

**A Summary of
Foster Youth Recommendations
from California Youth Connection
Conferences**

•

Princess Scott

(PRINCIPAL AUTHOR)

Reina Sanchez

Myeshia Grice

(CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS)

CALIFORNIA YOUTH CONNECTION

417 MONTGOMERY STREET, STE. 900

SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94104

415.398.1063 / 800.397.8236

INTRODUCTION 3

EDUCATION 4

Problems and Suggested Solutions 4

Lack of Consistency in Curriculums 4

Management of Personal Information and Records 4

Non-public Schools 5

Final Comments

HEALTH CARE 6

Problems and Suggested Solutions 6

Incomplete or Outdated Records 6

Health Care and the Care Provider 7

MENTAL HEALTH 8

Problems and Suggested Solutions 8

Medications 8

Involving Youth in Services 9

Quality Service Providers 10

Availability of Services and Alternative Services 11

Relationships 11

Final Comments 12

TRANSITIONAL HOUSING 12

Problems and Suggested Solutions 13

Availability 13

Variations Among Transitional Housing Programs 13

Structure, Rules and Regulations 14

Coordination with Independent Living Programs (ILP) 16

Final Comments 16

EMANCIPATION SERVICES 17

IMPROVING SOCIAL WORKER SERVICES 17

Problems and Suggested Solutions 18

Social Worker Training 18

Social Worker Caseloads 18

Improving Relationships 19

Final Comments 20

IMPROVING FOSTER PARENT SERVICES 20

Problems and Suggested Solutions 20

Compatibility and Pre-placement Visits 20

Training of Foster Parents 21

Financial Issues 22

Support for Foster Parents 22

Final Comments 23

INTRODUCTION

California Youth Connection (CYC) is an advocacy organization of foster youth throughout California. It is organized by and comprised of current and former foster youth. Local chapters are organized on a county-by-county basis.

California Youth Connection promotes the participation of foster youth in policy development and legislative change in an effort to improve the foster care system and strives to forge collaborations with decision makers to improve social work practice and child welfare policy. CYC has many goals, two of which are to educate the general public and policy makers about the unique needs of foster youth and create partnerships in which both youth and adults share responsibility for the success of the organization.

The accomplishments of the organization demonstrate its effectiveness in educating decision makers on the needs of foster youth. In 2001 CYC members successfully advocated for new programs to support youth who are transitioning from foster care to adulthood. Due in large part to the efforts of CYC members, legislation passed that creates a program of financial support for emancipated foster youth who are working towards their independent living goals. CYC members named this program the Supportive Transitional Emancipation Program or “STEP.” The legislation also expands the Transitional Housing Placement Program (THPP) so that greater numbers of youth can participate in transitional housing. Because many CYC members have experienced homelessness or know someone who has, they strongly support expansion of THPP throughout the state.

California Youth Connection hosts three annual statewide conferences: the Day at the Capitol, the spring statewide conference and the fall statewide conference. CYC youth organize and facilitate these conferences for over 150 foster youth every year. CYC’s annual “Day at the Capitol” educates youth on the legislative process and lawmakers on the needs of foster youth.

At the spring and fall CYC conferences, youth and their supporters convene at the hosting chapter’s county and the numbers of attending foster youth vary from 150 to 200. The hosting CYC chapter organizes and facilitates the conference focusing on major issues related to the child welfare system. The issues are discussed in “small groups” throughout the duration of the conference and are the main focus of the weekend. From the discussions, youth make presentations of their findings, recommendations, and experiences to panelists at the end of the conference. The panelists are normally high-level policy makers affiliated with or from the different systems related to foster care. CYC hosts these conferences in an effort to make an impact on the child welfare system through the voices of the experts themselves, the youth.

This report presents information accumulated from three of CYC's recent statewide conferences. It is derived from the work of the youth during the fall statewide conference in September 1999, hosted by the San Francisco County CYC chapter; the spring statewide conference in April 2000, hosted by the Los Angeles County CYC chapter; and the spring statewide conference in April 2001, hosted by the Contra Costa County CYC chapter. The topics discussed during these conferences were: education, mental health, transitional housing, aftercare and emancipation services, healthcare, improving social worker services, and improving foster parent services.

EDUCATION

Foster youth, like everyone else, know that education is essential to their future success, but they are frustrated by a system that can hinder rather than support their efforts to achieve their educational goals.

Foster care is a trying time for school-aged youth. Education is often very challenging for all youth, even more so for youth in foster care who not only have to face the challenges of being youth in the world today, but also of the foster care system and the obstacles that it frequently brings forth. Foster youth, like everyone else, know that education is essential to their future success, but they are frustrated by a system that can hinder rather than support their efforts to achieve their educational goals.

Problems and Suggested Solutions

Lack of Consistency in Curriculums

Foster youth are often moved from placement to placement, which can result in a change in schools and school districts. Varying curriculums can work against foster youth who often lose educational credits and have to start on a whole new educational program when they transfer schools or districts. Curriculums that differ across schools and districts can provide a particular disservice to foster youth who are moved from placement to placement. After they have completed many units at one school, there is no guarantee that the units will transfer to another school when they change placements. Youth find themselves falling farther and farther behind. Many foster youth don't feel motivated to catch up because they know that their placements could change as soon as they make an effort.

- A standardized curriculum would make it possible for foster youth to maintain successful academic progress while in school. CYC youth feel that a standardized curriculum is the first step to addressing a barrier that often prevents them from keeping pace with the credits they need to graduate. The end result will be that students, especially foster youth, will no longer be able to "slip through the cracks."

Management of Personal Information and Records

When foster youth transfer schools, they often have to wait long periods of time before their records are transferred to their new school. During this period of time,

youth miss several days of school. Such delays put the youth's education on hold and leave the youth at the mercy of an overworked system. Foster parents and social workers vary in their effectiveness in following up on lost records and assisting with the transition to a new school.

- CYC youth felt that the best solution to problems with management of their personal information would be an educational advocate for every foster child. Educational advocates would understand the unique needs of each foster child and be able to devote their time and energy to helping the youth progress successfully through the educational system. The advocate would also make sure that the child is placed in the appropriate classes, (e.g., honors, special education, or upper division classes that are required upon entering college). Another responsibility that the educational advocate could take on would be to assure that the youth do not change schools more often than necessary. Also, foster youth sometimes need supplies that are not provided by the school, (e.g., bathing suits, uniforms, musical instruments), and the advocate would take on the task of assuring that the youth are provided these necessary items.

Non-public Schools

Perhaps one of the most disturbing problems that the youth reported with the educational system was with group home education. Youth feel that the quality of education offered through “on-site” schools is extremely poor. These institutions have limited oversight, and the standards are not reflective of what is necessary to succeed in the outside world. Many youth said that they were placed in classes that combined 7th, 8th and 9th grade students and taught the same curriculum regardless of their educational standing and aptitude. This means that youth who want to continue their education are often not ready because they have not fulfilled the higher education requirements. CYC youth also expressed that group home schools do not offer enrichment classes and there is little room for extracurricular activities. Because of this, youth expressed feelings of being isolated from the outside world because they interact with the same group of people each day. Youth feel that proper education should be a right for everyone, and in order for them to be successful, changes need to be made in group home education and “on-site” schools.

- Students in group home schools need to have the opportunity to receive the same education as youth who go to public schools. This means that they should be placed in classes appropriately suited to the individual and should have access to college prep and enrichment courses, as well as extracurricular activities such as clubs, and athletics. Group home youth should not be punished for being in foster care by receiving a less than standard education. They should be allowed interaction with other youth to prevent feelings of isolation and difficulty in building relationships outside of group homes and foster

care. CYC members suggest group home field trips with other schools, as an opportunity to participate in public school activities.

Other CYC youth recommended that all group home schools be discontinued or at least, more closely monitored and held to public school standards. Youth feel that they should be given the option to attend public schools and saw a role for their educational advocate in assisting with this issue.

Final Comments

Assume more effort and responsibility in ensuring that youth stay in the same school district throughout their educational career.

Youth also expressed the following comments and suggestions related to improving the relationship between the foster care and educational systems:

- Provide more tutoring for foster youth.
- Assume more effort and responsibility in ensuring that youth stay in the same school district throughout their educational career.
- More scholarships should be available to youth in foster care.
- Some group home youth stated that they simply want to receive the same recognition as they would in any other public school and “don’t want to be treated like prisoners in the process”.

HEALTH CARE

When discussing health care, youth expressed many frustrations with the services provided. Although youth agree that the topic is one that they don’t completely understand, youth in CYC agree on many aspects of health care that they would like to see improved. Youth do not feel that the quality of care they receive is adequate. The following is a summary of the information and recommendations youth in CYC provided.

Problems and Suggested Solutions

Incomplete or Outdated Records

Youth have experienced frustration with foster parents and social workers because they do not have the proper documents that enable youth to see a doctor. This is often because youth were placed in a new foster home and the social worker did not get the medical insurance information to the care provider. Consequently, youth may not be medically treated in a timely manner. One youth said that she had a terrible rash, but was in a new county and could not see the doctor until she received a new medical card. Complications almost always arise when youth change placements. Not only do they have to wait until the documents are in proper order and files are transferred, but

they often have to change doctors making the process very difficult for youth. When there are many hassles involved with seeing a doctor, youth get discouraged and would rather not see a doctor at all. In addition, when youth visit a new doctor, doctors sometimes make youth feel very uncomfortable because they question the youth about why they have had so many doctors. The youth find themselves educating the doctor about foster care instead of being treated.

- Because youth do not fully understand how the system works, they could not offer many suggestions to improve the transfer of necessary documents when moving to a new placement. Their input included creating a system that works to ensure that youth receive proper medical care in a timely manner. When it comes to how they are treated by doctors, youth would like doctors to be educated regarding foster youth and the foster care system. Understanding the foster care system allows doctors to handle situations better as well as treat their patients with appropriate care. It also encourages them to be more thorough with their examinations, since they understand that the current medical condition of the youth may not be consistent with what the records indicate.

Health Care and the Care Provider

CYC members expressed concerns regarding health care issues in their foster homes. Many girls reported that they were forced to take birth control just because they were between the ages of 12 and 13, and the care provider required it. Youth feel that this is a violation of their bodies. Youth also want the opportunity to see a doctor without the foster care provider present. Many providers feel that they need to be at the appointments with the youth, but this potentially breaches confidentiality. Youth would like their privacy to be respected. With more privacy, youth find it easier to open up to doctors and become more honest about what they are going through.

Another issue that youth have is that care providers will often deny them over-the-counter medications out of fear of potential liability or of being cited by Community Care Licensing. Youth sometimes have to steal these medications just to cure a common ailment.

- Youth would like to be respected when it comes to putting substances in their bodies. They feel that it is unfair to force someone to take birth control when she doesn't want to, regardless of whether she is sexually active. Youth would also like their rights to confidentiality respected. They feel much more comfortable and willing to disclose information when their care provider is not present. Also, youth do not understand why care providers cannot administer over-the-counter medications properly and safely without being in danger of losing their licenses or being sued. This prevents the youth's wellness and singles them out as foster children.

When youth visit a new doctor, doctors sometimes make youth feel very uncomfortable because they question the youth about why they have had so many doctors.

MENTAL HEALTH

Of the many issues grappled with during CYC conferences, the issue of mental health is one that almost never fails to hold a place of significance. It not only draws much attention from youth in CYC, but also attracts a myriad of input, all of substantial standing and supported by strong, passionate opinions and personal experience. Overall, youth do not feel adequate services or treatment are being offered to them for many different reasons. The following are the often-reiterated problems and solutions meant to improve the quality of services provided in the mental health field.

Problems and Suggested Solutions

Medications

Many youth claimed that medications prescribed to them were not to treat their problems, but more to control their behavior or alter their personalities.

CYC members express concern with the fact that too many youth are being hastily medicated. By “hastily medicated,” CYC youth are generally referring to the improper diagnoses and administration of medications. The results of this can be some or all of the following: ineffectiveness of the treatment or medication, over-medication, and unknown short and long-term behavioral and physical effects. Many youth claimed that medications prescribed to them were not to treat their problems, but more to control their behavior or alter their personalities. Youth stated that caretakers saw medication as a means to remedy behavioral episodes or characteristics. Also, youth felt that the improper administration of medication, (e.g., over-medication), is not only a derivative of the need to control behavior, but also a determining factor in the amount of monetary compensation the caretaker receives for the youth in care. Because caretakers receive a higher rate of pay when caring for a medicated youth, caretakers encourage and sometimes prefer that the youth is medicated, especially when there are behavioral issues at hand. Youth also said that medications were not always the answer. They felt that alternative methods of treatment would have best suited them, yet these were not offered or rendered as an option. A few of the alternative treatments that the youth suggested were anger and stress management, peer support groups, counseling, and changes in diet or nutrition counseling.

- Many different solutions and suggestions were offered when discussing the problems with medication. Youth suggest that ongoing follow-up care should take place to ensure that youth are not being under or over medicated. Youth also feel that psychiatric evaluations should be both more frequent and thorough. This may mean any or all of the following: a tougher evaluation focusing on more aspects of the youth’s situation; an evaluation lasting over a longer duration; or even a mandate stating that the therapist must know the youth for at least three months before making a diagnosis, unless there is a serious condition.

The administration of long-term medication is another important topic for youth in CYC. Because the decision to put youth on long-term medication has lasting implications, youth feel this decision should not be taken lightly. Youth suggested that there should be a standard process for putting youth on long-term medication, which included the following steps:

Step 1. Meet with the doctor to discuss the type of medication being prescribed, including how long the medications are to be taken, and what the long-term and short-term effects will be. After the young person understands what is being prescribed, a follow-up appointment should be made within a reasonable amount of time, preferably within two-weeks.

Step 2. Evaluate the effectiveness of the medication at the follow up meeting and address such questions as: why was the youth put on medication; how long will he or she be on medication; does the youth know about the short-term and long-term effects of the medication; is the youth fully aware of any possible side effects?

The follow-up meeting could take the form of a hearing with a panel composed of a social worker, CASA representative, physician, other foster youth and other youth advocates.

Involving Youth in Services

In addition to concerns regarding medications, youth raised issues around how they are acknowledged by service and care providers. Youth feel that their input is often disregarded. Dismissal of the youth's input leave youth feeling insignificant, isolated and powerless in the decisions affecting their lives. CYC believes that youth are the most significant source of information regarding matters that pertain to them, especially the decisions that directly affect their lives. The notion that youth are not capable of providing substantial input is a form of discrimination and contributes to the inability to fully improve the child welfare system.

Service and care providers rarely provide the youth with information regarding their treatment options and current diagnosis, which youth would like to have and need to have. For instance, youth made claims of being given generic medications and being completely unaware of the side effects. Being provided the information about their medications allows youth to understand and be a part of their treatment. One youth stated that if he had been aware of the side effects of his medication, he would have understood how to effectively communicate his feelings, and that the cause for his feelings were not his own fault, but due to the medication he was taking. Being knowledgeable in the affairs of their lives is very important to youth. Possessing such knowledge empowers youth, leading to feelings of self-confidence, self-control and contributes to a healthful relationship between providers and youth. Without consideration of the individual youth, treatments and therapy programs fail to be successful.

One youth stated that if he had been aware of the side effects of his medication, he would have understood how to effectively communicate his feelings, and that the cause for his feelings were not his own fault, but due to the medication he was taking.

Youth have every right to be valued stakeholders in the decision-making process. Collaborations with youth and providers would greatly enhance the youth's experiences. In addition, youth are not aware of resources, options, and how to access services. Better communication between youth and service providers is a crucial element in successful treatment

- Simple solutions to such a complex web of problems were suggested by youth in CYC. They suggested mandating that providers include youth in their treatment plans. Allowing youth to stand as significant stakeholders in collaborations with all providers, should be welcomed, and perhaps mandated. Services provided to youth should be delivered in a youth friendly manner. This would bridge the communication gaps which can disregard the youth's input. In response to the lack of information provided to youth, suggested solutions were: provide youth with packets containing mental health resource information, and how to access those resources at least once a year; and provide youth with information regarding their mental health rights at least once a year. These packets should provide a myriad of mental health information, including information regarding services and rights for youth after emancipation. Regarding medications, youth suggested that second opinions be mandatory, regardless of whether the youth disagrees with the therapist's diagnosis or not. This helps to confirm an accurate diagnosis, and ensures an appropriate medication for the individual youth.

Quality Service Providers

Youth in CYC feel that the quality of services and mental health service delivery could be improved. This, much like the aforementioned items of concern, is a very broad topic that relates to many aspects of mental health. Beginning from the service provider's end, youth expressed opinions that their rights are violated when they are forced to see counselors and interns who aren't yet licensed. This practice leads youth to believe that they are not deserving of quality care and treatment. Youth also expressed their disappointment with the lack of knowledge, information, and training that foster parents and other caregivers were provided. Youth feel that education regarding mental health, cultural issues, services and resources should be provided to foster parents in order to care for youth with these special needs, as well as to care for themselves. Finally, youth identified a great need for aftercare mental health services that currently do not exist. Therapy is most needed after emancipation when youth are going through many crises, especially emotional crises.

- Suggestions to resolve this issue included creating mental health services geared towards youth who are out of care. Services of this kind are so important, yet unavailable. It is crucial to a youth's well being to receive support services after emancipation. Emancipation, and post-emancipation are such devastating periods of time for the majority of youth in care.

Therapy is most needed after emancipation when youth are going through many crises, especially emotional crises.

- Youth in CYC also feel that care providers should be educated about mental health issues and services available. Care providers should have access to services for themselves as well as the youth in their care. Lastly, youth feel that they should be allowed to choose their service providers and have professionally certified mental health service providers to choose from.

Availability of Services and Alternative Services

Another topic related to quality of care is knowledge of the range of services available. Youth feel that their options are very limited. In some cases, youth and care providers are both unaware of the services that are available. In other cases, there are not enough available services to suit individual consumers. Alternative treatment options are essential to individual consumers with very different needs. In addition to the diverse needs that patients and consumers have, the levels of treatment required are also very different. To best suit the individual consumers of mental health services, different methods and programs should be available.

- Services that youth felt should be available under the umbrella of mental health included: group therapy, stress relief training, anger management, conflict resolution sessions, peer counseling and mentor programs, sessions for whole foster families, biological family counseling, and sibling therapy and counseling. Youth also suggested a variation in environment during counseling and therapy sessions. Sometimes, regular visits to an office become routine and boring. This results in opposition and apprehension of visits. Changing the environment regularly is a small step toward more youth-friendly services.

Relationships

According to youth in CYC relationships with service and care providers can be poor. Youth value positive, trusting relationships as healthy factors in their lives. From the youth's perspective, many factors contribute to the lack of trust including: uncaring service providers who are not youth friendly, prejudice based on experience with previous youth or the information contained in youth's files, discrimination brought on by the stigma surrounding foster youth, and breach of confidentiality. Breach of confidentiality seems to be a major disgruntlement in mental health systems. Youth are fearful and protective of themselves, thus hesitant to disclose information to service providers fearing that the information will not be respected by confidentiality agreements. This is a reoccurring topic with youth receiving mental health services.

Many youth claimed being punished by caregivers for a statement made during a private session where youth were assured confidentiality. Breach of confidentiality not only results in youth feeling violated, but also causes many problems in the home, sometimes resulting in punishment and even change of placement. Also, youth find building trustful relationships with service providers very difficult due to the lack of consistency. Inconsistency among providers inhibits youth's desire to

build relationships because of fear that once a connection is made, the relationship will end due to changes in providers.

- In an attempt to create a comfortable therapeutic environment, youth suggested that counselors be held accountable to confidentiality rules to ensure that confidentiality is not breached. Service providers should respect the youth's confidentiality rights unless detrimental information is disclosed. If confidentiality is breached, a special complaint packet should be available and acted upon. Ensuring consistency among providers is significant to healthful relationships and efficient service delivery. This eliminates the stigma surrounding mental health, and contributes to the positive outlook youth require regarding mental health services. Youth urge that these changes be made in hopes for a successful mental health system and positive outcomes for all youth in care.

"Adults don't trust us but they are giving the care provider trust in administering medications properly. Youth should at least be allowed to get an outside second opinion. In my county, if we don't take the medication, we get in trouble or get kicked out of the group homes."

Final Comments

Youth made the following final comments and suggestions to improve the system of mental health:

- Youth need to be informed of their rights as consumers. They need to know the availability of mental health services and how to access them.
- Youth should be given choices of services and service providers.

TRANSITIONAL HOUSING

Each year, approximately 2,000 foster youth emancipate from the foster care system in California. In a society where the average young person doesn't leave home and become fully self-sufficient until age 26, foster youth are being hastily thrown out of the system and expected to be fully self-supportive at 18 years of age. At this time, foster youth are expected to find housing, provide for their medical needs, secure transportation, and do all of the other things necessary for survival, usually without the benefit of a caring parent to guide the way. Many youth struggle to survive. No matter what the degree of individual effort, youth just cannot make ends meet. For this reason, many foster youth who emancipate from the system, end up homeless for some period of time. Transitional Housing Programs (THP) were created in some counties as a means to remedy this problem. THP provides assistance to emancipated foster youth who have nowhere to go. This alternative living arrangement gives youth a place to stay, and works with them to achieve self-sufficiency. Youth who enter this program are better able to transition from foster care to independent living. As successful as this program may be, CYC youth identified it as one of the areas that could benefit from systemic change. CYC members offered the following suggestions for improving the Transitional Housing Program and making it accessible to everyone.

Problems and Suggested Solutions

Availability

Transitional Housing Programs (THPs), just as other aspects of child welfare, contain a variety of potential barriers to access. Many youth are not awarded access to the Transitional Housing Program in their county due to its very strict limitations and availability. THP resources are scarce in counties partly because of a lack of funds in the program. The lack of funds limits the number of spaces which limits the number of youth who are allowed to access THPs benefits. Other youth are unaware of THPs in their county. THP is almost like a rumor among youth in care. Without the knowledge of the program, youth are not able to utilize it.

- The lack of funding contributes to the unavailability of the program. The success of youth in THP and in foster care would greatly benefit from an increase in funds, allowing more youth to be part of the program in more areas of the county. With more funding, THP can spread information about the program, making it accessible to more youth in care. Also, with more funding, THP can make various types of housing available based on the individual needs of the youth.

Since CYC members discussed the topic of transitional housing, AB 427 (Hertzberg, Chapter 125, Statutes of 2001) passed in California. This bill allocates state funding to develop Transitional Housing Placement Programs for current and emancipated foster youth. The intent of the legislation is to increase the supply of transitional housing in the state. However, counties must match state funds with county funds in order to successfully support new programs and the expansion of existing programs. The issue of adequate funding for transitional housing remains an important one for CYC members.

Variations among Transitional Housing Programs

The Transitional Housing Program, like the Independent Living Program, is a county-based program. The program varies from county to county. Services that may be offered in some counties are not offered in others. When youth move to a different county from their county of origin, this inconsistency can be confusing and challenging when it comes to accessing services.

Apart from the inconsistency of THP between counties, youth claimed the location of THP units to be an issue. Youth would like to be assured that their home through THP is in a safe area. One youth said, “Why would I want the system to place me in the same environment that was not suitable for me as a child, living with my biological family?” Furthermore, youth would like THP placements to be located in areas that have easy access to public resources such as grocery stores, job centers, schools, and libraries. This is important, especially to youth who do not have their own means of transportation and are forced to utilize public transportation.

“Why would I want the system to place me in the same environment that was not suitable for me as a child, living with my biological family?”

- A suggested solution to the problem of THP inconsistency is to make THP a state program instead of county one. The state should adopt THP as a state funded and managed program, structured consistently between counties. This way, there is no confusion between programs, and a reasonable allotment of funds can be distributed accordingly. As many programs related to foster care branch from the county, THP should branch from the state, allowing more focus, structure, and funding for the program. Being organized, monitored and funded by the state, statewide guidelines can ensure standard THP living criteria for all counties. It would be the state's task to assure that THP housing is located in areas of the community that are safe, clean and close to resources.

Structure, Rules and Regulations

Another issue with Transitional Housing Programs is its rigid structure which is unsuitable for various youth's needs. A couple of problems stemming from this issue are time frames and age restrictions. Some youth depend on THP services for a longer period of time than is allowed by program guidelines. Some youth do not meet the age criteria for THP services or services that are still needed are ceased because they reach a certain age. Also, the program is not suited to the individual. Some THP service recipients have no desire to attend college and choose to enter the workforce. These youth normally do not have access to THP services due to requirements of continued education after high school. These youth are being punished by not being allowed to access THP because of their positive, yet different career choice. It is important that those youth have access to transitional housing as well. Transitional Housing Programs should be flexible and versatile to the various needs of youth by offering a variety of types of housing arrangements, based on the needs of the youth.

- Youth felt that strict restrictions and limitations should be reduced or eliminated to allow youth of different ages to partake in THP. Youth said THP should be extended past high school and be open to youth up to the age of 23 who need support. To make Transitional Housing Programs better able to meet individual needs, the youth recommend individual case management. This means to offer THP services to the individual youth based on assessments made by the youth, THP worker and the social worker as a team. Managing youth in THP this way treats youth as individuals, catering to the special needs of the youth without discriminating against those needs. Of course, confidentiality is a very important factor when operating in this fashion and definitely should not be breached by the youth, or service providers. The design of different settings for THP is a wonderful idea introduced by youth in an attempt to make THP services more flexible and efficient. Different settings in communities can accommodate youth based on their lifestyles and specific needs. In addition to community resources that would be available, amenities such as on-site counselors, career/educational resource

centers, child care facilities and computer centers should be offered which would contribute to the success of youth.

Rules and regulations of THP were also a concern of youth in CYC. An example of this is that some Transitional Housing Programs penalized youth for staying out after curfew by not allowing them inside or not allowing youth to leave after curfew. Curfew times and rules are not reasonable. They interfere with youth's work schedules and sometimes school schedules. Youth also felt that because receiving THP services is a privilege, all youth in THP should be required to maintain a job. Some youth feel that there should be only two other housemates in the house or apartment. They feel that relationships become difficult to maintain and house management is more complicated with more occupants. Youth also expressed their desire to allow family members to stay the night while in THP. Overnight stays are normally not allowed in THP, but youth argue that they would like to continue to have relationships with their siblings and other family members who they rarely see or have contact with while in the foster care system.

- Youth suggested that THP services should not be lock down facilities. Youth claim that it is unfair to shut youth in or out, while trying to maintain an independent lifestyle, especially when youth's reasons for breaking curfew rules are work and school related. Having a job while in THP is also a requirement that youth would like to see. As far as housemates, youth feel that matches between two youth should be carefully managed and that occupancy limits should be placed appropriately. Youth would also like to see an exception made for youth's siblings and family members regarding overnight stays.

"Two youth in my group attend college. One slept in eighteen different beds during this past summer and another slept in his car."

AB 427 (Hertzberg, Chapter 125, Statutes of 2001) addresses the concerns of CYC members regarding the restrictiveness of THPs to some degree. The bill states that regulations governing THPs should be "age-appropriate and recognize that youth who are about to emancipate from the foster care system should be subject to fewer restrictions than those who are younger." The regulations should also "allow emancipated youth to have the greatest amount of freedom possible in order to prepare them for self-sufficiency." CYC will monitor the new regulations to ensure that they match the intent of AB 427 and are consistent with the youth's recommendations.

Transitional Housing Programs are generally wonderful programs with much potential. However, one problem with THPs is that they are not necessarily customized to the individual foster youth. They are unable to provide adequate services to certain groups of youth who don't fall into the normal or average range of criteria. Youth would like to see programs branch from THP designed to suit these different groups of youth. In some cases, youth with mental health issues are isolated due to their history. In other instances, youth with dependents are shunned and have no resources similar to THP available to them. Other youth, who are emancipated, may be capable of living in more of an independent environment requiring minimal assistance.

- Ideas to provide services to these populations were numerous. Youth suggested that services be provided to youth who are in need of more assistance due to mental health issues or special needs. Services could take the form of a program designed specially for youth in need of extra assistance such as on-site counseling, or a 24-hour help contact. For youth who are more capable of independence, youth suggested a program similar to a boardinghouse. This program would allow youth to rent rooms from foster care oriented families who have agreed to sublet their rooms for a monthly fee. These youth would have access to the same resources that THP services provide, with less restriction on their daily lives.
- Youth also envisioned programs designed for youth with dependents. One of those involved parents being given a one-bedroom apartment to share with their child. These parents would also be able to consult with an advocate who assists them in finding and utilizing resources for the youth and their child. They would be allotted extra funds for their child, and also meet different requirements than other youth in THP. Another program designed for parents, involves sharing a larger apartment or house with other single parents and their children. The same resources would be provided as before, and this way, parents would be able to share responsibilities and learn from one another.

Coordination with Independent Living Programs (ILP)

Youth expressed a strong desire to incorporate ILP services with THP services. Youth in CYC feel very strongly about the importance of Independent Living Programs and would like to see THP and ILP work in collaboration. THP and ILP are very closely related and youth could benefit from closer collaboration between the two programs. Youth participate in THPs to learn skills that are transferable in the real world. Therefore, it is necessary for programs to have independent living skills components to them, where youth learn skills such as how to budget money, grocery shop, and properly clean and maintain a house.

- Youth would like to create transitional housing sites that have an assigned ILP Job Coordinator. A job coordinator would be an essential part of the program, assisting youth with all of their occupational needs. Youth would also like to have an educational advocate to assist youth with their future educational and career goals. Youth need an advocate to help them with things like tutoring and finding resources in the community to assist them as students. Having a computer on site would be beneficial to the youth's education as well.

Final Comments

Youth had additional comments and suggestions supporting their solutions and desire to improve THP services:

“Youth in college need support and help. Youth do not have resources. Youth who attend college full time can only work twenty hours a week which is not enough to pay rent, buy bus passes and other necessities. One youth got a credit card and charged \$500 for groceries because he had no money to eat.”

- THP entering and exiting ages should be based on individual capabilities. Anyone who is interested should be granted an interview.
- Those youth with mental or physical disabilities should get financial and everyday help.
- Statewide placement regulations should be set.
- A six-month evaluation should be done to see how youth are adjusting.
- Youth should have co-signers for special needs such as utilities and driver's licenses.
- Youth should be able to meet roommates before they move in to decide compatibility.
- Support groups should exist in Transitional Housing Programs.
- There should be contact between youth and the ILP worker at least twice a month.

EMANCIPATION SERVICES

Emancipation services are not plentiful and often unheard of by youth in foster care, partly because they don't exist in many counties. Many youth are unaware of any services offered to emancipated youth. This is something that youth would desperately like to change. The following are suggestions offered by CYC youth about how to improve and build upon existing emancipation services available to foster youth:

- Housing available to youth who are emancipated, similar to the THPs in the county, yet less restrictive, offering resources that are currently suspended at emancipation. Youth should receive living stipends and assistance with everyday living costs. Youth would also like to have outreach counselors and staff available for their assistance.
- Better educational tracking and assistance to ensure post-emancipation success.
- More programs geared towards the emancipated youth providing assistance with education, jobs, finances and health management.
- Mental health services should also be continued beyond the age of 18.

IMPROVING SOCIAL WORKER SERVICES

Youth have a lot to say about social workers and the quality of the relationships they had with those who retain primary control over their lives. You can imagine the passion behind the input from youth in CYC. Youth were able to articulate their feelings and issues in an effort to improve social worker services.

Problems and Suggested Solutions

Social Worker Training

Many youth feel that their social workers are unaware of resources and options available to foster youth. They feel this way because youth receive answers like “I don’t know” to the questions they ask social workers. Youth are not always confident in their social workers’ ability to manage their case and they feel social workers’ knowledge of mental health services is very limited. Youth who are not confident in their social workers’ ability to manage their case, cannot build trustful relationships with their workers. Youth who encounter new social workers often feel that they are overwhelmed and did not receive enough necessary training to cope with the duties of social work.

- Youth in CYC suggest that social workers receive in-depth training on the resources available for the age ranges that they work with. Social workers should be sent through a month-long training where they can receive hands on training regarding the foster care system and paperwork. Training should also be provided to social workers on how to interact with foster youth. Training should be provided regarding services and resources regularly, updating previously acquired information. In addition to this, youth feel that it’s important that foster youth are involved and are allowed to regularly partake in new social worker training. Youth believe that by being involved in social worker training, they can provide new social workers with a valuable, unique youth perspective, making a positive impact on the social workers’ career and on the child welfare system.

Social Worker Caseloads

“We value the education of social workers.”

One particular problem that has many ramifications for foster youth is the size of caseloads social workers carry. Social workers, as well as youth are frustrated with this dilemma. Social workers are not able to focus on youth when they are overwhelmed with an unreasonable number of cases. This disservice to both youth and social workers prevents social workers from performing their duties appropriately. When social workers receive a new case to manage, they may not have time or energy to exert the proper and standard procedures. They may glance through a youth’s file and make assumptions about the youth without ever taking the time to get to know the youth personally. This practice may become habit and is unfair to youth.

- According to the youth, hiring social workers should be a top priority, yet it is not so easy. Youth suggested hiring social workers without MSW degrees, who have related degrees in Sociology or Criminal Justice. Newly hired social workers should have flexible work hours to accommodate their needs as well as the youth’s needs. Having a large caseload does not allow social workers to get to know youth as individuals. Hiring more social workers would allow

workers to devote more time to getting to know youth as individuals, and build relationships without pre-conceived notions.

- Another suggestion provided by youth in CYC was to divide workers' case-loads by age ranges. Although youth feel that inconsistency among social workers is a problem, it's something youth have come to terms with as being inevitable. Youth suggested assigning social workers based on age groups of youth. For example, youth would have one social worker from ages 0–5, a different one from 6–11, 12–15 and 16 through after care. This enables social workers to be specialists in their category of age groups. They can also focus their continuing education on specific age groups and provide exceptional knowledge of resources available to the groups they work with. Youth adjust routinely to changing teachers as they graduate levels of education, and feel they can adjust to changing social workers as they progress in age.

Improving Relationships

In an attempt to improve relationships between youth and social workers, youth provided useful input regarding the important factors in these relationships. Having trustful and healthy relationships with social workers is something that youth feel is crucial. It is necessary to maintain effective communication, understanding, and cooperation between the often opposing forces. With healthy relationships, tensions between social workers and foster youth need not occur. Youth complained that currently, social workers meet primarily with the youth's caregiver to receive input and perspectives. Youth also complained of being moved to homes of higher levels of care for complaining about their placements or standing up for their rights.

- One of the suggestions to eliminate the issues that youth face with social workers was to require social workers to meet with youth monthly for a reasonable amount of time. During this time, confidentiality rules and rights should be paramount, ensuring that youth feel comfortable expressing their feelings and thoughts with social workers. Youth want social workers to meet with them before court dates to provide information on what is happening with their cases. Social workers should not be able to make mental health diagnoses based on just one visit with youth.
- Foster youth would also like to be able to write a report stating their current health and educational standing as well as the outcomes of their visits with their parents and siblings. These reports should be available to the court. Youth also expressed their desire for social workers to meet with the youth's caregiver and schoolteacher to get updates. Social workers should be easy to communicate with, and should promptly respond to youth's messages. Youth would like to see checklists made available to social workers and appropriately

“Effective communication is important between social workers and foster youth.”

utilized in every case plan, to ensure adequate treatment. Brochures and other materials regarding fair treatment in foster care should be made available to youth by social workers. Information is valuable to youth, and should come from social workers as well as foster parents and other care providers.

Final Comments

Youth had the following additional suggestions to improve social worker services:

- Statewide, county social workers should come to the youth's house monthly. There should be statewide regulations for monthly visits. During the same visit, social workers should meet with both the adult caregiver and the youth, separately and together.
- Social workers should assist youth who are applying for jobs with obtaining necessary documents such as drivers licenses, birth certificates and social security information.

IMPROVING FOSTER PARENT SERVICES

Our last topic of discussion, improving foster parent services, is another passion filled topic with much insight provided from youth in CYC. Relationships between youth and foster parents often need attention. As key service providers and consumers of the system, the importance of the relationships between the two should take precedence in the home. This is not always the case. Youth in CYC have deep desires to improve their relationships with foster parents and offer recommendations on how their experience in foster care could have been improved.

Problems and Suggested Solutions

Compatibility and Pre-placement Visits

One issue that can lead to tension is the incompatibility within placements. Foster parents and youth are often not compatible. Not only is compatibility an issue, being placed appropriately is as well. This may sound similar, yet youth in CYC clarified the two concepts. When youth are placed in a home, they receive no other information than what the social worker wishes to disclose. Their input regarding placements is almost completely disregarded, whether they have a choice in the matter or not. Often times, prospective foster parents pre-judge before they even arrive in the home, based on the youth's case files and what the social worker discloses. This lack of information, and in the foster parents' case, preconceived notions can contribute to tension in the relationship between youth and foster parents. Being placed appropriately may or may not have anything to do with the compatibility between the care provider and the youth. Youth said that the failure of the placement was sometimes a result of other factors besides the

Pre-placement visits with the whole prospective foster family should be arranged to encourage familiarity, comfort and to establish compatibility.

relationship between the foster care provider and the youth. Some factors affecting the success of the youth's placement are location, and other household members.

- To acquire more useful information, youth suggested that a one-on-one meeting be held with the youth and the prospective caregiver before final placement. Pre-placement visits with the whole prospective foster family should be arranged to encourage familiarity, comfort and to establish compatibility. Background information on the foster parents should be prepared for youth just as it is for the prospective caretakers. Youth also felt that psychiatric evaluations should be part of licensing requirements.
- Regarding placement structure and options, youth agreed that there are not enough alternative placements, especially for youth with children. Youth suggested that placements for pregnant and parenting teens be integrated with placements for other teens. Youth can benefit from this by learning lessons in parenting from the parenting teens already in the home. This would also result in more placement options. Another suggestion was placing youth in homes by age groups, similar to an earlier suggestion regarding the structure of assigning cases to social workers. This would assure that the foster care provider is limited to providing the best possible care for specific age groups. Providers who specialize in certain age groups would be able to deliver expert care due to the knowledge that they receive through foster parent training and frequent workshop attendance. A benefit of this structure is that foster parents would receive all of the information available regarding resources and services specifically for their age group.

Training of Foster Parents

Other issues included the education and training that foster parents receive. Youth in CYC agree that foster parents are not always aware of the responsibilities that they undertake when deciding to be foster parents. Some foster parents are not educated about rules and regulations concerning foster care, and begin learning them after having a youth placed in their care. This does not guarantee the youth's right to adequate care and services. Youth also agreed that training and continuing education for foster parents is not enough. Training in a variety of areas in foster care is not provided. Foster parents cannot be successfully prepared for providing foster care, nor can foster parents provide quality care if they are not equipped with the necessary tools they can receive through valuable training.

- To clarify the responsibilities foster parents have, youth suggested there be proper intake forms with specific conditions customized for the individual youth prior to placement. Assuring that foster parents know rules and regulations prior to receiving a youth should be a priority with new foster parent training. Youth feel that the knowledge of the rules and regulations should also be tested prior to receiving new youth.

Foster parents cannot be successfully prepared for providing foster care, nor can foster parents provide quality care if they are not equipped with the necessary tools they can receive through valuable training.

- Youth suggested that foster parents complete mandatory training before receiving a license. After receiving the license, training should be continuous. Foster parents should receive citations, and/or consequences for not attending mandatory training. Mandatory training should occur at least once a month and should be followed up. Training that foster parents attend should cover a variety of areas including different age groups, cultural sensitivity, safety in the home, child development, and individualization between foster parent and child. An important training topic that youth suggested was communication. Effective communication between youth and care providers is a priority to youth and should be learned in training courses and workshops, and demonstrated in the home. Workshops and training should not only be continuous and mandated, but updated as well, to suit the different needs and times, and to disseminate newly discovered information.

Financial Issues

Youth claimed the money is often an issue in foster care. Many foster parents are not financially stable enough to provide well for foster youth and depend on the care provider income. This places a monetary amount on the foster child and can become a barrier to the quality of care that youth receive. Youth report that at times fresh food isn't available in the foster home due to the provider's lack of financial stability. Money intended for the care of the foster youth is sometimes used for the biological children of the foster parent, or never used for or given to the foster youth. In addition to this, allowances provided for foster youth are generally less than the amount provided to youth in the general population.

Regulations should be placed on the financial stability of the foster care provider before having youth placed in the home. Allowances should be more reasonable and appropriate for the costs of clothing, toiletries and everyday living. Youth suggested having social workers and/or probation officers check receipts for clothing allowances, and verify expenditures with the foster youth. To assure that youth are receiving proper nutrition and adequate clothing and toiletries, youth should be able to evaluate their standards of living and communicate it to social workers or probation officers. Foster parents and youth could switch off cleaning out refrigerators and checking expiration dates to ensure the availability of fresh food at all times.

Support for Foster Parents

Similar to the issues concerning training, youth felt that educational opportunities and resources should be more available to foster parents. Issues and altercations happen often in homes. Foster parents end up frustrated and don't know how to handle tough situations.

- Foster parents should be provided with information about resources and accessing services. This information should be frequently updated. One of the most requested resources that should be provided is a list of emergency phone

numbers, and also a list of numbers for support. Foster parents should be provided with the full medical history and background of the youth in their care. Youth feel that social workers should meet with the foster parents consistently. Counseling is another valuable resource that should be available to foster parents as well as youth.

Final Comments

Improving foster parent services directly affects the youth and the system in so many different ways. Foster care providers have a substantial amount of influence in the shaping and molding of a child and the child's future. Care providers are definitely key players and valuable resources in the child welfare system. For all of these reasons, youth feel that improving these services should be a top priority that would benefit the whole system.

- Treat foster children the same way that biological children are treated.
- Don't take advantage of the money that is provided for the care of the youth.
- Good communication skills should be practiced between foster parents, foster youth, and biological children.
- Don't involve interaction with unnecessary third parties such as boyfriends, or girlfriends. This confuses matters in the home.
- Respect the beliefs, morals, and values of foster youth just as you would like them to do for you.

“I look out in the audience and I don’t see strangers,
I see my brothers and sisters. We all have the same mother
who is the state, and we all want the best from our mother.”

—ERIC, SISKIYOU COUNTY

It is our hope that the information provided in this report will shed light on the foster youth’s perspective of the foster care system. The voices in this report are of youth who have come together from all parts of the state to speak in unison, hoping to be heard, and more importantly, hoping for action. These are the issues that will shape the future of foster care and they enormously impact the lives of the state’s children. Whether large or small, the changes recommended here will dramatically improve life for all youth in California’s foster care system.