



PROMISING FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITION PRACTICE

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

Shasta County Independent Living Program Builds Enduring Relationships with Transitioning Youth

Submitted by: Shasta County Independent Living Program

Community: Shasta County, California

Key Partners: Youth and Family Programs, Shasta County Independent Living Program, Shasta College Independent Living Skills Program, Shasta County Department of Social Services

Subject: Comprehensive Transition Support

All Youth – One System Element: Community Services and Supports

Function: Improve Program Practice

The Challenge:

Shasta County foster youth, like other youth in care around California, face a difficult transition into the world of adult life. As many as 50% experienced homelessness; only 50% graduated from high school. More than one third of them experienced joblessness at some time during their first post-emancipation year. Even though Shasta County had the state-mandated Independent Living Program (ILP) in place, Shasta County youth were still facing difficulties. As Lisa Goza, Program Manager for the Shasta County ILP, pointed out, youth leaving foster care do not have adults to whom they can turn. In contrast, youth who grow up at home are often on their family's health care plan until age 24, and many can call their parents to ask for advice or financial help if they run into a problem.

The Practice and Evidence:

The Practice: Beginning in 2005, the Youth & Family Programs Agency has contracted with Shasta County to run the Independent Living Program (ILP) for youth ages 16 to 21. Youth & Family has created an ILP that combines experiential learning with a relationship-based approach; each youth is assigned a permanent caseworker.

Evidence that the practice or program is working: When Youth & Family Programs took over Shasta County's ILP in 2004, enrollment was low. In 2005, enrollment had increased significantly; 220 youth took part over the course of the year, and currently (December 2006) 120 youth are participating. In addition, caseworkers have reported anecdotally that certain youth in their caseload call them for advice on matters small and large.

The Details:

Process used to establish the practice: Youth & Family Programs had a foster care agency in Shasta County, so they were aware of the difficulties transitioning youth were having. They put in a bid to run the ILP as well. Once they received the contract, they rebuilt the program from

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scratch, incorporating the relationship-centered philosophy that the agency uses in all their programs.

Strategy and practice: Shasta ILP has structured their program to provide personal support as a main function of the Independent Living Program. The long term, one-on-one relationship between the caseworker and the youth is central. Caseworkers are assigned to each young person when he or she turns 16. The caseworker serves as a mentor, and the goal is to establish a lasting relationship. “We really try not to change caseworkers with the youth,” said Goza. “We want to [provide a] stable connection since their social workers and placements often change.” So far they have been able to keep each youth with the same staff person. “We haven’t had one of the caseworkers leave yet,” Goza said.

In each youth’s initial transition plan, the ILP staff hope to establish a support network as they help him or her plan short- and long-term goals. Other services include assessment of initial needs, referral to needed services, after care services, Transition Housing Placement Program (THPP), and outcome tracking.

Participants must be 16 to 21 years old, currently in foster care or previously in care at age 16 or over, and accept services voluntarily. Youth in the program join small groups and participate in experiential learning activities such as trips into the community to car sales lots, property management offices, and employers. For example, the local Les Schwab Tires dealership offers classes in changing tires and other car maintenance basics. Guest speakers provide information about health, domestic violence, and self-defense. The Shasta County Independent Living Program collaborates with Shasta College Independent Living Skills Program on social events.

The Shasta County Independent Living Program provides an active support system that prepares current and former foster youth in a wide range of survival skills:

- employment skills
- health, safety, and hygiene
- banking, money management, and budgeting
- consumer purchasing, loans, and contracts
- home maintenance
- time management
- interpersonal skills
- knowledge of community resources

Opportunities exist for youth to save for emancipation, participate in a paid volunteer program, to receive incentive earnings based on participation, and earn scholarships. Staff help youth under 18 build a resume. For young people over 18, caseworkers help connect them to the Smart Center, which has a program that pays youth to prepare for jobs. They also connect youth with the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) housing program.

Caseworkers also help individual youth cope with problems as they arise. Resources are available to help in emergencies with utility payments and rent, and staff arrange for a bus pass if a youth can use one. Perhaps the most important assistance is offered on an as-needed basis. Each youth is given cell phone numbers for two or more caseworkers so they can get help when they need it. Goza explained, “They call us for all those things that other youth call home for: tiny things from ‘I left my keys at the Laundromat. What now?’ to big things like ‘I got arrested. What should I do?’” A year before emancipation, quite a few foster parents said the young people could stay as long as they needed to, but it hasn’t always worked out. Last year, for example,

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they had five youth say they had to leave their foster homes even though their foster parents had initially said they could stay. ILP staff helped these youth find housing.

The Shasta ILP has mutual agreements with Independent Living Programs in other counties so that teens in out-of-county placements receive services. They make scheduled home visits to all foster youth in the program. For youth living in outlying areas, case managers travel to meet with them and offer assistance. The Program Coordinator determines eligibility upon receiving the referral from the county social worker or probation officer. Foster parents and group homes play an important role by providing transportation to appointments and group meetings as well as offering encouragement and guidance.

Evaluation criteria used: The Shasta County ILP generates the state-mandated annual report that tracks placements, jobs, and education. They also create quarterly reports on each in-care youth for his or her social worker. They pay particular attention to whether after care youth go on to attend college. Quarterly reports are created for after-care youth as well. Recently they began researching employment more closely; they are now tracking how many youth stay on a job for 3 months, 6 months, a year.

Lessons learned:

According to Goza, the most difficult time for the youth occurs when they first emancipate. "It's very, very hard between the ages of 18 and 19. They have an extremely giant hole to fill as they transition. There's a huge gap to fill, and they're tired of it [being part of the system]. They want everyone to go away. They want to do it on their own."

It's a challenge for the ILP staff too, Goza pointed out. "We want to help them make the transition as smooth as possible. I say, 'Let us be there for you,' but we have to let go and let them come back when they are ready."

That's why the ILP staff is focusing on establishing the connections with younger youth. "It's critical to establish the secure relationship with youth between 16 and 18, so there's someone there for them," explained Goza. "With the youth who have been with us, it's getting better. They trust that person to walk with them through the transition. The first youth who have been with ILP since age 16 are now getting ready to emancipate, and Goza is hopeful that more of them will stay connected throughout their first year.

What's Next for this Promising Transition Practice?

The next goal is to start bringing in after-care youth to do peer mentoring and other work with the younger youth. This program would match 20- to 21- year old youth with 16-year olds. The ILP staff think the younger youth will listen more readily to the older youth than they will to the adults. The staff are also working with the City of Redding to come up with more housing for 18- to 21-year olds.

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Where to go for more information

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