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TRANSITION LIFE COACH (TLC) OPTION: EMPOWERING CONGREGATIONS AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS TO PROVIDE FORMER FOSTER YOUTH WHAT THEY NEED IN THE MANNER BEST AIMED AT ENDURING SELF- SUFFICIENCY

Each of California's former foster youth has been abused or neglected to such an extent that the courts have found by "clear and convincing evidence" that their parents are unfit to raise them. These children are then subject to an often impersonal foster care system and many lack stability in placements and in relationships. They far too often age out with no social or familial safety net at all. The results are devastating:

- Only 50% get a high school diploma and only 3% ever receive a four year college diploma.¹ Consider this statistic in light of the fact that individuals with a high school diploma have a median income 28% higher than those without and individuals with a Bachelor's degree have a median income that is 59% higher than those without a high school diploma.² Further, in the current economic climate, individuals without a high school diploma are unemployed at rates far higher for those without a high school diploma (14.6%) than it is for those with a high school diploma (9.7%) or with a Bachelor's degree (5.2%).³ Former foster youth face these conditions without the safety net of parents and family.
- By the age of 24, nearly 40% of former foster youth have experienced homelessness, or have "couch surfed."⁴
- By the age of 24, over 30% of former foster youth are not yet connected to the job market.⁵
- Foster youth experience post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at higher rates than war veterans.⁶

- They have a high arrest rate after leaving care (up to 45% are incarcerated for some period as adults).⁷
- They experience higher rates of pregnancies and welfare, homelessness and unemployment (most foster youth have no job when they age out).⁸

In contrast, the median age for financial self-sufficiency for American youth raised by their families is 26 years of age.⁹ Parents whose homes remain available to their grown up children give a median amount of nearly \$50,000 and the equivalent of 9 weeks of full-time assistance per child post-18 to facilitate their self-sufficiency.¹⁰

Needless to say, former foster youth receive no such support, either from the government or from private actors impelled by faith or conscience.

Yet, to succeed in life in rough proportion to children raised by their families, former foster children need both emotional and financial support, just as all other children do.

AN APPROACH FAVORED BY YOUTH AND EXPERTS

The solution to this problem is not to depend solely upon government programs, especially as so many former foster youth – mistreated their whole lives by “the system” -- will reject any government-sponsored, one-size-fits-all effort to help them.

Instead, a key option for congregations or other community organizations is to be a resource bridge to former foster youth. This embraces two kinds of needed resources:

- Being a steady and consistent adult mentoring presence to the youth, providing practical, guiding advice and support to the former youth. Being a steadying hand, whether it be helping the youth to navigate job interviews, friendships, housing, romantic relationships, contractual commitments (they are adults), or school.
- Deploying the same legal mechanism to help support former foster youth long used by parents of means to support their adult children after they are unable to do so: money given not directly to the youth but held *in trust for the benefit of the youth*, either in an earmarked congregation/community organization fund or a formal trust.

This is the TLC Plan – to combine both of these parental functions into a non-governmental option that as closely as possible replicates the role of the missing parent.

More specifically, a congregation or community organization looking to implement the values of the TLC Plan:

- Appoints a “coach” – someone known to the youth, trusted and subject to foundational training (arranged by CAI or others) including training on the services available to the youth, how to access them, and a contact for assistance when needed. The coach is the

bridge between the youth and the broader congregation or community organization, drawing upon and invoking the congregation or organization's expertise, resources, and assistance.

- The youth and the coach collaboratively develop and approve a plan to achieve self-sufficiency, including education, wellness, housing, job search, insurance, and a budget.
- A TLC trust fund is created to receive monetary contributions from congregants, with money disbursed according to the terms of the self-sufficiency plan. The former foster youth won't view this as charity or a hand-out; they will be the legal beneficiaries of the money and they will be involved in directing how it is spent, just like a youth from an intact family.
- The coach (along with his or her back-up team from the congregation or community organization) monitors the youth and the plan, and writes checks consistent with its terms.¹¹ The coach also ensures the youth accesses services, such as counseling, transition living classes, and health care appointments, as needed and /or outlined in the plan.

The TLC format replicates as closely as possible the relationship between an extended family and a young adult. For this reason, it provides the best chance for congregations or community organizations to aid a former foster youth achieve enduring self-sufficiency.

ENDNOTES:

¹ P.J. Pecora, R.C. Kessler, et al. Improving family foster care: Findings from the Northwest foster care alumni study. Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs. (2005) See also Mark Courtney, Amy Dworsky, et al. Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Foster Youth: Outcomes at age 23 and 24. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2010. Pg. 22. Available online at: http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/Midwest_Study_Age_23_24.pdf. Note that this study included foster youth alumni from Illinois, where youth have the option to continue in care until age 21.

² Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey: Earnings and education in the second quarter of 2008. Available online at: <http://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2008/jul/wk3/art01.htm>.

³ Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment Projections: Education Pays...Unemployment Rates in 2009. Available online at: http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep_chart_001.htm.

⁴ Mark Courtney, Amy Dworsky, et al. Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Foster Youth: Outcomes at age 23 and 24. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2010. Pg. 10. Available online at: http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/Midwest_Study_Age_23_24.pdf. Note: Youth “couch surf” when they sleep on the couches of friends and families because they have no permanent living arrangement.

⁵ Jennifer L. Hook & Mark Courtney. Employment of Former Foster Youth as Young Adults: Evidence from the Midwest Study. Chapin Hall, March 2010. Available online at: http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/publications/Midwest_IB3_Employment.pdf.

⁶ Casey Family Programs. The Foster Care Alumni Studies: Assessing the Effects of Foster Care: Mental Health Outcomes from the Casey National Alumni Study. Available online at: http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/pdf/CaseyNationalAlumniStudy_MentalHealth.pdf.

⁷ Mark Courtney, Amy Dworsky, et al. Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Foster Youth: Outcomes at age 23 and 24. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2010. Pg. 67. Available online at: http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/Midwest_Study_Age_23_24.pdf.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ For more information – see The Bank of Mom and Dad. *The New York Times*, G2 p.1. Bennett, C.M. and Baird, A.A. Anatomical Changes in the Emerging Adult Brain: A Voxel-Based Morphometry Study., Bower, B. (May 4, 2004). Teen Brains on Trial. *Science News*, 165, p. 299. Shirk, M. and Stangler, G. (2004). *On Their Own: What Happens to Kids When They Age Out of The Foster Care System*. Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, Brannen, D., *Debunking the Year 18 Myth: Righting the Way for America's Foster Youth*, Advocacy Strategy Paper of Dan Brannen and Kids@Home (October 2002) at 6. Boca Raton: Kids@Home.

¹⁰ 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. Available online at www.transad.pop.upenn.edu/projects/frontier.htm. The average amount parents pay to assist their children post-18 is \$38,340 (2001 dollars, the figure in 2010 dollars is about \$47,590 – Federal reserve Bank of Minneapolis CPI Calculator at <http://www.minneapolisfed.org/>).

¹¹ Courts commonly monitor conservatorships, guardianships, probate funds and the juvenile court functions in this tradition, assuring plan compliance (and adjustment as needed) and fidelity to the plan. Note that California Probate Code Section 1517(b) clarifies the clear right of a juvenile court to make such orders *or appointments* as needed to administer funds for foster children *after they age out*. The court may retain jurisdiction over such an appointee and a fund established for such a purpose.