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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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## San Diego Youth Empowerment Services (YES) Offers Connections to Range of Services

**Submitted by:** ACCESS, Inc.

**Community:** San Diego County, California

**Key Partners:** ACCESS, Inc., Casey Family Programs, and the San Diego Workforce Partnership (San Diego Workforce Investment Board)

**Subject:** Education, Career Preparation, and Housing

**All Youth – One System Element:** Education; Career Preparation; Community Services and Support

**Function:** Improve Program Practice

**The Challenge:** In the County of San Diego, approximately 7,000 to 8,000 youth are in foster and group home care. About 200 to 300 of these youth are emancipated from the system each year. In 2000, it was clear that many of these young people were ill prepared to become productive, self-sufficient adults. At that time, 50% of the youth were leaving the system without a high school diploma. A startling number of those who had a high school diploma were basic-skill deficient, with many reading at the 4th or 5th grade level.

Casey Family Programs and the San Diego Workforce Partnership decided to develop a program that would address some of the needs of these youth such as remedial education, work readiness skills, housing, etc.

**The Practice and Evidence:**

**The practice:** in 2000 the key partners—Casey Family Programs (Casey), San Diego Workforce Partnership (SDWP), and ACCESS, Inc.—developed the Youth Empowerment Services (YES) Program. The YES Program, now called the YES Transition Network, provides services that address the unmet needs of many emancipating foster youth, especially in the areas of remedial education, housing, work readiness skills, and connections to employment opportunities.

The YES Transition Network serves current and former foster youth as well as other at-risk youth from 13 through 24. YES has a strong and active employment services component, but staff recognize the fact that youth cannot successfully deal with employment and career issues until they have addressed other life challenges as well. To that end, they work with youth on a continuum of services and activities that blend employment with the other transition issues they must handle.

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**The Evidence:** Casey Family Programs has continuously reviewed the YES Program and has expressed a high level of satisfaction with the services and strategies employed, according to Marilyn Stewart, Director of the YES Transition Network. Casey Family Programs have established the YES Program as one of the two models of transition services to be developed within their system of service. "As a result, we have renamed the program the YES Transition Network," said Stewart. "[In addition], the SDWP has consistently reviewed our files and has given us high marks not only for numbers achieved but services provided."

### **The Details:**

**Process for establishing the program:** The plan to develop the YES Program was welcomed by SDWP and the County of San Diego Children's Services since neither the county services nor the partnership services seemed to be sufficient to address all of the needs of the youth.

A collaborative was developed among Casey, SDWP, and ACCESS, with Casey and ACCESS having the direct responsibility for the development and implementation of the program. Funding was the first issue. Staff from the SDWP located some state discretionary funds, which needed a match. Casey Family Programs stepped up and provided the match. The combined funds became the first budget.

**Strategy and practice:** All three organizations in the collaboration formed a team to assure that the program was moving along as planned. Weekly team meetings were held then and continue to this day. As with all components of the YES Transition Network, the employment services pieces are under a continuous quality improvement process. "To keep our services fresh and effective, it is important to stay on top of employment trends, best practices, and continue to build and develop strong relationships in the employment community," said Stewart.

Networking and developing employment resources are as important as the work training skills, said Stewart. She elaborated on the YES Transition Network's efforts to create and maintain relationships with organizations that can offer work opportunities to young people:

*For example, we are working with Randstad Temp- to- Hire organization. While clients are working in temporary positions and waiting to be hired permanently, Randstad pays benefits, an important factor for our youth.*

*Many of our youth are 16 + and have few if any work skills. We have identified and work with several employers who will hire these younger youth with no skills and train them on the job.*

*Internship and employment agreements with a number of San Diego employers have helped to get our youth placed. Chula Vista Scripps Hospital, the YMCA, Paradise Valley Hospital, and others are willing to work with us and give our young people a chance to break into the employment market. This requires lots of careful relationship building to develop and maintain these agreements.*

*Our relationship with the California Conservation Corp is an excellent example of a partnership that has had many benefits to our young participants. The corp provides skill training, room and board and a real chance for our youth to experiences new life opportunities. YES provides the work readiness training, leadership training, case management, and other supports as needed.*

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The YES Transition Network was marketed through relationships with county foster care programs. "We also received referrals directly from the Juvenile Court with whom we also had a positive relationship," Stewart said. YES staff also participate in conferences and job fairs, which gives them the opportunity to extend their reach to youth outside the YES Transition Network. These convenings also give YES staff the opportunity to hone their skills and learn from other service providers.

Some of the employment/career services and activities provided by the YES Transition Network are as follows:

- Work readiness skills training (resumes, interviewing, job retention, etc.)
- Job shadow opportunities (provides exposure to a wide variety of opportunities)
- Job tours (provides exposure to opportunities)
- Job search (in person and via computer resources)
- Paid internships (opportunity to try out the world of work and some of their new skills in a safe environment)
- Intensive case management to mentor and coach youth
- Pre-Employment Traineeships (P-E-T) for youth 13, 14, and 15 to help younger youth begin the process of learning and experiencing the work of work)
- Youth One-Stop Career Center (provides all of the same employment/career resources that are available through the adult career centers but they are more youth friendly.....staffed by former foster youth Career Advisors who work with their young participants)
- Monthly "Career Day" activity (brings a variety of employers in to work with the youth and help them understand about opportunities for employment....Q&A sessions so youth can ask for more information)
- Incentives for youth who hit certain benchmarks in their work readiness activities and training
- Follow-up training and coaching for youth who need the extra boost and support.

Stewart explained the level and length of support services the YES Transition network offers: "We serve youth with one year of active/intensive service and a second year of follow-up services per our WIA contract regulations. YES never turns down a youth who needs our help after the contract period. Youth return to us frequently and know that ours is a safe environment and that they will be welcome and help is available."

***Evaluation:*** The YES Program conducts three different sets of evaluations, Stewart explained. One is for WIA. "The Workforce Investment Act has stringent requirements for programs funded with their resources. Regular evaluation of data entry and direct case reviews are part of the process of tracking the success of the programs." Casey Family Programs collect program data that are reviewed at their program review meetings. In addition they use "periodic customer surveys and focus groups with participating youth to take a reading on our service delivery."

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### Lessons learned:

According to Stewart, open communication, sharing ideas and strategies, successes as well as setbacks have produced a strong collaborative relationship. "Developing a collaborative has been the best way for us to implement and advance our program," said Stewart. "It does take a lot of time and patience, but it is worth it to leverage funds and resources for our youth. Open communication is key to a strong partnership and a lasting relationship. If that also sounds like the recipe for a good marriage, the concept certainly is similar! I recently changed employers from Casey to ACCESS. Because of our strong relationship, it hardly caused a ripple since the staff and partners are so used to working together. The agency lines have been blurred and almost forgotten."

**What's Next for this Promising Transition Practice?** The YES Transition Network is a work in progress, Stewart noted. "We participate in a process of continuous quality improvement that reviews not only existing services and programs but planned enhancements as well. We are expanding our program to additional work sites so that youth will have easier access to our programs. We have opened an additional office in our South Bay area of [San Diego] County, one in the Southeast area, and in the new year we will be moving into the Casey Family Programs office in the central part of San Diego."

Stewart said that they will also be working with the staff in children's services that serve the deaf foster youth population. "We also are working with public health to have the mobile health clinic available for our youth and other community residents at our primary location," she added.

### Where to go for more information

ACCESS, INC.  
2612 Daniel Ave.  
San Diego, CA 92111  
(858) 560-0871  
[www.access2jobs.org](http://www.access2jobs.org)

Marilyn Stewart  
Director  
YES Transition Network  
2612 Daniel Ave.  
San Diego, CA 92111  
(858) 560-0871  
[mstewart@access2jobs.org](mailto:mstewart@access2jobs.org)