



Promising Foster Youth Transition Practice

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

County of San Diego's Workforce Academy for Youth

Submitted by: County of San Diego's Workforce Academy for Youth

Community: San Diego County

Subject: Career Preparation, Coordinating Youth Services, Cross System Partnerships, Paid Work Experience, Transition Support, Community Services and Support, Occupational Skills Training, Work Experience

All Youth–One System Element: Academic Achievement, Career Development, Community Services and Support

Function: Improve Program Practice, Create Linkages and Connect Systems, Measure Effectiveness

The Challenge:

There are approximately 75,000 children in foster care in California. Each year over 4,000 of these young people age out of the system and find themselves on their own. It is well documented that youth who are making this transition from foster care to independence typically face a number of significant challenges, including educational deficits, mental health problems, economic instability, victimization, pregnancy, and increased involvement with the criminal justice system. Foster youth who have aged out of the system are less likely to be employed than their same-age peers, and earnings from employment provide few of them with the means to be self sufficient.

The Details:

In September, 2006, the County of San Diego implemented the Workforce Academy for Youth (WAY), to help foster youth with their transition to self-sufficiency. WAY provides six month paid internships to participating youth while teaching work skills and life skills that will prepare them for ongoing positions with the County of San Diego (or equivalent job) and/or help and encourage them to continue their education.

County departments are given the opportunity to participate but are not required to do so. Jobs are made available in all areas of County government, including public safety, community services, health and human services, land use and environment, and general government.

San Diego County foster youth, between the ages of 17-21 years of age, who have completed high school, are eligible to apply for the program. The application process requires a completed Letter of Interest and a County employment application. Youth must attend a Job

Fair where they talk to department representatives, learn about available jobs, and identify the positions in which they are interested. Youth applicants are matched to jobs based on the information they provide as well as other factors. Selected participants must complete a background clearance and pass a medical evaluation, including drug testing, just like any other person newly hired by the County.

Both full and part-time internships are available. Those who are not in school are encouraged to work full time. College students can only work 20 hours per week during the school year, but can work full time during breaks from school, including summer break.

The program is designed to provide a continuum of learning with all components supporting one another. Community partners and volunteers also provide additional resources and time. The program includes the following components:

- **Job Coaches** are assigned to each youth. The job coach acts as the supervisor and on-site coach to assist youth in learning and performing assigned duties on the job. Job Coaches help youth develop job skills and understand appropriate worksite behaviors. Job Coaches also complete bi-weekly performance evaluations as a tool for coaching as well as a way to keep the Program Manager informed of progress. Youth are rated on such things as good attendance/punctuality, appropriate dress, productivity, attitude, and honesty.
- **Life Skills Coaches** are senior volunteers (50 years old and over), assigned to each youth. The County's Aging and Independence Services coordinates this component of the program. Each Coach receives a stipend of \$250 per month and is required to spend 3-5 hours each week with the youth or on work related to the program. Life Skills Coaches have assisted youth with such things as signing up for college, applying for scholarships, supporting attention to dental and medical issues, assistance with housing, child care, and transportation issues.
- **Case Consultants** provide individual counseling and involve the youth directly in the process of developing a plan for success and transition. They work with other staff (instructors & education specialists) and coordinate with community partners to involve the youth in services appropriate for their individual needs. They assist with resolving problems or obstacles. Opportunities for the youth include work readiness training (resume development, how to interview, etc), case counseling, education support services, and financial literacy training.
- **Independent Living Skills (ILS) Contractors** meet with youth monthly to provide classes and case management. They assist youth in becoming independent by addressing such issues as education plans, employment, housing, and medical care/mental health care.
- **Training**
Mandatory work readiness group training is provided to the WAY interns three hours each month. Basic skills training, primarily in the areas of math and reading comprehension, is also offered to those who are interested in improving their skill

levels so they might be more successful on the job or in school, and better prepared to take entrance-type examinations.

WAY youth are also offered the opportunity to participate in the wide array of training that is available to other County employees. In addition, \$340 is set aside for each youth during the session to cover outside training, such as training on Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, Excel, and Access or other training where a fee is required.

Key Partners: County of San Diego, Casey Family Programs

Evaluation:

Program performance is evaluated at the end of each six month session. Focus groups and surveys of interns, Job Coaches, and Life Skills Coaches, are used to solicit feedback and recommendations for improvement. The success of the program is assessed using the following strategic measures:

- 80% will complete the program or, if they leave the program before finishing, find placement in county positions or other equivalent positions, or enroll in an educational and/or advanced occupational training program to acquire additional skills for employment.
- 80% of youth who complete the program will:
 - Find placement in county government positions or other equivalent employment positions; or
 - Those who do not move into an employment track will enroll in an educational and/or advanced occupational training program to acquire additional skills for future employment; or
 - Engage in a combination of employment and education.

Lessons Learned: During the first session, WAY staff allowed one youth who was still in high school to participate. The typical high school schedule does not allow enough flexibility for interns to participate in training activities and provides for very little time to be at the job site. They now require the completion of high school prior to participation in the program.

Where to go for more information:

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