



PROMISING FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITION PRACTICE

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

Shasta County's 21st Century Career Connections Develops County's First Transitioning Youth Resource Fair for Service Providers

Submitted by: Shasta County, 21st Century Career Connections Improving Transitions Outcomes Project (ITOP)

Community: Shasta County, CA

Key Partners: Shasta County 21st Century Career Connections, Shasta County Social Services, Local educators, and panel members including: Business partners, Shasta Builder's Exchange, One Stop, Disability Navigator, California Conservation Corps, Shasta-Trinity Regional Occupation Program, Disability Student Services, EDD, Probation, Shasta College, and Shasta County Mental Health.

Subject: Networking Youth Transition Support Service Providers

All Youth – One System Element: Community Services & Supports

Function: Create Linkages and Connect Systems

The Challenge:

Youth who are enrolled in the ITOP Futures Project are youth with disabilities, who may also be involved in an array of social services and/or foster programs. It became obvious to the partner organizations that there are multitudes of plans written for each youth. Each plan has a different message and differing goals. One strategy we identified to address this issue was to provide a forum for Service providers in Shasta County who had a general lack of awareness regarding the other, often free, services available to transition aged youth. This lack of community resource knowledge among the resource providers often resulted in clients either paying for, or not accessing, services that were free in their community. As a consequence, free services weren't reaching their grant prescribed populations and transition aged youth weren't getting all of the assistance that they needed for which they were eligible. All of these factors impacted the quality of plans and the ability to collaborate among youth-serving professionals.

The Practice and Evidence:

The Practice:

The Improving Transition Outcomes Project (ITOP), currently funded through the California Health Incentives Improvement Project (CHIIP), is a capacity building initiative intended to

build an effective system to assist all youth, especially those with disabilities, to make positive transitions. ITOP members engage in monthly partner forums. These forums established that service providers were unaware of one another's services. In response to a need for greater awareness and networking between service providers, ITOP held Shasta County's first Youth in Transition Resources Fair for Service Providers on March 29, 2007. The Fair included 18 panelists and 50 attendees.

Evidence that the practice or program is working:

Measurement of the resource fair has as much to do with assessing community need and interest as it does about the event acting as a catalyst for change. For example, the local social service department made the event such a high priority that they requested that the fair be moved to a different day in order to fit with their training schedule. Another indicator was the feedback from the Resource Fair. Attendee feedback was consistently positive including a high volume of requests for a regular recurrence of the event. Since the event, attendees have indicated learning about resources that they didn't know existed before. As time elapses from the initial fair and more are held, participants can be surveyed to see how many new activities come out of this type of networking.

The Details

Process used to establish the practice:

Awareness about the lack of networking between Shasta transition service providers was longstanding, but a November 2006 Youth Transition Action Team (YTAT) Foster Youth Forum, sponsored through a partnership between New Ways to Work, Child and Family Policy Institute of CA, and Casey Family Programs; inspired ITOP members with a possible solution. Previously, Shasta County had either had resource fairs where youth attendees self-selected tables of service providers. Youth often bottlenecked around one or two tables, frequently not knowing what to ask service providers. Service provider round tables were also held. These seemed good at the time but yielded minimal results. These events had failed to properly engage the audience and move them to action. The YTAT Forum suggested a different approach, where service providers were invited to an event of scheduled thematic panels followed by networking time with each group of presenters in order to maximize attendee exposure to resources and foster service provider communication.

Strategy and practice:

Once the idea for the fair was established, a committee of ITOP members was brought together to determine the need and feasibility of the fair. This included verifying with key agency leaders, such as education administrators, juvenile probation and the county social service department that this was a wanted and needed resource. The event was planned over two networking meetings as well as subsequent teleconferences and emails.

Systems and topics included in the event were based on youth feedback from an ongoing online survey administered to transition age foster youth. This survey asks youth about their greatest challenges succeeding in High School and the workforce, to describe their school experience, and assesses their plans and preparedness post High School. This measurement tool allowed event planners to determine where transition age youth need the most resources.

From this population needs assessment a flier was sent out to a mapped group of local professionals requesting their involvement as attendees and presenters. When service professionals think of transition, it mostly involves youth going to work and/or continuing their education and needing support to get and stay at that functional level. The agenda reflected those priorities in a logical flow from what youth are expected to achieve, to the resources available to help them to achieve those ideals:

- **Employment panel:** employers, one-stop system, CA Conservation Corp., School-Based Workability Program, representative from EDD about using internet for job searches (51% of people who went to work in Shasta last year started on the internet).
- **Education and training panel:** Shasta College, College Options Builders Exchange, Shasta ROP and in-school programs
- **Transition Support Services Panel:** Shasta county mental health services department, Disability Navigator, Disability Student Services,
- **Independent Living Panel:** ILP services, financial education services, county transportation, and social security.

Panelists each had 10-15 minutes to share their resources and discuss who was eligible for their services and then another 20 minutes was allowed for networking between panelists and participants. Allowing that free space was a risk because there was no guarantee how attendees would use that time. All attendees made good use of this opportunity, clustering around panelists and networking with one another.

Lessons Learned

Finding the right people to deliver the message:

Once an event's main message is determined, finding the people in the community who can deliver that message effectively can be a challenge. Some service providers are wonderful at what they do, but if they don't feel comfortable sharing their work they either may not be the best choice for a panelist or should be encouraged to bring a multi-media presentation such as a video or power point to augment their presentation.

Audience participation:

The success of this type of event is heavily dependent on audience participation. It's a real challenge to make sure that the audience is willing to participate. In the case of the Shasta County Resource Fair, attendees were very excited about the dialogue. This is where research of attendee capacity is helpful. Attendees were invited because they'd voiced a need for this information. Topics were covered that were requested by the audience and their clients. This sort of content research is crucial for keeping the attendees engaged.

Don't rely on resource mapping alone!

Although resource mapping is a great tool, it's only really useful if there isn't a huge turnover in the staff receiving that resource. If organizations have high turnover then something more interactive, like The Transition Resource Fair for Professionals, is a more engaging and effective way to keep current staff up to date with available resources.

What's Next for This Promising Transition Practice?

Keeping in line with the recommendations made by event participants, the next Resource Fair will be aimed at Parents and Guardians of transition aged youth in order to help bring youth to

greater early success. In addition, a transitioning youth community calendar is being developed for parents, guardians, and service providers.

Shasta County is also adding a lens of greater awareness regarding transitioning youth with disabilities. The next programmatic focus will be to assist youth with disabilities to transfer from high school to the community college.

For More Information:

www.shastacareerconnections.net