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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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### **Youth Voice Guides Placer County YTAT**

**Submitted by:** United Advocates for Children and Families, Placer County Direct Services, CSOC

**Community:** Placer County, California

**Subject:** Youth Leadership

**All Youth–One System Element:** Youth Leadership

**Function:** Improve Program Practice, Build Awareness

#### **The Challenge:**

Historically, there has not been a focused effort made to involve or engage youth on the Placer County YTAT. As YTAT team members were strategizing priorities around the needs of the youth in their community. They decided that they did not want to create any additional youth programming without incorporating youth voice into their discussions. Through a Substance Abuse Mental Health Systems Administration (SAMHSA) grant, United Advocates for Children and Families partnered with Placer County Direct Services and Children's System of Care to hire a Youth Coordinator and Youth Advocate. The goal of the grant is to improve services for transition-age youth, increase family and youth involvement in program planning, as well as to improve services for Latino and Native American populations.

Cindy Brundage, Program Manager for the Placer County Children's System of Care and the Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration, states that "youth involvement is part of the philosophy of the Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the Mental Health Services Act (MHSA) and has become a growing conversation in Mental Health and Children's System of Care (CSOC). The idea is to make our services family centered and youth guided/directed. One of the ways to do this is to have family and youth at the table."

#### **The Details:**

In July of 2008, the Youth Advocate began coordinating the YTAT meetings as well as convening a steering committee of youth who guide and inform the work of the larger group. The youth steering committee consists of ten youth, some of which have experienced system involvement and are passionate about wanting to help other young people not have to go through what they have gone through. All of these youth have expressed and share a desire to improve their community. The Youth Steering Committee has developed the YTAT mission

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statement which reads: “To integrate youth voice into systems of care, education, employment, and the community to provide youth a smoother transition into adulthood and bring all community resources to one table to better assist youth in transition.”

The Youth Steering Committee has also created a set of meeting guidelines to not only serve as ground rules for the YTAT meetings but also to make the meetings more youth friendly and encourage youth participation. The following guidelines have been defined:

- Respect each other’s boundaries
- What’s said here stays here
- Be respectful of others
- Don’t interrupt each other
- If you don’t want to share, you don’t have to
- Don’t pry for anyone to share their story
- Have group participation (no side-bar conversations)
- Define all acronyms and speak in a youth friendly way
- The group needs to come to consensus on decisions

In addition to the mission statement and guidelines, the Youth Steering Committee created the following list of pressing youth issues within their community which they presented to the YTAT.

- There are few youth activities in our community that are affordable for youth.
- Need to change the stigma around being a youth in the system (child welfare, mental health, probation). Youth get treated differently by people in the community when it is known that they are in the system.
- Many youth don’t know their rights or that they even have rights. They don’t know what to do if their rights are violated. Youth don’t know what an ombudsman or patients’ rights advocate is.
- There is a lot of abuse and maltreatment in placements that often gets overlooked. Many times youth get moved to another placement without the problem being resolved.
- Youth belongings often get lost and broken when traveling through the system. In many cases when placements occur these personal items are packed in garbage bags by other people. Generally little care is taken towards the condition and well being of these belongings.
- Youth in the system move too frequently to have consistent employment history.
- Foster youth and youth in group homes bounce from home to home. There are not enough successful placements.

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- Youth in the system don't have enough family connection or adult supporters.
- Youth exit the system without knowing what resources are available for them.
- There are not enough foster homes that want to take teenagers in.
- Youth who have a mental health and substance abuse diagnosis (dual diagnosis/ co-occurring) are not receiving successful recovery treatment.
- Case plans and treatment plans are not youth driven. Most youth don't even know what these are.
- Youth don't get help until they are in trouble.
- There is not enough transitional housing available for transition age youth in the community.

The group has chosen to work on the issue of *few youth activities in the community that are affordable for youth*. The next step will be voting on the ideas that the youth committee has presented as short and long term goals that would lead to progress on this community issue. Some of the ideas that the youth have brought forward are a free youth event in the community that incorporates youth resources, a web resource bank for all youth, and a one stop youth center for transition age youth.

**Key Partners:** Adult System Of Care/ Mental Health Services Act (Transition Age Youth Program), Community Health (Teenage Pregnancy Parenting Program), Placer County Office of Education/ Foster Youth Services, United Advocates for Children and Families (Family and Youth Advocates), Whole Person Learning (Placer County ILP Services/ THP Program), ALTA Regional Center, Cal Works/ Welfare To Work Job Services, Chana High School, Department of Rehabilitation, Sierra College, Someone Believes In You, Children's System Of Care/ Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration, Children's System Of Care (Diversion Program), Placer County Health and Human Services/ Community Health, Placer County Mental Health Collective, Adult System of Care, Children's System of Care.

### **Evaluation:**

A yearly survey has been developed to get feedback about the YTAT meetings. The survey goes out to everyone who has attended the YTAT in order to assess how people feel about the goals, content, and structure. The survey asks that YTAT members share reasons for not attending regularly as well as give input into things that they would like to see being done differently or would like to see continue.

### **Lessons Learned:**

The idea of a Youth Steering Committee has really led to youth feeling more empowered by seeing that their opinion really counts. Meetings are becoming more youth friendly so that young people are more comfortable attending and actively participating. Meetings are held at youth friendly times and focused on real youth-identified issues.

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

The next steps for this YTAT are to vote on the short and long term goals proposed by the Youth Steering Committee and to then develop a plan of action for how those goals can be achieved. They will also continue to spread the word about the need for more youth involvement in the YTAT meetings. The Youth Steering Committee has developed a [YTAT Flyer](#) for distribution in county offices, systems of care, and schools to promote more youth participation. They have also created a My Space link for increased youth outreach at: <http://www.myspace.com/youthtransitionactionteam>.

### **Where to go for more information:**

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