

Supporting Transition-Aged Foster Youth

Background

A Vulnerable Population. Each year, roughly 4,000 foster youth ages 18-21 leave California’s foster care system, and strive to achieve self-sufficiency. Foster youth leave home on average eight years earlier than non-foster youth, yet receive only one-fifth the financial support.¹ Unsurprisingly, most struggle to secure and maintain housing, transportation, employment, and health care.



Trauma and Mental Health. All foster youth share a history of abuse, neglect, or abandonment that led to their foster status. Once in the system, most foster youth were separated from their parents and siblings, and experienced continued instability as they moved frequently between placements. Foster youth exhibit higher rates of emotional and behavioral problems than non-foster youth, and the disparity persists into early adulthood.^{2,3,4} Disparities in health status are made worse by disparities in healthcare access: it is not uncommon for mental health treatment received while in foster placement to be discontinued after emancipation, leaving foster-involved youth on their own yet again.^{5,6}

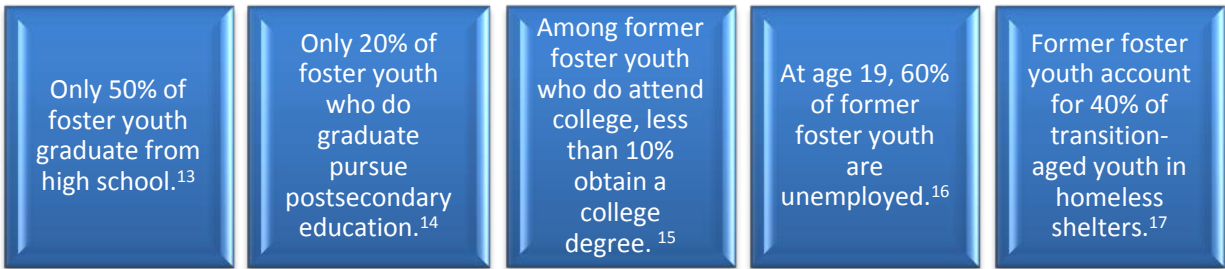
25% to 35% of foster youth have experienced incarceration.^{7, 8}

While most foster youth do not use illegal drugs, they are moderately more likely to have used them (33.6%) than youth in the general population (21.7%).^{9,10}

Foster youth are twice as likely as non-foster youth to have contemplated suicide in the past 12 months, and almost four times as likely to have attempted it.¹¹

85% of foster youth live with serious mental health challenges.¹²

Educational Success. Education often falters or ceases for foster youth on the road to self-sufficiency, with predictable outcomes in decreased standard of living. Unstable placements lead to frequent transfers between schools, interrupting educational advancement. This, in turn, affects the employment prospects of foster-involved youth in early adulthood.



Resources and Support

Several recent pieces of legislation support transition-aged youth (TAY) exiting the foster care system, including: CA AB12, which allows foster youth to remain in care and maintain housing placements until age 21; CA AB167, which exempts them from the effects of disparate graduation requirements related to school transfers; CA AB194, which provides priority registration for foster youth at California Community Colleges and California State Universities; and the Affordable Care Act, which allows them to maintain access to MediCal health benefits until age 26.

California Community Colleges can also support educational outcomes for TAY by adopting emerging best practices which emphasize comprehensive services for youth as they transition out of the foster care system. These practices increase the odds that TAY will receive the higher education that allows them to transition to adult independence successfully.



Given the complexity of their needs, TAY often benefit from a combination of strategies which include increasing access to programs and services, providing comprehensive support services, building supportive relationships, developing partnerships that enhance resource availability, and improving the evaluation of programs and services.

Increasing Access to Programs and Services. Increasing access to mental health and other essential services can improve educational and other outcomes for TAY. Elements of success for this strategy include implementing better ways to identify and connect with TAY, increasing their awareness of campus and other local resources, and facilitating their connection to services and supports.

- ***Identifying transition-aged foster youth.*** The traditional practice of using the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) to identify foster youth can impede access to support services, since it arrives too late for acceptance into some programs, and can be confusing to students whose

situations don't match the terms on the form and can lead them to under report.¹⁸ A more inclusive question asking students to "indicate if you have been in foster care (e.g., foster home, group home, or placed with a relative by the court)" was recently added to the admissions application for California's public colleges and universities, and is a preferred method for identification.

➤ ***Increasing awareness of campus and other local resources.***

Recommended strategies to increase awareness of available resources for TAY include posting signs, posters, or flyers around campus; targeting mailings to lists of foster youth and their caregivers obtained from foster service agencies; hosting activities designed expressly to attract former foster youth, such as clubs or events; and/or coordinating with local high school counselors, foster youth liaisons within the K-12 system and at other local colleges, independent living programs, local public child welfare agencies, and community organizations that serve foster youth. Colleges can also reach new TAY by networking at conferences for foster youth-serving professionals, and providing referral information to campus counselors, residential advisors, faculty, and staff.



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➤ ***Facilitating connections to services and supports.***

California community colleges can facilitate TAY access to support by restructuring services to better accommodate their specific needs. For example, in response to increased need for mental health services, some campuses have lifted limits for the number of sessions TAY can receive each year. Other campuses provide assistance and services at night and online, to increase access for foster-involved students who must work full-time during the day. Extending eligibility for services and financial resources to students older than 21 also increases access for TAY, who are more likely to not be ready to pursue their education at age 18, but are ready by 21 or 22. Also, TAY who have achieved financial self-sufficiency through full-time work may earn incomes above requirements for demonstrated financial need, but nevertheless need financial aid to survive and thrive without parental support in the college environment. Effective programming for TAY accommodates these needs.

Providing Comprehensive Support Services. To succeed academically, TAY in college often require support in meeting basic needs such as housing, transportation, financial resources, identity documentation, and medical care. They also often benefit from receiving remedial academic support and assistance with the interpersonal and basic life skills needed to navigate the college environment. A comprehensive approach to support is often essential, and should strive to include the following elements:

➤ ***Assistance with year-round housing.*** Many TAY drop out of college due to homelessness and transportation issues. Although most community colleges do not provide on-campus housing, some offer year-round housing to TAY on a priority basis. This practice can be critical for those with nowhere else to go when school is not in session, and reduces the costs and complications of commuting when housing near campus is unaffordable. County **Independent Living Programs (ILPs)** provide transitional housing as well as training, services, and programs to youth under age 21 who are transitioning from foster care to independent living. **Transitional Housing Program Plus (THP-**

Plus), a program of the California Department of Social Services, provides subsidized housing for some emancipated foster youth. Unfortunately, these resources have not adequately met the needs of California's transitioning foster youth, leaving many unable to transition successfully to permanent housing. Successful assistance for TAY must therefore consider housing and transportation needs, and provide solutions where possible.

- **Assistance with basic needs and transition resources.** In addition to housing placement, ILPs offer participants an independent living skills assessment, assistance with developing a written **Transitional Independent Living Plan (TILP)**, and career resources including financial assistance with college or vocational school. Eighteen California colleges host **Youth Empowerment Strategies for Success – Independent Living Programs (YESS-ILPs)**, which represent a collaboration between the California Department of Social Services and the Foundation for California Community Colleges. These partnerships bring together campus and community resources to provide educational advocacy services and to help foster youth achieve independence. Youth enter the program through campus outreach and referrals from county agencies and other local partners. Community colleges should work to build on these existing resources, assisting TAY to address basic needs like food, medical care, obtaining a California ID, and transportation. Educational and career supports, as well as mental health and substance abuse services, are also important. For more information about the YESS-ILP programs in your area, contact Colleen Ammerman, Program Director at cammerman@foundationccc.org.



- **Life skills training and socio-emotional support.** In addition to access to services, ILP and YESS-ILP participants receive life skills training and tutoring to learn employment and job readiness skills, financial literacy and management, and home and living skills. Twenty-five colleges are currently piloting a **Wellness and Self-Care** curriculum for high school- and college-aged foster youth, building on the YESS-ILP programs and CalMHSA funding. Efforts aimed at helping TAY should build life skills through innovative and engaging, especially hands-on, delivery methods.
- **Knowledgeable staff providing specialized support.** The fourth element of a successful comprehensive support strategy for TAY is to ensure that all staff working with them receive basic training on the foster youth experience, and on practical ways to address key concerns such as housing, financial support, and remedial academic support. Key staff should receive advanced training. Programs serving these students should utilize a multidisciplinary team approach to inform staff about resource availability, eligibility requirements, and how to interact with TAY in a culturally responsive manner. Once trained, case workers then help to ensure that youth successfully gain access to services and resources, according to an individualized plan. The **Foster Youth Success Initiative (FYSI)** was launched by the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) in 2006 to provide training and resources related to TAY needs. The FYSI developed a comprehensive *Foster Youth Success Initiative Manual: A Guide for Financial Aid Administrators*, and asked each college to designate at least one staff person as a **Foster Youth Liaison** who receives specialized training from the CCCCCO on the issues facing transition-aged foster youth and how to better serve

these students. Learn more about current FYSI activities and resources at <http://extranet.cccco.edu/Divisions/StudentServices/FosterYouthSuccessInitiatives.aspx>.

Building Supportive Relationships. As youth exit the foster care system, they often lack strong connections to community life and to permanent, caring relationships. Another way California Community Colleges can support TAY making positive transitions to stable and thriving adult social lives is by facilitating consistent, caring relationships and social linkages. Elements of success for this strategy include:

- ***Relational approach to comprehensive support services.*** The intensive approach to comprehensive support services suggested above can allow youth to build trust with a consistent, caring adult who is knowledgeable about their needs and interests. Support providers should strive to achieve and sustain such a relationship.
- ***Natural and formal mentoring.*** Current and former foster youth in California need support for the connections they may have had previously, but have often lost, with positive adults in their lives. Colleges can recognize the importance of such natural mentors, and seek to preserve or reestablish these relationships where possible. Mentoring programs have also shown very positive results with TAY, especially when tailored to the special needs of the population and individual youth, and when mentors have strong training and support to remain consistent and positive.
- ***Transition Life Coaches.*** The Children’s Advocacy Institute has proposed the “Transition Life Coach Plan” which would “appoint a Transition Life Coach to each foster youth, to be a consistent, caring adult in the Transition Age Foster Youth’s life, serve as a mentor, and distribute a fund to the youth according to a plan individualized to fit his/her unique needs.”¹⁹
- ***Peer to peer support.*** Programs serving TAY vary with respect to the amount of peer to peer interaction. Some mandate minimal attendance at events to help sustain a sense of community. Others incorporate mentoring by pairing older students with younger students to help them navigate the transition from foster care to college, and to promote interaction with other students.



Developing Partnerships that Enhance Resource Availability.

Successful implementation of all of the abovementioned strategies often entails effective collaboration among college personnel, local mental health systems, housing and employment resources, and other community supports. Formalizing relationships at the following levels can expedite the availability of resources for TAY:



- ***Within the college.*** Collaborate frequently and strategically with a range of departments, offices, and programs on your campus to increase TAY access to available services, and to identify unmet needs for assistance. Campus Health Services can provide TAY access to counselors, therapists, psychiatrists, and other sources of support, whether on campus or off. Disabled Students Programs and Services (DSPS) can arrange reasonable academic accommodations for TAY with learning and psychological disabilities. Extended Opportunity Programs & Services (EOPS) can support the recruitment, orientation and retention of TAY based on their economic and educational disadvantage.
- ***With external agencies and community partners.*** Collaborate with local corporations, private foundations, and county government to expand the resources available to TAY, and to enlist the support of community partners in making TAY aware of the services available on your campus. Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) are useful to formalize these relationships and expedite the transfer of information and referrals.
- ***With other campuses.*** Collaborate with support programs offered by other campuses, especially within the region, to share ideas and best practices for serving TAY. One way to do this is through formal organizations such as the Southern California Higher Education Foster Youth Consortium, the Northern California University Foster Youth Consortium, or the Southern California Council of Colleges. Some program directors also work with the CCCCO's Foster Youth Success Initiative for assistance with transferring TAY from community colleges to four-year schools.

Improving the Evaluation of Programs and Services.

External funding may be available to support the needs of TAY on campus. To pursue such funding opportunities, colleges need data to support the efficacy of services for TAY. Program evaluation not only helps enhance services for TAY, but supports the ability of colleges to pursue additional partnerships and funding opportunities for these programs. Elements of success for this strategy include:



- ***Tracking student progress and service access.*** The best place to begin to evaluate the success of interventions for TAY is to systematically identify and collect data from individuals eligible for services, quantify their usage of programs and services, and analyze their progress towards desired outcomes over time. The California Community College system recently added foster youth as an identified student population to its Matriculation Information Services (MIS) system. All CCCs will now have the capacity to track matriculation information including foster youth attendance, GPAs, retention rates and services accessed. Program staff serving TAY should work with their college information/data services to gather critical information regarding how their students are doing, and intervene when necessary.
- ***Choosing appropriate outcome measures.*** Evaluating a program for TAY with an orientation toward higher academic or professional goals can be problematic. By failing to give attention to the

comprehensive material and social needs of TAY, evaluation measures can make invisible some of your most important impacts. How can youth do well in school if they have no place to live and no form of valid identification, for example? Make sure to set attainable goals, and to highlight and celebrate improvements in these more basic measures.

- ***Developing and building upon evidence-based programs.*** Research has demonstrated the success of basic skills educational courses, student success courses, and career pathway courses in serving vulnerable populations in higher education. Youth prevention models that have shown promise with foster care youth include **Project Success, Strengthening Families, CASA-START**, mentoring, and intensive case management. Utilizing these models, or developing and evaluating new ones that are tailored to the needs of youth exiting foster care, can strengthen your program and the knowledge base of the field.

California Community Colleges Student Mental Health Program (CCC SMHP)

Toll-free: (855) 304-1647 ~ www.cccstudentmentalhealth.org

The California Community Colleges Student Mental Health Program (CCC SMHP) is dedicated to increasing the capacity of the CCC system to provide student mental health services. Funded by the California Mental Health Services Authority, this program offers cost-free training and technical assistance (TTA) to California's community college campuses.

The California Mental Health Services Authority (CalMHSA) is an organization of county governments working to improve mental health outcomes for individuals, families and communities. Prevention and Early Intervention programs implemented by CalMHSA are funded through the voter-approved Mental Health Services Act (Prop 63). Prop 63 provides the funding and framework needed to expand mental health services to previously underserved populations and all of California's diverse communities.

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