

## **Creating Access to Opportunities for Youth in Transition from Foster Care: State Perspectives**

**A Capitol Hill forum presented by the American Youth Policy Forum**

**January 30, 2015**

Each year, approximately 26,000 young people in foster care will turn 18 and "age out" of the system. These youth face numerous obstacles as they transition to adulthood like homelessness, unemployment, difficulty accessing postsecondary education, and financial instability. The American Youth Policy Forum recently conducted research into these challenges and released an issue brief, "*Creating Access to Opportunities for Youth in Transition from Foster Care*," highlighting the best practices and policies they found during their research.

This was the first of two AYPF forums discussing the transition from foster care to adulthood. The second, on February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2015, looked at these challenges from the youth perspective. During this forum, panelists shared how policies and programs in their states have addressed these challenges and opportunities.

AYPF's Erin Russ and Garet Fryar began the forum with a presentation of their findings in "*Creating Access to Opportunities for Youth in Transition from Foster Care*." The 2008 Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act gave states added flexibility to address transitional youth, leading AYPF to ask how states are using the added flexibility to implement policies supporting transitioning youth. Through their research, three categories of need emerged – sustainable social capital, permanency supports, and postsecondary opportunities. Sustainable social capital is the idea that many youth in foster care do not know where to begin when trying to access resources like mentors and life-skills coaches to ease their transition into adulthood. Permanency supports are things like housing, financial stability, transportation, and healthcare. Without these general supports, it is difficult for the youths to make long-term decisions. And finally, foster care youth lack access, support, and exposure to postsecondary educational opportunities.

The overall theme of the AYPF findings was that foster care youth do not have singular needs. Rather, they have a variety of needs that require comprehensive, wraparound support. In order to address these challenges, AYPF made several recommendations. Policymakers should highlight a range of postsecondary options, develop and coordinate services that address multiple needs at once, engage youth in the decision-making process, and change the conversation from the transition from foster care to a conversation about transitioning to new opportunities. Russ and Fryar's presentation set the context for the forum discussion.

## **Supporting Sustainable Social Capital in Tennessee**

**Michael Leach, Director of Independent Living, Tennessee Department of Children and Families**, was the first panelist to discuss how his state is helping youth transition from foster care. Tennessee is improving the system through collaboration and trying to create a culture of permanency and preparation for adulthood. Rather than just getting young people to 18, their goal is to begin the transition to adulthood, around 14 and 15 years old, by helping teens cultivate skills that will prepare them for life once they age out of the foster care program. Leach stressed that none of this can happen without constant, intentional collaboration.

### *Collaborating with Youth*

The Tennessee Department of Children and Families collaborates with youth to get their input on specific services they want, life skills they need to learn, and who they would like to teach them these skills. A survey of 949 youth, about one-third of Tennessee's foster care youth population, showed that youth want to learn life skills – like cooking, cleaning, budgeting, how to drive a car, how to write a resume and interview for a job – from their foster parents. In response, Tennessee developed curriculum for foster parents on how to take advantage of “teachable moments,” unplanned events during the day that adults can use as learning opportunities for youth. (This curriculum is available on AYPF's forum resource page). A statewide youth board provides valuable input to the staff of the Tennessee Department of Children and Families as well as the department's commissioner, and this information helps move the system forward.

### *Communication*

Tennessee's Department of Independent Living takes a holistic approach to supporting youth by addressing multiple needs at once and bridging the gap between different state agencies and services. He stressed the need for constant communication in order to build relationships with organizations, eventually bringing them all together for a larger conversation.

Mr. Leach emphasized that one of the main challenges is just getting the information out that this population needs support. This is especially important for the local business community; all it takes is making them aware of the need, and they are typically very willing to help. Similarly, making the youth aware of the various resources at their disposal is another challenge. The Tennessee Department of Children and Families is working to move the foster care system forward with a culture of collaboration, awareness, and preparation.

## **California Housing for Youth in Foster Care**

**Cecilia Tran, Policy Analyst, John Burton Foundation** described California's approach to providing housing for transitional-age foster youth. This is accomplished through the Transitional Housing Placement-Plus Program (THP-Plus) and the Transitional Housing

Placement-Plus Foster Care (THP+FC) program. Both programs offer comprehensive support services and affordable housing.

THP-Plus was established in 2001 for former foster and probation youth ages 18-24. It is state funded and county administered, with 57 providers operating 79 programs in 48 of California's 58 counties. Housing rates in THP-Plus are set locally, averaging \$2,633 per participant. THP+FC was established in October 2012 as a placement option for non-minor dependents ages 18-21. Modeled after the THP-Plus program, it is a state licensed placement program for youth participating in extended foster care. THP+FC offers housing in 48 counties, and, as of January 15, 2015, there were 52 licensed THP+FC providers. In contrast to THP-Plus, THP+FC has one statewide rate. This program provides housing and supportive services in a semi-supervised setting and is a great fit for youth who are unable to live in foster homes but are not ready for a Supervised Independent Living Placement.

### *Multiple Housing Options*

THP-Plus and THP+FC provide the same support services and housing models. Support services include job-readiness training, mentoring, a food allowance, apartment furnishings, and several other mandatory services to address the participants' unique needs. The housing options are single-site, scattered/remote-site, and host-family. Single-site housing is one apartment building or complex owned or leased by the provider where all participants live. The scattered-site housing option is more of an independent living experience. Participants' neighbors are typically not in the foster care system and they learn how to interact with neighbors and the landlord. In the host-family option, which is the least used, participants live with an adult who supports them, and they can still utilize the THP+FC support services.

### *Outcomes and Results*

California extended foster care to age 21 in 2012. Because the THP-Plus system serves former foster youth until age 24, many young people who either opted out of extended care or turned 18 before extended care was an option, choose the THP-Plus system. These participants were typically on their own for a significant amount of time before joining THP, so the variety of support services is an important aspect of the program. For example, many have children, have experienced homelessness or traumatic experiences, or have mental health problems.

Both programs have seen positive results. Monthly wages of participants increased from \$737 when entering the THP-Plus program to \$833 at exit, and the employment rate increased from 34 percent at entry to 43 percent at exit. Ms. Tran said that these are small but significant improvements. THP is still looking to improve in the area of educational attainment. Of youth who left the THP-Plus program in FY 2013-14, 55 percent did not experience an increase in educational status. THP+FC experienced significant growth from June 2013 to June 2014, with the number of participants increasing from 273 to 1,031. This demonstrates the want and need for these housing programs.

### *Lingering Questions*

Regarding the future, Ms. Tran posed some important questions. With 2,000 youth aging out of extended care this year, how will they be served in counties with reduced or eliminated THP-Plus programs? And, despite additional growth, THP+FC requires additional expansion. So, what is the “right” level of service statewide? Ms. Tran said the answers to these questions require additional data, and the most important thing is to ensure program quality no matter what.

### **Connecting Michigan Foster Youth to Postsecondary Education**

**Ann Rossi, Department Analyst, Michigan Department of Human Services**, spoke last and echoed both Mr. Leach and Ms. Tran’s sentiments that getting started early with college planning and utilizing youth input are vital to successfully serving the foster care youth population. Ms. Rossi’s presentation looked at the various college initiatives the Michigan Department of Human Services is implementing to get foster youth to college and keep them there. Like the other panelists, Ms. Rossi pointed out that these students have unique needs that should be addressed collaboratively.

In 2010, the Michigan Department of Human Services began an education planner program to work with foster youth age 14 and older to break down the barriers between the child welfare and education systems. Students are referred to education planners for a range of reasons, including special education needs or discipline issues, GED preparation, tutoring, postsecondary support, and even advocacy to help students remain in their original schools if they move to a new foster home.

#### *Education Planners*

Michigan’s education planner program led to the development of a Seita Scholarship-funded “campus coach” program in 2008, started at Western Michigan University. The campus coaches work with students and universities to help with funding issues, academic preparation, coordinate housing during breaks, and generally provide a support system for the students. The program is now supported by Michigan’s Youth in Transition Funding, the state’s version of Chafee funding. The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program is a federal funding source available to cover expenses not covered by other government or community resources, which Michigan uses for youth ages 18 to 21 who have been in foster care since they were at least 14-years-old. So far, seven colleges and one community college have a campus coach program. The program has been successful in several ways. Most colleges have supportive administration, students now have champions all over campus who better understand their needs, and students receive care packages and supply closets to make their lives a little easier. However, Ms. Rossi pointed out that it is difficult to find former foster students who could benefit from the campus coaches, and due to the limitations of Chafee funding, the contracts can only technically serve the students until they turn 21. To get around the Chafee limitations, some counties have used funds to allocate a campus coach or educational planner position on campuses.

Ms. Rossi wrapped up her presentation reminding the audience that these youth have unique needs beyond the financial burdens of college, so it is important for the child welfare and education systems to work together and to garner support and resources from college administrations and local communities.

## **Q&A**

*How did you get your state to buy-in and support your programs?*

**Michael Leach** – Some of the programs already existed when I got there, which was great. The governor said the state would provide a contract to us because they were able to match that money through a private contract. It also helps to get our young people in front of the people who make these decisions. The states have to work towards building youth boards and helping the youth learn how to be their own advocates.

**Cecilia Tran** – We have people who have been very active at the Capitol to bring these needs to the legislators' attention. State leaders are very informed and very big champions of the cause. Being very adamant about keeping everybody informed has done so much. Collecting data and research has been really helpful in making the case to elected officials who have never heard about these issues before.

**Ann Rossi** – We have legislators with a passion for higher education. We have Michigan youth groups – that youth voice is what got the higher up people on board.

*Because of turnover and siloes, how do you push the knowledge to frontline staff about the various resources you can offer? What are some best practices in letting other professionals know these resources exist?*

**Michael Leach** – I have staff all over the state, and awareness is part of their job. They make referrals, I send a lot of emails to private providers, and we do a lot of youth engagement webinars. You just have to do it all the time, and you have to keep doing it again.

**Cecilia Tran** – I work with a nonprofit, but we do interact a lot with the county welfare association. Having open lines of communication with the county has really helped. We're constantly trying to put out our resources through webinars, monthly conference calls with THP-Plus providers, and making our website a great resource.

**Ann Rossi** – We send e-blasts that go out to everybody with any kinds of updates. We utilize our education planners by telling them to push out the information, post it, and send it to their workers. We just keep doing it and keep pushing this stuff out.