



PROMISING FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITION PRACTICE

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

In San Mateo County, Fostering the Future Develops Model to Support Transitioning Youth and to Change Local System

Submitted by: Silicon Valley Community Foundation's Center for Venture Philanthropy

Communities: San Mateo County, California

Key Partners: Center for Venture Philanthropy, Youth and Family Enrichment Services, Edgewood Center for Children and Families, Law Foundation of Silicon Valley, San Mateo County Office of Education, Human Services Agency of San Mateo County (Adolescent Services and Workforce Development divisions), San Mateo County Community College District and San Mateo County Health Department (Mental Health Services).

Subjects: Transition Support, Education, Career Preparation, Asset Development and Community Service

All Youth – One System Elements: Community Services and Support, Education, Career Preparation

Function: Improve Program Practice and Encourage Systemic Change

The Challenge:

As young people in foster or kinship care move toward adulthood, they are having greater challenges than the general population with employment, housing, education and health care. These challenges result in increased homelessness, incarceration, suicide rates, reliance on public assistance programs and poor health status.

Due to these challenges, many young people do not see themselves as succeeding in adulthood and they often lack a sense of belonging to community. Many of them have no aspirations or dreams and cannot envision a healthy future for themselves.

The Practice and Evidence:

The practice:

Fostering the Future (FTF) is a collaboration of nonprofits, governmental agencies and Silicon Valley Community Foundation's Center for Venture Philanthropy. Launched in 2005 after two years of extensive planning, FTF is creating a model of transition support for youth ages 11 to 25 who are in foster or kinship care or who have emancipated. At the base is the asset team approach, which offers three distinct support services:

- Asset coaches work with youth one-on-one and in groups to help them create goals and objectives that will lead toward attainment of their dreams. The coaches help youth build a strong base of educational and developmental assets by pulling on their strengths and

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talents, while developing skills and connections with the community. At this early stage of the pilot there are three full-time asset coaches working with close to 100 youth.

- A housing advocate works directly with emancipating youth and kinship youth moving out of the home of a relative caregiver. She works one-on-one and in groups to help young people learn how to determine the best housing situation, how to locate housing and build the skills to retain the housing. She is also working with landlords and associations in the region to make more housing available to the youth.
- A legal advocate works with youth, caregivers, social workers, and school personnel on educational rights. She provides training opportunities for these audiences and direct intervention where needed. If other legal needs arise, she will assist the youth or refer them to the appropriate person for help.

In addition to providing direct service to young people, the program also addresses local systems change. Many services formerly available only to foster youth are now available to youth in kinship care. This is seen as a strong effort to protect the viability of at-risk families and keep young people out of foster care.

The evidence: As of December 2006, FTF has three well-qualified asset coaches working directly with 51 youth and another 22 were pending enrollment.

A key component of the FTF program is a Youth Consulting Council (YCC), a group of youth representing the wide range of ages 11-25, that meets monthly to plan group activities and advise the program. This council has created a mural art project for all FTF youth and advised the leadership team on a satisfaction survey. They provide extremely valuable feedback and input.

FTF also sponsored a San Mateo County chapter of the California Youth Connection, a policy advocacy organization whose members are current and former foster youth. Chapter members led a training for adults across the county. The group included the sheriff, the director of the health department and many nonprofit leaders. Entitled "How to Encourage Meaningful Youth Involvement", the training helped the adults learn how to successfully solicit and listen to youth voice.

More than \$2 million has been invested in or pledged to FTF. Contributors include fourteen individuals, three foundations and one governmental agency.

The Details:

Process for establishing the program: A branch of the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, CVP has developed a model of venture philanthropy based upon selected principles effectively used by venture capitalists. It is defined by a spirit of opportunity and by the willingness to seek out and support new solutions to long-standing challenges. While CVP's social venture funds focus on large issues affecting communities in San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties, the Center is well-positioned to draw upon national cutting edge approaches, focus on system change, use long-established connections with other community players, monitor the progress of any project closely, and build a strategy for sustainability.

In January of 2004, the CVP met with the San Mateo County Human Services Agency (HSA) leadership "to see how we could best work together," according to Margot Rawlins, CVP initiative officer. "We saw a place where our kind of philanthropy could be helpful and they were very

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excited to see philanthropy at the table. As a community foundation, we know all the players and the leadership, both in government agencies and local nonprofits. It seemed that we could effectively help the County move forward as they worked on their System Improvement Plan.” This and subsequent meetings helped the CVP staff see where the County was concentrating its efforts, and where CVP could offer support. “During the first few years of their improvement plan, HSA needs to focus on safety. We all saw that. We decided we would concentrate our efforts on helping young people transition well when they ‘age out’ of the system at around age 18,” said Rawlins.

After these and hundreds of hours of other discussions, CVP launched its six-year social venture fund, Fostering the Future: Successful Transitions for Youth in Foster and Kin Care. Fostering the Future (FTF) is a pooled investment fund with dollars supplied by the community foundation’s endowment fund, individual donors and grants from other foundations. Its primary goal is to create a model that will not only help young people in foster and kinship care become successful adults but also effect changes in the current youth-serving systems that will support transitioning youth for many years to come.

FTF has set a target of enrolling 520 youth at a minimum over the six-year period. They have established the following benchmarks:

Eighty percent of those served by the program for six months or more will have improved outcomes in one or more of the following areas:

- *Academic performance*
- *Independent living skills*
- *Work skills and/or employment*
- *Self-advocacy*
- *Knowledge and comfort with personal financial issues*
- *Housing*
- *Sense of belonging to community*
- *A permanent relationship with at least one caring adult*

Establishing a sustainable program is an important criterion for each CVP fund, including FTF. Recognizing that long-term program success requires more than direct support of youth, the fund is pursuing five goals intended to help make a lasting, systemic change in transition supports:

Goal 1 The Asset Team Model

FTF initiates, pilots, and refines a new asset team model of youth support.

Goal 2: Training for Youth and Adult Support Network

Of school-aged FTF youth, 100% are offered and at least 80% receive training on their educational rights. A minimum of 50% of the caregivers supporting youth enrolled in FTF receive training on parenting, educational rights or other topics as identified by the adults and the youth. Other adults (e.g., social workers and teachers) receive selected training on educational rights.

Goal 3: Local Systems Change

Fostering the Future has systemic impact in San Mateo County as measured by new, improved ways of doing business that deliver improved outcomes for youth. This systemic change will include new ways of collecting and analyzing data, new forms of cooperation and communication, and new alignment of resources that encourage breakthrough strategies.

Goal 4: Scaling Impact

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Fostering the Future engages in regional and statewide collaborations to inform policy and practice. The venture fund pursues innovative ways to sustain positive results.

Goal 5: Financial Resources

Private, foundation, and government funding is combined to support the goals of the plan. (FTF October-December 2006 Report)

Strategy and practice: At the core of Fostering the Future's work with youth is an asset coach model. Assets are defined as the elements needed for full, healthy youth development. According to the Search Institute, developer of the Asset model, these elements "address support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity." The Search Institute refers to research that shows "every child needs between 31-40 assets before there is a significant drop in at-risk behavior." The FTF collaborative partners, CVP staff, and the participating funders support the goal of developing self-sufficiency, and have confidence in the asset concept as a vehicle for reaching that goal.

Three new staff members joined partner nonprofits to work with youth who are in either foster or kinship care (or who have already emancipated from the foster care system). These coaches are not case workers, but focus on helping each young person develop his or her personal plan for forward movement over the next period of time in that youth's life. Emphasis is placed on each young person's developmental assets and strengths rather than deficits and weaknesses. As a natural outgrowth of the work, the asset coaches support permanency planning, helping particularly the older youth develop a sense of belonging to a community and having a lifelong relationship with at least one caring adult.

A housing advocate and a legal advocate are working with the asset coaches to help youth gain access to housing and to their rightful educational and mental health services. The attorney, who is with the Law Foundation of Silicon Valley, connects youth to other civil legal services as well.

Training for the youth and adult support network (Goal 2) is being developed with partners and put in place as needs and opportunities arise. To date, an independent living program has been offered at Cañada College and a chapter of the California Youth Connection (CYC) has been sponsored. Youth in the CYC chapter designed and ran a training for adult allies on involving youth effectively in leadership.

The FTF staff is working on local systems change (Goal 3) by continuing to "explore ways to share student educational records within legal protections preserving confidentiality." FTF has "secured an enterprise license with Social Solutions for their web-based software Efforts to Outcomes (ETO). Partners working directly with the youth are able to enter data and have limited need-to-know access to each young person's file. Other partners may have other access to aggregated information" (FTF March–April 2006 Report).

Evaluation: A distinctive feature of the Center for Venture Philanthropy's approach is the close monitoring of the program. Instead of looking at results on an annual basis, CVP reviews data quarterly. They have found that the more frequent assessments help them to make course corrections more effectively and provide investors with accountability. Rawlins explains, "A quarterly report is sent out to the partnering nonprofits and investors. We pull the data, put some of it in a graphic format, and analyze it, comparing it to the targets and milestones that we all agree to in our annual memorandum of understanding."

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Lessons learned:

Two lessons were identified in the March–April 2006 Report. First, recruiting of some youth took longer than anticipated. Kinship youth came on board more rapidly than foster youth for a couple of reasons: 1) contact with them and their caregiver was easier to make through one of the partner nonprofits; and, 2) kinship youth have very few programs available to them in comparison to those available to foster youth, making this more attractive to them. Middle school youth in foster care were difficult to reach because their social workers need to be involved, and they are decentralized, which made sharing information about the program a challenge. In general, social workers were unclear about confidentiality guidelines and differentiation of the services being offered by the asset coaches. Also, locating and recruiting youth who have emancipated from kin care has proven challenging, since they are not connected with any system. FTF staff are developing outreach strategies that address these situations.

Working with caregivers requires more time than staff had anticipated. The middle school and high school asset coaches reported that over 50% of their time was spent working with caregivers on alternative discipline approaches, such as positive parenting. A family conferencing model is proving to be very effective. Youth do not operate in a vacuum; caregivers must be involved.

The importance of sharing information was apparent. The April 2006 report states, “It is important that the asset coaches, housing advocate, and legal advocate be able to share information about the young people in their communities not only with each other but also with the people from the county’s Human Services Agency who provide services.” Members of the asset team regularly attend TDM (team decision making) conferences and are considered members of the multi-disciplinary team. This did not happen overnight, however.

What’s Next for this Promising Transition Practice?

In late April, members of the collaboration are convening for a half-day retreat to examine the pilot’s results-to-date and determine next steps.

Where to go for more information:

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Search Institute web site
www.search-institute.org

Search Institute’s 40 Developmental Assets introduction
www.search-institute.org/assets