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CULTIVATING SELF-SUFFICIENCY FOR FORMER FOSTER YOUTH: THE TRANSITION LIFE COACH MODEL

THE PROBLEM:

Children enter the foster care system because they were abused and/or neglected by the people who are supposed to protect, love, and nurture them. The impact of this removal is compounded when the child is placed in an unfamiliar place, often with strangers. It is also important to remember that though the child is being removed from a harmful and dangerous situation, the child is losing his or her parents, possibly siblings, pets, and other people and places that are familiar and loved. It's hard to imagine a more traumatic and confusing event in a young child's life. Strike one.

While in foster care, these children and youth miss out on much of what is commonly taken for granted as part of growing up. What they lose just in terms of stability is staggering — they are moved out of their homes, away from friends and family, often transferred to a new school, and most traumatically, are often put in the homes of strangers or, even worse, in an institutional group home setting. Any one of those things can be a traumatic event in the life of a child; imagine suffering all of them simultaneously. While in care, they have little or no chance to learn basic life skills, as opportunities to engage in even the most common activities (such as participating in extracurricular programs, getting a part-time job, etc.) are severely restricted. Consider that strike two in their young lives.

And then there's what awaits them after they age out of care — minimal resources and no familial safety net. That regrettable combination typically results in negative outcomes such as poverty, homelessness, unemployment, under-education, physical and mental health challenges, unplanned pregnancies, and incarceration. Strike three.

Every year about 3,000 young adults reach age 18 while in the foster care system.¹ Of these young adults, only 15% opt out of foster care within two months of their 18th birthday.² By age 19, about 70% of the young adults have opted to remain in care.³ In the end, two-thirds of these young adults remain in foster care with the added supports provided by California's Fostering Connections Act until they reach age 21.⁴ California's Fostering Connections Act was put in place to help provide supports to young adults who choose to remain in foster care after age 18 (nonminor dependents). The Act has been successful in many regards. Compared to their peers who leave care at age 18, young adults who participate in extended foster care experience less homelessness between the ages of 18 and 21, are more likely to pursue higher education opportunities, and have more opportunity to form important long-term connections.

Unfortunately, despite the progress that has been made, a recent study found that at age 21, these young adult alumni of foster care are "faring poorly compared to their age peers across many measures of well-being, including their educational attainment, employment, economic self-sufficiency, physical and mental health, and involvement with the criminal justice system."⁵

Young adults aging out of foster care in California — even at age 21 — are rarely prepared to make a successful transition to financial self-sufficiency. This important transition is difficult for all young adults. In fact, on average, an individual does not fully mature and reach a point of self-sufficiency until about age 25.⁶ This is true even for youth who have stable families that offer financial and emotional support and assistance post age-18. The ability to attain financial stability is far more difficult for foster youth, who typically lack strong, reliable familial safety nets.

The bottom line is that extending foster care has helped improve life for foster youth during the ages of 18 through 21. But at age 21, those youth face, and are all too often experiencing, the negative outcomes discussed above. Private parents typically do not cut off their young adult children from support and resources at age 21; in fact, parents typically provide over \$54,000 in support to their adult children through age 26.⁷ That assistance — that bridge to self-sufficiency — is currently not there for youth who were raised in the foster care system.

¹ Webster, D., Lee, S., Dawson, W., Magruder, J., Exel, M., Cuccaro-Alamin, S., Putnam-Hornstein, E., Wiegmann, W., Saika, G., Chambers, J., Min, S., Randhawa, P., Hammond, I., Sandoval, A., Yee, H., Benton, C., White, J., Lee, H., & Morris, N. (2019). *CCWIP reports*. Retrieved 1/29/2019, from University of California at Berkeley California Child Welfare Indicators Project website. URL: <http://cssr.berkeley.edu/ucb_childwelfare>

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ Courtney, M. E., Okpych, N. J., Park, K., Harty, J., Feng, H., Torres-Garcia, A., & Sayed, S. (2018). *Findings from the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CalYOUTH): Conditions of youth at age 21*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. Available online at: <https://www.chapinhall.org/research/cal-youth-wave3/>

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Mariam Arain, Maliha Haque, Lina Johal, Puja Mathur, Wynand Nel, Afsha Rais, Ranbir Sandhu, Sushil Sharma *Neuropsychiatr Dis Treat*. 2013; 9: 449–461. Published online 2013 Apr 3. doi: 10.2147/NDT.S39776 Available online at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3621648/>

⁷ Schoeni, Robert F. and Ross, Karen E. Chapter 12: Material Assistance Received From Families During Transition to Adulthood. On the Frontier to Adulthood: Theory, Research and Public Policy. Edited by Richard A. Settersten, Jr., Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., and Rubén G. Rumbaut. Note that dollars are converted to 2018 dollars using the CPI

OUR SOLUTION:

The Transition Life Coach Pilot Project (TLC) is comprised of five key elements woven together to provide young adults with the age-appropriate guidance and stability required to ensure they are able to achieve financial independence and become self-sufficient. The TLC provides a flexible approach, because, as studies have found, a “one-size-fits-all” approach will not work.⁸ Just like everyone else, these young adults are unique individuals with a diverse array of personalities, backgrounds, and needs.

THE FIVE KEY ELEMENTS OF THE TLC PILOT PROJECT:

1) Young adult alumni of foster care

The population for whom this pilot project is comprised of young adults who are alumni of the foster care system ages 21 to 23, who aged out or left foster care between the ages of 18 and 21.

2) A Transition Life Coach:

- Each young adult will be paired with a transition life coach (Coach).
- Preferably, the coach will be someone the young adult will help select, and will be somebody with whom he or she already has a connection. A recent study found that 90% of young adults in California have some kind of a permanency connection.⁹ These connections could provide a pool of potential coaches.
- The coach will serve much the same role as a parent would play in the life of a young adult who is learning how to be financially and socially self-sufficient. The coach would help administer a fund designated for the young adult. The coach would discuss life decisions and financial expenditures with the young adult and work with him or her to determine how best to proceed, given the young adult’s circumstances and his or her goals, like a parent would. Young adults who are alumni of foster care often lack financial literacy skills. The Transition Life Coach would help the youth develop these and other essential skills.
- Coaches will be screened to ensure they are appropriate and responsible to serve in a mentoring role with fiduciary responsibilities.
- Coaches will be trained regarding the population with which they are working, resources available to the youth, and their fiduciary responsibilities
- Coaches will be provided with access to pilot project staff who can help them troubleshoot and / or find resources when necessary.
- If the young adult does not have a connection who could responsibly serve as a coach, pilot project staff would facilitate connections through work with CASA and other organizations and institutions that have expertise in the area of foster care and mentoring and / or with which the young adult has been affiliated.

⁸ *Supra* at 2.

⁹ *Supra* at 1. Available online at http://cssr.berkeley.edu/ucb_childwelfare/CDSS_8A.aspx?r=1

3) A fund for the young adult

- An essential component of the TLC model is a fund, set aside and designated for the young adult.
- The use of the fund will be determined collaboratively by the coach and young adult, with oversight by the court and pilot project staff. It can be used for educational purposes, housing, transportation, employment training, living expenses, health and mental health-related services, or other appropriate in line with the participant's goals related to achieving self-sufficiency and independence.
- Any differences that arise will be settled by the court.
- Funding would be made available on a front on a front-loaded basis, with the expectation that each youth will become more self-sufficient over the course of the five-year pilot project period

4) Court and pilot program supervision.

- The juvenile court, which had jurisdiction over the young adult for a significant portion of their lives, will oversee the coach and the fund created for the benefit of the young adult. The juvenile court acted as the legal parent of the young adult when he or she was a child, and therefore knows the young adult and his or her circumstances. For these reasons, the juvenile court is best suited for a necessary oversight role.
- California Probate Code §1517(b) provides that the court is not prevented from issuing orders or making appointments, on motion of the child's counsel, consistent with Division 2 of the Welfare and Institutions Code or Divisions 4 to 6, inclusive, of the Probate Code necessary to ensure the appropriate administration of funds for the benefit of the child. Orders or appointments regarding those funds may continue after the court's jurisdiction is terminated pursuant to Section 391 of the Welfare and Institutions Code.
- The oversight will, in most cases, be limited to 6-month progress reviews to ensure the appropriate progress and use of funds.
- There would be **no** contested hearings, which would add significantly to the court's workload.
- Some funding would be directed to the court to offset the costs of court personnel devoted to assisting the court in its oversight of those participating in the pilot project.
- An external pilot project staff, selected and overseen by the Children's Advocacy Institute, would assist with the selection, training, and ongoing oversight of coaches and participating foster care alumni; identify resources and opportunities for coaches to share with the foster care alumni; and help address any issues or concerns that arise over the course of the pilot project.

5) Outcome data.

- Outcome data is necessary to demonstrate the effectiveness of the TLC model and provide insight into any aspects of the program that may need to be refined.
- The outcome data will be collected throughout the project and upon completion.

STRUCTURE AND BUDGET:

- The Transition Life Coach Pilot Project will provide transition life coaches to 50 young adults who are alumni of the foster care system who are between the ages of 21 and 23 at the beginning of the program. Preference will be given to youth who stayed in care until they were 21. This will be a five-year pilot project (but the final phase of evaluation will occur in year 6).
- The pilot project will cost \$5.6 million:
 - \$125,000 per year will be provided to the court to dedicate a court clerk to help in the supervision and administration of the court's role in the pilot project
 - Up to \$45,000 would be set aside for each young adult participant in the program over the course of the five-year project
 - Annual funding will be dedicated to the pilot project staff and Children's Advocacy Institute for administration and oversight.
 - A total of \$300,000 will be set aside for a longitudinal outcome study
 - Up to \$300 per month will be given as stipends to the transition life coaches, to help offset travel expenses and other costs associated with their duties.