

A young person with short hair, wearing a light blue button-down shirt, is holding a yellow rectangular sign with both hands. The sign has the text "I am Empowered" written on it in a bold, dark grey font. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light color.

**I am
Empowered**

Works Wonders™: an Empowerment and Employment Intervention for Youth in Foster Care

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*A Report on Works Wonders™ from Foster Forward,
in partnership with Rhode Island College,
Children's Bureau and Workplace Center, Columbia University*

In 2011, Foster Forward and its partners – the RI Department of Children, Youth and Families, The Workplace Center at Columbia School of Social Work, Rhode Island College School of Social Work, and The Voice Youth Leadership Board – were awarded a five year grant from the Children's Bureau to help youth impacted by foster care develop skills to strengthen and manage relationships. As part of our dissemination activities to share evaluation findings and lessons learned, the partners have developed a five part brief series to highlight Works Wonders™, explore the youth participatory aspects of the project, share lessons learned on our data collection process, explore the importance of policy in promoting career readiness, and provide an analysis of cost feasibility for replication.

WHY

WORKS
WONDERS™?

An increasing body of national data on the aging out population places youth at greater risk for incarceration, unemployment, early pregnancy and parenting, poverty, mental health problems, and homelessness.¹ Research demonstrates that youth are more likely to make successful connections to competitive employment after leaving foster care, when they engage in on-the-job training while in care.²

WHAT IS

WORKS
WONDERS™?

The primary purpose of Works Wonders™ is to prepare young people to successfully transition to the adult world of work by actively engaging them in career readiness activities, identifying and minimizing barriers to success, and by building team work, active listening, and conflict resolution skills. Works Wonders™ moves beyond a transference of skills and knowledge relevant to job-seeking toward a comprehensive, developmentally appropriate career service. The program integrates a career approach both internally and with external systems and is supported through the continuing professional development of its staff.

There are five key steps in the Works Wonders™ model:

STEP 1: REFERRAL & ENROLLMENT

Given that youth in foster care often feel mandated to participate in programs, youth are given decision making control about whether they would like to participate, regardless of the referral source. During enrollment, youth are coached on the value of career development and employment engagement.

STEP 2: EMPOWERMENT AND EMPLOYMENT (E2) TRAINING

Youth participate in 10-12 hours of soft skills training in a group setting. The training combines concrete skill development and mutual support.

STEP 3: CAREER COACHING

Youth receive 12 weeks of individualized job coaching where they explore career interest and educational pathways.

STEP 4: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Youth are connected to work-based learning opportunities through informational interviews, job shadows, and internships. These opportunities are made possible through the employer cultivation activities of the staff.

STEP 5: EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION, & VOCATIONAL TRAINING

Youth are supported in achieving their educational and employment goals through connections to educational opportunities, vocational programs, and paid employment.

¹ Courtney, Mark & Heuring, D.H. 2005 "The transition to adulthood for youth aging out of the foster care system", In D. W. Osgood, E.M. Foster, C. Flannagan, and Gr. Ruth (eds), *On Your Own Without a Net: The Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.

²Casey Family Programs, 2004; Clark & Davis, 2000; Naccarato & DeLorenzo, 2008

The evaluation of Works Wonders™ assessed the impact of a career readiness preparation program as a strategy to support youth in foster care to gain economic self-sufficiency. The results demonstrated that this program was effective in enhancing youths' career preparation, connecting them with jobs and supporting a sense of self-determination. Findings suggested that Works Wonders™ achieved success through its influence on challenging life circumstances that had the potential to undermine work, developing the skills to secure work, and on the relational competencies important to getting and keeping jobs.

Youth who participated increased their engagement in career exploration, work readiness activities, job search activities, and job retention activities during their program participation and these increases persisted through a one year follow-up post-enrollment.

The proportion of youth employed following program participation increased significantly from 38.3% to 52% and the evaluation found significant increases in the proportion of those who both worked and stayed connected to school or training, an important component of helping youth to progress in their careers.

For more information on the Works Wonders™ model, its evaluation findings, successes and challenges visit www.fosterforward.net. There you can view video testimonials, preview the E2 Toolkit, or download a copy of the program model and practice standards for replication. You can also look for the other briefs in this series or view a copy of the final report submitted to the Children's Bureau.

Foster Forward, through the generous support of grants, corporations, and private donations has been able to continue to offer the intervention to youth in and who have aged out of foster care in Rhode Island. Foster Forward has made modifications to the intervention based on the data and feedback from our youth leaders who continue to guide the program's growth.

Foster Forward is interested in helping other organizations and jurisdictions implement Works Wonders™. Of particular interest is the ability to replicate and test the effectiveness of the intervention components through a Randomized Control Trial. Verification from such a test could give foster care providers the tools that are needed to implement programs that best help turn the tide on the negative outcomes often encountered by youth leaving foster care and change the economic trajectory for transitioned aged youth.



WAS WORKS
WONDERS™
SUCCESSFUL?



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FOR WORKS
WONDERS™



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