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A Preliminary Examination of the Transition from Foster Care Youth to Emancipated Adult

*Center for Public Policy Studies
at
California State University, Stanislaus
in
partnership with
The Master of Social Work Program*

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August 2004

The Center for Public Policy Studies at CSU, Stanislaus is a non-profit, non-partisan entity dedicated to research and public education about important policy issues and to providing a forum for discussing public policy issues with community representatives, academics, and policy makers in the CSU Stanislaus service area. The center is committed to facilitating regional and community problem-solving through activities and research projects that bring together diverse constituencies and perspectives to clarify issues, consider options, and build consensus.

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Aging Out

A Preliminary Examination of the Transition from Foster Care Youth to Emancipated Adult

**A Report Prepared for the
Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors
and the Stanislaus Community Services Agency
by the
Center for Public Policy Studies
in partnership with
The Master of Social Work Program
at
California State University, Stanislaus**

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Executive Summary

The Center for Public Policy Studies at California State University, Stanislaus, in partnership with the Master of Social Work Program, conducted a 15 month study to provide a preliminary assessment of the issues, obstacles and successes experienced by foster youth as they transition through the emancipation process. The study was intended as a means to provide Stanislaus County Community Services Agency, as well as persons interested in youth who have been in the foster care system, with a preliminary profile of recently emancipated “Stanislaus County” youth, an assessment of emancipation issues (including resource gaps and strengths), a process evaluation of the Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP), and an identification of some promising practices in the field regarding youth and emancipation from the foster care system. The Center intended for this initial study to serve as the foundation for the development of further emancipation research and to serve as a mechanism for offering insight into programmatic and policy decision-making.

Major Findings and Associated Recommendations

Outcomes and Placement Stability

The compilation of data from our multiple data sources suggested that, as a whole, youth emancipating from the foster care system in Stanislaus County are not fairing particularly well, and our findings tend to mirror the poor outcomes experienced by emancipating foster youth across the Country. For instance, fewer than half (44%, n=69) of the emancipated foster youth enrolled in/received Medi-Cal (health insurance) post emancipation, just over half (50.8%, n=62) possessed a California driver’s license, and nearly half (45.5%, n=70) of the youth had contact with the local Police Department, with many being suspects, defendants, and victims in a crime. In addition to the administrative data, follow-along interviews suggested that former foster youth are struggling to find and maintain housing and employment, and their social support systems (particularly prominent among males) are severely lacking/underdeveloped. A pervasive theme for many of the former foster youth was uncertainty.

While the findings suggest that a significant percentage of the youth who exited care in Stanislaus County are not fairing well, the study has helped shed light on factors that

appear to be contributing to this reality. Placement stability while in care was found to be significantly associated with more positive post-emancipation outcomes. The results of the study also identified prominent factors that contribute to placement instability/change: 1) kinship care, 2) behavioral concerns and 3) caretaker incapacity.

The findings surrounding placement stability and reasons for placement instability highlight the need for greater attention to be directed at those adults who provide direct care to youth in the foster care system. We specifically recommend the creation of both formal and informal structures to serve as mechanisms for preparing foster care providers (foster parents) for meeting the needs of youth. The formal structure would involve the participation of both the foster parent and foster youth in a program, such as the Independent Living Skills Program, where the two participants engaged in “training/education” designed to prepare foster youth for emancipation. The second informal structure would involve support-groups for foster parents, where they regularly meet to discuss strategies for meeting the needs of emancipating foster youth and their roles and responsibilities as care providers. In our attempt to prepare youth for emancipation, we must expand our conceptual lens to be inclusive of the adults who have accepted the responsibility of providing care.

Re-conceptualizing Success and ILSP

A prevalent theme in our focus groups, but also evident in follow-along interviews and observations of the Independent Living Skills classes, was that participants expressed concerns regarding the lack of vision related to the process for emancipation. Many of the participants felt that the “assumptions” underpinning a successful emancipation are flawed. Participants expressed the belief that, given all that is known about foster youth, preparing them for “independence” is unrealistic on the one hand and not a desired goal on the other hand.

Currently, the fundamental premise underpinning Independent Living Skills Classes is based on the concept of “independence.” In our evaluation of the Independent Living Skills Classes, in addition to observing fragmentation in the connectedness of the various classes, we also noted that the classes specifically focus on promoting independent living: for instance, learning interviewing skills, cooking skills, and money management skills.

Our process evaluation also revealed that similar to what our focus group participants expressed, the Program operates from a pedagogical standpoint of “banking,” where youth are “told and shown what to do.”

Based on our findings, we are proposing the creation of a broad based community partnership with the Community Services Agency of Stanislaus County and the Master of Social Work Program at CSU, Stanislaus to design and implement a “new” approach for preparing youth for life after foster care, in all its possible variations. Our vision involves the transformation of the current Independent Living Skills Program, whose emphasis focuses on the concept of “independence,” into a program/practice that centers on “interdependence.”

Fundamentally the vision underpinning this work will involve the creation of a program/practice built on the tenets of “problem-posing” education where youth and adults work together to prepare young people for life after foster care. Our attention will focus on crafting a curriculum and enacting a program that shifts the focus from individual tasks/skills for independent living to one that builds partnerships vital for survival and success in our culture. Driving this practice will be an emphasis on interdependence and strategies for living, working and being connected to others, while fostering skills for mobilizing community change efforts, advocating for social justice, and taking action to secure one’s well-being and the well-being of those around him/her.

Addressing the Diverse Needs of Foster Youth

A third major finding of this study is the reality that emancipating foster youth are not a homogeneous population. The administrative data, case record reviews and follow-along interviews clearly illustrate the diversity of needs/issues for emancipating youth.

Our follow-along interviews demonstrate that young men were much more likely than young women to be disconnected from a reliable support system. The typical support system for an emancipated male youth was “himself” or a professional service provider. Additionally, young men were more likely than young women to be defendants, suspects, and witnesses in or to criminal activities. While placement disruption (change) was an issue that negatively impacted both males and females, sexual abuse was an issue that was particularly prominent for females. Girls who came into the system as a result of

sexual abuse were much more likely to experience placement change than other girls who came into the system for other reasons. Girls who experienced three or more placement changes were much more likely to have been in contact with law enforcement than girls who experienced fewer than three placement changes.

It becomes intuitively clear that a “one-size” fits all intervention model will not meet the unique needs of the heterogeneous group of emancipating foster youth. For instance, it is evident that matching youth who have been victims of sexual abuse with a skilled foster provider is critical for promoting placement stability. Additionally, we need to continue examining the messages that we (both within and outside of the foster care system) express to boys and young men about relationship and how to build trusting, lifelong relationships. In addition to examining our messages, we need to craft interventions that help both boys and girls connect with adults and peers for emotional support.

Ethnic differences also illustrate the heterogeneity of the emancipating youth population. Of particular note is the overrepresentation of African American youth (particularly African American females) in the emancipating foster youth population. African American youth in the emancipation group were found to have longer stays in care and were more likely to be classified as entering care due to “parents being absent.” African American youth also experienced, on average, fewer placement changes than their ethnic counterparts.

Our recommendation calls for the Community Services Agencies and other interested service providers and professionals to create a structure whereby African American community members can come together and begin interpreting the data/outcomes found in this and other studies, explore strategies for addressing the problem, and ultimately craft and implement a plan for addressing the concern. We envision this process involving a committed group of African American community members in partnership with service providers and other professionals embarking on a Participatory Action Research study to explore and address these issues.

Promoting and Planning Life Long Connections

Our final, and possibly most important, finding involved the expressed need for devoting serious attention to promoting and planning for life long connections of foster youth to caring and committed adults. Throughout the focus groups, follow-along interviews, and exploration of promising practices, we noted a theme for the need for youth to form personal, meaningful relationships with adults other than social workers and service providers. Similar to previous research, we found that many of the former foster youth had limited support systems. We also observed that many of the former foster youth identified their family of origin as the main support system post-emancipation.

We are encouraging the Community Services Agency to utilize and expand preexisting services that embrace the concept of connectedness, provide support for the development or expansion of Family Resource Centers, and continue exploring possibilities to build partnerships with the broader community that foster life-long connections.

It is our understanding that the Agency is working with youth on the development of “youth driven” planning meetings to promote and formalize the commitment of lifelong connections for the youth and to create a transitional plan for the youth who will be emancipating from foster care. Creating the transitional plan with the youth’s life-long connections in attendance will help create the needed safety net and networks of support for the youth. This “team decision making” practice has also been recognized as a promising practice approach by other child welfare agencies and professionals. However, our recommendation not only calls for increasing the practice of “emancipation” team decision meetings, but also calls for expanding the method in which the practice is conducted.

Throughout this study we have noted suggestions for collaboration and community building and partnerships. The “team decision making approach” offers an opportunity to operationalize this call for action. The reality is that on the one hand the Community Services Agency is committed to this practice but on the other hand is conducting the practice with limited resources (including money, time, and human power). Our specific recommendation calls for extending the practice outside of the Agency structure. By increasing the pool of coordinators/facilitators to include the work done internally by

Agency workers and externally by community members, we increase the capacity to conduct greater numbers of emancipation (team decision making) conferences. This process offers the opportunity to begin a new partnership between the Agency and the Community that is consistent with the findings and recommendations of this study.

While it is clear that the Community Services Agency has worked hard to establish a culture that supports “team decision making efforts,” as evidenced by its historic commitment to Family Decision Meetings, it is also our contention that this practice must be closely and continuously scrutinized. While it is easy to talk about the formation of partnerships, the redistribution of power, and shared decision making (the philosophical tenants underpinning this type of practice), the reality is that this practice is extremely difficult to put into place. Much of the difficulty in actualizing this practice stems from the bureaucratic and litigious nature of the foster care system and the historic adversarial relationship between the “system” and the community. Given this reality, the need for serious/rigorous research designed to explore the match between the practice as conceptualized and the practice as implemented is imperative.

In addition to expanding and connecting current practices, we are also recommending that the Agency continue to support/promote community building efforts that are designed to promote life long connections for emancipating foster youth. One such community effort that we believe has particular relevance to foster youth is that of Family Resource Centers. Family Resource Centers offer an exciting possibility for enhancing (life long) youth connections to the community. A typical Family Resource Center is an integral part of the community that is a welcoming, safe and secure site to link families and individuals to the broader community. One of the hallmarks of the modern Family Resource Center is a commitment to respect the beliefs, values and contributions of all members of the community. Moreover, Family Resource Centers might be an ideal venue for expanding the use of “Team Decision Making”. It is quite likely, then, that Family Resource Centers would welcome the opportunity to participate in the practice of Team Decision Making.

There are other forces currently at work in Stanislaus County that have identified the Family Resource Center as an important partner in nurturing families and children. These forces include Child Welfare Redesign and the Stanislaus County Children and Families Commission. It appears that the timing in this County is particularly propitious for developing a multidimensional Family Resource Center strategy to benefit families and children, including foster youth and their families.

Having completed this extensive investigation of the emancipation process, the research team has arrived at a very basic conclusion: the Child Welfare System cannot and should not be expected to assume sole responsibility for the care and well being of foster youth. From our vantage point, if we are to experience substantive change to the health and well being of foster youth, the broader community must become more intimately involved. While the Child Welfare System can continue to promote practices that enhance life-long connections, given its legal mandates and historic role, it is apparent that the “system” is not in the best position to lead the process of developing/conceptualizing, implementing and monitoring change efforts. It is our opinion that these change efforts stand a greater chance of producing meaningful results if the Agency (or System) serves as a partner in the process rather than the leader of the practice. This then puts the onus squarely on the shoulders of the broader community of concerned citizens to step to the forefront and assume a leadership role.

AGING OUT:

A Preliminary Examination of the Transition from Foster Care Youth to Emancipated Adult

Introduction

The Center for Public Policy Studies at California State University, Stanislaus, in partnership with Faculty members and graduate students from the Master of Social Work Program, conducted a 15 month study to provide a preliminary assessment of the issues, obstacles, and successes experienced by foster youth as they transition through the emancipation process. The study was intended as a means to provide Stanislaus County Community Services Agency, as well as persons interested in youth who have been in the foster care system, with a preliminary profile of recently emancipated “Stanislaus County” youth, an assessment of emancipation issues (including resource gaps and strengths), a process evaluation of the Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP), and an identification of some promising practices in the field regarding youth and emancipation from the foster care system. The Center intended for this initial study to serve as the foundation for the development of further emancipation research and to serve as a mechanism for offering insight into programmatic and policy decision-making.

This report provides a detailed identification and discussion of the major findings of the study and the implications for practice, policy, and future research. The report is organized around six major segments that embody the overall goals of the research. Section I documents and describes the “characteristics” of foster youth residing in Stanislaus County who emancipated during a recent four year period. Section II adds depth to the quantitative data described in Section I by exploring and describing the post emancipation experiences of a group of young adults, formerly in the foster care system in Stanislaus County, who participated in a series of monthly in-depth interviews over an 8 month period. Section III describes the findings generated from focus groups with an array of participants, including service providers and youth currently in the foster care system, regarding service needs and service gaps. Section IV describes the findings of the

process evaluation of the Independent Living Skills Program. Section V provides an overview of “Promising Practices” related to emancipation issues, which are occurring across the country. Section VI details the major findings of the study and recommendations for practice, policy and future research.

Section I: A Profile of Emancipated Foster Youth

Overview

This portion of the study was designed to document and describe the characteristics of youth who emancipated from care between January, 1998 and December, 2001. Our analysis included a description of demographic characteristics (gender, ethnicity, health and mental health issues, age of entry into care, reason for entry into the foster care system) and placement history characteristics (length of time in care, number of placement changes, educational experiences while in care, participation in ILSP). Our analysis also included an examination of the interaction between and among demographic and placement history characteristics. Overall, our intent was to create a clearer picture of the characteristics of the emancipation cohort and factors that might impact their placement experiences.

In addition to describing the cohort of emancipating youth’s demographic characteristics and placement experiences, we attempted to understand what happened to youth following their departure from the foster care system. One method for completing this objective involved compiling administrative data from various agencies/sources that the exiting youth might “touch” as they attempt to transition from foster youth to emancipated adult. It was our belief that these contacts might suggest how youth are fairing in their adult journeys following their departure from the foster care system. Armed with these “service/system contact” data, we then transposed the demographic and placement history data onto the “outcome/contact” data in order to uncover connections or patterns. Specifically, we wanted to determine if there were patterns regarding the youths’ demographic characteristics and placement experiences while in the foster care system and the services/agencies in which they came in contact following their emancipation.

Ultimately, by possessing this information, one is in a position to: 1) better compare the characteristics of youth who emancipated from the foster care system in Stanislaus County to foster youth in other locations, and 2) have a clearer understanding of what happens to Stanislaus County youth as they exit care and the relationship between placement experiences and adult outcomes. It is our belief that this information is vital in planning and implementing policies, practices and procedures for working with youth.

Methodology

All administrative data related to demographic and placement history variables were provided by the Community Services Agency of Stanislaus County. The four-year time period (January of 1998 through December of 2001) was established because the data management system (CWS/CMS) was implemented and operational in January of 1998. For definitional purposes, Agency personnel were asked to provide data on all (non-probation) Stanislaus County youth who emancipated (“aged out”) from all types of foster care during the four year time period. The Agency personnel ran a query on all foster youth in Stanislaus County who matched the specifications of the study. Additional information that was not readily available via administrative data, such as educational experiences and health and mental health issues, was pulled from existing case records. All data were provided by the Agency in the form of an excel data file. Case record reviews were conducted in-house/agency by two graduate students under the supervision of the Principal Investigator.

All “system” contact data were gathered through partnerships/agreements with the identified systems governing the requested data. The Community Services Agency was able to provide “system contact” information related to Medi-Cal Enrollment, StanWORKS recipients, child abuse allegations, and Mental Health Services. The Department of Motor Vehicles provided driver’s license information, and the local University determined whether or not emancipated youth made contact by taking classes, applying for admission and requesting information. The local police department provided data related to whether the youth were defendants, suspects, victims, witnesses, or reporting parties to a crime.

Results

Demographic Overview

A total of 154 “Stanislaus County” youth emancipated between January, 1998 and December, 2001. Of the 154 youth who emancipated during the four year time period under study, 30% (n=46) emancipated in 1998, 27% (n=42) emancipated in 1999, 18% (n=28) emancipated in 2000, and 25% (n=38) emancipated in 2001. In 2001, it was estimated that there were 725 “Stanislaus County” children in foster care. (This number does not include the approximate 500 foster youth who were placed in Stanislaus County by other counties throughout California.) These numbers indicate that roughly 5% of the Stanislaus County youth in foster care emancipated each year during this four-year period.

Nearly two thirds (61%, n=95) of the 154 youth who emancipated between 1998-2001 were females. The gender composition of emancipated youth differs significantly with regard to the overall youth population in Stanislaus County, in which males comprise 52% and females 48% of all youth between the ages of 15 and 19 (Rand, 2003); however, the gender composition is consistent with the general composition of youth in the foster care system and emancipating foster youth in California, where girls generally outnumber boys (Goerge, et al., 2002).

As revealed in Table 1, there were notable differences in the ethnic composition of the group of emancipated youth and the total youth population (ages 15 to 19) in Stanislaus County. The largest group of emancipated youth consisted of White/Non Hispanics (59%, n=91), followed by Hispanics/Latinos (23%, n=36). African American youth were the only group that was significantly over represented (14%, n=22) in the emancipation population in relationship to the percentage of African American youth in the general population in Stanislaus County (2%, n=663). Again, however, these findings are consistent with the “aging out” population across California where African Americans are over-represented (32.2%) and Hispanics/Latinos (20.5%) and Whites/Non-Hispanics (43.7%) are under-represented in the aging out population (Goerge, et al.).

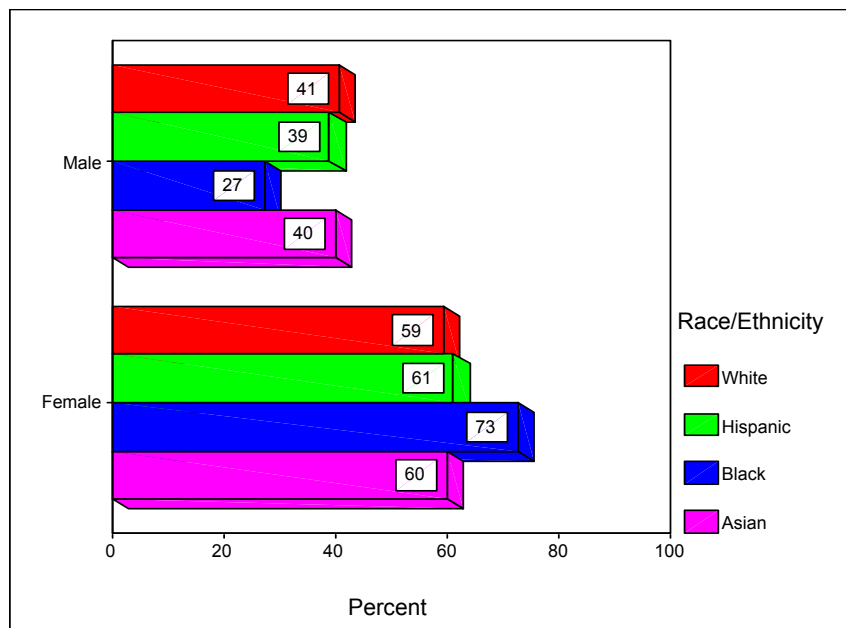
Table 1
 Ethnic Composition
 Stanislaus County Emancipation Group vs. Stanislaus County Youth Population.

Racial/Ethnic Group	Emancipated Group	Youth Population
White/Non Hispanic	59.1%(n=91)	56%(n=17,868)
Hispanic/Latino	23.4%(n=36)	32%(n=10,323)
African American	14.3%(n=22)	2%(n=663)
Asian American	3.2%(n=5)	8%(n=2536)

(Rand California Population Statistics for 1999)

As revealed in Figure 1, a further examination of the emancipated youth based on gender and ethnicity reveals an even clearer composite picture of the 154 youth. While females outnumber males in every ethnic group, the percentage of African American females is disproportionately higher in comparison to African American males and the composition of the other ethnic groups and their gender comparisons.

Figure 1
Gender Composition by Race



Placement History

The 154 youth came into the foster care system for a myriad of reasons. As revealed in Table 2, the largest percentage of youth who came into the system were classified as “Parent Absent” (26.0%, n=40), followed by “General Neglect” (16.2%, n=25), and “Disrupted Guardianship” (13.6%, n=21). Seventeen of the 154 youth (11%) came into the system as a result of sexual abuse.

Table 2
Reason for Case Intervention (n=154)

Reason	Percent	Frequency (n)
Parent Absent	26.0%	40
General Neglect	16.2%	25
Disrupted Guardianship	13.6%	21
Physical Abuse	11.0%	17
Sexual Abuse	11.0%	17
Severe Neglect	9.0%	14
Failure to Protect	6.5%	10
Disrupted Adoptive Placement	3.9%	6
Other	2.6%	4

As revealed in Table 3, the reason for entry into the system was somewhat consistent for both males and females, and again the category “Parent Absent” was the most prominent reason for both males’ and females’ entry into the system. One difference involved the fact that a significantly higher percentage of girls entered the system as a result of sexual abuse.

Table 3
Reason for Intervention by Gender

<u>Reason</u>	<u>Females</u>		<u>Males</u>	
	n	%	n	%
Parent Absent	25	26.3	15	25.4
General Neglect	14	14.7	11	18.6
Sexual Abuse	13	13.7	4	6.8
Physical Abuse	12	12.6	5	5.8
Disrupted Guardianship	12	12.6	9	15.3
Severe Neglect	7	7.4	7	11.9
Failure to Protect	6	6.3	4	6.8
Disrupted Adoptive PLT.	3	3.2	3	5.1
Other	3	3.2	1	1.7

While the “Parent Absent” category contained the highest number of cases for each ethnic group as the reason for case intervention, as revealed in Table 4 there was notable variance among the ethnic groups and the circumstances that brought youth into the system. African Americans (as well as the small sample of youth classified as Asian Americans) had the highest rate of case intervention attributed to “Parent Absent,” with over one-third of the African American youth being designated in this category. Physical abuse and sexual abuse were more prominent reasons for intervention for those classified as Hispanic/Latino in comparison to the other groups, while “General Neglect” was more prominent for those classified as White/Non-Hispanic.

Table 4
Reason for Intervention by Race/Ethnicity

<u>Reason</u>	White (n=91)	Hispanic (n=36)	Black (n=22)	Asian (n=5)
Parent Absent	25.3%	19.4%	36.4%	40.0%
General Neglect	20.9%	11.1%	9.1%	0.0%
Disrupted Guardianship	15.4%	11.1%	13.6%	0.0%
Sexual Abuse	9.9%	16.7%	9.9%	0.0%
Physical Abuse	8.8%	19.4%	9.1%	0.0%
Failure to Protect	7.7%	8.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Severe Neglect	6.6%	8.3%	13.6%	40.0%
Disrupted Adoptive PLT.	4.4%	2.8%	0.0%	20.0%
Other	1.1%	2.8%	9.1%	0.0%

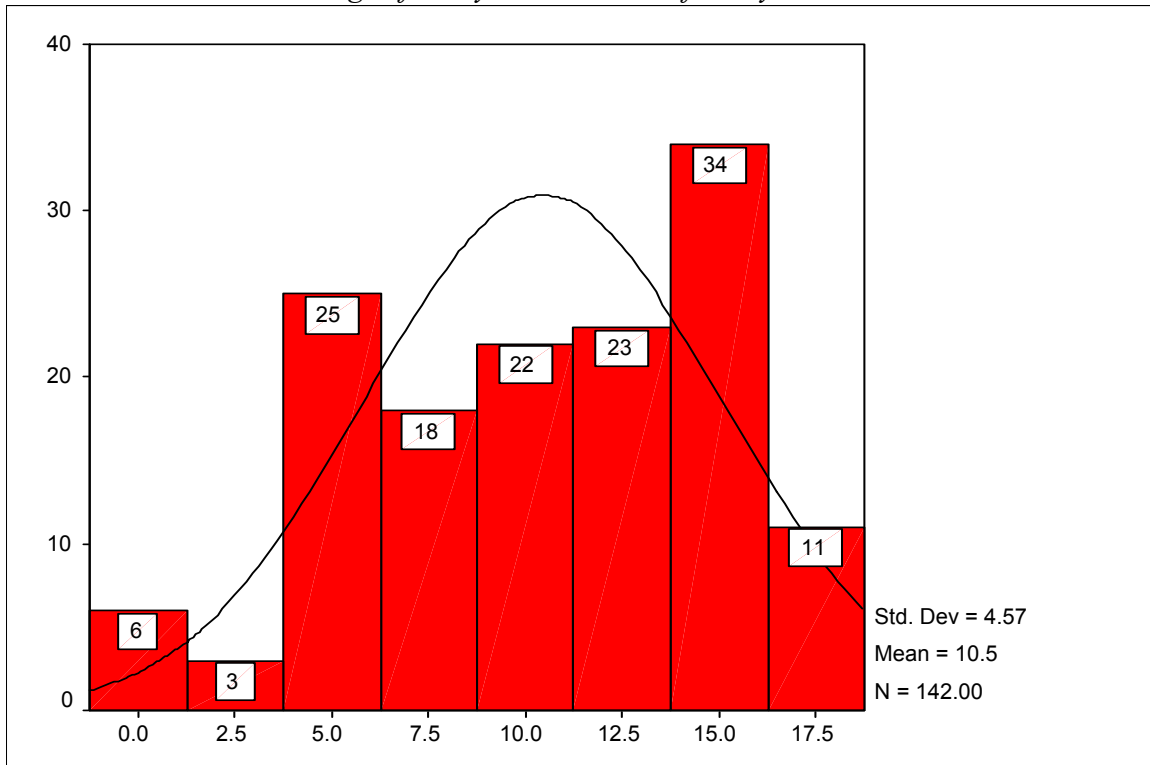
For the 154 emancipated youth, the average age of entry into the system was 10.45 years (median age of 11 years). As revealed in Table 5, similar to the California aging out population as a whole, the highest percentage of Stanislaus County emancipating youth (39.4%) entered the system between the ages of 11 and 15 years of age. Holistically, the age of entry into the foster care system for Stanislaus County emancipating youth mirrors that of the California aging out population.

Table 5
*Age Entering Care of
Stanislaus County Emancipated Youth vs. California Emancipated Youth*

<u>Age of Entry</u>	Stanislaus County Youth	California Youth
0 years	4.2% (n=6)	.07%
1-5 years	9.9% (n=14)	8.6%
6-10 years	31.0% (n=44)	33.8%
11-15 years	39.4% (n=56)	42.6%
16+ years	15.5% (n=22)	14.2%

As revealed in Figure 2, the Stanislaus County emancipation group included youth who spent all 18 years of their childhood in the Child Welfare system, as well as those who spent less than a year in care. Coinciding with age of entry into care, on average the emancipated youth spent 7.5 years in care.

Figure 2
Age of Entry into Child Welfare System



As revealed in Table 6, again while there were many similarities based on gender and ethnicity and the age at which youth entered the foster care system, there were also notable differences. For each ethnic group, girls tended to be slightly older than boys when they entered care. However, African American girls and boys tended to be younger than their ethnic cohorts when they entered the system. As highlighted in Table 7, these numbers also coincide with the findings related to the length of time spent in care. As a whole, African American youth had longer stays in the foster care system in comparison to their ethnic and gender cohorts.

Table 6
Age of Entry by Gender and Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Age of Entry	
	Males	Females
Asian American	10.5 years	13.0 years
White/Non-Hispanic	10.3 years	11.3 years
Hispanic/Latino	8.7 years	10.3 years
African American	7.6 years	9.9 years

Table 7
Length of Time in Care by Gender and Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Length of Time In Care	
	Males	Females
Asian American	7.5 years	5.0 years
White/Non-Hispanic	7.6 years	6.6 years
Hispanic/Latino	9.2 years	7.6 years
African American	10.3 years	8.0 years

Education

Educational data for the emancipation group posed a significant problem. The administrative data did not contain the information necessary to provide a profile of the group’s educational experiences while in care. For example, only 18 of the 154 cases (11.7%) contained information regarding the highest grade completed while in care, and only 13 of the 154 cases specified a projected graduation date. The only somewhat useful data regarding education gleaned from the administrative data involved the “type” of school attended by the emancipated cohort. In 64 of the 154 cases (41.6%), the name of the last school attended by the youth (while in care) was specified. From these data, we

were able to determine that 13 of the 64 youth (20.3%) for which data were available were attending school in a non-traditional educational setting.

Given the limitations of the administrative data, we conducted an examination of 100 randomly selected case files from the pool of 154 cases. While the data contained in the case files were slightly more descriptive, again the quality and consistency of the data made it difficult, if not impossible, to draw an accurate picture of the emancipated group's educational progress and experience while in the foster care system.

Of the 100 files, we were able to extract educational data for 96 youth. The case files suggest that 20% of the youth (19 out of 96) were "expected to graduate on time," suggesting that nearly 80% of the youth were not at "grade level" at the time of emancipation. In a total of 12 cases (3%), there was clear documentation that the youth did graduate; however, in only 3% of the cases did graduation occur prior to emancipation.

The case file data suggested that 67.7% of the youth (65 out of 96) attended a traditional public high school, 39.6% (38 out of 96) attended an alternative education school, 4.2% (4 out of 96) attended a private high school, and 3.1% (3 out of 96) attended a private special education school. These numbers exceed 96 (n=110) because some youth attended multiple types of schools. In total, the group attended 195 different high schools, which indicates that on average each youth attended two high schools while in the foster care system. In total, the group attended 243 primary schools (grades K through 8) while in care, which indicates that on average the youth experienced 2.5 school changes during the primary school years.

Given the overall limitations of the educational data, we did not pursue further analysis regarding the relationship between education and other demographic (or outcome) variables.

Placement Stability

Of the 154 emancipated foster youth, half experienced 3 or fewer placements while in the foster care system. (It should be noted that one of these placements likely included the initial “placement/receiving home,” as Stanislaus County’s data collection system “counts” these initial receiving homes when calculating placement change.) The average number of placement changes for the group was 5. Figure 3 provides a composite picture of the sample as a whole and reveals that the placement changes included as few as one change and as many as 25.

No differences were found between males and females and the average number of placement changes (5.27 and 5.35, respectively). Additionally, no differences were found between the percentage of males and females who experienced three or fewer placements. A comparison of the number of placement changes based on gender and ethnicity (Table 8) revealed that African American males and females experienced the fewest number of placement changes on average. The findings also revealed that (other than the small group of Asian Americans) those boys classified as Hispanic/Latino have on average the most placement changes of all groups.

Figure 3
Placement Change Distribution

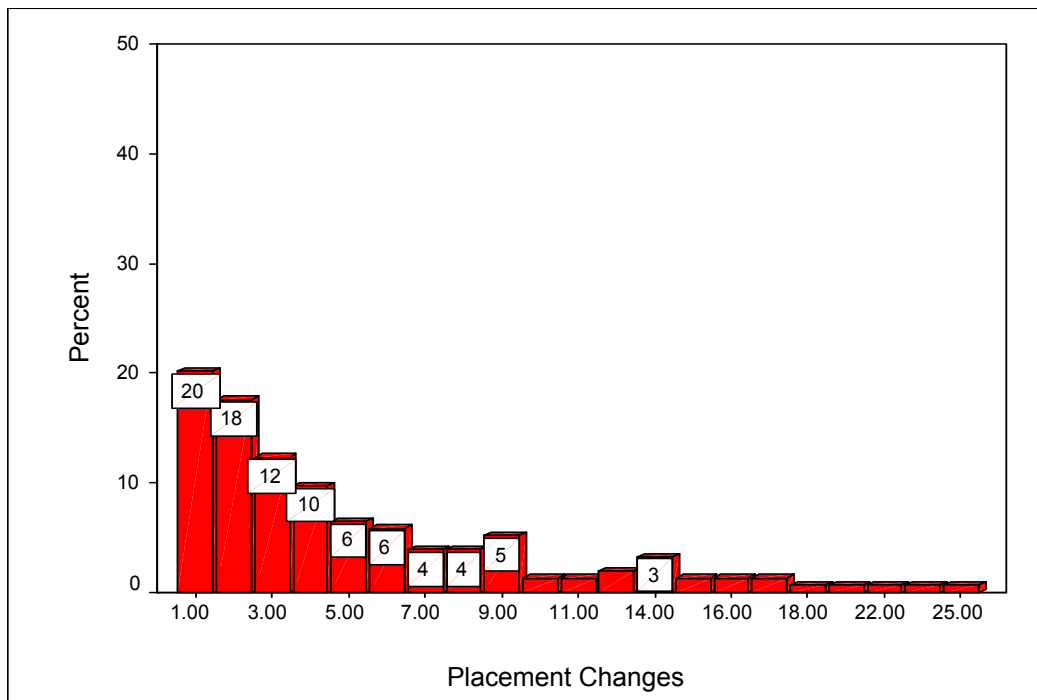


Table 8
Placement Changes by Gender and Ethnicity

Ethnicity	# of Placement Changes	
	Males	Females
Asian American	10.0	5.3
White/Non-Hispanic	4.7	5.9
Hispanic/Latino	7.7	4.9
African American	2.8	4.4

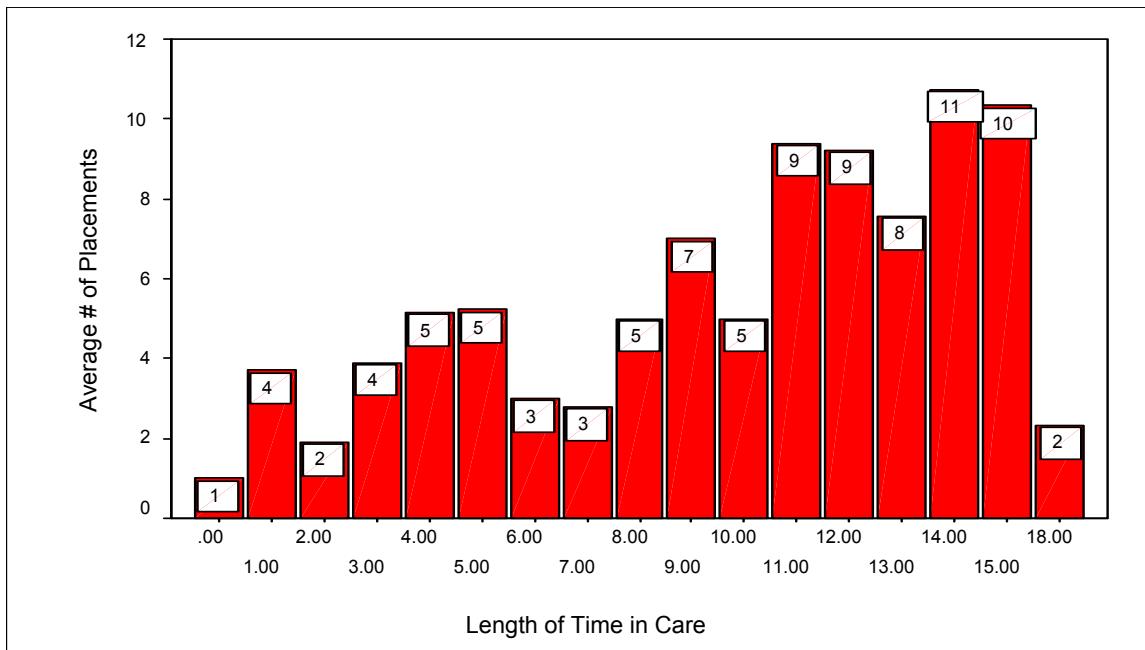
An examination of placement stability (placement changes) based on the reason for entry into the system revealed that holistically the number of placement changes were consistent among the various reasons for entry; however, the highest number of placements were experienced by those who came into the system due to sexual abuse, and the fewest number of placements were experienced by those who experienced a disrupted guardianship or a guardian requesting Foster Care payment.

Table 9
Reason for Case Intervention and Placement Change (n=154)

Reason	Average # of Placement Changes
Sexual Abuse	7.0
Severe Neglect	6.2
Physical Abuse	6.2
General Neglect	5.8
Other	5.7
Disrupted Adoptive Placement	5.0
Absent Parent	5.0
Failure to Protect	4.6
Disrupted Guardianship	2.8

The results also revealed a relationship between the length of time in care and the number of placement changes. Generally, the more time one spent in care, the higher the number of placement changes.

Figure 4
Length of Time in Care and Placement Change



In addition to examining the number of placement changes and the demographic variables associated with placement changes, we also were interested in examining the identified reasons for placement changes. The administrative data did not provide the type of insight/information to allow us to uncover reasons for placement changes, so again we turned our attention to the case files. Specifically, a random sample of 100 case files (of the 154 youth) was used in order to document the major themes regarding the causes or situations that led to a need for a placement change.

The random sample of case files produced somewhat of a similar finding regarding the average number of placement changes (6.5 for the sample of 100 versus 5 for the total group of 154). Nevertheless, the sample of 100 case files did include a smaller percentage of youth who experienced three or fewer placement changes (24% for the sample of 100 versus 50% for the total 154 youth).

In examining the case files, there were 12 cases where no placement change occurred. For the remainder of cases, there were 29 that involved placement change(s), but there was no information found describing the reason for placement change. In total, 136 identified explanations were found for the placement changes that occurred. These explanations produced three major themes encapsulating reasons for placement change: 1) Kinship Care Issues, 2) Behavioral Concerns, and 3) Caretaker Incapacity.

The theme “Kinship Care” was identified as the most frequent reason for placement change. This category included changes that resulted when youth moved from a placement with a non-relative to a relative, changes that occurred between relatives (for example from grandparent to aunt/uncle), “trial visit” placements with biological parents, and change that occurred as a result of the child being placed with a guardian. Within the category of kinship care, we noted two types of kinship changes, which were evenly divided among the sample in this category: those that resulted because of the desire/opportunity to reconnect the child with his/her biological family and those that occurred because of a “concern” with the original kinship placement.

Closely rivaling “kinship care” as the most common reason for placement change was the category of “behavioral concerns.” This category encompassed a number of behavioral characteristics that were attributed to the foster youth and resulted in a situation whereby the action taken by the youth was described as the principle factor that led to placement change. These identified actions included, but were not limited to, verbal and physical aggression, disobedience, violence, stealing, and deception. Additionally, a major component of this category was “running away.” Many of the placement changes that were specified in this category were described as a result of the youths’ problematic behaviors, which culminated in the youth running away from the home.

A final theme, which encompassed the myriad of factors that led to placement change, can be best described as “caretaker incapacity.” This theme encompassed those situations where it was deemed that the foster care provider simply could not care for the youth.

This category included instances where the health of the care provider was such that he/she could no longer meet the needs of the child, actions taken by the care provider were deemed inappropriate, or the provider simply “changed his/her mind” about the placement. The care provider “changing his/her mind” was the most common reason for placement change under the theme “caretaker incapacity.”

ILSP Participation

If the administrative data accurately capture participation rates, the emancipation group as a whole was not overly involved in the Independent Living Skills Program. According to the administrative data, of the 154 youth, 64.3% (n=99) did not attend a single ILSP class. The next largest group (13.6%, n=21) attended between one to five classes. A total of 16 (10.4%) youth attended 6 to 10 classes, and the remainder (11.7%, n=18) attended more than 10 classes.

There were no differences in the rate of participation based on gender or ethnicity. Additionally, there was no observed relationship between the number of ILSP classes attended and length of time in care or in the rate of participation based on the reason for entry into the child welfare system. There was a positive linear relationship observed between number of ILSP classes attended and number of placement changes ($r=.221$, $p=.005$) experienced. The greater the number of placement changes, the greater the number of classes attended.

Health/Mental Health Issues

The administrative data indicated that 32 (20.8%) of the 154 youth had an identified health or mental health “condition.” Table 10 provides a breakdown of the health/mental health conditions that were identified from the administrative data and indicates that a “Conversion Client Condition” was the most commonly reported health/mental health condition for the emancipating youth. (Our follow-up conversations with Child Welfare staff failed to produce a consistent definition for the term Conversion Client Condition.)

Table 10
Health and Mental Health Conditions

Specified Condition	Frequency
Conversion Client Condition	12
Emotional Disorder	6
Other Physical Health Condition	4
Mood Swings	2
Developmental Disabled	2
Alcohol Abuse	1
Allergies	1
Blind/Visual Impairment	1
Cruel or Mean to Others	1
Temper Tantrums	1
Visual Impairment	1

Given the somewhat non-descriptive nature of the physical and mental health data provided by the administrative data, we also conducted a case review of 100 randomly selected case files from the pool of 154 cases and were able to extract health and mental health data from 98 cases. This case audit provided greater insight into service providers’ views of the physical and emotional well-being of the emancipated youth and raised questions about the quality of the administrative data related to this variable.

As revealed below in Table 11, Depression, Attention Deficit Disorder, Suicidal Ideation, and “Other” mental health issues were prominent “terms” used to characterize the mental health of a significant portion of the emancipated group. Additionally, behavioral problems were identified/specified in 31.6% (31 out of 98) of the cases.

Table 11
Identified Mental Health Conditions: Case Records

Specified Condition	Frequency	Percentage
Depression	21/98 cases	21.4%
ADHD	16/97 cases	16.5%
Suicidal Ideation	15/97 cases	15.5%
“Other” Mental Health Issue	29/98 cases	29.6%
PTSD	8/98 cases	8.2%

The most notable differences in mental health conditions based on gender involved that fact that a higher percentage of females (27.1%) were characterized as “depressed” compared to males (12.8%). Conversely, a higher percentage of males (34.2%) were identified as Attention Deficit Disorder compared to females (5.1%). No differences were found with regard to mental health conditions and ethnicity.

Only two discernable patterns were found connecting mental health conditions to placement change. All three female youth who were identified as ADHD experienced four or more placements while in care. Additionally, all four males who experienced suicidal ideations experienced four or more placements.

Post Emancipation “Contacts/Outcomes”

With the demographic and placement history overview created, our next task was to examine the post emancipation experiences of this group of 154 youth using service contact data and to connect demographic and placement history variables to post-emancipation outcomes.

Medi-Cal

Of the 154 youth, fewer than half (44%, n=69) enrolled in/received Medi-Cal (health insurance) entitlements post emancipation. Emancipated females (49.5%) were more likely than males (37.3%) to have Medi-Cal coverage. There was no difference in Medi-Cal enrollment based on ethnicity, placement stability (those who experienced fewer

placements were not more or less likely to be enrolled in Medi-Cal services), length of time in care, or reason for entry into the Child Welfare System.

Significant differences ($t=2.27$, $p=.02$) were observed regarding participation in the ILSP classes and Medi-Cal coverage. The youth who had Medi-Cal coverage, on average, attended more classes (5.07) than those who did not have coverage (2.40).

DMV

Just over half (50.8%, $n=62$) of the emancipated youth for which data were available ($n=122$) possessed a California driver's license. A comparable number of males (48.4%) and females (51.5%) possessed a license, and there were no differences in possessing a driver's license based on ethnicity. (One group was not more or less likely to possess a driver's license than another.) There was a significant difference ($\chi^2=12.02$, $p=.00$) in rate of driver's license possession and placement stability. Those youth who experienced 3 or fewer placements while in care were significantly more likely to possess a driver's license (67.9% had a driver's license) than those who experienced more than three placements while in care (36.4% had a driver's license). This connection between placement stability and driver's license possession is evident for both males and females (i.e., males who had three or fewer placements were more likely to have a driver's license than males who experienced more than three placement changes, and females who had three or fewer placements were more likely to have a driver's license than females who experienced more than three placement changes.)

No differences were observed with regard to length of time in care or reason for entry into the Child Welfare System and possessing a driver's license. However, significant differences ($t=-2.20$, $p=.03$) were observed regarding participation in the ILSP classes and possessing a driver's license. The youth who had a driver's license, on average, attended *fewer* classes (2.20) than those who did not have a license (5.18).

Law Enforcement

Since leaving the foster care system, nearly half (45.5%, $n=70$) of the emancipated foster youth had contact with the local Police Department. This contact included being a defendant in a crime (23.4%, $n=36$), a suspect in a crime (21.4%, $n=33$), the victim of a

crime (18.8%, n=29), the reporting party to a crime (11%, n=17), or a witness to a crime (9.7%, n=15). These numbers reflect the fact that nearly half of the youth who came in contact with law enforcement had more than one interaction.

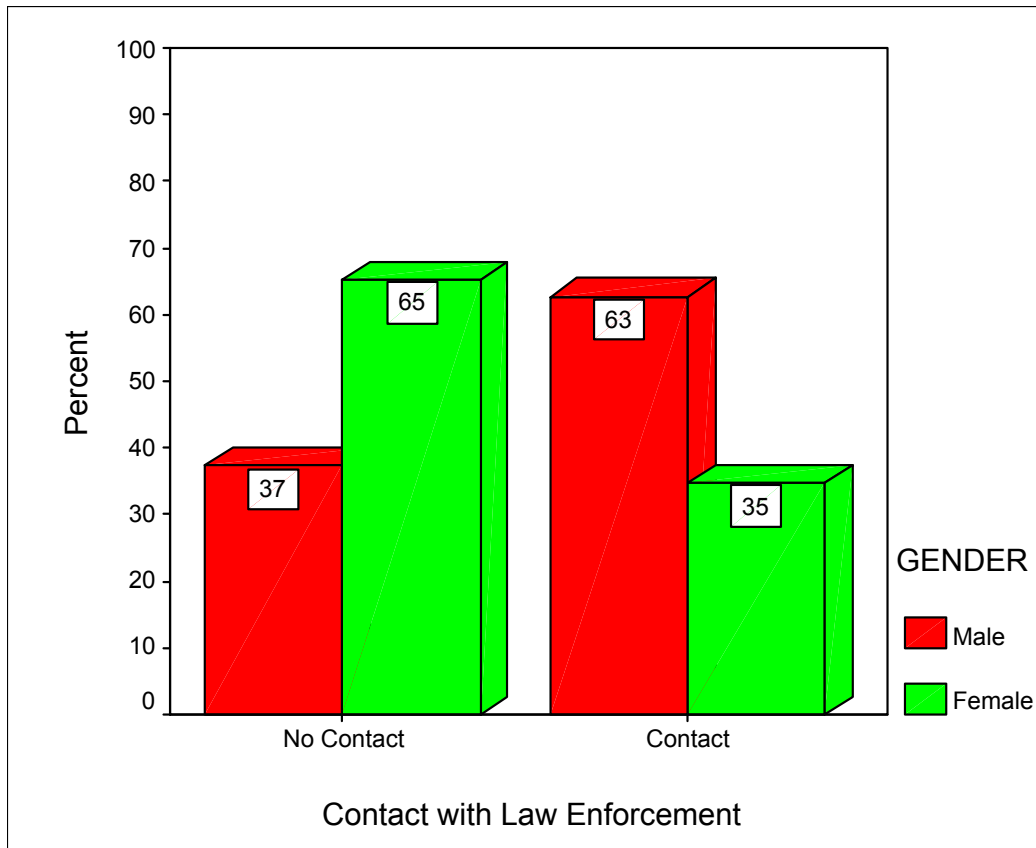
Table 12 identifies the specific “types” of offenses for which former foster youth had contact with law enforcement, in which they were the suspect or defendant in the crime.

Table 12
Nature of Contact with Law Enforcement

Aggravated Assault	Forgery
Assault and Battery	Grand Theft
Auto Theft	Petty Theft
Burglary	Possession of Controlled Substance
Carjack	Rape
Child Abuse	Spousal Battery
Child Molestation	Suspended License
Disturbing the Peace	Trespassing
DUI	Unlicensed Driver
Embezzlement	Vandalism

Figure 5 illustrates the fact that males (62.7%, n=37) were much more likely than females (34.7%, n=33) to have had an interaction with the local law enforcement.

Figure 5
Emancipated Youth and Law Enforcement Contact



Further analysis revealed that a significantly higher percentage of males (45.8%) than females (9.5%) were defendants in a crime, suspects in a crime (40.7% versus 9.5%, respectively), and witnesses to a crime (15.3% versus 6.3%, respectively). There were no differences between males and females and the rate of interaction related to being a victim of a crime or a reporting party.

There were no differences observed with regard to ethnicity and interaction with law enforcement, including no statistical differences in the number of contacts or the type of contact.

Placement stability was connected to contact with Law Enforcement. Those youth who experienced 3 or fewer placements were less likely (33.8%) to have had contact with law enforcement than those youth who had more than 3 placements (57.1%). Youth with

more than three placements were also statistically more likely to be defendants, suspects and victims of/in a crime. This pattern of placement stability and contact with law enforcement was consistent for both males and females; however, given the relatively small percentage of females who had contact with law enforcement, this pattern is particularly powerful. Of the nine females who were defendants in a crime, seven (77.8%) experienced more than three placements while in care. Of the nine females who were identified as suspects in a crime (two of which were also defendants in a crime), seven (77.8%) experienced more than three placements. Of the 17 females who were victims in a crime, 12 (70.6%) experienced more than three placements while in care.

Attendance in ILSP classes was also connected to contact with law enforcement. Those youth who were identified as a victim, witness, or defendant in a crime attended a significantly *greater* number of classes (7.03, 7.20, 5.69, respectively) than those youths who were not associated with such contact (2.80, 3.20, 2.95, respectively).

StanWORKS

Of the 154 youth, 18.8% (n=29) received StanWORKS services (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, General Assistance, and Food Stamps) post emancipation. Slightly more females (21.1%) than males (15.3) received assistance. There was no difference in utilization rates of StanWORKS services based on ethnicity, placement stability (those who experienced fewer placements were not more or less likely to receive assistance), length of time in care, or reason for entry into the Child Welfare System.

Significant differences were noted related to number of ILSP classes and receiving services post emancipation. Those persons who were recipients of services were also ones who attended ILSP more regularly (averaging 6.68 classes attended), compared to those who were not recipients (averaging 2.88 classes attended).

Child Welfare

Twelve (7.8%) of the 154 youth who emancipated between January, 1998 and December, 2001 were later reported as the perpetrator in an allegation of child abuse. Seven of the

12 allegations were substantiated. Ten of the 12 persons against whom an allegation was made were female, and six of the seven substantiated cases involved females.

Given the “small” number of former foster youth in this category, no discernable pattern linking demographic variables or placement history variables was noted. It is worth mentioning that the 12 youth who were involved in allegations of child abuse originally came into the system for the same myriad reasons that all of the youth became involved in the foster care system.

Higher Education

We attempted to determine the percentage of youth who continued their education after high school at institutions of higher learning. Our hope was to gather data from both the local junior college and the four-year University. We were informed that the local junior college did not have sufficient resources to address our request; however we were able to compile data from the four-year institution.

Our data suggests that 13% (20 out of 154) of the youth made contact with the University. This contact typically involved the submission of a request for application, an application (or portion of an application) submitted, or a letter of inquiry/interest. Nevertheless, less than 1% of the group actually attended classes at the University. There was no difference in the rate of contact for males and females; however, there was a difference based on ethnicity. Nine out of the 22 (40.9%) African American youth had contact with the University, while 11 out of the 91 (12.1%) youth classified as White/Non-Hispanic had contact with the University. None of the youth classified as Latino or Asian American (n= 41) had contact with the University.

There was also a pattern related to ILSP participation and contact with the University. Those youth who did not attend ILSP and those youth who attended 11 or more classes were more likely to have contact with the University compared to those youth who attended between 1 and 10 ILSP classes. Of the 18 youth to attend 11 or more ILSP sessions, 27.8% (n=5) made contact with the University. Of the 99 youth who did not

participate in the ILSP program, 15 (15.2%) made contact with the University. Of the 37 youth who participated in at least one ILSP class but no more than 10 ILSP classes, none had contact with the University.

Section II: Longitudinal Follow-up Interviews with Emancipated Youth

While research (such as that described above) on former foster youth continues to highlight the problems confronting them after they emancipate from care, the depth of their experiences and struggles is often lost in the aggregation of data. The numbers themselves fail to capture the hardship, despair, and isolation, as well as the former foster youth's goals and dreams and the progress and successes they achieve as they strive to adjust to life after foster care. As such, in addition to creating an aggregate picture of the youth who emancipated from Stanislaus County using both pre and post emancipation administrative and case record data, we were also interested in capturing former foster youth's post emancipation experiences via their personal perspectives. In order to achieve this objective, we connected with 20 young adults between the ages of 18 and 23 who had emancipated from the child welfare system in Stanislaus County. Our intent was to engage the young adults in monthly conversations over an eight month period in order to highlight their experiences after exiting the foster care system. Our specific intent was to explore the issues that have been raised by foster youth, practitioners and researchers as critical areas of concern for emancipating foster youth, namely housing, education, employment, transportation, social support, and goals.

This section of the report contains two components. First, the general patterns or themes that were gleaned from the total compilation of interviews with the former foster youth are described. Second, and most importantly, we highlight three individual case vignettes, which not only express the general patterns that were observed in the group as a whole but also add greater insight into the unique experiences of the young adults as they grapple with life issues post emancipation. It is important to mention that the small sample of youth who participated in the follow-along interviews do not necessarily reflect all emancipated foster youth. Simply given the fact that we were able to consistently meet with the foster youth for a period of eight consecutive months suggests that these participants might be experiencing "fewer" struggles than many foster youth. Nevertheless, the interview process did reveal what we believe is extremely valuable insight, as these discussions highlighted the complexity of issues facing former foster

youth and foster care providers. The process also highlighted both the variance in tools, resources, skills and abilities from one young adult to another, as well as the “thin line” that differentiates what one might define as a successful and unsuccessful emancipation.

Demographics

Multiple interviews were conducted with seventeen emancipated youth living in Stanislaus County. These participants met with an interviewer monthly to explore issues related to housing, education, employment, transportation, social support, and future goals. As the eight waves of interviews progressed, over half (n=12) of the young adults participated in all eight interviews. Additionally, three of the young adults participated in six interviews, and the remainder (n=2) participated in fewer than four interviews. (Three of the original 20 youth participated in only one interview and thus were not included in the analysis.) The participants included a diverse array of ethnic groups, including White/Non Hispanic, African American and Hispanic/Latino youth. Additionally, the group was evenly distributed between males (n=9) and females (n=8). The group ranged in age from 18 to 21.

Collective Observations

While each individual provided us with unique insight about his/her experiences, struggles, and successes post emancipation, there were a number of pervasive/common themes that emerged from our in-depth tracking interviews. These themes clustered into two broad categories of “struggles” and “strengths.” Regarding specific areas of struggle, the thematic observations evolved into two “interrelated” major categories:

1) lack of tangible resources and 2) uncertainty and lack of interpersonal connectedness.

The broad thematic area of strength clustered into three major categories:

1) resourcefulness, 2) persistency, and 3) personality.

Group Struggle

Lack of Tangible Resources

Not surprisingly and consistent with the current knowledge base, a major theme to emerge from the in-depth interviews with youth involved their struggle to obtain and maintain tangible resources. Housing and employment were two issues that posed the greatest difficulty to the participants. Nearly all participants experienced at least one (sometimes more) housing change(s) and (if employed) a job change in the short eight-month interview period. Regarding housing, many of the participants lived in “short-term housing” arrangements, either receiving “transitional” housing from an Agency or living “for the time being” with a friend or “non-permanent” adult. Regarding employment, those who were employed tended to be drifting between part-time and full-time “service” industry jobs, particularly fast food. Only one of the participants had heard of and was getting an Earned Income Tax Credit.

Many of the young adults reported difficulty in their living arrangements. These difficulties encompassed an array of issues, including problems related to personality clashes, unrealistic rules/expectations, lack of dependability on the landlord’s part, and poor/unsanitary living conditions. As the interviews progressed, expressed concerns over housing and living arrangements became more exacerbated.

Similar concerns were raised regarding difficulties related to maintaining employment. Many young adults talked about the struggle of finding employment and some raised concern regarding discrimination in hiring practices based on their age, appearance and socioeconomic status. Others described personality conflicts with co-workers or managers and poor working conditions. Still others raised concern about irregular and inconsistent hours and work schedules. Finally, others described concerns over low wages and the ability to cover basic expenses.

Transportation and lack of money were two additional tangible resource issues that were problematic for the participants. Five of the seventeen young adults indicated that they owned or possessed a vehicle. However, most of the participants indicated that they

relied heavily on friends and other adults to “get around.” Nevertheless, many of these individuals also expressed concern about the dependability of these supports, with many indicating that they managed to find other ways of getting around, including walking, riding a bicycle and hitchhiking. While most of the young adults reported knowing how to use public transportation, numerous reasons were given for not depending on this mode of transportation to get around. Participants complained about the cleanliness and safety of public transportation, about the restrictive hours and routes, and about lacking resources (money) to utilize the public transportation system.

Regarding money, at one point or another virtually every participant spoke about the difficulties of surviving on the money that they make or receive. Their concerns included lack of money to cover basic expenses, as well as a lack of money to cover any additional type of recreational activities.

Uncertainty & Lack of Interpersonal Connectedness

Certainty and consistency are components of our lives that we, as humans, at some level value. That is, while we all theoretically value change and purport to desire spontaneity, all of us to some degree desire to have consistency or some level of certainty in our daily lives. Connected to the lack of tangible resources, **uncertainty** was a major theme for nearly all of the young adults in this study. Uncertainty was not specific to one component of the groups’ lives, but rather pervasive in all aspects of life. This uncertainty included concerns over housing and the fact that they could be forced to move at a moment’s notice. Many of the young adults expressed the fact that their placement (housing) with an agency was time limited and that they were unsure where they would go next. This uncertainty included concerns regarding employment and the fact that they were not sure if they were going to be able to continue their employment. A myriad of reasons were given regarding why they might quickly be unemployed (transportation, layoffs, poor working conditions, personality problems, housing concerns). Uncertainty involved transportation and their ability to get from one place to the next. Uncertainty permeated their relationships with friends, as many of their trusted confidants were those in the same position as they, and thus the participants were not sure if their

friends/support systems would “be there tomorrow.” Uncertainty also involved their relationships with adults, as many of the participants indicated that their “support systems” were professionals (program staff, social workers) from whom they were certain to be disconnected in the near future.

While this pervasive sense of uncertainty is connected to the lack of tangible resources (housing, employment, transportation, and money), it also appears to be tied to a general lack of connectedness with one additional tangible resource: individuals who are committed to the young adults in the long term. While some participants did indicate that their family of origin was a support system at this point in their lives, most indicated that their true support systems were friends who were in a similar (uncertain) position or professionals, whose support was time-limited.

This pervasive sense of uncertainty and disconnection, while prevalent for all participants, was particularly prominent for the males in the study. That is, throughout the in-depth interviews it became particularly clear that female members of the sample had an elevated level of social support in comparison to the males. Female participants tended to be more connected with their biological and foster parents and identified these persons more regularly as being of major importance in their lives. Contrasting this tendency, males mentioned mostly friends, social workers and other professionals as their main source of support.

This pervasive theme of uncertainty and disconnection became particularly noticeable as all participants (males and females) expressed what they needed in order to achieve their goals. The resounding issue consistently described by twelve of the seventeen participants did not involve tangible issues such as employment, education, housing or transportation. Rather, for these youth the number one “support” that they identified needing in order to achieve their desired goals was “love” and “encouragement.” They indicated that they need people in their lives that they can “trust,” “depend on to be there over time,” people who will “support and understand”, who will “encourage” and “care” about them. To this end, toward the latter half of the interview process, which also

coincided with the reality that many of the participants' support systems were time-limited, there was a heightened concern raised by the participants about the "fear of being alone."

Group Strengths

Resourcefulness

Cliché as it might sound, each individual who participated in the follow along interviews showed an amazing sense of resourcefulness. In the face of limited resources (money, transportation, employment), the participants found ways to not only survive but also implement plans to improve their situation. Almost half of the participants were either attending or trying to attend the local junior college. Many of the participants who were receiving "supportive" housing acknowledged that although their current living situation was not ideal (because they had to follow someone else's rules), it was in their best interest to remain in this situation (for the time being). Most of the participants describe "themselves" as their greatest asset.

Persistence

Dovetailing with their resourcefulness, it became intuitively clear throughout the short eight-month period that the former foster youth collectively were a persistent group of individuals. Faced with many trials and tribulations, their descriptions of their future goals and plans were filled with optimism, hope, and dreams. At some point throughout the interview process, nearly each young adult expressed a desire to "contribute to society" and "help others." While this persistence was very pervasive, it is not to say that their "optimism" did not waiver. Toward the end of the interview process, the "energy" that was associated with their plans and dreams did begin to dissipate (slightly), as more and more of the participants encountered the struggle associated with being "completely independent in this world."

Personality

Throughout the interview process, our results for the most part mirrored the outcomes of previous research regarding the struggles emancipated youth face. However, one of the

issues that is not readily described in research on emancipating foster youth, but was particularly pervasive in our discussion with this group of young adults, was the powerful/dynamic personalities of the participants. While much of the current literature addresses the lack of “success” for emancipating foster youth related to resources, less attention is devoted to the “human” elements of the young adults. Our participants, as a whole, were funny/witty, nice, and compassionate. Throughout the interview process, they shared their stories in a way that it was clear that they cared what we and others thought about them. The participants expressed a range of human emotions: they laughed, cried, got angry, and forgave; they were shy at times and at other times they were boastful; they admitted mistakes and took responsibility for situations (almost to a fault). We could not help but notice that these character traits are similar to the characteristics that one would want for all young adults or that one might use in describing a “successful” young adult.

Individual Vignettes

In order to protect the identity of the participants, we have purposefully excluded demographic and descriptive “historical” information. All of the information is presented as gender neutral in order to maintain this commitment.

Case #1

This young adult lived with an aunt throughout the teen years in the foster care system and continued to do so throughout the study period. Prior to emancipating from foster care, the participant attended Independent Living Skills (ILSP) classes and had been employed at different times at a fast food restaurant and a local retail store.

The young adult continuously reported enjoying ILSP, not only benefiting from the classes and presentations but also benefiting from the interaction with the social workers, who provided guidance and support. Throughout the interview process, the participant continually expressed the valuable role ILSP played forming a connection with caring adults.

While in the foster care system, the participant reported being socially active, graduating from high school, and developing plans for an academic future. The participant planned on attending Modesto Junior College (MJC) and then transferring to a four-year university after achieving an Associate of Arts (A.A.) degree. Appearing to struggle somewhat with academics early on in the study, the participant reported that school “was hard” and balancing personal responsibilities and homework demands was quite difficult. However, by the last interview, the participant reported school was going well and reported utilizing a tutor and receiving a voucher from work for achieving a high grade point average.

While reflecting on the experience in foster care, the young adult stated the best thing about being emancipated was the newfound “freedom” from the intrusive nature of the system. Specifically, the participant stated that the numerous visits from the various social workers “would ruin my work schedule.” However, the participant also reported one of the most difficult aspects of being out of the foster care system was the disconnection from past social workers.

Throughout the study period, the participant’s living arrangement did not change. Since emancipating from foster care, the young adult reported living with a relative, paying \$100-200 a month for rent. The participant paid for food and clothing with money earned at a part-time job.

Throughout the study, the participant consistently reported liking “everything” about work and alluded to the fact that the location of the employment made it easy to work and attend classes. The participant consistently reported feeling well prepared and well suited for the tasks that were assigned on a daily basis. The participant acknowledged that relationships with co-workers and supervisors were an additional benefit of the employment. Indeed, the young adult continued to remain at the same job until the end of the interview process, at which time it appeared that the state budget cuts would eliminate the position. The participant reported looking for alternative work, in the event that the position was eliminated.

The self-described need for encouragement and emotional support was a continual theme throughout the interviews. The participant indicated that biological family, friends, church members, previous Stanislaus County ILSP social workers and God were support systems. However, throughout the study, the participant expressed the need to be self-reliant, periodically pointing out the need to work hard and maintain “self discipline” in order to achieve personal success.

Recurrent stressors in the participant’s life were financial concerns, a lack of transportation, balancing school, work and family, and graduating from junior college.

During the first few interviews, the participant reported goals for the future to include graduating from college and eventually pursuing a professional job. However, over time these plans changed to include other career options. The amount of money earned and the potential for personal “happiness” appeared to be an important link to an eventual career. Throughout the interviews, the participant expressed a firm belief in the link between thinking positively and being successful.

Case #2

Following emancipation from the foster care system, this young adult spent a year and a half in a training program for young adults. This training program is intended for low-income young adults and focuses on skill building and outdoor experiences and conservation. The participant described the experience as a “tough” but beneficial experience. During this process the participant was able to receive a GED.

At the time of the first interview, the participant reported not possessing a job and was making money by donating blood, despite “hating needles.” The participant candidly answered questions about life in foster care and stated that although life had been “tough” since emancipating, the freedom that accompanied adulthood was valued.

This participant reported being homeless for approximately six months prior to being accepted into a transitional housing program. The participant resided in this program throughout the study period but by the seventh interview reported being on the verge of getting kicked out of the program. The participant reported working two days each week at a job set up through a Helping Agency but that it was time limited and the wages were low. Indeed, there was virtually no movement in the area of work from the first to last interview.

It was clear from the interview process that the participant was an intelligent young adult with an interest and special talent in the field of art. The participant revealed that a life goal was to be the most successful individual in this field. The participant not only expressed an interest in art but also culture and wanted to study a foreign language.

Perhaps the most obvious and notable stressor in the participant's life was the lack of gainful employment and the limited funds that resulted. The participant self-described as feeling somewhat "alone" in the world and reported lacking any form of parental support. By the final interview, the participant did not have a job and was being terminated from the transitional housing program.

Case #3

At the time of the initial interview and throughout the remainder of the interviews, this participant reported that a former foster family agency worker was the most important person in his/her life. The participant indicated that the agency worker provided assistance with housing and communicating with other professionals related to technical matters. The young adult indicated mainly seeking advice from the agency worker and friends. The agency worker was described as the first person the participant would approach to discuss positive life events or problems.

The participant reported having a hard time securing housing after emancipation. The young adult initially lived in a friend's home for \$400 per month. According to the participant, the room was very small, and the participant indicated having a difficult time

getting along with other residents in the home. The participant reported having to move out, but having “no established credit.” The participant then was allowed to move in with the former foster family agency worker, and reported not having to pay rent. Throughout each interview, the participant reported difficulties in the living arrangement (namely that it could not last indefinitely), and the participant expected to be living “independently” within one year.

The participant’s main source of transportation was a bicycle. The young adult initially reported owning a vehicle; however, she/he reported that it was “lost” after an accident. The participant reported relying on a social worker for transportation. The participant did report using public transportation but described being annoyed by long waits between stops. The participant also reported relying on friends for transportation but was required to provide reimbursement for gas. This, of course, posed a problem, as the young adult reported not having the resources to pay for gas.

Admitting a historical struggle with alcohol and drug abuse, this young adult was quick to allude to the life lessons learned from indulgence in these substances. Providing a cautionary warning, the participant stated that “Everything you know will be thrown out the window” and that “Doing drugs will ruin your life.”

Like the previous participant, this young adult reported that “freedom” was perhaps the most important aspect of emancipating out of the foster care system. However, the participant also acknowledged early on that, without family, life has been considerably more difficult than one could imagine.

The participant did not work during the study period. The young adult reported being involved in an accident that prevented physical labor. Because of the participant’s inability to work, the young adult indicated struggling financially and found it difficult to “make ends meet.”

A tremendous source of frustration experienced by the participant was from the physical ramifications of the accident. It appeared that throughout the majority of the study period the participant was struggling to cope with the impact of this traumatic experience. An almost complete reliance on others for housing, transportation and emotional support was a source of considerable pain and emotional discomfort for this participant.

Section III: Service Needs and Service Gaps—Focus Groups with Key Stakeholders

Another objective of this study involved exploring the perceptions of key stakeholders regarding the service needs and service gaps related to youth emancipating from the foster care system. Specifically, our intention was to engage persons who are connected to foster youth in a professional capacity and those who are knowledgeable about the needs of emancipating foster youth in a dialogue designed to explore those factors which support and impede efforts to effectively serve youth who are exiting (or who have recently exited) the foster care system.

We conducted seven focus groups, with a total of 48 participants. Two focus groups were specifically conducted with professionals employed by the Community Services Agencies. Three focus groups were conducted with professionals who represented a variety of agencies, including Families First, Mental Health, Hutton House, Creative Alternatives, Pathways, and various group homes. One focus group was conducted with foster care parents (including kin and non-kin providers). A final focus group was conducted with youth who are part of the California Youth Connection.

Results

Service Needs & Gaps

Our intensive discussions with committed and concerned professionals and youth produced a number of pervasive issues that appear to hamper the provision of services to foster youth. Many of the issues identified throughout the focus groups are consistent with the current knowledge base regarding the service needs and service gaps for foster

youth. That is, all of the focus groups identified the fact that we are just beginning to acknowledge the needs of emancipating youth and that services are under-funded and under-staffed. These factors contribute to foster youth not being prepared for “independent living.”

Throughout our conversations, the participants also identified a number of unique and specific issues that we believe merit the greatest attention. As such, in this report we have attempted to briefly reiterate those findings which are consistent with the knowledge base, while devoting special attention to those issues that seemed most specific to service providers in this region. We distilled the wealth of information generated by the focus groups into four issues that seemed to undergird our extensive discussions with service providers and youth. The service needs and gaps identified in the seven focus groups clustered into four overarching areas, including concerns related to: 1) Resources (money, services and human power), 2) Program Fragmentation/Conceptualization, 3) Rigidity of Policies/Procedures, and 4) Interagency Collaboration/Communication.

Resources

Within every focus group that was conducted, the issue of lack of resources was a prominent area of concern. Service providers and youth alike expressed their concerns that there are simply not enough services targeted toward this population. While a number of tangible/specific service needs were identified, “lack of housing” was the most pervasive issue identified by the participants. This “housing issue” actually produced two distinct (but interrelated) issues. First, participants were vehement that more transitional housing was needed and that the housing that was available needed greater attention. Many of the participants raised concern about the quality of the housing and problems with “electricity, plumbing, and needed repairs.” Next, building on the term “transitional” housing, as a collective, the group expressed the need for “professional assistance” to help youth maintain the housing once they exited the foster care system. Many of the participants expressed the fact that the paperwork needed to secure housing and other services is very complicated and that youth need assistance in this area. Another

participant discussed the need to help youth make good decisions. The example was given that some youth, “try to help out a friend (another foster youth) by inviting the person to live with them.” Nevertheless, this puts the foster youth in jeopardy of losing the housing for “breaking the rules of the lease.” Additionally, while many of the participants expressed the fact that youth “should” receive visits from workers to ensure that their housing needs are being met, many reported that the reality is that the “support” does not occur. This observation was not expressed as a commentary on “individuals not doing their job” but rather as the reality that resources simply do not allow for this type of “needed attention.”

While housing concerns dominated the discussions around tangible resources, employment assistance was also another resource that was described as limited. Many of the participants indicated that greater attention needs to be devoted to employment/career planning and work readiness skills. Related to employment readiness, many participants talked about the need for helping youth receive remedial education. Many of the participants talked about the fact that youth need basic “educational skills and testing” to help prepare them for the work force. One participant indicated that while many foster youth have special educational needs, “IEP’s typically do not address the years of 18 to 21.”

Related to educational needs, many of the participants expressed concern over independent living skills programs. Many of the participants had negative views over what is taught in the programs, how it is taught, and youths’ lack of interest in the program. One participant stated, “The same programs (classes) are offered year after year with no changes.” Another participant suggested that there are simply not enough ILS programs to meet the demands of the youth. Others expressed concern about the lack of access of the ILS program because of its location. Still another participant expressed concern of the safety of foster youth who are attending independent living skills classes, stating that, “One kid was accosted by gang members.” While this concern was not expressed by others, concerns were also raised around foster parents’ use of independent living skills classes. Some participants felt that the reason for attendance was to “give the

foster parent a break.” Many of the participants felt that foster parents, as much as foster youth, needed “educational interventions” to help prepare foster parents to support/prepare youth for emancipation. This view was expressed by service providers, foster youth and foster parents themselves.

A final theme related to resources, which seemed to consistently develop with each focus group following the discussion of concerns related to housing and employability, involved the need for caring adults. After discussing the fact that housing was limited and youth were ill-equipped to live on their own and find employment, most groups turned their attention to the fact that these issues are not likely to be resolved unless youth are connected in meaningful ways to adults. Much attention was given to the fact that many emancipating youth are “truly disadvantaged, having experienced extensive emotional turmoil and loss, before entering care, while in care, and while emancipating from care.” According to the participants, unless these issues are “acknowledged, processed, and addressed” in partnership with meaningful support systems, including “caring adults and trained professionals,” the chances for a successful emancipation are severely diminished.

Program Fragmentation/Conceptualization

A central theme of the focus groups involved participants’ concerns related to the poor conceptualization of the services which are available to foster youth. Much conversation was devoted to what participants viewed as a poorly conceptualized model of preparing youth for emancipation. This issue regarding concerns over “conceptualization” typically arose around the concern that the “emancipation process” begins too late. Many of the participants expressed concern that youth are not introduced to the issue of emancipation early enough. One participant stated, “Youth don’t understand what emancipation is”; another indicated that, “They are not prepared for emancipation”; while another commented, “Emancipation is just sprung on them.”

In addition to concerns over when and how youth are introduced to the emancipation process, the participants expressed a collective concern that the fundamental premise behind a “successful” emancipation is flawed. Participants expressed concern that it is

unrealistic to expect individuals who are 18 years old to be “independent.” Furthermore, the groups expressed concern that given all that is known about the struggles facing foster youth that maintaining housing and a job are pretty poor indicators of youth being prepared to leave the system.

Many of the participants indicated that because of a poor conceptualization of the needs of foster youth, services are presented in a “piecemeal” fashion, with somewhat “little hope for success.” One participant stated:

Because we are concerned they will become homeless, we try to find them housing; because they are likely to be unemployed, we give them job skills; because they are likely to not have a car; we give them a bus pass. This all sounds logical, but it is a band-aid approach. None of this gets at the reasons why they are likely to be homeless, don’t have a job, or are in need of transportation.

Continually within the various focus groups, the conversation turned to the issue that few 18 year olds “outside” of the foster care system are prepared to take on these types of responsibilities. Add in the many struggles that foster youth experience prior to coming into the system and while in the system, and the participants believed that, “Few will experience success based on our current working definition of what it means to successfully emancipate from the foster care system.”

Rigidity of Policies and Procedures

A prevalent concern raised by the majority of participants involved the sentiment that there are too many policies that restrict service providers from actually preparing youth for independence. Many of the participants expressed the sentiment that, “We do everything for foster youth.” This comment was related to the fact that the providers believe that rigid policies do not allow foster youth to “make decisions.” One participant stated, “Youth are not allowed to do household chores or use the washing machine.” Another participant indicated that she had concern over the inability of the foster youth to accrue assets while in care. Others expressed the fact that youth have no “independence” while in the foster care system.

The participants expressed two specific outcomes that result from their views of rigid policies. First was the concern that youth become dependent on others (adults) to do for them. They need others to “make decisions for them,” to “critically think.” At the point of emancipation, they are ill-equipped for the responsibilities of adulthood because they were not able to practice and fail or succeed. Additionally, of grave concern was that because “They have had so many adults in their lives telling them what to do, when to do it, and how to do it, youth desire freedom. They want freedom once they turn 18.” Another participant indicated, “They don’t want to be told or shown what to do. They are so controlled, they want their freedom.” Another participant stated, “They do not want to deal with grown-ups anymore.” This idea of control and a desire for freedom was an issue that was also expressed by foster youth who participated in the focus groups.

Interagency Collaboration/Communication

Another major theme regarding service gaps involved the participants’ concern over the lack of communication/collaboration among service providers. Many of the participants expressed the fact that while they are aware of the various agencies, they do not possess a clear understanding regarding what the other agencies are doing to provide services to emancipating foster youth. It is noteworthy that both during and after the focus groups, many participants took the opportunity to make connections with one another and to share their stories regarding what services they provide and what services they need. Holistically, the groups indicated that there was a serious need to create forums or opportunities for service providers to connect with one another in order to “maximize resources, keep informed of what is available, and to better serve the youth.”

In addition to the need for dialogue, the participants also expressed a need to mobilize resources. Participants felt that while many of their agencies are doing exciting work, working in isolation is not likely to produce positive dividends or produce the types of structural changes that they believe are needed. Many of the participants expressed the need to create better partnerships with the community. One participant stated that, “There is not enough interest in the community for those who are 18 years old and up.” Another

participant stated that she is “not sure the community is aware of needs for those who are 18 and up.” Yet another participant expressed the need for “businesses to get involved and for workers to serve as mentors to foster youth.”

Strengths of Existing Services

While the focal point of the focus groups was on service needs and service gaps, we also probed for the strengths that exist in the current service delivery system. It was clear that the strengths were much harder to identify in comparison to the service needs and gaps. Nevertheless, there was concurrence among the groups that a major strength involved the fact that there presently exists a core group of committed individuals and agencies who are devoted to foster youth. Participants also expressed the belief that while there is a need for greater collaboration and communication, lack of collaboration was not the result of professionals’ unwillingness to collaborate. As a matter of fact, the participants suggested that one of the strengths of the current system is the “county’s commitment to collaboration.” Another participant said, “While funding sources are different from county to county, counties are willing to work together, particularly in the area of housing.”

The strength of a core group of committed individuals was clearly evident throughout our focus group process. It became intuitively clear that those persons who participated in this process were truly committed to helping improve the system for emancipating foster youth.

Section IV: A Formative Evaluation of the Independent Living Skills Program

Since the Independent Living Skills Program serves as one of the primary intervention programs for preparing youth for transitioning into adulthood, it is important to regularly examine the manner in which the program is implemented and functioning and the impact of the program. To date, research on Independent Living Skills programs tends to focus on and emphasize the “outcomes” associated with the programs, such as the success of the youth in finding employment, building a support network, continuing education after emancipation, and completing the classes provided by the ILSP. While summative (outcome) program evaluations are necessary (critical), it is equally important to examine the “process” by which the program operates. That is, model drift (mismatch between the program as conceptualized and the program as implemented) is an issue that has historically plagued social programs and has greatly impacted associated outcomes. Nevertheless, the current knowledge base is virtually void of process evaluations designed to examine the fit between the programs as conceptualized and the programs as implemented, the theory or pedagogy that guide ILSP classes, and the manner in which the content is received by the youth. Given this reality, this part of the research focused on a process evaluation of the Independent Living Skills Program at the Stanislaus County Community Services Agency.

Methodology

Two specific data collection strategies were used to conduct the formative evaluation: 1) direct observation of the ILSP classes, and 2) unstructured interviews with program presenters and participants. A member of the research team attempted to attend all ILSP classes offered between March, 2002 and December, 2002. As a non-participant observer (the researcher attended the classes and made observations but did not participate in the discussions), the researcher took notes regarding a number of issues, including the topic of each class, the presentation content, the presentation style, the space and atmosphere, the youths’ participation, and the interpersonal interactions in the class.

In addition to the direct observations, “unstructured” interviews were conducted with presenters to explore the educational methodologies and philosophies utilized in their presentations to the youth and their perceptions related to the ILSP classes. These include interviews with nine presenters who conducted sessions at the ILSP classes during the period January, 2002 through December, 2002. In addition to interviews with presenters, interviews were conducted with nine youth (who were attending the ILSP classes) regarding their experiences in the ILSP classes. These interviews focused on what the youth found helpful with regard to the information presented, the manner in which the content was presented, and their recommendations for changes in the classes to meet their needs more effectively.

Major Findings

Overview

The research team attended 11 ILSP classes between March, 2002 and December, 2002. No “formal” classes were offered during the summer months (June-August), which reduced the total number of classes that could be observed. The class schedule breaks the classes down into two tracks: Track A and Track B. The participants in the two tracks attended classes on alternate weeks. Track A is meant for youth ages 15-17 and track B for youth ages 17-18, high school seniors, and foster youth emancipating in the current year. However, all youth had the flexibility to attend either of the two classes, as the classes offered to both the groups were typically identical: they were presented by the same person and covered the same content.

For the most part, the structure of each class was standard. Usually the presenters outlined the agenda for the evening and then began their presentations. Around 7 p.m. the youth were given 30 minutes to have their dinner. (Dinner was provided, usually pizza). Afterward, the presentation was completed. Finally, if there were any announcements, they were made.

The classes included 3 “tangible” skills classes and 7 “intangible” skills classes. Tangible skills are defined as skills that one knows and is able to do, including money

management, household management, transportation, finding and using resources for leisure and recreation, and vocational interests and aptitudes (Nollan et al., 2000). According to Cook et al. (1989), intangible skills include skills required for interpersonal relationships and the ability to maintain employment, such as decision-making, problem-solving, planning, communication, self-esteem, anger and grief management, and social skills. The three tangible classes included Employment and Job Interviews, Career Planning, and Life Book Workshop. These three classes were practical in nature and required the youth to actually practice certain skills. The intangible classes included sex education, domestic violence and AIDS awareness, cultural awareness, substance abuse awareness, and the film *White Oleander*.

Based on the direct observations of the 11 classes and the interviews with presenters and foster youth attending the ILSP classes, the process evaluation revealed “program strengths,” as well as “areas of concern or in need of reflection.”

Program Strengths

Commitment of Staff

Without question, a clear strength of the ILSP classes involved the commitment of the ILSP staff, particularly the ILSP coordinator. Curzon-Hobson (2002) highlights the significance of a trusting relationship between the learners and the instructor and believes that the potential of the project is highly dependent on this connection. He describes it as an experience of care and mutual respect. The coordinator’s own actions and reactions play a critical role in developing this trust. These characteristics were evident in the relationship between the youth and the ILSP coordinator. As revealed by her actions and interactions with the youth participants, it became intuitively clear that the coordinator is truly committed to the youth and the program. She is able to communicate effectively with the youth, and the youth view her as an important source of information. As one youth remarked, “I like to hear everything she has to say.” The coordinator makes the effort to connect with the youth and understand them and their perspectives, thereby communicating to the youth that “she cares.” For example, after the summer break the coordinator checked on how the youth had been since the last time they met. At every

class, she socialized and talked with the youth during dinner and took the time to listen to them and to answer any questions that they had.

The coordinator also addressed issues that were raised during the course of the classes. For example, after the substance abuse class she demonstrated effective problem solving skills by involving the youth in a discussion regarding her concerns about a “lack of respect” for the presenter. The youth were encouraged to dialogue about her views related to “lack of respect” and then brainstorm solutions.

It was also clear that the coordinator was a vital cog in the program operation. During one session when the coordinator was not in class, the class seemed disrupted and chaotic. The alternate staff present tried to “redirect” the youth, but the redirection was short-lived. It seemed that the youth were more responsive to the coordinator (probably as a result of the established connection) than to the other staff.

In addition to the commitment of the program coordinator, it was also very clear that all of the adults connected to the program had a level of personal commitment to the classes. Each presenter who was interviewed expressed a desire to “help” or “contribute” to the well-being of the youth.

Curriculum Flexibility

A second strength of the program as implemented involved the “flexibility” of the curriculum. Prior research on Stanislaus County ILSP had recommended the need for the ILS program to set up a curriculum for the ILSP classes (Grant, 2000). The researchers noticed that the ILSP staff has been creating a curriculum each year for the ILSP classes but has left it flexible and open to changes during the year. Discussion with the staff revealed that youth “input” is incorporated in the development of the curriculum. The direct observations reflected that the ILSP curriculum taught to the foster youth is very flexible in nature, allowing for the possibility of the curriculum “to be experienced rather than covered.”

The curriculum is presented in the beginning of the year in the form of a class schedule with dates and topics that are scheduled to be discussed at each class. These topics were open to changes, as reflected by the changes that occurred while the classes were observed. “How to Plan, Set Goals and Make Good Decisions” was replaced with the viewing of the movie *White Oleander*. Other changes were events such as the Fun Night Carnival being cancelled and the Cultural Awareness event being moved to a later date. Discussion with the ILSP staff revealed that the curriculum is meant to be flexible, as it allows them to accommodate relevant changes spontaneously. For example, when the staff created the curriculum calendar they did not know about the film “White Oleander” and its relevance to foster youth. This flexibility, along with funding availability, allowed them to incorporate the film in the curriculum, and the youth reportedly enjoyed the film.

Positive Youth Feedback

Another strength of the Program involves its impact on the youths’ “positive” perceptions of the impact of the classes and their experience. Most of the youth interviewed had been attending the ILSP classes for almost two years. Even though a few youth remarked that they had started coming to the classes because they thought they “had to,” they were continuing to come because they felt they were “learning new things” and “enjoyed coming to the classes.”

Youth motivation to learn has been demonstrated to be positively correlated with their academic performance in school settings. Walberg and Uguroglu (1980) conclude that, “When there is no motivation to learn, there is no learning” (p. 4). Most youth shared that they were learning concepts that would help them to live on their own, and this motivated them to come to the classes. Youth also said that the incentive they received for attending the classes helped. Some youth knew they wanted to go to college and they would need all the help they could get, and this motivated them to come to the class. Friendship with the other youth was a significant contributing factor for most youth attending the classes.

Youth were excited about sharing which classes they found the most helpful and which classes were not beneficial to them. The youths’ responses varied and at times involved

contradictions with other youths' impressions. With regard to tangible skills classes, four youth reported finding the cooking class very helpful, especially as they said they did not know much about cooking prior to this class. However, three youth expressed that they did not need the cooking class, as they already knew how to cook. One youth specifically said, "We only cooked one dish. I am not going to cook one dish the rest of my life." Another youth shared that one of the worst classes she had attended was the "cooking class."

Most youth reported finding the employment skills and resume writing class beneficial as it provided them with "some good information about how to find a job." Another youth shared that, "The mock interviews [which were a part of this class] really helped me." The class on budgeting and balancing checkbooks was helpful to one youth, while another youth reported finding this class unhelpful.

With regard to the intangible skills classes, most (four) of the youth interviewed found the sex responsibility class useful. One youth felt that the presenter "made the class interesting." Another youth shared that this class, "made me think twice about becoming sexually active." Other classes that one or two youth liked included the anger management class and information regarding "Aftercare," as they did not know about the transitional housing program (Pathways).

A few youth did not find some classes to be of use to them. These included the customer service class and the class on "how to get your California state ID." A few youth shared that they already had their California state ID card.

Youth were asked if they knew in advance what topic was going to be addressed during that particular day and if that influenced their decision to attend the class. Three youth mentioned that they knew what was going to be covered in class the night they were interviewed and said that it did not influence their decision to come to class.

Youth Interaction and Reaction

Another strength of the program involved the “active” and “encouraged” interaction and participation (reaction) between and among the youth and the presenters. We know that socialization is a critical developmental need during adolescence. In fact, Scales (1991) identifies positive social interaction with adults and peers as one of seven key developmental needs of adolescents, especially between the ages of 10-15 years. This was supported by direct observations as the youth attending/participating in the classes engaged in dialogue with each other. They appeared to interact well in small groups, and it seemed that some of them attend the same schools, meaning that they were already connected. (However, at times, a few youth appeared to be isolated from the larger group.)

In the classes that were more interactive in nature, such as tangible skills classes, the youth interacted with each other more than in some other classes. The interaction between the youth was friendly, and it appeared that the youth felt a certain level of comfort around the other youth they knew. When the youth needed to be a part of activities where seating or groups were “assigned,” some youth were initially resistant to moving and seemed less willing to interact. However, in these cases (in order to encourage motivation) the facilitator kept reassuring the youth that this activity would be fun and that they would enjoy it when they saw its outcome.

The interaction between the speaker and the youth differed by class. The youth and speakers interacted considerably during all of the tangible skills classes and in intangible skills class five (sexual responsibility). In all of these classes, the youth were asked to participate in presentations by answering questions, participating in activities, or helping to identify the areas of discussion for the evening. In the remainder of the classes, there was limited interaction between the speaker and the youth, and this seemed to negatively influence youth participation and attentiveness. In all instances, during the dinner break the youth socialized among themselves, laughing and talking in groups while eating.

Program Concerns

While our direct observations and interviews highlighted a number of strong components of the ILS classes, we also noted a number of issues that we believe offer points for reflection. Many of the issues that we highlight below are not novel, as these are struggles that hamper Independent Living Skills Programs nationally. Nevertheless, we bring these issue to the attention of the Agency in order to pinpoint some of the more pervasive concerns directly associated with this particular program, as well as to create a foundation for offering recommendations and strategies for addressing these concerns.

Curriculum Conceptualization

It was clear from our observations and interviews that the ILSP curriculum is influenced by the Independent Living Program Regulations, which lists the core skills and services that need to be provided to the youth. These core skills/services include: education, career and employment development, self-development skills, daily living skills, financial resources information, emancipation and aftercare information, housing information, mentoring, and access to resources and documents that foster youth need for transitioning to independence.

The curriculum emphasizes addressing all or most of the content areas identified by the Independent Living Initiatives. However, there is a “disjointed feel” among the various classes. The classes seem to encompass a laundry list of “skills/tasks” without connecting, universal links. Ultimately, it is our belief that the program is void of a true “curriculum”: a written plan that drives instruction. A well-conceptualized curriculum delineates the skills and concepts to be taught in each independent course and offers linkages (horizontal and vertical) among the program mission, goals, classes, skills, and outcomes. A curriculum is a “plan” owned and shaped by program stakeholders, is under constant scrutiny, and serves as a roadmap for dictating actions.

A poorly conceptualized curriculum or one that is void of a conceptual lens produces a disjointed cluster of seemingly related but disjointed topics. Throughout our observations and particularly evident in our discussions with individual presenters, it became

increasingly clear that the role of the “curriculum” is underemphasized/ undervalued and that the string of classes is void of a plan that drives instruction. This lack of a conceptual lens underpinning the classes is critical given the “flexibility” of the curriculum. While flexibility (in our opinion) is always good and critical for quality pedagogy, without intent and focus flexibility produces a piecemeal approach to offering ideas that seem logical but are void of a unifying intent.

Track A and Track B Classes

A clear example of “concerns” regarding the curriculum conceptualization are our observations related to class “tracks.” The classes are offered on alternate Thursday nights to two tracks of youth identified as Track A and Track B. The presentation styles and the information provided to the youth did not differ for Track A and Track B. All youth received the same presentation regardless of their age. Although technically the classes are meant for different age groups, we were not clear regarding the underlying principle or rationale behind this distinction. If this classification is meant to serve a specific purpose, then it is not apparent that it is accomplishing that objective. If the two tracks are technically divided by age groups, it makes one wonder if the original intent of the classes was to cater to the more specific needs of the youth in the two age groups. Youth who are younger and a few years away from emancipation may have different needs from youth who are soon turning 18 and getting ready to live on their own. On the other hand, if the same classes are offered during two consecutive weeks to provide the youth the flexibility of attending a class that is convenient for them, then it is serving that purpose.

Curriculum Ownership: Youth and Presenters

Part of the limitations related to the conceptualization of the curriculum involved the lack of stakeholder ownership regarding the program curriculum. Two core stakeholders appeared to be missing from the conceptualization and on-going scrutiny of the curriculum: youth and presenters. While program staff suggested to us that youth were involved in planning the curriculum, it was clear from our observations and interviews that the role the youth played in this process was minimal. It is likely that youth were

initially “asked” about what they need or want in classes but actual “ownership” is not reflected.

Recent research emphasizes the importance of and need for youth involvement and participation in the very conceptualization, planning, development, and implementation of the curriculum. Karen Pittman (1999) asserts that, “Supporting youth development is not just about building the competencies, confidence, character, and connections of our future leaders. It is about actively engaging youth in their own development and that of their peers, families, schools, communities, cultures, and country. There is something developmental about engagement.” Morse, Markowitz, Zanghi, and Burns (2003) highlight the importance of involving youth in the development of curriculum and training. Based on their research findings, they report that youth voice has “improved the quality of independent living training curriculum”; youth ask “what if” questions which challenges traditional styles of presentation; based on their real-life experiences, youth offer creative strategies and new perspectives; and youth involvement helps the curriculum developers understand the youths’ experiences in foster care and helps them to develop “more responsive and effective training programs.”

This type of ownership, rather than “involvement,” was not evident in our observations or interviews. It is our belief that this lack of true partnership perpetuates the disjointed feel of the curriculum and must raise questions about the actual efficacy of the program. If the youth do not participate in the conceptualization of the curriculum, if they do not have a clear grasp of the intent of the classes, and if they are not clear regarding how classes are linked and what should be achieved as a result of their experience, it is likely that the goals and objectives will not be realized. Within our observations, while we did see moments where youth were “asked” what they wanted to get out of the class and played somewhat of a role in shaping the presentation, holistically “true” participation and authentic involvement in the curriculum construction was not observed or expressed in interviews.

Mirroring the lack of curriculum ownership by the youth, it was also apparent that the presenters had a minimal role in the conceptualization and scrutiny of the curriculum. (To some degree, this may be an impact of the reality of the lack of availability of the presenters.) Based on our observations and interviews, it was apparent that the presenters were very disconnected from one another, engaged in virtually no discussion regarding how “their” presentation related to or built on other presenters’ work, were not in a position to clearly articulate the cornerstone concepts that under-gird the curriculum, and had virtually no communication with other instructors regarding agreed upon teaching principles or teaching strategies.

Pedagogy

It was very clear that all of the presenters (and particularly all of the presenters who participated in interviews with us) were committed to contributing to the well-being of the youth. To a person, each presenter conveyed a true desire to offer his/her expertise. Additionally, all of the presenters appeared to be very knowledgeable about their topic areas. A number of the presentations were extremely interesting and appeared to capture the interest of the participants.

However, through our conversations with presenters and based on our observations, it became increasingly clear that the “art of teaching” (pedagogy) was a concept that varied significantly from presenter to presenter. Some of the presenters gave considerable attention to the “art” of reaching and engaging the youth; for others pedagogy was secondary to content; and for others little or no thought was devoted to the art of teaching and learning.

It was interesting to note that the presenters who were interviewed did not specifically mention any educational philosophy in which they believe or from which they derive their curriculum. The presenters do seem to be utilizing some strategies to involve and motivate the youth. However, it is unclear whether these strategies are guided by any theoretical framework or philosophy. For example, one presenter tries to “keep it simple, keep it intense, put [in] a lot of feeling and emotion.” Most of the presenters do use the

same information they use to present to adults but their way of presenting is different with the youth. As shared by one instructor, “You can present the same material, but it has to be tailored differently....With the adults, it is more of a training....With the youth, it is not only the information but involving them in dialogue, getting their perceptions, and ‘squashing’ misconceptions.”

Past research suggests that youth attending the ILSP classes need to develop critical thinking skills in order for them to apply what they learn in the ILSP classes in the everyday world of independent living. According to Howard (2002), engaging youth in an educational process to help support independent living requires more than just the transmission of knowledge. In a teacher-centered approach where the teacher lectures on disconnected facts and figures, students rarely understand how these facts and figures are connected with their lives. When students can incorporate their life experiences with the curriculum, education becomes a collaborative process. This process is called critical pedagogy (Howard, 2002).

Our direct observations revealed that the most commonly used presentation style was the lecture format, followed by a combination of the lecture and discussion styles. However, when presenters were interviewed, seven of the nine said they involve the youth in their presentations and all of them said they use a more hands-on approach for their presentations to the youth. Seven presenters shared that they utilize discussion to help the youth absorb the information. One of the presenters commented, “We try to keep the youths’ workshop more hands-on and break them out into smaller groups as opposed to keeping them in one large group.” Another presenter shared, “I am very hands-on, a cognitive type of learner... I want to know my people [the youth]. I want their input because that is why I am there... I let them help in the decision making in the class.”

Comparing and contrasting the direct observations with the presenters’ interviews seems to reveal some inconsistencies. The direct observations highlight more lecture style presentations. Several interpretations can be drawn from this inconsistency. It needs to be emphasized that we attended sessions between March, 2002 and December, 2002, but the

interviews were conducted with all of the presenters who had conducted sessions between January, 2002 and December, 2002. It is possible that we missed some sessions that were more interactive in nature. However, it is also likely that there is a mismatch between what the presenters conceptually believe in and how they actually present the classes.

In further exploring the role of pedagogy, the presenters were also asked what they perceived their role to be in the classroom and what they thought was the role of the youth in this learning process. While a few presenters expressed that the youth played the role of learners, others added that their (the youths') role was more than just a learner; they felt that the youth needed to participate as well. For example, one presenter said, "I like for them to give us ideas in regards to what types of classes do you [the youth] want to see... [be] active in a large part of the program and not just the student... to own the program and feel like it is theirs." If presenters are true to this rhetoric of ownership, it can contribute to an extremely empowering and liberating experience for the learners. However, overall presenters responded very briefly to this question. It appeared that most of them had not given much thought to this aspect of their teaching. Most of the presenters emphasized the fact that students play the role of participants. It was not clear how each of them operationalized this role.

With regard to their own role, presenters' responses were diverse. Two presenters perceived their role to be role models and mentors to the youth. For example, one presenter stated, "I hope on my end to be a positive role model to them... take a little bit of what I have taught them and use it in their everyday life... I hope they realize that when they get out into the cold world." One trainer saw it as a "facilitator and a liaison between the community and the students." Another presenter's comment was, "We are another wrench in their toolbox." It seems presenters do see themselves as a resource for the youth. Presenters shared that they hope to, "Expand their [the youths'] perceptions of the world and what is out there for them... [Give them] directions for a future goal."

Many of the presenters' philosophies on teaching mirror some of the traditional roles one assigns to an instructor or teacher. Nevertheless, many of these "traditions" have been

shown to produce an educational approach that fails to promote learning. Given the reality that many of the youth who participate in the independent living skills program are likely to have experienced academic difficulties, it is imperative that considerable attention be given to pedagogy. If independent living skills programs simply mirror the “traditional” (and outdated) approaches to teaching and learning, we have to question the likely success of the educational effort. Our knowledge base on teaching and learning is ripe with effective strategies and principles that are critical to knowledge acquisition. Yet, in our observations and in our interviews the seeds of what Paulo Freire (1970) calls the “banking approach” to education seemed evident. In the banking approach, students (learners) are viewed as empty vessels, and it is the instructor’s job to deposit (fill) the student with information/knowledge. Furthermore, in this traditional “banking” system:

- a) the teacher teaches and the students are taught;
- b) the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing;
- c) the teacher thinks and the students are thought about;
- d) the teacher talks and the students listen meekly;
- e) the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined;
- f) the teacher chooses and enforces his/her choice, and the students comply;
- g) the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the actions of the teacher;
- h) the teacher chooses the program content, and the students who were not consulted adapt to it;
- i) the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students;
- j) the teacher is the subject of the learning process, while the pupils are the objects. (p.54)

The reality is that this “banking” system of education simply breeds/perpetuates the characteristics that have been attributed to the oppressed (in this case, youth in the foster care system) in the broader society. The goal of this approach to education is to “change the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them” (Freire, p. 55). The findings of this process evaluation suggest that the “elements” of this philosophy can be found imbedded in the ILSP classes. In an atmosphere where little attention is

given to curriculum development and curriculum integration and virtually no attention is given to ongoing communication about teaching strategies, it would be easy for anyone to fall into the “traditional” role of the banking educator. Additionally, when key stakeholders play only a minor role in curriculum development, it is virtually impossible to escape the banking approach to teaching and learning.

Learning Environment

Good facilities appear to be an important precondition for student learning (Department of Education, 2004). Lowe (1988) interviewed State Teachers of the Year to determine which aspects of the physical environment affected their teaching the most, and these teachers pointed to the availability and quality of classroom equipment and furnishings, as well as ambient features such as climate control and acoustics as the most important environmental factors. The room where the ILSP classes are held, with a couple of exceptions, was generally well ventilated, an important factor considering that approximately 30 to 40 youth attended each class. In addition, generally the room was well lit, and when this was not the case the ILP staff turned on more lights to ensure adequate lighting.

While the general physical environment of the ILSP classes was conducive to learning, the student to presenter ratio is a factor that appears to be significantly impacting learning; it not only made it difficult for students to concentrate on their lessons, but inevitably limited the amount of time teachers could spend on innovative teaching methods such as cooperative learning and group work. With 30 to 40 youth generally in the room, the direct observations did reveal that it was difficult to pay individual attention to each youth. However, activities like mock interviews did provide the youth with some individual attention and feedback specific to their needs.

Additional Obstacles to Learning

One of the general direct observations made regarding the youths’ participation and involvement in the classes is that the youth have a difficult time staying attentive and involved for the entire duration of the class. It seemed that the youth were easily

distracted and seemed to be more interested in socializing than in listening to the presenter. Also, the youth appeared to be more distracted after the break and had to be “redirected” numerous times. This may simply be the result of a long day, as the classes are held at 6:00 p.m. Youth have been in school all day; many participate in after school activities and have homework. It is very possible that the youth are just tired and distracted toward the end of the class.

Another major disruption that was consistent throughout all classes involved the food being brought in for the dinner break. The food was always brought in before the dinner break started. Sometimes the staff had foster youth help with this, which increased the distraction. When the dinner was brought in during the presentation, all of the youth (naturally) focused on the food, which made it very difficult for the presenter to finish the presentation, as well as for the youth to pay attention.

The staff who brought the food usually sat in the back and talked with each other, which was disturbing to both the youth and the presenter. Once one of the staff who helped with the food received two phone calls during the presentation and proceeded to answer the phone, talk for a while, and then step out. One of the youth thought this was inappropriate and said “How rude!” The ILSP staff later addressed this and requested that all phones be set on silent during the ILSP class.

During the interviews with the youth, one youth shared that other people talking during class made it hard to concentrate. Another youth shared the same sentiment: “Classes lacked organization, and youth misbehaving added to the confusion.” They expressed their frustrations with these situations.

Other obstacles mentioned by youth include transportation to the ILSP classes and their jobs, as they needed to take time off from their work to come to the class. One youth shared that being on the track team makes it hard for her to attend every class, as track practice takes up a lot of time.

Summary and Recommendations

The results of this process evaluation identified program strengths, as well as areas of concern. Our hope is that our observations are taken in the spirit in which they are offered. That is, our intention is to offer credible and usable information that allows for the strengthening of this centerpiece intervention program to youth in the foster care system. Our recommendations call for building on the strengths of the program, while reflecting on specific concerns. Our specific recommendations include:

- 1) Revisiting the curriculum design/conceptualization “process” for the ILSP classes. Identify the manner in which the classes are linked, including the goals and objectives.
- 2) Actively engage youth and instructors to participate in the development and ongoing “reflection” of the classes.
- 3) Create strategies for engaging stakeholders in on-going discussions around teaching and learning strategies.
- 4) Consider strategies for “reducing” class sizes.
- 5) Acknowledge the considerable contributions and significance of the Program Coordinator to the Program. Identify/recruit additional program staff (who embody the characteristics of the Program Coordinator) to participate in the daily operations of the program.
- 6) Create an on-going process and outcome program evaluation plan to provide credible insight into the functioning of the program.

While we have offered a list of recommendations for the ILSP classes, we are also offering our participation in this on-going work. In the final section of this write-up, we have delineated our ideas and willingness for creating a partnership to embrace the recommendations we have offered here.

Section V: Promising Practice

This section of the report focuses on the results of our efforts to identify programs and activities that demonstrate significant promise to improve foster youth emancipation outcomes. The research into promising practices relied heavily upon a review of the child welfare literature as it relates to foster youth transitions. Child welfare practitioners, in both the public and private, non-profit sectors, and researchers were also contacted.

Two very telling observations are important to note at the outset:

- there is only a very modest literature that directly discusses promising practices,
- we could not find many programs, or program components, that have been subjected to rigorous evaluation and that have been demonstrated to be promising practices.

What emerges from our analysis, then, is not so much a discussion of promising practices but rather three less dramatic outcomes. There is an evolving consensus about the principles or criteria that ought to drive policy and program development in the area of foster youth transitions. This consensus derives largely from the limited studies undertaken to date, the work of dedicated and creative practitioners in the field, and interviews with current and former foster youth. We will refer to this section as “principles of promising practice” and discuss them in the next section of this chapter.

The second outcome is a modest body of innovative practices that are worth serious consideration by policymakers, program managers and caseworkers. A few of these innovative practices have been evaluated; several others are the subjects of current evaluations. Unfortunately, completed evaluations have focused largely on measures of program activity, short-term program outcomes (e.g., number of youth who have graduated from high school), and costs. There are no significant studies that have measured long-term outcomes and revealed successful new programs (with, perhaps, the exception of research done on the Work Appreciation for Youth Program, see below). In other instances, more rigorous evaluations have shown that the “experimental” programs were no more successful than current practices. Consequently, we must approach the notion of “promising practices” with caution. Because of the caveat, we refer to these as

innovative programs. Nevertheless, we believe that several programs are worth consideration and will be discussed following the section on “principles of promising practice.”

The third component of this section focuses on additional programs and practices, which have not received a considerable amount of attention in the literature but appear to offer some innovative ideas. We conclude the chapter with a brief discussion of program replication. Reproducing programs designed and implemented elsewhere is much more complicated and “tricky” than is often appreciated. Agency management and staff need to approach replication cautiously, as we suggest at the end of this chapter.

Promising Practices Criteria

In 1983, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Human Development issued a document titled “Study of the Adaptation of Adolescents in Foster Care to Independence and Community Life.” This report initiated an on-going discussion in the field about philosophy and principles to guide the development of foster youth transition programs. One of the early outcomes of the discussion was the Independent Living Initiative passed by Congress in 1986. The Initiative was an early federal effort to assist states to better serve youth leaving foster care. This was followed by the publication in 1989 of a model for the content of independent living programs produced by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA).

The 1999 Chafee Foster Care Independence Act and several recent studies, particularly those by L. Anthony Loman and Gary Siegal, Alfred Sheehy and his colleagues, and Ben Kerman, Richard Barth and Judith Wildfire,¹ substantially advanced thinking about promising practices criteria for programs designed to assist the transition of foster youth. Based on these and other recent publications, conference proceedings, and discussions

¹ Loman, L. A., & Siegel, G. L. (2000). *An evaluation of independent living services in Ohio*. Institute of Applied Research, St. Louis, Missouri; Sheehy, A., Oldham, E., Zanghi, M., Ansell, D., Correia, P., & Copeland, R. (2002). *Promising practices: Supporting transition of foster youth served by the foster care system*; Kerman, B., Barth, R., & Wildfire, J. (2002). *Outcomes for young adults who experience foster care*. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 24, 319–344.

among researchers, practitioners and foster youth, we offer the following set of promising practices criteria:

- specific actions should be tailored to the needs of the individual,
- the youth must be involved in the planning,
- planning should include discussions about possible family reunification, adoption, legal guardianship (especially by kin), safety nets and lifelines as well as about transitions,
- planning should begin no later than age 16,
- programs need to be able to provide a wide range of services that include money management/financial planning, driver's training, using public transportation, educational planning, tutoring, job search and pre-employment assistance, medical check-ups, mental health counseling including stress and anger management, relationship skill building, substance abuse counseling, pregnancy prevention, parenting skills, and career counseling,
- this programming diversity and complexity requires substantial collaboration among myriad public and non-profit agencies and with employers,
- life skills programs must include as many "real life" encounters as possible (simulation/role playing activities can also be helpful),
- foster parents, birthparents, and/or other significant adults should be an important component of life skill training and they, in turn, should receive training,
- emancipation planning must recognize that most youth will want to continue close contact with birth and/or foster families,
- to the extent possible, foster youth should be assisted to work through relationship issues with the birth family,
- to the maximum extent possible, youth should receive "job mentoring," and "job shadowing,"
- to the maximum extent possible, youth should be assisted to establish or extend community connections,
- former foster youth should be involved as mentors and advisors,
- most youth will need transitional assistance with schooling, employment, housing, counseling, and medical care,
- for most youth, assistance needs to continue after emancipation,
- supervised "independent living" can provide an ideal transitional setting, and
- to accomplish the above, on-going training for agency staff and caregivers is critical.

Innovative Programs

In this section we briefly summarize several programs that are innovative and appear to offer promise of successful outcomes for foster youth in transition. We employ cautionary language because, as noted above, most of the programs have not been the subject of rigorous evaluation. Based on limited evaluation evidence, related primarily to program outputs and derived largely from interviews with staff and youth rather than from systematic process and outcome analysis, these programs have produced at least some evidence of notable success. We believe, therefore, that they merit serious consideration for agencies seeking to improve outcomes for foster youth transitioning from foster care to “independent” adult living.

Before describing some notable programs outside of the area, we want to acknowledge that innovative and promising efforts are already underway in Stanislaus County. Family Decision Meetings, although not specifically designed for emancipating foster youth, offer an intervention model that may reduce the number of youth placed in the foster care system and may also serve as model to prepare youth for emancipation. The Stanislaus County Community Services Agency also participates in the California Permanency for Youth Project (CPYP). This project was funded by a 3-year grant from the Stuart Foundation and provides technical assistance, curriculum, training, and evaluation to assist counties working with emancipating youth to develop more effective permanency planning.

Congregate Care, Emphasis on Education, Employment and Interdependence

Children's Village and the Work Appreciation for Youth program²

Program Name: Work Appreciation for Youth (WAY)

Program Provider: Children's Village of New York City

Type of Program: In-residence, congregate care and 5-year aftercare focusing on dropout prevention, employment, and long-term success.

Program Customers: Very high-risk male youth unable to be cared for in less restrictive settings.

Program Philosophy and Goals:

- Employability is linked to acquisition of basic skills, a work ethic, and a work history at a young age,
- Program components must be individualized and developmentally appropriate and work experiences must be carefully sequenced,
- Services must be long-term (both during and after care), comprehensive, and provided in the context of a close relationship with a caring adult,
- Youth will graduate from high school and be employed.

Key Program Components:

- Education that focuses on job skills, positive work attitudes, and extensive individual counseling,
- A five-level work component that begins with non-paid chores within residential cottages and ends with five-years of carefully supported, paid employment following discharge from care,
- Long-term, individualized counseling, mentoring and modeling,
- Group activities and workshops to promote positive peer culture,
- Financial incentives to plan, save and develop positive attitudes about the future.

² The program description relies heavily upon Dale, N., Baker, A, and Racine. D. (n.d.). *Lessons Learned: What the WAY program can teach us about program replication*. Washington, D.C.: American Youth Policy Forum.

Program Results: WAY has been subjected to rigorous, longitudinal evaluation and found to produce substantially better educational and employment outcomes than was true of a matched comparison group that did not participate in the program.

Contact: Nan Dale, President and Chief Executive Officer
Children's Village
Phone: (914) 693-0600
www.childrevillage.org/

San Pasqual Academy

Program Name: San Pasqual Academy

Program Provider: Founded by the San Diego County Board of Supervisors and administered and funded by a partnership of public and private entities.

Type of Program: In-residence, congregate care focusing on high school education, vocational education, developing positive attitudes.

Program Customers: Foster youth ages 14-18 who do not have serious psychological or behavioral problems but who have had difficulty bonding in a foster family.

Program Philosophy and Goals:

- Through an intensive, exceptional educational program based on individualized instructional plans and small class sizes, youth will receive education and social supports to become confident, sufficient and contributing citizens of their communities.
- The academy is committed to providing a safe, stable and caring home.
- Teens will learn the necessary social, vocational, and life skills.
- Developing a strong bond with a caring adult and establishing community ties are important to later success.

Key Program Components:

- Youth live in Family Groups of 6 to 8 kids with professional staff and parent-educators,
- Education that is individualized providing both vocational and AP/ College prep classes,
- Links to mentor families and community-based organizations,
- An array of campus clubs and organizations, including inter-scholastic athletic competition,

- Employment preparation, internships, life skill workshops,
- Health and wellness education,
- Scholarships for college
- An active Alumni Association that encourages life-long ties to the Academy.

Program Results: The Academy graduated its second class in June 2003. Preliminary information indicates the program has been successful, particularly in placing students in college. The Child and Adolescent Services Research Center at San Diego State University currently is conducting a comprehensive evaluation of the Academy's objectives and outcomes. The principal investigator is John Landsverk who can be reached at 858.966.7703.

Contact: Bobbie Plough is the Principal of San Pasqual Academy and can be reached at 760.233.6003. www.sanpasqualacademy.org/

Housing Focus

Program Name: Colorado Family Unification Program for Youth

Program Provider: Colorado Department of Human Services, Division of Child Welfare.

Type of Program: Housing-focus that works to direct Chafee funds to housing needs; complements these with Section 8 housing vouchers.

Program Customers: Former foster youth ages 18-21 who have a closed child protection case and commit to an 18-month plan.

Program Philosophy and Goals:

- Emancipating foster youth need substantial assistance with a range of services if they are to succeed as adults,
- Housing is one of the most critical needs for emancipated foster youth.
- The provision of housing, and related services, can best be met by collaborating with existing agencies, such as those who deal with runaway youth.

Key Program Components:

- A coordinator to identify and remove obstacles to the provision of services,
- Provide housing vouchers to emancipated foster youth,
- Links to other services, including case management.

Program Results: Fifty youth have been placed in apartments and 200 youths have received case management services.

Contact: Brandy Darling, Independent Living Coordinator
Colorado Department of Human Service, Child Welfare Division
Phone: (303) 866-3151

Substance Abuse Treatment

Program Name: STAR (Starting Treatment and Recovery)

Program Provider: Urban Peak, Denver, Colorado

Type of Program: Substance abuse treatment-focus that seeks to provide services to homeless youth.

Program Customers: Homeless young adults with substance abuse problems willing to undergo supervised, residential treatment.

Program Philosophy and Goals:

- Intervention, treatment and case management can turn around the lives of substance abusing young adults.
- Success depends upon intensive case management and the comprehensive provision of health and housing services,
- The level of intensity of case management will decline following a post-abuse period and some stability in housing and employment.

Key Program Components:

- Intensive case management in a residential, drug treatment facility,
- Provide medical care, counseling, job preparation, GED or high school diploma preparation,
- Links to other services, including case management.

Program Results: Unknown

Contact: Jamie Van Leeuwen,
Program Director, Urban Peak
Phone: (303) 777-9198.

Additional Resources

Throughout our investigative endeavor, we noted a number of Programs and Resources that we believe might be of value to the Agency and those interested in providing services to emancipating youth. These Programs/Resources have received less attention in the academic literature, and thus we have attempted to provide a description of core components.

YouthBuild Coalition:

The YouthBuild Program funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development provides competitive grant awards to local agencies to provide job training, education, counseling, and leadership development opportunities to unemployed and out-of-school young adults ages 16 to 24. Participants take part in the construction and rehabilitation of affordable housing in their own communities. The program, does not, however, provide housing to the program participants themselves.

Purpose: The national YouthBuild Coalition seeks to persuade the United States government to fund local communities to employ and train young people to serve their neighborhoods by building affordable housing for homeless and other low-income people.

Basic Philosophy: The positive energy and intelligence of young people need to be liberated and enlisted in solving the problems facing our society. Young people in poor communities want to rebuild their communities and their lives, and will do so if given the opportunity. The desire to serve, to do meaningful work, is universal. Community-based organizations need to be given the resources to solve local problems and to mobilize local people, including neighborhood youth. Leadership development is a central element of effective community development and youth service.

Accomplishments: Since the founding of the Coalition in June of 1988, federal legislation has been passed to fund YouthBuild programs, and appropriations passed for fiscal years 1993 through 2004, in the total amount of \$525.5 million, administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). As a result, the number of YouthBuild programs has increased from 15 to more than 200 as of the Fall 2003. Legislation supporting community service has also been passed which includes YouthBuild as an eligible program for funding through the Corporation for National Service. Continuing mobilization of the Coalition is required to insure continued and expanded funding through both HUD and national service.

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Administration for Children's Services Mentoring Program (New York)

The ACS Mentoring Program is designed specifically to meet the needs of older youth in foster care. At an age when most teenagers are learning how to manage their own affairs and take responsibility for their futures, youth in foster care are often grieving for lost family, adjusting to new living environments, and coping with difficult emotions. For young people who have lived through particularly challenging times, having a stable, caring adult in their lives can make a world of difference.

Mission: The mission of the Mentoring Program is to support young people as they prepare for life beyond foster care. The ACS Mentoring Program pairs young people, ages 14-21, with volunteer mentors. As mentors and role models, volunteers can provide friendship, guidance, and compassion to young people in need of positive one-on-one relationships.

Who are the youth? The youth involved in the ACS Mentoring Program are ages 14-21 and live in group home foster care facilities. Most came into foster care because their parents could not care for them adequately. Many have experienced abuse, neglect, and/or abandonment. As older youth in foster care, they have little chance of being reunified with family or being adopted. These young people face leaving foster care to live life on their own with limited support networks. While they are going through uniquely difficult times, they are very much like other young adults their age—they like to have fun, are concerned about their future, and want support from someone. In order to be a consistent source of support for a young person, mentors are asked to spend at least 2-3 hours each week with their mentee for at least one year. This regularly scheduled time together can make an enormous difference in the life of young person.

Community Transition Services Center, San Antonio, TX

In most communities, there is no single site where current and former foster youth can go to seek answers, access services, and gain the skills they will need. Instead, youth and foster parents must navigate a maze of agencies and service providers. In San Antonio and surrounding Bexar County, the Community Transition Services Center offers “a

home base for youth who don't have a home or adult guides to help them through this period and answer their questions," says Scott Ackerson, the center's coordinator.

The center was launched by Casey Family Programs in partnership with community groups. The center serves as a central intake point for Bexar County youth ages 14–21 who have been in the child welfare system. Working with Baptist Children's Home Ministries, a local youth-serving agency, it provides preparation for adult living training for 250–300 adolescents each year, as well as personalized planning and case management for 150 older youth and young adults

The Transition Center offers youth an array of helpful services:

- Employment assistance, including resume writing, job search assistance, and vocational coaching;
- Career development through Project Quest, an intensive career planning and counseling program that helps young adults identify and train for gainful careers;
- community college enrollment, through an on-site counselor from Alamo Community College who assists youth with applications, financial aid, and placement into the college's programs;
- Transitional housing, including \$109,000 per year in federal independent living funds for room and board and access to 18 beds set aside for youth in the community; and
- Peer support and advocacy through an alumni outreach effort staffed by recent foster care graduates and frequent peer group meetings at the center.

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Lighthouse Youth Services, Cincinnati, OH:

For more than a decade, Lighthouse has been providing transitional housing for young people in and around Cincinnati, offering youth the opportunity to learn by doing. Before entering the program, each applicant completes a 13-unit life skills training curriculum. Once youth move into apartments, Lighthouse pays the security deposit, rent, utilities, phone bills, and furnishings, along with a \$60 per month living allowance. Lighthouse also provides counseling (at least weekly) and help finding jobs, earning GEDs, applying for college, and meeting other needs. The program, which is funded with county taxes, serves 50–55 young people, who stay an average of 11 months.

Mark Kroner, director of independent living programs for Lighthouse Youth Services, believes two factors have made his program a national leader in transitional housing. First, because Lighthouse operates a variety of group homes, foster homes, and shelter facilities for youth they never kick a youth out of the program. Second, rather than maintain apartment buildings or homes where youth are surrounded by peers in identical circumstances, Lighthouse places youth in apartments scattered throughout the community.

The scattered-site approach also allows youth to live near their jobs or schools, rather than moving to a central location, and it gives youth the option to remain in their apartments permanently.

The UPS School-to-Career Partnership, Baltimore, MD:

A steady job at a living wage with benefits along with transportation assistance, counseling support, and tuition reimbursement for continuing education and training. That dream is exactly what foster youth in the Baltimore area have been offered the past three years, thanks to a partnership involving United Parcel Service, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Maryland Department of Human Resources, and the Living Classrooms Foundation, a local youth agency. Applicants must complete work readiness training and demonstrate preparedness. Most are then referred for interviews at the UPS shipping facility in Burtonsville, Maryland. (In some cases, participants are referred to Marriott Hotels, which recently signed on as a second employer partner.)

At UPS, participants work part-time (15 to 25 hours per week) for \$8.50 to \$9.50 per hour plus health benefits. UPS also reimburses youth for tuition at colleges or vocational training programs, and it has hired a counselor to assist foster care youth on the job. Living Classrooms shuttles youth to and from work, and counselors visit up to three times each week to check on youth at the worksite.

Last year, UPS hired 42 foster care youth into the program. UPS hired another 38 youth in the first eight months of this year, and again the youth are demonstrating better retention than other UPS workers, thus saving the company money. (UPS spends \$1,400 to \$1,500 to recruit and hire each new worker.) In addition, 16 percent of youth hired this year earned promotions or raises by August.

UPS and the Annie E. Casey Foundation recently agreed to introduce similar projects in seven additional cities, which will bring the dream to hundreds more young people in the coming years.

Connecticut Department of Children and Families:

When Congress established the Chafee Independent Living Program in 1999, it required states—for the first time—to develop comprehensive long-range plans to assist youth in the transition out of foster care. Connecticut already had a plan. In fact, Connecticut already had a comprehensive array of independent living programs with a collective annual budget of \$17.4 million. The state provides medical coverage for current and former foster youth up to age 21, 100 percent tuition reimbursement for college and

vocational training, and continued financial support up to age 23 (for those who remain full-time students).

At age 14, the state assigns most youth in care to specialized caseworkers who work only with adolescents. Young people work with their caseworkers to begin setting goals, and those living with foster families undertake life skills training using an experiential curriculum designed with input from youth themselves. Youth in residential treatment—who often have serious mental health issues—move into transitional living homes for the 18- to 24-month Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) program.

After they complete the life skills training or PAL and turn 17, participants are eligible for the state’s 180-bed transitional housing program. To take part, youth must be enrolled in school and working, and they must agree to place 50 percent of their income into savings.

Rhode Island Foster Parents Association, RI

The Association is the contracted provider for life skills instruction in Rhode Island. The life skills training emphasizes the importance of skills acquisition and the importance of education. Youth are constantly reminded that, "Decisions today affect opportunities for tomorrow".

A report compiled by the Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service and the National Resource Center for Youth Services lists certain notable programs and resources with specific focus on providing educational supports for post-secondary education. Some of them are discussed below:

Annie Family Program, San Antonio Division, TX

Project Quest which is a collaborative effort between 3 agencies provides support to youth to complete high school. Youth are assessed using the “Discovery Program” and they follow either a career plan or a post-secondary educational plan. Their education also involves an educational/apprentice track. Community college representatives come to the Casey office 2-3 times per month to help youth with financial aid forms, admissions and enrollment.

Denver Dept of Human Services, Alive-E Youth in Transition, CO Adolescents Living Independently Via Education/Employment

ALIVE is a federally funded program that assists youth in out of home care to prepare for their transition to the community. GED support is provided along with educational supports to prepare youth for post-secondary education. Alive-E directs youth to the Orphan Foundation of America for scholarships and the Governor’s Opportunity Scholarship, a Colorado-based scholarship available to youth who are or have been in foster care.

The program connects youth with spiritual community, program graduates serve as Life Skill instructors, informal mentors. The program director noted that these mentoring relationships occur as an informal outgrowth of the Life Skills instruction. Additionally, the program encourages youth to transition from care to college, reflecting the program's belief that "Education is the best community link."

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Child Welfare Alive/e Program,
Colorado Department of Human Services,
1575 Sherman Street
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Oklahoma Department of Human Services, Independent Living Program

The program provides educational advocates through ILP and through Citizens Caring for America, a contracted service provider. Program youth have access to two scholarship programs through the Youth with Promise Foundation. Citizens Caring for Children (an independent contractor) provides support for youth in post-secondary educational settings including care packages sent to youth during exam weeks. In addition, IL youth in post-secondary educational programs receive an allowance based on their performance.

Crawford County IL Program: Hermitage House Youth Services, PA

Program youth are encouraged to participate in the Shadow Project, a collaboration with the local School-to-Work Program. Youth participate in job shadowing experiences in areas of possible career interest.

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Quakerdale Independent Living- Cluster and Scattered Site, IA

Quakerdale connects youth to area community colleges for employment-focused post-secondary education. Quakerdale establishes program youth in scattered-site apartments located in the community college towns.

Brighton Center Independent Living Program, KY

The program has relationships with several local businesses who employ IL youth. They bring in employment consultants and also have a relationship with the local university to assist youth with career assessments.

Some other educational support programs include:

Guardian Scholars Program

Ball State and Ivy Tech are working together to improve retention and graduation rates for former foster youth enrolled on their campuses. This Guardian Scholars Program is funded through a \$208,000 Breaking the Cycle grant from the Indianapolis-based Lumina Foundation for education. This grant intends to assist college students transitioning out of foster care. This two-year collaborative will provide one-on-one tutoring, counseling and mentoring services for former foster youth at Ball State and Ivy Tech campuses in Muncie, Anderson and Marion.

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Ball State's Social Science Research Center
Phone: (765) 285-5491 or

Director: Elizabeth Yaryan
Ohio Parent Information & Resource Center
Lighthouse Youth Services, Inc.
4837 Ward Street, Cincinnati, OH 45227
Phone: (513) 272-0273

Lumina Foundation for Education

This private, independent foundation, strives to help people achieve their potential by expanding access and success in education beyond high school. Through research, grants for innovative programs and communication initiatives, Lumina Foundation addresses issues surrounding access and success — particularly among underserved student groups, including adult learners. The Foundation bases its mission on the belief that post-secondary education remains one of the most beneficial investments that individuals can make in themselves and that society can make in its people. For more details, go to www.luminafoundation.org.

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Indianapolis, IN 46204-3503
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Guardian Scholars Program

California State University, Fullerton in partnership with the county foster care program offers the Guardian Scholars program for kids who have been in foster care. This program provides the youth's tuition, books, year-round housing, and faculty mentors. The Guardian Scholars is a comprehensive program that supports former foster youth in their efforts to gain a college education. The Guardian Scholars program is a working partnership between the private sector and public agencies designed to achieve significant synergies which allow us to support our students effectively and cost-efficiently. Cal State Fullerton, the Orangewood Children's Foundation, public agencies and private citizens create a powerful team dedicated to assisting deserving foster youth to achieve their dreams of a college education, realize true independence and reach their full potential.

In addition to all annual fees, academic tuition, textbook & supplies, the program provides:

- Orientation to university life
- Year round on-campus housing
- On-campus student employment opportunities
- One-to-one counseling
- Friendly and informal biweekly meetings with the Program Director, a graduate student or board member focusing on problem solving,
- life counseling and encouragement.
- Peer mentoring
- Faculty mentoring
- Financial aid application assistance
- Monthly recognition event for scholars and program supporters
- Assistance with off-campus jobs in career field
- Post graduation career planning and assistance

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Guardian Scholars
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Texas A & M University

Along with the state department of child welfare, this university located in Commerce offers a four-year, \$1,000 per year scholarship to help pay with room and board for foster youth who qualify. Each student is paired with a faculty or staff mentor and a sponsor family in the community.

Orphan Foundation

The Orphan Foundation of America is committed to helping parentless teens make the difficult transition from foster care into independent adulthood, and education, be it a college degree or a vocational training certificate, is the foundation for success. OFA's four main initiatives - the Scholarship Program, the eMentor Program, the OLIVER Project, and Send a Care Package - support these young people in their college career and provide them with a sense of community.

- The Scholarship Program awards between \$1500 and \$10,000 per year to students pursuing a two-year, four-year degree or vocational training certificate.
- The [eMentor Program](#), for which every scholarship recipient is eligible, matches students with volunteer online mentors based on career and personal interests and provides continuity of concern throughout their college experience.
- The [OLIVER Project](#) is an annual foster teen leadership training program held in Washington DC each summer. Students work with Members of Congress, participate in professional and personal development workshops, and attend a gala dinner honoring them and OFA's Humanitarian Award recipient.
- The [Care Package Program](#) sends gift boxes to thousands of former foster youth across the country. This innovative program is sometimes the only indication these young adults receive that the community around them is concerned about their welfare and future. It is sponsored entirely by corporate contributions.

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HEY: Housing for Emancipated Youth

HEY is a collaboration of 36 public, private, and nonprofit agencies designed and funded by United Way of the Bay Area to assist foster youth successfully transition to adult independence. The collaborative partners of HEY offer a comprehensive and coordinated approach to help youth find affordable housing and gain marketable employment skills, while also advocating on behalf of this at-risk population.

HEY Goals:

1. To transition HEY from its current role as a direct service contractor to an intermediary that facilitates increased housing and enhanced services for former foster youth.
2. To increase the awareness of the issues facing emancipated youth among service providers to impact funding and resource allocation.
3. To increase the visibility of the issues faced by foster youth emancipating from care.
4. To mobilize HEY partners to promote public policies that will result in effective, long-term opportunities in education, housing, and support services for former foster youth.
5. To promote regional collaboration to support youth in their transition out of foster care.

Some recent HEY accomplishments include:

- HEY partners joined other stakeholders to persuade San Francisco policymakers to implement a transitional housing program for emancipated foster and probation youth. By the end of February, an additional 31 youth will have access to housing and supportive services as a result.
- On October 28, United Way of the Bay Area/HEY co-sponsored a conference titled *All the Way Home: Creating Partnerships to House Emancipated Foster and Homeless Youth*. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) hosted this conference to promote partnerships between housing developers, youth service providers, local government and foundations to support the development of housing for emancipated foster and homeless youth. More than 200 participants attended the event, which has resulted in several concrete housing partnerships

- The HEY Jobs, Education, and Youth Empowerment Workgroup (JEY) hosted a Bay Area Regional Dialogue, *Overcoming the Catch 22 of Higher Education for Foster Youth*, on October 30, 2003. This event drew over 50 individuals from colleges and community-based organizations. Participants discussed the barriers to accessing and achieving success in higher education for foster youth, shared best practices in higher education, such as the Page and Elise Smith Society, and strategized solutions to overcome barriers and create linkages between supportive service programs
- HEY planned a comprehensive youth leadership program, and recruited four members and a youth mentor for the Emancipated Youth Advocacy Board (EYAB), which met for a nine-month term in 2003. The second EYAB term will convene in February 2004

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Promising Practice and Replication

Although few in number, promising—or, at the least, innovative—foster youth transition programs do exist. We have briefly described a few that merit serious consideration for replication in Stanislaus County. Replication, however, must be approached cautiously and with a substantial amount of planning. On the basis of previous replication efforts, it is possible to identify the critical planning needs that must be satisfied in order to increase the likelihood of successful replication.³ We summarize these below as a series of questions that planners must be able to answer.

- Is there a clear and coherent statement of the program’s philosophy, goals, outcomes, and theory of change?
- Is the program’s philosophy and theory of change appropriate for Stanislaus County and compatible with norms in the Community Services Agency?

³ Cf., Dale, Nan, Baker, Amy J.L, and Racine, D. (n.d.) *Lessons Learned: What the WAY Program Can Teach Us About Program Replication*. Washington, D.C.: American Youth Policy Forum.

- Is there evidence that suggests that the program has been successful in improving outcomes for transitional foster youth?
- Do CSA management and staff clearly understand which parts of the program need to be replicated with utmost fidelity?
- Does the program's success rely upon carefully nurtured relationships with other institutions and individuals in the area (and thus require substantial developmental time and planning)?
- Are there explicit directives for program replication, including appropriate training?
- Is the timeline for achieving success reasonable, particularly given the points in the previous three bullets?
- Have management and staff carefully calculated the costs: start-up funding, operational funding, staff time, etc.?

We can also not stress enough the importance of the role of evaluation associated with newly adopted or replicated programs. While it is important to evaluate the “outcomes” associated with the newly adopted program, it is our opinion that good/rigorous “process” evaluation must be a requirement. Process evaluation should be conducted in a manner to allow one to determine if the program as conceptualized is implemented and experienced by clients in the manner that was intended. Evaluation that focuses on “model fidelity” has been consistently under-utilized and under-funded given our heavy focus on the need for determining outcomes. Nevertheless, unless we have a clear sense of how the program is being implemented, we will not be in a position to understand the associated outcomes.

Section VI: Summary, Major Findings, and Recommendations

In this section of the write-up, we have attempted to distill the major findings of the study and synthesize the themes that emerged for the various components of the study. In addition to identifying what we perceived to be the major findings, we also offer our views on the implications of these findings. Based on the major findings, we are providing observations regarding strategies for addressing these issues in the areas of practice, policy, and future research. In providing these observations, we offer very specific recommendations and strategies for addressing the highlighted issues. Additionally, we are putting forth creative/innovative recommendations for addressing the complex issues that this study uncovered.

In presenting these observations, we also highlight a word of caution. While we offer our views on the data and the meaning of the findings, we encourage others to participate in the process of reflecting on the results of the study and to offer their interpretation and recommendation for practice, policy and future research. It is our hope that this research can serve as a tool for promoting dialogue among persons concerned about youth in the foster care system and that this dialogue can produce strategies for better meeting the needs of youth emancipating from the foster care system. Finally, we also encourage the Community Services Agency and others interested in serving foster youth to not only consider our recommendations but also to utilize the information that we have provided in this report regarding Promising Practice. It is our belief that there are a number of grassroots efforts that are producing innovative ideas for addressing the needs of emancipating foster youth.

Major Findings and Recommendations

Positive Outcomes and Placement Stability

Our first major finding involves the state of the youth who emancipated from care. Similar to previous research on emancipating foster youth, the outcome data and follow-along interviews revealed serious concerns for youth exiting the foster care system.

Nearly half of the former foster youth have had contact with law enforcement. This contact includes being defendants, suspects, victims and witnesses to and in a variety of criminal activities. Similarly, nearly half of the youth did not possess a driver's license, more than half of the former foster youth did not receive Medi-Cal insurance, and only 13% had any type of contact with the local four year university. Additionally, our follow-along interviews suggested that former foster youth are struggling to find and maintain housing and employment and that a pervasive theme for many of the former foster youth is uncertainty.

Holistically, while these data suggest that a high percentage of the youth who exited care in Stanislaus County are not fairing well, the study has helped shed light on some of the factors that appear to be contributing to this reality. The results of this study suggest that there are two major groups of youth emancipating from care in Stanislaus County: those who came into care and experienced a relatively stable placement history and those who came into care and experienced multiple placement changes. Half of the emancipated youth in this study experienced three or fewer placements while in care. Placement stability was found to be significantly associated with more positive post-emancipation outcomes. For example, those youth who had three or fewer placements were less likely to have contact with law enforcement following emancipation and were more likely to be in possession of a driver's license. Additionally, those youth who had three or fewer placements were also less likely to be participating in the Independent Living Skills Program but were more likely to have had contact with the local four year university than most of the ILSP participants.

Throughout this study, one of the most pervasive findings involved the need for caring and committed adults to be connected to youth who are exiting the foster care system. It is evident that this connection must begin prior to youth exiting care. Placement stability appears to be one of the most consistent factors associated with positive outcomes for former foster youth.

The results of this study revealed three prominent factors contributing to placement instability: Kinship Care Issues, Behavioral Concerns, and Caretaker Incapacity. As such, our first recommendation is the devotion of greater attention and resources in these three areas. Providing greater support and attention to both Kin and Non-Kin providers could pay dividends in promoting placement stability. One of the major findings from our focus groups involved the need for support and training for foster parents. Foster providers (kinship and non-kinship providers) must possess an array of skills and abilities to effectively meet the needs of the youth entrusted in their care. Given this reality, creating systems of support for foster care providers appears to be an area that would help reduce placement change and promote more positive outcomes for youth exiting care.

Our recommendation involves the creation of both formal and informal structures to serve as mechanisms for preparing foster care providers for meeting the needs of youth. The formal structure would involve the participation of both the foster provider and foster youth in a program, such as the Independent Living Skills Program, where the two participants engaged in “training/education” designed to prepare foster youth for emancipation. (The model we are envisioning is described below: Re-conceptualizing Success.) The second informal structure would involve support-groups for foster providers, where providers regularly meet to discuss strategies for meeting the needs of foster youth and their roles and responsibilities as care providers. In this support group, our vision would be that the participants (foster care parents) would be responsible for crafting the direction of the support group but that the focus would likely center on issues such as meeting the needs of foster youth, problem solving, dealing with adolescent behaviors, and promoting education. This type of support group would require a facilitator who was skilled in allowing the group to dictate the focus of the meeting but who was also able to contribute to the process by injecting the needs of foster youth and promoting critical reflection regarding the roles and responsibility of foster care providers.

Our efforts to prepare foster youth for emancipation cannot focus solely on the youth. We must expand our conceptual lens to be inclusive of the adults who have accepted the

responsibility of providing care. It is our belief that the better prepared adults are to support youth, the better prepared youth will be for their transition to adulthood.

Re-conceptualizing Success and ILSP

A second major finding of this study involves concern over program fragmentation and a poor conceptualization related to the needs of emancipating foster youth. A prevalent theme in our focus groups, but also evident in our follow-along interviews and observations of the Independent Living Skills classes, is that participants expressed concerns regarding the lack of vision related to the process for emancipation. Many of the participants in this study believed that the emancipation process started too late. Additionally, many of the participants felt that the “assumptions” underpinning a successful emancipation are flawed. Specifically, participants expressed the belief that, given all that is known about foster youth, preparing them for “independence” is unrealistic on the one hand and not a desired goal on the other hand.

Throughout this study, participants expressed the need to re-conceptualize what it means to successfully emancipate from the foster care system. Participants expressed that preparing youth to be “independent,” to be able to live on their own, and to be able to support themselves is simply not realistic for an 18 year old, and even more unrealistic for an 18 year old who has experienced the difficulties that many foster youth encounter. Many of the participants discussed the need for “interdependence” and connecting youth to adults—similar to what youth outside of the foster care system experience as they enter their early adult years. Examples of this were specifically stated regarding the need for adults to help support youth with difficult paper work/applications, with monitoring living situations, and promoting the continuation of education. Throughout our follow-along interviews, former foster youth continually expressed the need for love and support and the importance of being connected to caring and committed adults.

On the flip side of interdependence, but directly related to the idea of poor conceptualization, participants also expressed concerns over rigid policies that result in foster youth desiring “freedom.” Participants talked about the reality of foster youth

wanting “freedom” and wanting adults out of their lives: “They don’t want to be told or shown what to do.” The participants’ views were that much of the desire for freedom was the result of rigid policies that do not allow youth to make decisions, to critically think, or to succeed and fail in a safe environment, pre-emancipation. It is important to acknowledge that a natural component of the transition from adolescent to young adult involves a desire for “freedom and independence.” Nevertheless, the participants in this study made it clear that the desire for freedom expressed by foster youth was more than the “natural” growth process and search for independence, but rather involving a complete “rejection” and pressing desire to “disconnect” from an intrusive relationship with adults who represent a system experienced as rigid and inflexible.

While the re-conceptualization of the emancipation process is monumental and while we do not profess to have a quick fix remedy, we do believe that focusing attention on the centerpiece intervention program for emancipating foster youth (the Independent Living Skills Program) might make a significant contribution in efforts to better meet the needs of emancipating foster youth.

Currently, the fundamental premise underpinning Independent Living Skills Classes is based on the concept of “independence.” In our program evaluation of the Independent Living Skills Classes, in addition to observing fragmentation in the connectedness of the various classes (a poor conceptualization of the curriculum underpinning the program), we also noted that the classes specifically focus on promoting independent living: for instance, learning interviewing skills, cooking skills, and money management skills. Our process evaluation also revealed that similar to what our focus group participants expressed, the Program operates very much from a pedagogical standpoint of “banking,” where youth are “told and shown what to do.”

Given our observations of the Independent Living Skills classes, we have made six recommendations for strengthening the current program:

- 1) Revisiting the curriculum design/conceptualization “process” for the ILSP classes. Identify the manner in which the classes are linked, including the goals and objectives.
- 2) Actively engage youth and instructors to participate in the development and ongoing “reflection” of the classes.
- 3) Create strategies for engaging stakeholders in on-going discussions around teaching and learning strategies.
- 4) Consider strategies for “reducing” class sizes.
- 5) Acknowledge the considerable contributions and significance of the Program Coordinator to the Program. Identify/recruit additional program staff (who embody the characteristics of the Program Coordinator) to participate in the daily operations of the program.
- 6) Create an on-going process and outcome program evaluation plan to provide credible insight into the functioning of the program.

While we believe that these recommendations can contribute to strengthening the existing Program, we are also recommending the re-conceptualization of the Program. We are proposing the creation of a broad based community partnership with the Community Services Agency of Stanislaus County and the Master of Social Work Program at CSU, Stanislaus to design and implement a “new” approach for preparing youth for life after foster care, in all its possible variations. Our vision involves the transformation of the current Independent Living Skills Program, whose emphasis focuses on the concept of “independence,” into a program/practice that centers on “interdependence.”

While the core curriculum of this Program will be developed in partnership with various constituents, including current and former youth in the foster care system, service providers, and community members, fundamentally the vision underpinning this work will involve the creation of a program/practice built on the tenets of “problem-posing” education where youth and adults work together to prepare young people for life after foster care. Our attention will focus on crafting a curriculum and enacting a program that shifts the focus from individual tasks/skills for independent living to one that builds partnerships vital for survival and success in our culture. Driving this practice will be an emphasis on interdependence and strategies for living, working and being connected to others, while fostering skills for mobilizing community change efforts, advocating for

social justice, and taking action to secure one's well-being and the well-being of those around him/her.

It is our vision that this Program will differ significantly from the current Independent Living Skills Program not only in content and process but also in composition. With an emphasis on interdependence, our view is that the program participants cannot be limited to foster youth. Rather, the participants will also be adults, including foster care providers, family of origin, and other interested community members.

Not only does this broad based re-conceptualization effort begin to address concerns over program fragmentation and a poor conceptualization related to the needs of emancipating foster youth, it also begins to address a number of issues that have emerged from this study. Specifically, we have recommended the creation of a formal mechanism for engaging foster providers (kin and non-kin foster parents) in an educational program to prepare them for their task of serving foster youth. A newly conceptualized "Interdependent Living Skills Program" would create one such structure. Additionally, throughout our focus groups, participants expressed the need for enhanced collaboration, information sharing, and community building efforts. A broad-based partnership such as this would serve as one mechanism for promoting such collaboration. Additionally, by the local University becoming more actively involved in the emancipation process and potentially even housing the program, we are beginning the process of forging an additional avenue for more foster youth to begin having more regular, consistent, and meaningful contact with this institution of higher learning. The ultimate desire would be that these types of contacts and relationships result in greater numbers of emancipated foster youth actually continuing their academic careers at this University.

Addressing the Diverse Needs of Foster Youth

A third major finding of this study is the reality that emancipating foster youth are not a homogeneous population. The administrative data, case record reviews, and follow-along interviews clearly illustrate the diversity of needs/issues for emancipating youth.

One clear distinguishing characteristic involves gender issues. It became evident in our follow-along interviews that young men were much more likely than young women to be disconnected from a reliable support system. The typical support system for an emancipated male youth was “himself” or a professional service provider. Additionally, young men were more likely than young women to be defendants, suspects, and witnesses in or to criminal activities. Furthermore, young men were less likely than young women to have Medi-Cal insurance. While in care, males were more likely to be identified as having an Attention Deficit Disorder, while females were more likely to be described as depressed.

While placement disruption (change) was an issue that negatively impacted both males and females, sexual abuse was an issue that was particularly prominent for females and was connected to placement disruption. Girls who came into the system as a result of sexual abuse were much more likely to experience placement change than other girls who came into the system for other reasons. Girls who experienced three or more placement changes were much more likely to have been in contact with law enforcement than girls who experienced fewer than three placement changes. Finally, both boys and girls who experienced placement stability were more likely than their comparable gender cohorts to possess a driver’s licenses in comparison to those who experienced more than three placement changes.

These findings suggest that both between group differences (males vs. females) and within group differences (such as females experiencing sexual abuse vs. females not experiencing sexual abuse) are areas for further investigation and intervention. It becomes intuitively clear that a “one-size” fits all intervention model will not meet the unique needs of the heterogeneous group of emancipating foster youth. For instance, it is evident that matching youth who have been victims of sexual abuse with a skilled foster provider is critical for promoting placement stability. Additionally, we need to continue examining the messages that we (both within and outside of the foster care system) express to boys and young men about relationships, about what it means to be a man, and how to build trusting, lifelong relationships. In addition to examining our messages, we

need to craft interventions that help both boys and girls connect with adults and peers for emotional support.

Another finding that illustrates the heterogeneity of the emancipating youth population involves that of ethnic differences. Of particular note is the overrepresentation of African American youth (particularly African American females) in the emancipating foster youth population. While this finding is consistent with research on emancipating foster youth across the country, it also raises questions regarding strategies for addressing the problem. African American youth in the emancipation group in Stanislaus County were found to have longer stays in care (entered at a younger age) and were more likely to be classified as entering care due to “parents being absent.” African American youth also experienced, on average, fewer placement changes than their ethnic counterparts.

Currently, there has been considerable debate within the professional literature regarding strategies for addressing the overrepresentation of African American youth in the child welfare system. Many have argued that institutional racism is the most pervasive cause for the disparity in numbers and that only when the Child Welfare System begins to address the problem from within will the overrepresentation of African American youth dissipate. Still others have called for the mobilization of and intervention strategies to be directed toward the African American community to address the problem.

Our recommendation calls for the Community Services Agencies and other interested service providers and professionals to create a structure whereby African American community members can come together and begin interpreting the data/outcomes found in this and other studies, explore strategies for addressing the problem, and ultimately craft and implement a plan for addressing the concern. We envision this process involving a committed group of African American community members in partnership with service providers and other professionals embarking on a Participatory Action Research study to explore and address these issues.

With its historical roots in Third-World research development, Participatory Action Research gained prominence in South America, Africa, and Asia, and since the 1970's its popularity has spread to Europe and North America (Gaventa, 1991; Townsend, Birch, Langley, and Langille, 2000). Participatory Action Research is an approach to studying complex social issues, whereby the persons who are most directly impacted by the problem are given control over all aspects of the inquiry, from problem formulation/conceptualization, to the creation of the research methods, to the interpretation and dissemination of the results. Babbie (2001) defines Participatory Action Research as “an approach to social research in which the people being studied are given control over the purpose and procedures of the research; intended as a counter to the implicit view that researchers are superior to those they study” (p. G7). Freire’s (1982) words embody the spirit of this participatory process to research: If I am interested in knowing the people’s ways of thinking and levels of perceptions, then the people have to think about their thinking and not be only the objects of my thinking. This method of investigation which involves study—and criticism of the study—by the people is at the same time a learning process. Through this process of investigation, examination, criticism and reinvestigation, the level of critical thinking is raised among all those involved. (p. 30)

Given the history of racism and oppression within the broader society and within child welfare specifically, Child Welfare professionals have begun to acknowledge the need to redistribute power in practice. The need to redistribute power in our professional relationships also extends to our research efforts designed to guide our intervention processes. Providing African American community members the opportunity to explore issues related to the over representation of African American youth in the child welfare system will help ensure that the questions posed are the ones that help us to best understand the problem and the approaches for addressing the situation. This process will also help ensure that the information derived from the research effort is usable and meaningful to those persons most intimately impacted by the situation—namely African American community members and foster youth. Additionally, this approach to problem solving creates a new partnership between the Child Welfare Agency and the African

American Community, built on the tenets of collaboration, shared decision making and mutual respect.

Strengthening Documentation

The fourth major finding from this study involves our concern regarding the quality and consistency of documentation related to emancipating foster youth. Our concern involves both the administrative data and case records. In both instances we encountered a number of variables for which data were unavailable or difficult to find and interpret. The quality of data is always an area of concern raised by researchers, and this observation typically pits researchers against practitioners. In this case, our observation is not intended as an indictment against the Agency but rather as an additional point of intervention for improving the delivery of services to foster youth.

We noted two particular areas in case files and the administrative data that were under-addressed for emancipating foster youth: education and mental/physical health. Regarding the former, we found that both forms of data (case files and administrative data) did not consistently identify the educational progress, needs, and goals of emancipating foster youth. From the case files, we were able to document that emancipating foster youth experienced points in their academic careers where they had success and other points where they experienced struggle; however, we were unable to uncover the factors that resulted in the academic decline. It is our belief that given the many struggles that foster youth face, it is easy for education to become a less than primary focus of child welfare professionals. Nevertheless, given everything we know about factors that contribute to the health and well-being of adults in this society, education must be a responsibility of the system providing care to foster youth. As such, we believe that the documentation on this variable needs to be given greater consideration. In our process of exploring Promising Practices, we did uncover the fact that Sacramento County, in collaboration with the Office of Education, has created an integrated database, which focuses entirely on educational issues. If this system has not been explored, we encourage Community Services Agency personnel to follow-up with this Agency regarding their education database.

We also found great disparity between the case files and administrative data regarding mental and physical health issues. The administrative data contained scant information regarding mental or physical health. While case files provided considerably more information, they failed to provide the depth of information needed to understand youths' progress and needs as they approached emancipation. We particularly noted in the case files that while considerable documentation was devoted to the mental health diagnosis of the youth and the medications prescribed, little attention was given to the "progress" that youth were making related to the intervention. Additionally, limited attention was given to the type of intervention that was being implemented. We also believe that the administrative data failed to capture the number of youth who remain in contact with or contacted the mental health system post-emancipation. The administrative data suggested that fewer than 10% of the youth made contact with the mental health system as adults. Our follow-up work with Mental Health suggests that this number does not appear to represent the number of emancipating youth who came in contact with the mental health system post-emancipation.

Finally, while research continues to suggest that emancipating foster youth experience a number of health concerns that are likely to carry over as they exit the foster care system, our review of the case files found that the youth emancipating from Stanislaus County were in very good physical health. Nevertheless, given our concerns over the quality of the case files, we are not sure if this finding accurately portrays the health of emancipating youth or is the result of poor documentation.

Similar to the education variable, we believe that the mental health and the physical health of foster youth are important factors that require special attention in the documentation process. These variables play a critical role in the adequate preparation of youth for emancipation, in the process of connecting youth to foster care providers, and in assessing the quality of intervention approaches. Poor or fragmented documentation will only continue to promote inadequate services to future foster youth.

Promoting and Planning Life Long Connections

Our final, and possibly most important, finding involved the expressed need for devoting serious attention to promoting and planning for life long connections of foster youth to caring and committed adults. Throughout the focus groups, follow-along interviews, and exploration of promising practices, we noted a theme for the need for youth to form personal, meaningful relationships with adults other than social workers and service providers. Similar to previous research, we found that many of the former foster youth had limited support systems, and for males we found that their sole identified support system was often a professional whose support was time-limited. We also observed that many of the former foster youth identified their family of origin as the main support system post-emancipation. Focus group participants also expressed the fact that little attention or systematic planning is devoted to those years between 18 and 21.

We are encouraging the Community Services Agency to utilize and expand preexisting services that embrace the concept of connectedness, provide support for the development or expansion of Family Resource Centers, and continue exploring possibilities to build partnerships with the broader community that foster life-long connections.

It is our understanding that the Agency is working with youth on the development of “youth driven” planning meetings to promote and formalize the commitment of life-long connections for the youth and to create a transitional plan for the youth who will be emancipating from foster care. Creating the transitional plan with the youth’s life-long connections (adults) in attendance will help create the needed safety net and networks of support for the youth. This “team decision making” practice has also been recognized as a promising practice approach by other child welfare agencies and professionals. However, our recommendation not only calls for increasing the practice of “emancipation” team decision meetings, but also calls for expanding the method in which the practice is conducted.

Throughout this study we have noted suggestions for collaboration and community building and partnerships. The “team decision making approach” offers an opportunity to

operationalize this call for action. The reality is that on the one hand the Community Services Agency is committed to this practice but on the other hand is conducting the practice with limited resources (including money, time, and human power). Our specific recommendation calls for extending the practice outside of the Agency structure. By increasing the pool of coordinators/facilitators to include the work done internally by Agency workers and externally by community members, we increase the capacity to conduct greater numbers of emancipation (team decision making) conferences. This process offers the opportunity to begin a new partnership between the Agency and the Community that is consistent with the findings and recommendations of this study. This expanded base of attention to the work of putting together Team Decision Making conferences could have several beneficial effects. Among them are:

- An opportunity to explore partnerships between CSA and its community in new ways.
- An increased awareness in the community of child welfare issues, priorities, experiences, and resources from the department's perspective.
- An increased awareness in the agency of child welfare issues, priorities, experiences, and resources from the community's perspective.
- An increase in the number of possible conferences.
- An experience in the community of the practice of Team Decision Making and its expanded use as a prevention and community organizing process.

While it is clear that the Community Services Agency has worked hard to establish a culture that supports "team decision making efforts," as evidenced by its historic commitment to Family Decision Meetings, it is also our contention that this practice must be closely and continuously scrutinized. While it is easy to talk about the formation of partnerships, the redistribution of power, and shared decision making (the philosophical tenants underpinning this type of practice), the reality is that this practice is extremely difficult to put into place. Much of the difficulty in actualizing this practice stems from the bureaucratic and litigious nature of the foster care system and the historic adversarial relationship between the "system" and the community. Given this reality, the need for

serious/rigorous research designed to explore the match between the practice as conceptualized and the practice as implemented is imperative.

In addition to expanding and connecting current practices, we are also recommending that the Agency continue to support/promote community building efforts that are designed to promote life long connections for emancipating foster youth. One such community effort that we believe has particular relevance to foster youth is that of Family Resource Centers. Family Resource Centers offer an exciting possibility for enhancing (life long) youth connections to the community. A typical Family Resource Center is an integral part of the community that is a welcoming, safe and secure site to link families and individuals to the broader community. One of the hallmarks of the modern Family Resource Center is a commitment to respect the beliefs, values and contributions of all members of the community. Moreover, Family Resource Centers might be an ideal venue for expanding the use of “Team Decision Making”. It is quite likely, then, that Family Resource Centers would welcome the opportunity to participate in the practice of Team Decision Making.

There are other forces currently at work in Stanislaus County that have identified the Family Resource Center as an important partner in nurturing families and children. These forces include Child Welfare Redesign and the Stanislaus County Children and Families Commission. It appears that the timing in this County is particularly propitious for developing a multidimensional Family Resource Center strategy to benefit families and children, including foster youth and their families.

Having completed this extensive investigation of the emancipation process, the research team has arrived at a very basic conclusion: the Child Welfare System cannot and should not be expected to assume sole responsibility for the care and well being of foster youth. From our vantage point, if we are to experience substantive change to the health and well being of foster youth, the broader community must become more intimately involved. While the Child Welfare System can continue to promote practices that enhance life-long connections, given its legal mandates and historic role, it is apparent that the “system” is

not in the best position to lead the process of developing/conceptualizing, implementing and monitoring change efforts. It is our opinion that these change efforts stand a greater chance of producing meaningful results if the Agency (or System) serves as a partner in the process rather than the leader of the practice. This then puts the onus squarely on the shoulders of the broader community of concerned citizens to step to the forefront and assume a leadership role.

Future Research

The Center for Public Policy Studies in partnership with the Master of Social Work Program at California State University, Stanislaus intended for this initial study to serve as the foundation for the development of further emancipation research, providing a mechanism for offering insight into programmatic and policy decision-making. We believe this study has begun this process, and we remain committed to our partnership with the Community Services Agency to continue examining emancipation issues. This preliminary study has offered a number of points for future research, including further research related to the independent living skills program, gender differences and similarities, the over-representation of African American youth, foster provider training needs, and a closer examination of mental and physical health issues. While each of these areas requires closer research attention, we believe that it is also important to offer our recommendations regarding strategies for approaching such research.

In all of the identified areas, we believe that it is critical for current and former foster youth to not only “participate” in the research process but also play a major role in the conceptualization, implementation, interpretation, and dissemination of the research. In addition to foster youth, we extend this observation to include other key stakeholders, including foster care providers (namely kin and non-kin providers), social workers, and community members (including foster youth’s family of origin). As such, along with other traditional approaches to conducting evaluation, we are strongly encouraging the use of Participatory Action Research (described earlier) as a major strategy for examining the issues described above. Not only will this approach to research help generate a knowledge base, it will also help transform and foster partnerships between stakeholders and the Agency.

In addition to the generic recommendations regarding future research, there is one specific research observation that needs attention. That is, based on this research study, one specific research study seems to emerge as the next logical step. Within this initial study much attention was given to the “definition of a successful emancipation.” We believe that “research” can and should play a fundamental role in our efforts to begin re-conceptualizing the centerpiece intervention (Independent Living Skills Program) for preparing youth for emancipation. Thus, we are recommending and hoping to initiate a study that will begin exploring and creating a definition for what it means to successfully emancipate from the foster care system. Our intention is that the results of this study will be critical to creating and implementing an intervention program that attempts to promote and achieve this definition.

Our proposed study involves the participation of three groups in the research process. The first two groups include the participation of two key groups of local stakeholders. The first group of stakeholders (Group A) involves those persons closely connected to the foster care system in Stanislaus County (service providers, foster care parents, former and current foster youth). The second group involves stakeholders in Stanislaus County (Group B) who are *not part of the foster care system* but possess similar characteristics (parents of teens, professionals who provide services to teenagers [educators, employers], and teenagers and young adults). The final group involves persons outside of Stanislaus County who are connected to programs that are based on the philosophy/concept of interdependent lifelong living. (For instance, San Pasqual Academy in San Diego County emphasizes the need to help foster youth establish intergenerational connections. Once foster youth graduate from the residential Academy, they are encouraged to maintain ties and return regularly for visits. While the Academy does address the need to help prepare youth for productive adult lives, the Academy recognizes the importance of continued relationships and lifelong interdependence.) We propose to identify 3-4 programs with similar philosophies and conduct interviews with foster youth, program directors, and other staff associated with the programs.

The study would be organized into two components. The first step of the study would involve individual interviews with our local stakeholders where each participant defines what it means to successfully emancipate from the foster care system (Group A) or what it means to successfully transition to young adulthood (Group B). The second part of the study involves bringing the local stakeholder groups together in paired focus groups (teens with teens, parents with foster parents, etc.) to explore the various definitions, including similarities and contradictions. Following this “consciousness raising process,” our attention would then move to action. That is, as a group, we would begin formalizing a definition of a successful transition/emancipation. Based on the created definition(s), we would then move to a process of creating strategies for achieving success—we would begin the process of creating a conceptual lens for guiding the curriculum for an “Interdependent Living Skills Program.” To add depth to the discussion and ideas, we would share the results generated from our interviews with those persons connected with existing programs that promote the philosophy of interdependence.

It is our belief that this proposed study matches/embodies the results that were produced from the original study. The proposed study will not only serve as a strategy for creating a clearly conceptualized lens for coordinating services, but will also promote collaboration and partnerships with key stakeholders and will form relationships with the broader community. As such, not only will the outcomes provide great dividends, but the research process will service as a means for addressing some of the identified service needs and service gaps related to providing services to youth who are emancipating from the foster care system.

Conclusion

In the general population, the journey from adolescence to adulthood is rarely void of obstacles, but most young people navigate the transition with relative success (Kurtz, Lindsey, Jarvis, and Nackerud, 2000). However, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the roads that most foster care youth travel as they speed toward independence are lined with numerous barriers, pitfalls and landmines. This study has attempted to provide an in-depth examination of the issues that specifically impact Stanislaus County foster youth

and local service providers, as they grapple with the emancipation process. Given the complexity of issues related to foster youth and emancipation, if research is to generate meaningful insight that can impact policy and practice, it must be multidimensional and consistent with the needs of agency personnel and foster care youth and their support providers. To this end, in conceptualizing this study we attempted to draw on the insights of the Stanislaus County Community Services Agency staff to craft a multi-dimensional research project that attempted to capture data to provide a first stage assessment of the foster youth emancipation process. This process was only possible because of the commitment of the Agency staff to serious inquiry and their willingness to expose their processes to critical reflection. It is hoped that this research project is not viewed as an end point, but rather the beginning of a journey (partnership) to continue exploring the panoply of issues related to the health and well-being of foster youth.

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