foster care. The center helps young people who are aging out of foster care gain access to all the assistance they need: health services, housing, job training, employment, transportation, education needs, social development, family support, and everything in between.

The V.O.I.C.E.S. website provides the following examples of current initiatives (December 2006):

SOURCES – Youth Employment Initiative

Fifteen young people between the ages of 16 and 24 are currently employed as V.O.I.C.E.S. staff at three different levels of responsibility. At an entry level, seven youth are employed as interns to work 10 hours per month, staffing and coordinating a range of ongoing events; at the mid-level, five youth are employed 10 hours per week to perform secretarial and administrative duties; at the highest level, three youth are employed for 25 hours per week as Staff Assistants. In addition to opportunities for 15 V.O.I.C.E.S. youth staff, V.O.I.C.E.S. is partnering with local government and non-profit agencies and with Job Connection, the Napa County job placement agency, to develop a range of training and placement opportunities for up to 75 transitional youth. Through these partnerships, youth learn about the world of non-profit work, hold internships and receive job training and employment support services geared to people ages 16 to 24.

PLACES – Youth Housing Initiative

On The Move and the Progress Foundation are collaborating to provide PLACES, a transitional youth housing initiative. This initiative is designed to support emancipated foster youth, ages 18-24, in their transition into self-sufficiency. Over the course of two years, PLACES participants will be responsible for a growing amount of rent and living expenses, until housing subsidies expire at the end of their 24th month. PLACES participants [have access to] food aid, a micro-loan for moving and daily living expenses, and monthly rent subsidies beginning at 80%. To ensure that participants are prepared to stand on their own after two years, all participants will develop a detailed Transitional Independent Living Plan, meet regularly with an individual Life Skills Coach, and participate in weekly facilitated Roommate Communication sessions. In addition, PLACES participants will receive independent living skills training, college and vocational counseling, personal finance and money management training, job placement support, mental health services, and ongoing peer and professional support.

The Napa Valley Register reported that “[The PLACES] program . . . creates a support network for them at the same time. Each teen lives with a roommate, then meets with two other groups of roommates to make sure everyone is on track to living independently.” (November 21, 2006)

A third initiative supports youth who pursue post-secondary education:

CHOICES – Continuing Post-High School Education Initiative

Through the CHOICES program, V.O.I.C.E.S. staff and partners encourage and support foster youth through each stage of the higher education experience. This process begins by helping these young adults to think beyond survival and to recognize that college is a genuine option

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and is critical to future employment. Through a strong partnership with Napa Valley College, V.O.I.C.E.S. members can access staff on-site to simplify the enrollment process. A V.O.I.C.E.S. college counselor is available to help youth apply for scholarships and devise a viable financial plan. Once enrolled, youth continue to receive support, including assistance navigating the community college system and tutoring in a range of subjects. Though many V.O.I.C.E.S. members will ultimately require four-year degrees to reach their personal and professional goals, CHOICES is built upon the completion of a two-year Associate Arts degree from Napa Valley College. In addition, CHOICES participants benefit from opportunities to gain college credit through partnerships with the Napa County R.O.P. Program and the Napa County Department of Rehabilitation. (V.O.I.C.E.S. web site)

V.O.I.C.E.S. has also piloted two discussion groups this year:

- Parent and Child Education and Support (P.A.C.E.S.). P.A.C.E.S. was created to maintain a safe space where expecting and current young parents can get resources, support, and parenting knowledge.
- Communication and Relationship Education Support (C.A.R.E.S.). C.A.R.E.S. provides peer support to assist Napa youth in building effective communication skills and healthy relationship skills. C.A.R.E.S. is a place where young people can determine their needs, discover personal boundaries, and gain knowledge on communication and dating.

Evaluation: V.O.I.C.E.S. participates in the Capacity Building Initiative (CBI) Bay Area Cohort. Through CBI and a process called Participatory Evaluation Research (PER), V.O.I.C.E.S. youth and adult staff explore and discover what they do, why they do it, and how to do it better. Also, youth who access V.O.I.C.E.S. are regularly asked for feedback. In addition, partnering agencies track outcomes mandated by their funding sources.

Lessons Learned:

The youth leaders of V.O.I.C.E.S., working with their adult partners, demonstrated that youth who have been involved in the foster care system could realize a shared dream. In fact, they demonstrated that youth could sometimes be more effective than adults in bringing together community resources and creating a center where youth's real needs are met.

What's Next for this Promising Transition Practice?

V.O.I.C.E.S. is planning on adding the following programs in early 2007:

- Wellness Program. This program will be geared towards helping youth members navigate through systems such as medical, dental, and mental health. The Wellness program will assist foster youth, emancipating foster, probation youth, and group home youth to address and combat drug and alcohol abuse, to connect them with existing support services, and to provide personal and peer mentoring to develop their skills to become productive members of society. The Wellness program will also work to develop identity, assets, and personal strengths of foster youth so they will be able to avoid substance abuse, gang involvement, and other at-risk behaviors, while making positive lifestyle choices for themselves.
- Auto and Credit Establishment and Support (A.C.E.S.) A.C.E.S. is aimed at helping youth establish credit and receive support when looking into purchasing a car.

In addition, an internal youth empowerment program for youth staff—to foster personal, interpersonal, and professional learning, skill building, and career development—is being

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developed. The goal is to create a sustainable employment model to address the need for youth participation in all levels of the operation and visioning of V.O.I.C.E.S.

Where to go for more information

V.O.I.C.E.S.

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