

EXTRAORDINARY FOSTER PARENTS IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY

*CHILD WELFARE INITIATIVE'S IMPLEMENTATION OF BEST PRACTICES IN
RECRUITING AND RETAINING NEW THERAPEUTIC FOSTER PARENTS*

June 2013



Child Welfare Initiative



Our Mission

The Child Welfare Initiative implements programs and practices that produce measurable improvements in the lives of children and families involved in child welfare systems.

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Extraordinary Foster Parents in Los Angeles County

Child Welfare Initiative's Implementation of Best Practices in Recruiting and Retaining New Therapeutic Foster Parents

Background

The recruitment and retention of capable foster parents are persistent challenges for child welfare agencies. Foster parenting is demanding and turnover is high. At least 20% of all foster homes exit each year, according to a study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. A significant portion of that attrition comes from new foster parents. The National Foster Parent Association estimates that as many as 60% of foster parents leave within the first year. Finding new parents, along with convincing experienced parents to stay, is a regular part of business for child welfare agencies.

The need for foster parents is most intense, however, for older children and adolescents, especially those with severe emotional and behavioral problems. California's Intensive Treatment Foster Care (ITFC) program is designed to serve children and youth ages 10 to 17 with serious emotional or behavioral problems. The ITFC program seeks to move young people with behavioral and mental health problems out of group homes and into family homes where they receive intensive support from qualified staff and highly trained foster parents before moving to a permanent home. Finding foster parents for the ITFC program has been a significant challenge.

In 2011, the United States District Court approved a settlement in the *Katie A., et al., vs. Diana Bonta, et al.*, (State of California and County of Los Angeles) lawsuit that required Los Angeles County to set aside \$17.3 million to provide ITFC homes for a minimum of 300 children and youth. Since then, the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services has found only about 80 ITFC homes for these children, leaving 220 children without appropriate family homes.

Against this backdrop, the Child Welfare Initiative (CWI) began work to research then implement new and more effective approaches for foster parent recruitment and retention in Los Angeles County and elsewhere.

Best Practices Research

Since the mid-1990's, experts have recommended focusing on improving the public image of foster parents, relying on community groups in recruitment drives, and involving current foster parents in the recruitment of new parents. In 2002, the United States Department of Health and Human Services' Office of the Inspector General noted a growing need for additional foster parents who are willing and able to care for older foster children – particularly those with severe mental and behavioral problems. The

Office of the Inspector General concluded that the most effective means for finding and recruiting such parents were not traditional mass solicitation campaigns but targeted efforts that focused on word-of-mouth recruitment where agencies ask foster parents to reach out directly to members of their family, friends, and community to find others who might be interested in fostering a child.

Recent efforts have employed more targeted approaches. Wisconsin launched a multi-year marketing campaign that used an assessment of the motivations of foster parents to drive the messaging. The California Department of Social Services found that in recent years, increased funding had gone to word-of-mouth and community-based recruiting, and Casey Family Programs reported that child welfare agencies had shown interest in moving from mass media campaigns toward smaller, targeted efforts to find capable foster parents. Recent work in Northern California identified personal and professional commonalities among high performing foster parents, then targeted community and civic organizations along with work environments where individuals with those characteristics were likely to be found. However, on a national level and in Los Angeles County, improvements have been inconsistent and reliance on broad, highly generalized campaigns has largely remained the norm.

Foster Parent Motivations, Characteristics, and Challenges

In order to learn about the characteristics and motivations of extraordinary foster parents, CWI partnered with six foster family agencies in Los Angeles County to obtain direct feedback from foster parents. Among other factors, CWI asked agencies to select foster parents from their existing pool of individual homes that agency social workers and staff felt would offer a safe and nurturing environment for their own children. CWI requested that agencies avoid identifying foster parents as extraordinary based on their simple willingness to take referred children or their overall compliance with an agency's policies or practices.

CWI's foster family agency partners referred a total of 40 foster parents: 24 traditional foster parents and 16 ITFC parents. CWI divided the foster parents into seven focus groups and interviewed each group for two hours. CWI retained an experienced marketing expert to ask each focus group of foster parents about their challenges, rewards, and motivations in foster parenting, and then to test a series of messaging themes for foster parent recruitment. In addition, CWI asked agency-identified foster parents to complete the Big Five Inventory (BFI), a nationally normed self-reported personality questionnaire that locates individuals along five continua of personality traits:

- Extroversion v. Introversion
- Agreeableness v. Antagonism
- Conscientiousness v. Lack of Direction
- Emotional Stability v. Neuroticism
- Openness v. Closedness to Experience

Each BFI domain is scored from one to five with higher scores showing a tendency toward extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness.

CWI's focus groups provided critical insight into the **motivations** of foster parents. Foster parents identified as the highest performing described being "called" to this work. For many such parents, faith helped them cope with the challenges of taking in a child. Others felt they could make a meaningful impact beyond the life of an individual child by "breaking the chain" of abuse and neglect. Still others noted that they had the time or wanted children in their home; empty nesters commented that they fostered children because they missed the energy that young people brought to their lives.

CWI's focus groups described the **rewards** of being a foster parent. Foster parents enjoyed seeing a child interact appropriately with others, growing more self-sufficient, demonstrating trust, and exhibiting loving behaviors. As rewarding, parents said, is helping a child move from destructive behaviors to a position of safety and trust with his or her foster family.

With its foster parent focus groups, CWI explored the **challenges** of being a foster parent in Los Angeles County specifically. The work of raising a child, especially one with emotional or behavioral problems, can be "frustrating, despair-inducing, and exhausting." Some parents fostering children with behavioral and mental health problems felt they were not told of the full breadth of their child's challenges in advance or adequately trained to handle those challenges. Foster parents also asserted that social workers, therapists and other support staff without parenting experience lacked credibility.

Foster parents **called for changes to agency practice** as well. Foster parents wanted foster family agencies to provide better reporting after in-home visits, preferring that agency staff treat them as members of the team. Parents also stated a preference for consistent respite care providers so that the children would develop relationships with the temporary caregivers. Foster parents requested regular contact with their peers, especially other foster parents engaged in parenting children with similar challenges.

Finally, foster parents shared what they regarded as the **key characteristics** of an exceptional foster parent. They highlighted patience as a crucial attribute; foster parents felt they needed to demonstrate patience with the child, the child welfare system, and themselves. Foster parents working with the most vulnerable youth noted the importance of “thick skin” to cope with the challenge of a sometimes angry and mistrustful child. Relatedly, they stressed having empathy for both the child in their care and the biological parents that are often so important to the child.

The BFI provided a different look at valuable foster parent characteristics. Foster parents identified by agencies as exceptional evidenced high levels of extroversion and openness, very high levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness, and moderately high levels of emotional stability.

BFI Scores from CWI’s Foster Parent Sample (Scale of 1-5)

Domain	Extraversion	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Emotional Stability	Openness
Average Score	3.73	4.22	4.29	2.97	3.84

Critically, foster family agency staff independently confirmed the importance of characteristics such as agreeableness and openness as valuable, which may reflect the support that foster families can offer agency staff in their work as team. Equally important and apparent from the BFI were characteristics such as conscientiousness and emotional stability, which play a critical role in the life of a child in a foster home and the daily therapeutic interventions that a foster parent offers in helping a child heal.

CWI’s Findings for Improved Foster Parent Recruitment and Retention

CWI’s research efforts provide a valuable window into the motivations, rewards, challenges, and characteristics of outstanding Los Angeles foster parents, as well as the need for foster family agency and practice changes to better support foster parents. These findings stand to improve the results of future recruitment and retention efforts.

- Understanding the **motivations**: Knowing that many foster parents are motivated by faith, by breaking the chain of abuse and neglect, or by wanting to bring youthful energy into a quiet home helps agencies construct compelling messages as they ask prospective parents to foster a child.
- Understanding the **rewards**: Recognizing that foster parents enjoy seeing a child exhibit one set of behaviors and leave others behind helps agencies highlight the

rewards of fostering a child. By highlighting those rewards, foster parents are reminded of the joys of even small successes and are more likely to continue fostering children.

- Understanding the **challenges**: Knowing that foster parenting is difficult work and that parents find each other comforting reminds us of the value of intentionally utilizing existing foster parents to recruit others and offering ongoing peer support. Hearing that foster parents sometimes felt unprepared reminds us that frank explanation of the challenges of foster parenting is important.
- Understanding foster parent **characteristics**: Knowing the characteristics of outstanding foster parents, especially those willing to take in the most challenging young people, helps agencies cost-effectively identify and target those parents. For example, nurses, teachers, mental healthcare workers, and others in service occupations often have the combination of empathy, conscientiousness, and thick skin necessary for fostering a child. Likewise, empty nesters have valuable parenting experience and sometimes miss the joys and challenges of having a child in the home.
- Responding to **calls for change**: Hearing foster parents want to be treated as members of a team is instructive for devising recruitment messaging, but even more important for improving internal foster family agency practices, such as how staff interact and communicate with parents. Knowing that foster parents prefer consistent respite care providers and regular contact with other foster parents indicates the value of strategies for building communities within and across foster family agencies.

Implementing Policy and Practice Changes: CWI's Comprehensive Strategy for Improving Recruitment and Retention of Therapeutic Foster Parents

CWI examined best practices research and utilized direct feedback from Los Angeles County foster parents on their motivations, challenges, values, and characteristics for comparison against prevailing foster parent recruitment and retention practices. This allowed CWI to identify critical changes in foster family agency policies and practices in recruitment and retention – changes that CWI is now implementing in partnership with six foster family agencies to recruit, train, and support additional high-quality therapeutic foster homes for children with mental disabilities and behavioral disorders.

Finding and keeping parents willing and able to serve youth with significant behavioral and mental health problems is a distinct challenge. To meet this challenge, CWI and the six partner agencies have signed a Memorandum of Understanding laying out specific

implementation steps to improve collective recruitment and retention of ITFC parents. CWI will direct the recruitment of therapeutic foster parents, using branding and messaging to reach specific groups of prospective parents, a recruitment and resource website for therapeutic foster parents, and a targeted multimedia campaign.

With CWI's leadership and guidance, the foster family agency partners will change their internal practices to improve both recruitment and retention in the following ways:

- Designate experienced ITFC parents as Ambassadors who will provide recruitment and retention assistance, including leading recruitment events, acting as a first contact point for prospective ITFC parents, serving as peer mentors for new ITFC families, or participating in respite care and childcare provider recruitment.
- Provide incentives to any foster parent, staff member, or other individual who recruits a new ITFC parent.
- Establish an ITFC parent council and regular ITFC parent surveys so parent feedback can be incorporated into agency policies.
- Set up pooled support groups so that ITFC parents have a support group of peers serving similar children within easy driving distance.
- Increase the pool of respite care and childcare providers by asking all prospective ITFC parents to bring family and friends who can be trained to serve as consistent respite care and childcare providers, as well as examining opportunities to provide respite care services across agencies.
- Designate ongoing resources and funds to sustain recruitment and retention efforts.

Producing Concrete and Measurable Results

Through the implementation of a comprehensive strategy for improving the recruitment and retention of therapeutic foster parents, CWI is working with its foster family agency partners to double the number of ITFC foster homes under their supervision by early 2014.

CWI recognizes the importance and need for the long-term financial sustainability in any recruitment and retention strategy for therapeutic foster homes. L.A. County has already awarded contracts for therapeutic foster homes to provide financial supports to such homes once they have been successfully recruited. In addition, the *Katie A.* settlement mandates an increase in the therapeutic foster care program in L.A. County to a minimum of 300 homes, ensuring program growth sustainability. Currently L.A. County has \$12.7 million ready to fund 220 ITFC homes. Moreover, CWI's foster family agency partners have committed to sustainable changes to their internal agency policies

and practices to improve recruitment and retention strategies and supports for therapeutic foster parents.

CWI's work is the first coordinated evaluation of L.A. County's prevailing foster family agency practices and policies for recruiting and supporting therapeutic foster parents, case planning for children with severe mental or behavioral problems, and of the motivations, needs, and satisfaction of individual therapeutic and non-therapeutic foster families currently under foster family agency supervision. At the conclusion of this project, CWI will have 1) doubled the number of therapeutic foster homes for its foster family agency partners, utilized a portion of existing but unspent funding to sustain those homes into the future, and demonstrated how those remaining funds can be spent effectively to meet children's needs; 2) established systemic change at the institutional level in the recruitment, training, and support that new and existing therapeutic foster parents receive; and 3) implemented a successful therapeutic foster care recruitment and retention model that can be disseminated across L.A. County and to additional counties statewide.

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An Implementation Guide for Improving Outcomes for Older Foster Youth

*Court Lab – A Nonprofit, Child Welfare,
and Judicial Partnership*

November 2013



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Introduction

According to the Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), more than 2,300 youth age 18 and older were receiving child welfare services in Los Angeles County in September 2013. An in-depth review of outcomes, conducted by Dennis P. Culhane, PhD, and funded by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, discovered that over 30% of youth between the ages of 16 and 21 in Los Angeles County's child welfare system experience a period of extreme poverty; 25% are incarcerated at some point; a substantial number of youth need outpatient treatment for health, mental health, and drug/alcohol issues; less than 50% have any earnings in the immediate years following their exit from foster care; only 2% of youth obtain two-year college degrees and less than 0.5% obtain four-year degrees. Similarly, an Urban Institute study, funded by the Stuart Foundation, determined that roughly 20% of transition age youth experience homelessness after leaving care.

Housed in three Edelman Children's Court courtrooms in Los Angeles County, *Court Lab* is a partnership of the Child Welfare Initiative (CWI), Children's Law Center of California, and The Alliance for Children's Rights with the Los Angeles County Juvenile Court and Department of Children and Family Services ("*Court Lab's Partners*").

Responding to the outcomes described above, *Court Lab* identifies and implements best practices and recommendations for improving transition planning at the departmental, judicial, and caregiver levels for older foster youth. These best practices were chosen for their positive impact on youth as they transition to independence. Transition age youth—youth ages 14 and older—interact primarily with four groups within the foster care system: their caregivers, social workers, attorneys, and judges. Youth spend most of their time with their caregivers, and decisions affecting youths' lives within the system are primarily made at the departmental and judicial levels. *Court Lab* studied transition age youths' interaction with the court because the court is one of the few places where these four groups come together.

Prior to the work of *Court Lab's* Partners, information on current transition planning practices in Los Angeles County was discussed anecdotally. *Court Lab* gathered data on these practices in order to develop informed recommendations for meaningful change and improvement.

Beginning in June 2011, *Court Lab's* Partners gathered and collected data across ten domains critical to the safety, well-being, and self-sufficiency of foster youth approaching independence. *Court Lab's* Partners reviewed court reports, observed judicial proceedings, and interviewed both youth and caregivers. Particular emphasis was given to transitional planning in the areas of education, employment, housing, mental and physical health, and extended foster care. Focusing on youth age 14 and older that were removed from their families of origin and in out-of-home placements, *Court Lab's* Partners conducted nearly 700 file reviews, observed 430 judicial proceedings, and interviewed 190 youth and 35 caregivers. In addition, *Court Lab's* Partners, judicial officers, former foster youth, and relative caregivers met twice monthly to assess data results and trends, and to identify best practices and discuss policy recommendations for Edelman Children's Court, DCFS, attorneys representing foster youth, and the California Department of Social Services.

Phase One: Measuring Gaps in Existing Transitional Planning for Older Foster Youth in Care, Youth Entering Extended Care, and Youth Leaving Care Entirely

Methodology

Court Lab evaluated the quality and process of transition planning for foster youth as they prepare to leave the child welfare system. To analyze this process most effectively, *Court Lab's* Partners developed an online data collection tool in Spring 2011 then began using it in the first courtroom by June 2011. *Court Lab's* Partners provided court observers—a total of 8 observers were on the project at all times. While in court, observers filled out up to four forms for each youth: a file review of the court report, a caregiver interview if the caregiver was present, and both a hearing observation and interview if the youth was present. *Court Lab's* Partners met with all of the observers at least once per month to discuss observations, suggest improvements to the tool, and ensure consistent data collection.

Data Collection

1. DCFS Court Reports

DCFS social workers evaluate the safety and well-being of youth under DCFS's jurisdiction and prepare reports that document their assessments and recommendations. DCFS social workers share these reports with the Juvenile Court and all counsel. DCFS court reports must be thorough and clearly stated. Court reports contain information related to all aspects of a youth's life: the allegations that brought the youth into foster care, the youth's placement type, the youth's visitation with various family members, and other information. Court reports may also be the only documentation that judicial officers and counsel read to understand the case planning that took place since the youth's last court appearance.

In Los Angeles County and across the State of California, court reports discuss transitional case planning that has taken place since the youth's last appearance in court and other topics that directly relate to a youth's transition from foster care to independence. Lacking clear and accurate court reports, judicial officers are hindered in their ability to make specific orders that ensure steps necessary to achieve clearly defined transition goals are taken. Transition goals help youth, caregivers, judges, attorneys, social workers, and other important adults stay focused on moving youth toward a successful transition to independence. Similarly, it is a challenge for a foster youth's attorney to communicate concerns or suggestions to social workers or make requests for specific orders.

Court Lab's Partners conducted 688 file reviews of court reports. Using court reports, *Court Lab's Partners* evaluated transition planning for older foster youth across the ten domains most closely associated with transition age youth outcomes: permanent adult connections, education, healthcare, employment, transition planning (i.e., Transition to Independent Living Plans, Independent Living Program classes, Extended Foster Care), essential documents (i.e., birth certificate, social security card, driver's license), housing, delinquency, Kin-GAP, and youth/caregiver involvement.

One component of the court report is the Transition to Independent Living Plan (TILP), a critical planning document that identifies a youth's goals to achieve self-sufficiency and must be attached to court reports for all Los

Angeles County foster youth aged 14 and older. The State of California requires TILPs for all youth 16 and older, and Los Angeles County's DCFS Procedural Guide details the importance of such planning:

It is DCFS policy to initiate transitional independent living planning for all youth who are 14 years of age or older and reside in out-of-home care. As children transition out of childhood and begin to develop into mature adults, they need a different level of support, skills training and guidance. Youth need to learn the process of how to set goals, what the steps are to achieve these goals, and how to assess their progress as they move towards their goals. It is the responsibility of the adults who are charged with ensuring the care and well-being of each youth to provide support, guidance and resources to the youth in the achievement of the youth's goals. The process for youth to successfully "launch" into their independent adult lives requires planning and support. No youth can do this alone.

2. Court Observations

Because court reports were often incomplete, *Court Lab's* Partners tracked topics discussed in the court hearings using a court observation form. *Court Lab's* Partners documented 1) instances when case planning may have taken place, but was not described in the court report, 2) important transition discussions that occurred between the judge and youth (e.g., when a TILP is not present in the court report), and 3) how often the judge engaged the youth about his or her transition goals.

3. Youth Interviews

Court reports and courtroom observations generally cannot convey how well youth understand their transition plans. Therefore, *Court Lab's* Partners interviewed all consenting youth who were present for their hearings in order to assess each youth's understanding of his or her own transition goals/process, and to document who helped him or her develop those goals. Using a Youth Interview Form, *Court Lab's* Partners covered the same subjects documented in file reviews and court observations, but focused on what information youth knew, who told them about it, and who helps them reach their transition goals.

4. Caregiver Interviews

Similarly, *Court Lab's* Partners interviewed all willing and present caregivers

to assess their involvement and understanding of the youth transition process. Using a Caregiver Information Form, *Court Lab's* Partners asked caregivers if they knew or had participated in the planning and decision making around where the youth will live and attend school after exiting care, to identify the youth's short-term and long-term employment goals, and to explain how caregivers were helping youth reach those goals.

Caregivers—foster parents, kinship providers, group home providers—are often the most supportive adults for youth preparing to leave foster care, a largely overlooked group of adults who could provide a continued presence in youths' lives after they enter extended foster care at age 18 or leave the foster care system entirely. In addition to knowing the details of youths' daily lives, caregivers often best know youths' goals, strengths and needs. Caregivers often have information that can inform social workers and judges on youths' needs, and if accessed, can improve the planning and long-term outcomes for older foster youth.

Data Analysis

To assess a youth's preparedness to enter extended post-18 foster care or leave foster care entirely, *Court Lab's* Partners used four online data collection tools—File Review, Court Observation, Youth Interview, Caregiver Interview (see Data Collection Tools: Phase One, Figures 1-4 at the end of this guide)—in the courtroom using either tablets or laptops. If a court report lacked a TILP, the Partners listened for a discussion of the TILP during the hearing, as well as interviewed youth about his or her transition goals. If the court report was lacking information, the hearing observation or youth interview may have shown a clearer picture of the youth's transition progress. Data concerning individual youth and judicial proceedings was in turn aggregated into a centralized spreadsheet.

Summary of *Court Lab's* Findings

Court Lab revealed the following regarding the state of transitional planning for older foster youth as they approached age 18, either to enter extended foster care under AB 12 or opt out of AB 12 and exit foster care entirely:

1. Permanent Adult Connection
 - 35% of court reports indicated that youth had a permanent connection with a trusted adult.
2. Youth and Caregiver Involvement
 - During the *Court Lab* observations, 38% of youth attended their hearings.
 - Youth attendance at hearings based on placement:
 - Of all youth placed with foster parents, 42% attended their hearing
 - Of all youth placed in group homes, 59% attended their hearing
 - Of all youth placed with relatives, 37% attended their hearings
 - Of all youth placed with legal guardians, 31% attended their hearing
 - Caregiver attendance at hearings based on placement:
 - 8% of foster parents attended their foster youth's hearing
 - 21% of legal guardians attended their foster youth's hearing
 - 33% of relatives attended their foster youth's hearing
3. Educational Planning
 - 38% of court reports indicated that high school aged youth (9th-12th grade) were not on track to graduate, as noted in the report or based on observers' review of attached education information, such as a report card. An additional 17% of court reports did not provide any information to the court of whether the youth was on track to graduate.
 - Of youth who were not on track to graduate, 57% of court reports indicated a plan to help the youth graduate from high school.
 - When the court report indicated that the youth was not on track to graduate, education was discussed in 76% of hearings where the youth was present for the hearing.
4. Health Care
 - When the court report mentioned a physical or mental health condition that may impact a youth's transition from care, 47% of youth interviews indicated that someone had discussed how to access medical care with the youth after they leave foster care.
5. Employment Planning
 - For youth 16 and older, 38% of court reports addressed career development.
6. Transition to Independent Living Plan (TILP)
 - 50% of youth ages 14-21 had a TILP attached to their court report.
 - 21% of youth under age 16 had a TILP attached to their court report

- o 63% of youth age 16 and older had a TILP attached to their court report
 - When the report did not contain a TILP, transitional planning was discussed in 17% of court hearings where the youth was present for the hearing.
 - When the report did not contain a TILP, the youth indicated they did have a TILP in 41% of transition age youth interviews.
 - The caregiver was listed as a responsible party to at least one goal in 40% of TILPs.
 - 84% of youth signed the TILP, 77% DCFS social workers signed, and 50% caregivers (all ages, but same values for youth 16 and older).
7. Extended Foster Care
- For youth ages 17.5-18.5, extended foster care was mentioned in 49% of court reports since January 2012, when extended foster care went into effect for youth in the State of California.
 - For youth ages 17.5-18.5, information regarding the right to re-entry was discussed in 10% of court reports since January 2012.
 - For youth ages 17.5-18.5, 8% of court reports mentioned a 90-day transition plan when youths' cases close.
8. Essential Documents for Youth Self-Sufficiency
- 38% of court reports indicated that youth ages 17.5 to 18.5 have at least one form of identification required upon exit from care, such as a birth certificate or social security card.
 - 3% of court reports indicated that a credit check has been performed for youth ages 16 or older.

Recommended Changes in Transitional Planning Policies and Practices

Court Lab's Partners met with the Juvenile Court Presiding Judge and the DCFS Director in November and December 2012, to discuss *Court Lab's* findings and to recommend changes in policy and practice that would produce concrete improvements for youth approaching independence. Importantly, both the Presiding Judge and DCFS Director expressed a strong commitment to correct ongoing gaps in transitional planning for foster youth and to work closely with *Court Lab's* Partners to implement essential changes in policies and practices.

1. Increase caregiver involvement in the development and implementation of transition plans and improve the Juvenile Court and DCFS's knowledge of caregiver concerns regarding individual youth.

Caregivers are among the most important adults in a youth's life and often have information essential to the development and implementation of appropriate transition goals. Caregivers are in a unique position to inform the Juvenile Court's and DCFS's understanding of the services that can best support a youth's transition goals. Caregivers are likely the adults most aware of the appropriateness and effectiveness of services that youth receive, and most likely to understand what changes in existing services or new services would be most useful for a youth in their home. Nevertheless, judicial proceedings and court reports continue to have little to no input from youth caregivers.

To improve outcomes for youth who may enter extended foster care at age 18 or leave care entirely, the following changes in practice and policy are recommended:

- a) Increase caregiver attendance at court hearings, and engage caregivers during the hearings in a manner that they feel is beneficial to the youth in their home and useful to them as foster parents.
 - b) Increase the use of the Caregiver Information Form (JV-290), and discuss the content during judicial proceedings. The Caregiver Information Form is an optional state form that allows caregivers an accessible way to provide information about youth to the court.
2. Improve the quality of information presented to the Juvenile Court in court reports to allow well-informed, specific orders that ensure steps necessary to achieve clearly defined goals are taken.

Court reports are essential to assessing and ensuring the youth's safety, well-being, and progress toward self-sufficiency. Court reports must provide judicial officers sufficient information to issue orders that support the youth's achievement of transition goals. As discussed in CWI's *Transition Age Youth Housing and Service Roadmap: A Best Practices Framework*, effective case plans require deliberate action steps that are relevant to the youth's identified interests and desired goals (see <http://www.cwinitiative.org/news/>).

To improve outcomes for youth entering extended foster care at age 18 or leaving care entirely, social workers should include the following information in every youth's court report:

- a) *Educational Planning*: Include every youth's high school graduation progress, including the number of credits required by the youth's school

district, the number of credits the youth has accumulated, whether the youth is on track to graduate with a high school degree, and, if not on track, what steps will need to be taken by what specific adults to ensure the youth obtains a high school degree before age 18. For youth under 16 years old who are not on track to graduate, include steps to ensure high school completion that are aimed at high school degrees rather than GEDs.

- b) *Employment Planning*: Include whether the youth would like to have a job before age 18; if yes, discuss what steps will be taken by which specific adults to ensure the youth is employed before age 18. Include whether or not the youth would like to have a job after age 18; if yes, discuss what steps will be taken by which specific adults to ensure the youth is employed after age 18.
- c) *Essential Documents for Youth Self-Sufficiency*: The State of California requires that every youth receives critical documents—social security card, birth certificate, driver’s license, and health and education summary, among others—upon leaving care, but youth may seek employment or apply for financial aid at an earlier point. Therefore, include whether the youth has the documentation that he or she needs to meet his or her employment or financial aid goals; if not, discuss what steps will be taken by which specific adults to ensure the youth receives the information. Amend DCFS policy and/or local rules of court to allow earlier release of documents to the youth and identify what adult is responsible for ensuring the youth receives those documents.
- d) *Credit Checks*: Include the credit check status for each youth aged 16 and older in each court report; if not, discuss what steps will be taken by what specific adults to ensure that a credit check is done and that the youth receives the results.
- e) *Permanent Adult Connection*: Discuss the existence or absence of a permanent connected adult, identify who that adult is, and clarify how that adult is connected to the youth. Ask if the adult is in the youth’s own network of relationships and how connected the youth feels to the adult emotionally. Additionally, discuss the nature and reciprocity of the youth’s relationship with the adult, as well as the youth’s expectations of the longevity of the relationship with the adult. If no permanent connected adult has been identified, discuss what steps will be taken by which specific adults to establish a permanent connected adult for the youth before age 18. Importantly, a permanent connected adult should

not be a peer of the youth and, ideally, should be an adult independent of the child welfare system.

- f) *Transition to Independent Living Plan (TILP)*: Attach to the court report for every youth aged 14 and older a TILP that states short-term, measurable, and age-appropriate goals that the youth has identified and with which the youth is in agreement. Ensure that each TILP has 1) clear and defined steps to support the youth's achievement of those goals and 2) what steps will be taken by what specific adult to ensure that the youth and caregiver receive the necessary services and support for the caregiver and the youth to progress toward achieving those goals.

Short-term, measurable, and age-appropriate goals are ones that are quantifiable and can be easily evaluated at the end of a six-month period. For example, a measurable and age-appropriate six-month goal for a 15 year old may be to raise a math score by a letter grade. Graduating high school would not be an age-appropriate goal for a 15 year old since it cannot be accomplished within the next six months.

3. Conduct a thorough review of all DCFS court reports and TILPs to ensure that the youth and caregiver have actively participated in the development of individualized, clearly defined goals for successful transition to extended foster care or exit from care entirely.

Court reports are essential to assessing and evaluating the youth's safety, well-being and progress toward self-sufficiency, and to ensuring that judicial officers have sufficient information to issue the orders that support the caregiver's and youth's achievement of transition goals.

To improve transition outcomes for youth, Juvenile Court judges, lawyers, and social workers should ensure that the information listed in Recommendation 2 above is included in every youth's court report and reviewed at every judicial proceeding that the youth attends.

4. Identify the specific adults who are responsible for helping a youth achieve his or her goals, including the social worker, caregiver, and adults outside the child welfare system.

When part of a collaborative process involving clearly identified adults involved in the youth's life in and outside the child welfare system, the TILP can be extremely effective in helping the youth describe and achieve his or her goals that will lead to safety, well-being, and self-sufficiency.

To improve outcomes for youth who may enter extended foster care at age 18 or leave care entirely, the following changes in practice and policy are recommended:

- a) Assign responsibility for specific steps to specific adults to support the youth's achievement of each individual TILP goal. The assigned adult must be informed that he or she is responsible for ensuring that each step is completed. When the caregiver is present, discuss progress toward each TILP goal, focusing on the caregiver's assigned TILP responsibilities during judicial hearings.
 - b) Increase youth attendance at court hearings, and engage youth during those hearings on the development and progress toward their own identified TILP goals in a manner that the youth feels has been supportive and productive.
 - c) Update the TILP template to detail specific, measurable, and age-appropriate goals that the youth has identified and agreed to, with clearly defined, short-term and immediate steps that a clearly identified adult and the youth will take to achieve those goals.
5. Review all available information—including DCFS court reports and TILPs—with the youth, communicate the youth's concerns or suggestions to social workers, and when necessary, ask the Juvenile Court for specific orders or DCFS for specific services.

To improve the information about a youth and to respond effectively to that information, the youth's attorney should verify the DCFS court reports and TILPs are filled out accurately and appropriately, articulate any deficiencies before or during the hearing, and when necessary, request specific orders from the Juvenile Court judge to address those deficiencies.

6. Improve efforts to connect every older youth who is in foster care, has entered extended post-18 foster care under AB 12, has left care entirely

with services aimed at establishing, supporting, and when necessary, finding permanent adult connections.

To help youth develop and maintain enduring adult relationships, attorneys, judges, social workers, and caregivers should:

- a) Increase efforts to find a youth's family members using family finding tools. Family finding connects youth in out-of-home placements to family members with whom they have lost contact, then to provide education, training, and support to those family members to allow them to help the youth find assistance in the child welfare system and to move toward self-sufficiency outside child welfare.
- b) Speak with youth about their non-family adult relationships before, during, and after judicial hearings.
- c) Develop new connected adult relationships for the youth, if none can be found, within the youth's existing network of adult relationships or with new activities.
- d) Train connected adults on child welfare issues, such as navigating the child welfare system, knowing what services and eligibility requirements exist for youth, and understanding a youth's developmental needs.

Phase Two: Implementing Recommended Improvements in Policies and Practices with Enhanced Transitional Planning

Court Lab's Partners developed *Enhanced Transitional Planning* to implement the recommendations above, which were presented to the Juvenile Court Presiding Judge and DCFS Director. *Enhanced Transitional Planning* primarily addresses two issues:

1. Consistent judicial oversight of DCFS court reports and planning to ensure that every transition age youth in an out-of-home placement receives meaningful transitional planning reflected in a written and regularly updated TILP and DCFS court report; that every TILP and DCFS court report is discussed and reviewed by all parties for accuracy, appropriateness, and progress; and that all parties assess overall transitional planning and take corrective actions, when needed.

2. Increased youth and caregiver involvement with transition planning by providing both the opportunity to address the Juvenile Court directly.

Implementation of concrete improvements with *Enhanced Transitional Planning* began in September 2013 in one Edelman courtroom. In November 2013 it expanded into a second courtroom and may be implemented in other courtrooms in early 2014. *Court Lab's* Partners will evaluate *Enhanced Transitional Planning* using the findings from Phase One as the baseline from which to improve. *Enhanced Transitional Planning* implements the *Court Lab* recommendations in two ways: transition planning training sessions and courtroom practice.

Enhanced Transitional Planning Training

To implement *Court Lab's* recommendations, *Court Lab's* Partners trained judges, attorneys, and social workers on the importance of effective and documented transition planning for every transition age youth in an out-of-home placement. The trainings focused on producing rigorous and regularly updated written transition plans in the TILP and court report, and the consequences for youth when failing to undertake such planning.

Judges

Court Lab's Partners trained Juvenile Court judges. The training included an overview of *Court Lab's* findings and recommendations and an introduction to *Enhanced Transitional Planning*. Attendees received *Court Lab's* data analysis, copies of previously ineffective TILPs and specific examples of comprehensive TILPs, which include age-appropriate, measurable, and youth driven goals. Effective TILPs have deliberate action steps that are relevant to the youth's identified interests and desired goals. The training identified specifically where the court reports lack information and how TILPs can be improved.

Enhanced Transitional Planning asks judges to review TILPs for youth-driven goals with specific steps assigned to responsible adults. Court reports must be reviewed for the information as set forth in the *Enhanced Transitional Planning* Bench Card and discussed in greater detail below in the Courtroom Practice section. Following such a review of each youth's TILP and court report, judges will have the information required to issue necessary orders that update and improve TILPs and court reports and that prepare youth to enter extended foster care at age 18 or to exit care entirely.

Attorneys

Using *Court Lab's* recommendations, *Court Lab's* Partners trained attorneys responsible for representing foster children. Attorneys reviewed the DCFS policy manual on the TILP process and the requirement and description of a quality, regularly updated TILP that is developed with the youth and the caregiver. The training addressed resources that can help attorneys better serve their transition age youth clients. The training prepared attorneys to communicate clearly and consistently with social workers regarding youth-identified transition goals and to request more specific orders from bench officers to assist youth in meeting those goals.

Social Workers

At the request and with the assistance of the DCFS Director, *Court Lab's* Partners trained administrators and social workers at DCFS regional offices on the importance of effective TILPs, and on *Court Lab* findings and recommendations concerning TILPs. The majority of social workers from these trained Regional Offices are assigned to the courtroom in which *Court Lab's* Partners are currently implementing *Enhanced Transitional Planning*. In addition, *Court Lab's* Partners are working with DCFS regional administrators on the implementation of *Enhanced Transitional Planning* at the Juvenile Court, from which *Court Lab's* Partners will provide ongoing social worker trainings to improve the content in the DCFS court reports and transitional services for youth.

Improved Courtroom Practices

Enhanced Transitional Planning requires consistent judicial oversight of DCFS court reports and TILPs for every transition age youth, combined with improved youth and caregiver involvement with DCFS and the Juvenile Court.

Judicial Bench Card

The *Court Lab* data revealed a number of areas in the court reports that regularly lacked information: TILPs were either not attached or did not contain meaningful information if they were attached; the education section often did not list if the youth was on track to graduate from high school or sometimes whether he or she was enrolled in high school at all; and most court reports did not discuss the youth's current employment situation or future employment goals. *Court Lab's* Partners created the Bench Card (see the Bench Card in Data Collection Tools:

Phase Two, Figure 5 at the end of this guide) to make certain that TILPs and court reports included more complete information.

Caregiver and Social Worker Involvement

Enhanced Transitional Planning trains caregivers on the value of their involvement in transitional planning, youth court hearings, and the importance of providing judicial officers the completed Caregiver Information Form. *Court Lab* findings indicate that caregivers rarely attend court. Therefore, with *Enhanced Transitional Planning*, all caregivers—foster parents, kinship providers, group home providers—for transition age youth in out-of-home placements will be called after a youth's hearing to determine why the caregiver did or did not attend court and what would make it easier for the caregiver to attend (see the Caregiver Home Form and the Caregiver Court Form in Data Collection Tools: Phase Two, Figures 7 and 8 at the end of this guide).

DCFS social workers will encourage caregivers to attend court hearings during their monthly home meetings. Social workers will also distribute and collect the Caregiver Information Form. Social workers will then submit the Caregiver Information Form to the court, providing the judge with additional information about the youth. The caregiver's presence in court and the Caregiver Information Form offer essential background about the youth, providing the judge with a clear understanding of the youth's progress and how to connect the youth with appropriate services. As importantly, the caregiver's presence in court may help youth feel supported during the hearing.

Youth Involvement

Enhanced Transitional Planning includes an individualized, youth-focused questionnaire that gives youth the opportunity to address the Juvenile Court directly and participate actively in the development of his or her plans for the future. When the youth is present for his or her court hearing, peer advocates will ask the youth to identify their three most important transitional planning areas of interest. The judge will then invite the youth to talk about and participate in the planning of his or her transition services and TILP (see the Youth Questionnaire in Data Collection Tools: Phase Two, Figure 6 at the end of this guide). The process is centered on encouraging the youth to identify and describe his or her personal goals, to articulate his or her housing, educational and employment needs, and to explain what adults he or she feels can best support achieving those goals. As of the writing of this guide, the Youth Questionnaire has led to additional and longer transitional planning conversations between youth and peer advocates,

attorneys, and judges. Youth have identified their short-term and long-term goals, and are learning to present those goals to others and advocate for themselves. This self-advocacy is especially important for youth ages 18 and older in extended foster care who have less adult supervision and more independence than younger youth in foster care.

When *Court Lab's* Partners presented their findings and recommendations to the Juvenile Court Presiding Judge, he expressed a strong interest in expanding *Enhanced Transitional Planning* to every courtroom at the Juvenile Court. Similarly, in judicial officer trainings, other judges expressed an interest in including *Enhanced Transitional Planning* in their courtrooms. Neither *Court Lab's* Partners nor the Juvenile Court have sufficient resources to place peer advocates in every courtroom at this time. However, early results from *Enhanced Transitional Planning* have shown that incorporating the Bench Card into the daily judicial reviews of transition age youth court reports significantly improves the quality of transition planning youth receive.

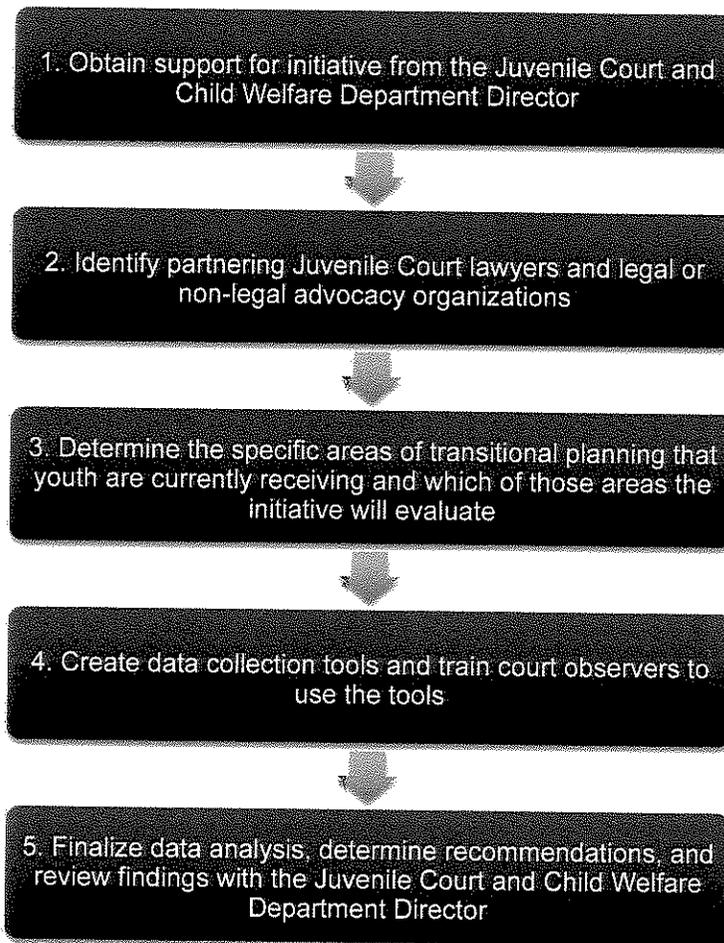
Data and Benchmark Analysis

Court Lab's Partners will evaluate *Enhanced Transitional Planning* using the data from the nearly 700 cases evaluated in Phase One as a baseline from which to improve. *Enhanced Transitional Planning's* Bench Card results should improve upon *Court Lab's* File Review results in all areas that previously lacked information. *Enhanced Transitional Planning's* results are currently being analyzed and the comparison with Phase One will be published at the completion of the project.

Implementation in Other Child Welfare Jurisdictions

Youth aging out of the foster care system are unprepared for independence due to a number of risk factors: low educational attainment, minimal or no employment experience, presence of mental disabilities or behavioral disorders, pregnant or parenting status, multiple placements while in foster care, and few close relationships with supportive adults. *Court Lab* and *Enhanced Transitional Planning* together can be used as a model for other jurisdictions, both in and outside California, to evaluate the transition planning for older youth and to implement concrete changes to improve that planning. The following steps offer a guide for undertaking similar initiatives in other jurisdictions.

Phase One: Measuring Gaps in Existing Transitional Planning for Older Foster Youth in Care, Youth Entering Extended Care, and Youth Leaving Care Entirely



The first step to evaluating transitional planning for youth and improving outcomes is to gain the support of the local Juvenile Court and Child Welfare Department, particularly the Presiding Judge and Department Director, if possible. *Court Lab* and *Enhanced Transitional Planning* evaluate social worker court reports as well as judicial procedures and practices related to transition age youth hearings. The Presiding Judge not only provides access to the courtroom and court reports, but also provides the necessary support to implement recommendations. The Department Director can ensure support from senior administrative leadership within his or her agency as well as support from department social workers.

With support from the Juvenile Court and Child Welfare Department secured, the next step is to identify partner agencies. Partners can vary depending on the

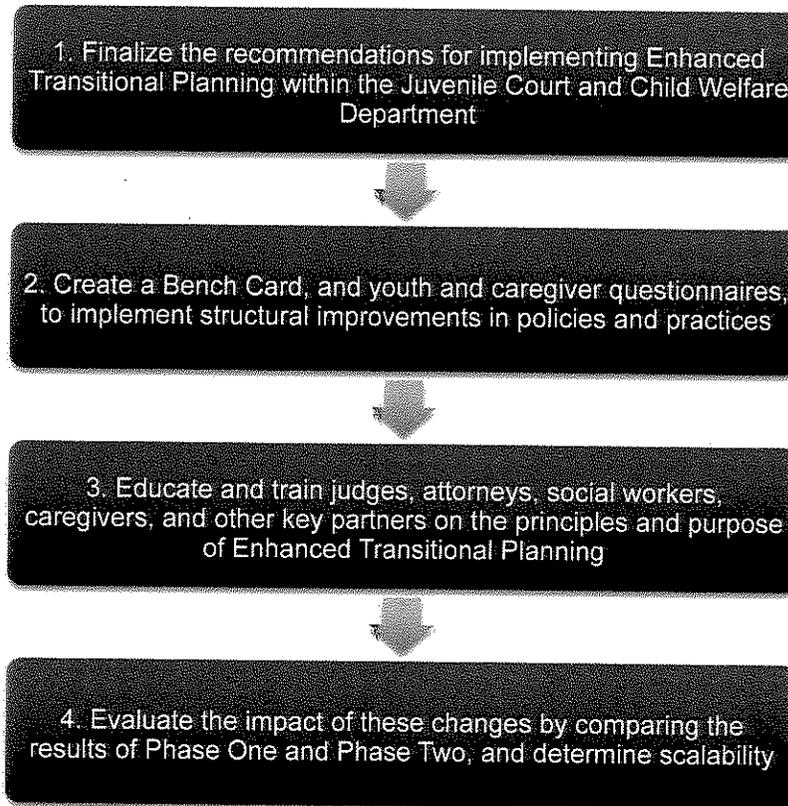
agencies and organizations within a local child welfare system, as well as the role of your organization in the child welfare system. Potential partners may include attorneys responsible for representing foster youth, the local child welfare agency, caregiver groups, and youth advocacy groups.

Working together with the partner agencies, research local laws, regulations, practices, and policies affecting transition age youth, as well as best practices around the country. This research will shape the data collection specific to existing transition planning procedures and practices and help establish clear goals for your project. These goals may include determining caregiver involvement in judicial proceedings, social workers' thoroughness in completing court reports, bench officers' enforcement of TILPs, among many others. Once these goals are established, determine the process to evaluate them. This process can include judicial or departmental forms that will be evaluated and the standards they will be compared to; individuals such as youth and caregivers that will be interviewed and the information to be gathered from them; and the capacity of partners to observe hearings, train court observers, and determine how often observations can occur.

Once the project goals are determined, create a data collection tool (see Data Collection Tools: Phase One, Figures 1-4) that captures the desired information. *Court Lab's* Partners chose to use an online data collection tool. The online data collection tool allows *Court Lab's* Partners along with judicial officers, social workers, and others to access collected data relatively easily and quickly. All court observers need detailed training on how to use the data collection tool. Follow-up trainings for court observers should occur frequently to ensure consistent data collection, to make necessary revisions to the tools being used to collect that data, and identify early trends in the consistency and depth of transitional planning that youth are currently receiving.

Once court observers begin collecting data, the partner agencies need to meet regularly to review data analysis and discuss barriers, issues, and trends in the data. *Court Lab's* Partners met every two weeks during Phase One's court observations to discuss trends and barriers. These discussions provided a forum for developing recommendations. Once data collection and analysis are sufficient to provide a full picture of the quality of transitional planning for older foster youth in a given child welfare jurisdiction, consolidate that data to identify common trends and barriers to effective planning for youth, then finalize recommendations for improving that planning. Present finalized findings to all affected groups, most critically to the Juvenile Court and Child Welfare Department.

Phase Two: Implementing Recommended Improvements in Policies and Practices with Enhanced Transitional Planning



Enhanced Transitional Planning focuses on implementing improvements in policies and practices within the Juvenile Court and Child Welfare Department, principally among individual judges, minor’s attorneys, and social workers. Outcomes for older foster youth, youth entering extended foster care, or youth exiting foster care entirely are most likely to improve with changes in policies and practices that allow judicial officers access to court reports and transitional planning documents, before and during the course of a youth’s hearing. These documents must accurately reflect what the youth’s needs currently are, how well the youth has progressed since the last hearing, whether existing services have been helpful to the youth, and what corrective orders need to be issued to meet the youth’s changing needs. Documentation of the above must be in the court report or other transitional planning documents that are immediately available to the judge.

Importantly, reliance on strictly verbal descriptions of the youth’s needs and goals, and of the history and effectiveness of services to address those needs and goals,

is highly unlikely to produce planning that is effective. Meaningful transition planning depends on documentation from judges, social workers, attorneys, and others that is written clearly and updated regularly. The Bench Card attached to this guide, along with the increased involvement of youth and caregivers as documented in the Youth and Caregiver Questionnaires, provide the documentation that supports effective transition planning and produces improved outcomes for older youth.

Though the improvements may vary in individual child welfare jurisdictions, *Court Lab's* Partners recommended and are currently implementing changes in Juvenile Court and Child Welfare Department policies and practices that relate to the documentation and transitional planning that include Educational Planning, Employment Planning, Essential Documents for Youth Self-Sufficiency, Credit Checks, Permanent Adult Connections, and Health. In addition, *Court Lab's* Partners' recommendations are based on data collected during Phase One, which established gaps in existing planning for youth. Choosing recommendations in this manner allowed *Court Lab's* Partners to address deficiencies in current transitional planning that had been measured. Moreover, *Court Lab's* Partners will use those earlier measurements of deficiencies as benchmarks to assess the success of Phase Two's recommendations in improving outcomes in youths' transitional planning.

Essential to this process is the meaningful involvement of youth; meaning that youth are present at the hearing and able to state and describe what transition goals are important to them and whether the support they are currently receiving is helping them move closer to their goals. *Enhanced Transitional Planning* includes an individualized, youth-focused questionnaire, which is also attached to this guide. Administered by a trained peer advocate, the questionnaire gives the youth both a written and verbal opportunity to address the Juvenile Court directly and to participate actively in the development of his or her plans for the future.

Also critical is the involvement of the youth's caregiver, whether that caregiver is a traditional foster parent, kincare provider, group home provider, or someone else. Caregivers often possess the most accurate and up-to-date understanding of a youth's strengths, needs, and goals, along with what the youth needs most and from what supports the youth will most benefit. Caregivers can be a reassuring presence for the youth during a hearing, and offer a judicial officer the opportunity to observe and to gain at least some understanding of the relationship between the youth and his or her caregiver. In addition, caregivers may offer the youth a

permanent connection with an adult once the youth enters extended foster care at age-18 or exits foster care entirely.

Enhanced Transitional Planning includes two caregiver-focused questionnaires that determine why caregivers do or do not attend court, and if they feel their presence is beneficial to the youth when they do attend court. These questionnaires are attached to this guide. Additionally, *Enhanced Transitional Planning* increases caregivers' usage of the Caregiver Information Form, which provides additional information about the youth to the judge that is not included in the court reports.

Upon the determination of deficiencies and recommended changes in Juvenile Court and Child Welfare Department practices and policies, the selection of a limited number of courtrooms in which to begin implementing those changes is necessary. Educating judicial officers, attorneys, social workers, and others on the principles and purpose of *Enhanced Transitional Planning* is essential.

Court Lab's Partners choose to implement *Enhanced Transitional Planning* in a single courtroom with the possibility of expanding it to additional courtrooms. Active engagement with and commitment from the judicial officer in that first courtroom, along with the attorneys and social workers who practice within that courtroom, have been critical. *Court Lab's* Partners have involved each of those parties in developing the Bench Card, Youth Questionnaire, Caregiver Home Questionnaire, and Caregiver Court Questionnaire. *Court Lab's* Partners and the associated courtroom parties also worked together to determine the most efficient and effective means to monitor and measure improvements in documenting and implementing meaningful transitional planning for youth. Working with *Court Lab's* Partners, social workers, attorneys representing youth, and judges have agreed on fundamental changes in transitional planning practices and policies to ensure that every youth has a meaningful opportunity to express what is important to his or her future goals and has an informed team of adults—a judge, social worker, attorney, and caregiver—capable of providing the support and services that the youth needs to help him or her achieve those goals.

Acknowledgments

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Pergamit, Michael R., and Johnson, Heidi. *Extending Foster Care to Age 21: Implications and Estimates from Youth Aging Out of Foster Care in Los Angeles*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute; Funded by the Stuart Foundation. (2009)

DATA COLLECTION TOOLS: PHASE ONE

File Review	Figure 1
Court Observation	Figure 2
Youth Interview	Figure 3
Caregiver Interview	Figure 4

FILE REVIEW

Date: _____ Obs. Initials: _____
 Case #: _____ Cal # / MI #: _____
 Youth's DOB: _____ Youth's Atty: _____
 Date petition filed: _____ Placement: (circle one; describe other) Relative / Foster Parent / Group Home / Legal Guard. / NREFM / Other: _____
 Purpose of Hrg: _____ Gender: M / F

SUBJECT	DOES THE FILE CONTAIN EVIDENCE OR DISCUSSION OF THE FOLLOWING?	Y	N	N/A	DESCRIPTION/NOTES
1 Transition Planning	a TILP				Date of current TILP: _____ Signed by (circle one or more): _____ Youth / CSW / Caregiver / Other _____ Number of TILPs on file: _____ Reference to earlier TILPs, or follow up on goals from previous TILP? Goals/Steps to achieve goals (list responsible person for each goal): _____
	b IILP Classes (16+) (check N/A for those under 16 years old)				Have they taken/received IILP classes/services? (circle one): Yes / Not yet, but referred or pending / No Description of IILP classes/services: _____
	c Extended Foster Care Benefits (check N/A for older youth who are not eligible for extended benefits)				
	d Plan to help youth meet one of the extended foster care participation requirements?				
	e For youth who opt out, is there a 90 day transition plan?				
	f For youth who opt out, are they informed of how to re-enter care?				
2 Documents	a Birth Certificate _____ Soc. CDL _____ ID _____				Indication of whether documents have been given to youth and/or caregiver?
	b Credit Check (N/A for those who are younger than 16)				
3 Education	a Currently Enrolled? (In the summer, youth is enrolled if he/she is on summer break and starting school in the fall)				If youth's enrollment in school is unclear, circle unknown: Unknown Note current or highest grade completed: _____
	b Is Youth on track to graduate high school on time? (check _____)				If report is unclear, circle unknown: Unknown
	c If Youth not on track to graduate on time, is there a plan to get the youth to graduate?				If yes, describe (example: tutoring, summer school, etc.): _____ If report is unclear, circle unknown: Unknown Is an IEP on file? Yes / No
4 Employment	a Employment				
5 Delinquency/Cross-over/	a Delinquency issues that may impact youth's transition from foster care				If yes, describe, and note whether it is in the juvenile and/or adult systems: _____
6 Healthcare/ Disability	a Is the Health and Education Passport (HEP) attached to the court report? Date of most recent education discussion/notes in HEP?				Date: _____
	b Physical/mental condition that may impact youth's transition from foster care Plan to manage physical/mental condition _____				Is the youth a Regional Center client? (circle one): Yes / No
	c SSI Screening (16.5+) (check N/A for those under 16.5 years old)				Mention/documentation of CSW completing SSI Screening Guide? Referral of Youth for SSI assessment? _____ SSI assessment _____
	d Substance abuse issues that may impact youth's transition from foster care Plan to manage substance _____				
	e Pregnancy/Parenting Plan for services/assistance for pregnant/parenting teen _____				
	7 Housing	a Discussion of housing goals/plans for 18+ youth? (check N/A for youth younger than age 16)			
8 Kin-GAP	a Discussion of Kin-GAP (check N/A if caregiver is NOT a _____)				If yes, with whom? _____ Describe: _____
9 Perm. Adult Conn.	a Connected adult in youth's life				

Figure 1

COURT OBSERVATION

Date:	Case #:	Cal #:	
Obs. Initials:	Next Court Date:	Minor #:	
Youth present: Y /	Others present (please circle; indicate other): CSW / CASA / FFA or		
N	Group, Home, social, worker, Other:		

WHO RAISED THE SUBJECT KEY: Youth's Atty = YA; Court = CT; County Counsel = CC; Parent's Atty = LADL; Caregiver = CG; Youth = Y;

NOTE: In some cases, the nature of the hearing is to discuss/resolve something very specific--if that seems to be the reason that the issues below are not discussed, please check the appropriate boxes, but describe in the notes/comments that the hearing did not generally cover youth's transition goals due to the nature of the hearing.

SUBJECT	ARE THE FOLLOWING ISSUES DISCUSSED IN THE HEARING?			NOTES / COMMENTS (If an issue is discussed in the hearing, describe HOW)
	Y	N	N/A	
1 Transition Planning				
a				TILP (if TILP is not discussed in hearing, describe why -- perhaps not appropriate in hearing; if TILP discussed and one is not on file, note if court orders one)
b				Specific goals in TILP or youth's transition, in general (check N/A if TILP and transition not)
c				Discussion of who was involved in TILP development?
d				TLP Services (Check N/A if youth younger than age 16)
e				Extended foster care benefits (check N/A for older youth who are not eligible for extended benefits)
f				If youth staying in extended foster care: Youth's progress in meeting the eligibility criteria and/or meeting transition goals? Describe.
g				If Youth exiting care: Is the re-entry process described? Any discussion of youth's transition out of foster care? Describe.
2 Documents				Are any documents (e.g., birth certificate, social security card, CDL, ID, credit check, immigration, other) discussed?
3 Education				Youth's education
4 Employment				Youth's employment goals
5 Delinquency / Cross-over / Tickets				Delinquency issues or discussion of tickets
6 Healthcare/ Disability				Youth's medical needs and plans for addressing needs
7 Housing				Where the youth is planning to live and wants to live post-foster care or after age 18? (check N/A if youth younger than age 16)
8 Kin-GAP (Relative caregiver)				Whether youth is going into Kin-GAP? (check N/A if caregiver is not a relative)
				How youth's benefits and services can be affected by the decision to go into Kin-GAP? Describe.
9 Perm. Adult Conn.				Does the youth have an adult in his/her life who is supportive (e.g. emotional, financial, etc.)? (If so, whom?)
# Involved/ Informed				Is Youth / Caregiver / CSW input solicited during the hearing? (please circle one or more, if applicable)

Figure 2

YOUTH INTERVIEW

Date: _____ Obs. initials: _____ Case #: _____ Cal #: _____ MI: _____
Note: Please be sure to ask youth follow-up questions (like those in the parentheses) to have a discussion with the youth for the comments/notes section. The goal is to understand how much the youth is involved/informed about their transition goals/process, and who is helping them reach their goals.

SUBJECT	QUESTION	Y	N	NA	Notes / Comments
1	Transition Planning				
	a Has anyone started talking to you about your plans for leaving foster care? (Who has talked to you about your transition out of foster care?)				
	b Do you have a TILP? (Did you complete it yourself and come up with the goals? Who helped you fill it out? CSW, caregiver, anyone else?)				
	c Who is helping you reach your TILP goals?				
	d Do you know about a new law (AB 12) that lets you stay in foster care until you are 20? (Who told you about it and what do you know?)				
	e Has anyone explained to you the process of how you can opt in to extended foster care? (Who? What do you know?)				
	f If you opt out of extended foster care, do you know how to opt back in?				
2	Documents				
	a Do you have a birth certificate, social security card, CDL, ID, credit check, immigration, other?				
	b Are these documents in your possession? (Do you know who has these documents?)				
3	Education				
	a Have you thought about your plans for school after leaving foster care? (What are some of your current and future educational goals?)				
	b Has anyone talked to you about how to accomplish your educational goals? (Who? CSW, caregiver, anyone else?)				
4	Employment				
	a Do you have any work/internship/volunteer experience? (If yes, what type of experience? How did you find/obtain this experience?)				
	b Has anyone talked to you about whether or not you want a job and/or how to find a job? (Who? CSW, caregiver, anyone else?)				
	c Has anyone talked to you about how to manage your money and budget? (Who? CSW, caregiver, ILP class, anyone else?)				
5	Healthcare/ Disability				
	a Has anyone talked to you about how to access medical care when you leave foster care? If so, what did they tell you? (Who? CSW, caregiver, anyone else?)				
	b If pregnant or parenting: Has anyone talked to you about how to take care of your child? (Who has talked to you? About what? What services do you know about?)				
6	Housing				
	a Has anyone talked to you about where you want to live after you turn 18? (Who? Where? How?)				
7	Perm. Ad. Conn.				
	a Is there an adult that you can talk to about things that are important to you? (Who? How often do you talk to that person? If no adult, has anyone talked to you about having someone like that in your life and how to develop a relationship with that person?)				
8	Involved / Informed				
	a Before a hearing, do you usually feel like you receive the information you need? (Who gives you the info? Or who would you ask for info?)				
	b How long did you wait today before you were called into the courtroom?				

Scale (1-5; 1= not at all, 5= often):

Scale (1-5; 1= no information, 5= most information):

Figure 3

CAREGIVER INTERVIEW

Date: _____ Obs. Initials: _____ Case #: _____ Cal #: _____ MI: _____
 Type of Caregiver (please circle): Foster Parent / Relative (relation to youth: _____) / Other: _____

NOTE: Please be sure to ask the caregiver relevant follow-up questions (like those in the parentheses) to have a discussion with the caregiver for the notes/comments section. The goal is to understand how much the caregiver is involved/informed about their youth's transition goals/process, and how they are

SUBJECT	QUESTION	Y N N/A			NOTES / COMMENTS
		Y	N	N/A	
1 Transition Planning	a Have you talked to the youth about specific goals/plans for transitioning out of foster care and/or becoming independent? (<i>How? What have you discussed?</i>)				
	-Education and employment				
	-Health care/disability (medical and mental health needs)				
	-Housing (Do you know how to help the youth receive housing services, Will you be involved in helping the youth reach his/her transition goals? (<i>How? What will you do/teach them?</i>))				
	b Does the youth have a TILP? (<i>Did you help the youth develop his/her goals?</i>)				
	c Do you know about a new law that allows the youth to stay in care until 20? (<i>Who has talked to you? What do you know?</i>)				
	d Has anyone explained to you the process of how the youth should opt in to extended foster care? (<i>Who? What is the process?</i>)				
	e Have you been included in making those plans? (<i>How so? Have you discussed with the youth and/or CSW?</i>)				
	f If the youth opts out of extended foster care, do you know the process for him/her to opt back in? (<i>Have you discussed it with the youth and/or card, CDL, ID, credit check, immigration, other?</i>)				
2 Documents	a Does the youth have documents (e.g., birth certificate, social security card, CDL, ID, credit check, immigration, other)?				
	b Who is in possession of these documents?				
3 Kin-GAP (For Relative Caregivers ONLY)	a Has anyone talked to you about Kin-GAP? (<i>Who? What did you discuss? What was the end result of the discussion?</i>)				
	b Has anyone talked to you about what you would do if the youth's mental or physical health needs changed after you've gone into Kin-GAP? (<i>Who? What do you know about the benefits/requirements of Kin-GAP?</i>)				
	c Has anyone talked to you about waiting to enter Kin-GAP until after the youth turns 16? (<i>Who? Why did you have this discussion?</i>)				
4 Perm. Adult Conn.	a Do you think you will be a part of the youth's life after the youth turns 18? (<i>Why? How do you see yourself being involved?</i>)				
	b Does the youth have other adults in his/her life to talk to about important things in his/her life? (<i>Who? Do you know the adult(s)? Have you talked to them?</i>)				
5 Involved/Informed	a Do you feel like you generally get the information that you need before a hearing? (<i>From whom? Who do you call if you need the info?</i>)				
	b Do you provide information to the court, attorneys, etc., if asked? Do you feel like the information you provide makes a difference?				
	c Do you often attend the youth's hearings?				
	d Would you attend more often if you knew what time the case would be called?				

Scale (1-5; 1=no information, 5=most information):

Figure 4

DATA COLLECTION TOOLS: PHASE TWO

Bench Card	Figure 5
Youth Questionnaire	Figure 6
Caregiver Home Form	Figure 7
Caregiver Court Form	Figure 8

Printed November 18, 2013
Bench Card:
 Youth 14 and older; Hearing types: RPP, 21e, 21f, 22, NMDSR
 General Comments:

Date: _____ Youth number: _____ Youth's birthday: _____
 Case number: _____ Youth's name: _____ Hearing type: _____
 Calendar #: _____

1. TILP: Verify the court report includes the following:	
Yes	No
Details: Current TILP included in court report (generated within the last six months)?	
Specific, age appropriate, measurable goals?	
Detailed steps to achieve those goals?	
Important adults listed as responsible parties in addition to the youth?	
If any of the above are NO, unknown, or unsatisfactory list corrective action:	
2. Education: Verify the court report or Health & Education Passport (HEP) includes the following information:	
Yes	No
Details: Current enrollment status? Circle: HS Comm. Coll. Univ. Vocation Other: _____	
On track to graduate high school on time?	
If not on track to graduate, is there a plan to get the youth to graduate? If not applicable, circle: already graduated	
Does the youth have an education rights holder?	
IEP on file? If not applicable, circle: N/A	
If any of the above are NO, unknown, or unsatisfactory list corrective action:	
3. Documentation: Verify the court report discusses ALL of following:	
Yes	No
Details: Birth certificate, social security card, and immigration (if appropriate)?	
Credit check (Applicable for youth ages 16.5 to 17.5)?	
Applied Completed Remediated (circle one)	
If NO, list corrective action:	
4. Perm. Connection: Verify the court report discusses the following:	
Yes	No
Details: Is there a caring, committed adult in youth's life? (Indicate explicit info or inference.)	
If any of the above are NO, unknown, or unsatisfactory list corrective action:	

5. Career Development: Verify the court report discusses the following:	
Yes	No
Details: Current or previous employment, including internship and/or volunteer work?	
Job training skills and/or future career goals?	
If any of the above are NO, unknown, or unsatisfactory list corrective action:	
6. Health Status: Verify the court report discusses the following:	
Yes	No
Details: Physical/mental condition that may impact youth's transition from care?	
For youth ages 17+, plan to manage health condition as they transition from care?	
Family planning and reproductive health education?	
SSI screening (N/A for youth under age 16.5)?	
Not Applied Approved Pending (circle one)	
If any of the above are NO, unknown, or unsatisfactory list corrective action:	
7. AB12 Status: Verify the court report discusses the following:	
Yes	No
Details: Does youth plan to remain in care under AB12?	
If yes, list the AB12 eligibility criteria youth meets in the box on the left.	
Is this a re-entry case?	
If it is a re-entry case, are there any issues or barriers?	
If any of the above are NO, unknown, or unsatisfactory list corrective action:	
8. Youth/Caregiver Involvement in Hearing:	
Yes	No
Details: Is the youth present for the hearing?	
Is the caregiver present for the hearing?	
Was the youth involved in the hearing, either by speaking or through his/her attorney? (Please indicate how.)	
Was the caregiver involved in the hearing, either by speaking, submitting an information form, or through the youth's attorney? (Please indicate how.)	
Was the Caregiver Information Form in the court report?	

Copies: CWI (white), Bench officer (pink), CLC (orange), County Counsel (yellow)

Figure 5

Youth Questionnaire:



Be Heard at Your Hearing!

This is **your court hearing** to talk about **what you need to reach your goals.**

Fill out this section BEFORE THE HEARING:

We encourage you to focus on 3 areas that are **most important to you as you think about your future** to discuss in court today. Sample discussion points: Education (credits, graduation, financial aid), Housing, Employment, Important Documents, Transportation, Health/Mental Health, and/or anything else that's important to your future plans:

Point #1:

Point #2:

Point #3:

1. Do you have a family member or another adult that is important to you that you will talk with regularly after you leave foster care?
2. How often do you spend time with that person or person(s)?
3. Do they call you most of the time or do you usually call them?
4. After you leave care, how often do you expect to talk with your caregiver?

Circle one: At least once a week; Twice a month; Once a month; Less than once a month; Not at all

Fill out this section AFTER THE HEARING:

1. How did you feel about speaking up for yourself in court?

Circle all that apply: Empowered Scared Nervous Overwhelmed Important Confused Happy Sad
Comfortable Helpful Bored Frustrated Satisfied Angry Okay
Comments:

2. Do you think coming to court today was useful and beneficial?

Circle one: Yes, definitely Yes, probably No, probably not No, definitely not Not sure/don't know
Comments:

Figure 6

Caregiver Home Form

Court date: _____ Caregiver's name: _____
Case number: _____ Caregiver's phone #: _____
Minor number: _____ Attorney's name: _____
Youth's name: _____ Youth's age: _____

Purpose: The purpose of this form is to determine the reasons that you do or do not attend court regularly.

1) Type of caregiver (circle all that apply)

Foster parent Relative Legal guardian Preadoptive parent
Group home staff Wrap around NREFM Other: _____

2) Did you attend the youth's hearing on _____?

3) How often do you attend court hearings with the youth (circle one)?

- a) Every hearing
- b) Occasionally
- c) Never

4) Please list the reasons you attend or do not attend court regularly:

- a) _____
- b) _____
- c) _____

5) What could the foster care system do differently so that you would be willing to come to court? (Examples: Tell me the date of the hearing earlier; I need to know a specific time the hearing will be called; provide transportation for relative caregivers; etc.)

- a) _____
- b) _____
- c) _____

6) Did anyone discuss the benefits for both you and the youth of your coming to court?

Who?

Figure 7

Caregiver Court Form

Date: _____

Hearing type: _____

Case number: _____

Minor's Attorney: _____

Minor number: _____

Purpose:

Caregivers play an important role in preparing youth for life after foster care. Your input is very important. Please share your opinions for the questions below. This form will be collected following the hearing.

1) Type of caregiver (circle all that apply)

Foster parent

Relative

Legal guardian

Preadoptive parent

Group home staff

Wrap around

NREFM

Other: _____

2) Did the judge ask for your input regarding the youth's transition plans and/or TILP during the hearing?

3) Do you feel like the information you shared was useful and beneficial to the judge and/or youth?

4) Do you feel like your presence in court benefited the youth?

5) Were you asked to fill out the Caregiver Information Form (JV-290) before attending court?

Yes

No

I have never heard of this form

a) If yes, did you fill it out and send it to court?

b) Was the information you provided on the Caregiver Information Form (JV-290) discussed in court?

6) How often do you expect to talk with the youth after he/she leaves foster care?

Circle one: At least once a week; Twice a month; Once a month; Less than once a month; Not at all

Figure 8





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An Implementation Guide for Improving Outcomes for Older Foster Youth:
Court Lab – A Nonprofit, Child Welfare, and Judicial Partnership
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TRANSITION AGE YOUTH HOUSING AND SERVICE ROADMAP

A BEST PRACTICES FRAMEWORK

January 2013



Child Welfare Initiative



Our Mission

The Child Welfare Initiative implements programs and practices that produce measurable improvements in the lives of children and families involved in child welfare systems.

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Introduction

Over 1,100 youth age out of Los Angeles County's foster care system annually. Despite the overall decline in children in foster care, persistently large numbers of youth continue to age out of the child welfare system and enter our communities in need of significant assistance. Los Angeles County's transitional housing and supportive services reach only a small percentage of former foster youth. In many instances, youth with the greatest needs remain unable to access the protection and help they need.

The Child Welfare Initiative (CWI) undertook a two-year assessment of housing and supportive services for transition age youth in Los Angeles County. Los Angeles County's service programs continue to encounter serious obstacles in reaching out to and serving our community's former foster youth, particularly former foster youth who are most at-risk. To identify solutions that can be implemented at the local level and within existing funding structures, CWI launched a partnership with Los Angeles County's transition age youth providers, government agencies, policymakers, private philanthropy, and others to develop better practices and policies.

Working with stakeholders, CWI developed this Best Practices Framework to improve outcomes for transition age youth. Both housing and supportive service providers and Los Angeles County public agencies impose a range of unnecessary barriers to serving youth effectively. Existing practices and funding barriers impact the efficiency of programs, failing to take into account the realities of youths' daily lives and the support that youth actually need to succeed. To improve outcomes for all youth and to serve more high-risk youth, providers and government agencies must:

1. Remove local public funding and contract requirements that limit providers' ability to provide essential supports for all youth;
2. Eliminate program practices that exclude youth who are most in need of accessing and remaining in programs;
3. Improve program accountability for delivering essential services and producing successful outcomes for youth; and
4. Coordinate services across the continuum of housing and service programs in Los Angeles County.

With these changes, Los Angeles County's service providers and public agencies have the ability to improve outcomes for former foster youth dramatically within their existing programs and resources.

This Framework offers the means by which Los Angeles County providers, public officials, and others can improve program utilization, decrease transition age youth homelessness, enhance outcomes across multiple life domains for youth, and expand assistance to the highest risk former foster youth. With this Framework, CWI urges individual providers and public officials to evaluate and support programs for transition age youth using four core practice principles: a youth driven process; individualized planning; developmentally appropriate, non-punitive programs; and services focused on realistic outcomes. Without services and public funding that promote and sustain these principles, Los Angeles County will continue to fail to help youth as effectively as it otherwise could.

The Problem

Despite the steep decline in the overall number of foster children in the last decade, the number of youth aging out of care has decreased only slightly. Since 2002, Los Angeles County's foster care population has fallen nearly 50%, from approximately 35,000 to 19,000 in the direct care of the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). However, the total number of youth aging out of care has declined by only 27%, from 1,500 to 1,100. In the last five years alone, more than 6,500 foster youth have aged out of County care and entered our community as young adults.

Of the 1,100 Los Angeles County foster youth that turn 18 each year while still in care, relatively few access transitional housing and supportive services. Among the youth who find assistance, only a small number are able to take full advantage of program offerings and complete them successfully. Significant numbers of Los Angeles County youth with the greatest risk factors when leaving foster care never access services in any manner. Risk factors include: leaving foster care without a high school diploma or GED, having no employment experience or job training, having mental disabilities or behavioral disorders, being pregnant or parenting, having experienced multiple placements while in foster care, or moving between the foster care, juvenile justice, and mental health systems ("cross-over placements"). Youth coping with these histories and difficulties often have no meaningful or lasting connections with committed adults capable of helping them.

With passage of the California Fostering Connections to Success Act, known as AB 12, and its successor bills, California extended benefits for foster youth from age 18 to 21. CWI proposed and successfully established AB 12's statewide regulations and administrative guidelines to ensure that transition age youth with serious physical and mental disabilities who are unable to meet AB 12's employment and education requirements remain eligible to receive extended foster care benefits. AB 12 now offers

youth with physical and mental disabilities time to acquire the skills they need to meet the law's employment and education requirements.

Extended foster care presents a significant opportunity for the provision of effective transition services to the most vulnerable foster youth, making it all the more important to improve the manner in which those services and programs are targeted and delivered to transition age youth. The core principles of this Framework apply equally to transition age youth who opt into AB 12's extended foster care and youth who choose to leave the foster care system at age 18. The barriers at the provider and public agency levels described in this Framework harm youth who opt into extended foster care under AB 12, as well as youth who do not utilize extended foster care. Both groups of youth rely on housing and related services from the same core set of providers, programs, and County funding structures.

Characteristics of Youth at Exit from Foster Care

Few foster youth are prepared to lead independent, productive lives at age 18. At exit from care, the average Los Angeles County foster youth tests at the 28th percentile in reading and only 57% of exiting foster youth have a high school diploma or GED. While Los Angeles County does not currently track employment services or outcomes before age 18, evaluations of national and state employment figures for foster youth are discouraging. Seventy percent of youth in the child welfare system have never been employed when they reach age 18. While their non-foster peers work an average of eight months between ages 18 and 19, foster youth work an average of 4.7 months and earn a median wage of less than \$5,000 per year. Foster youth who are able to find work earn an average of \$8.34 per hour, compared to \$10.07 for youth nationally.

In Los Angeles County, a significant number of youth aging out of foster care may be classified as high-risk, due to lack of a high school diploma or GED, the absence of job experience, mental health needs, pregnant or parenting status, multiple foster care placements, and/or cross-over placements. For example, close to half of all youth under DCFS's direct care receives services through the Department of Mental Health within 12 months of their case start date; at least 13% of foster youth have juvenile justice involvement or are "cross-over youth;" and 11% of foster youth are parenting at age 17. Youth with these risk factors are often especially unprepared for independence with lower educational attainment, minimal or no employment experience, and few independent living skills. Such youth are likely to have no enduring relationships with adults, particularly with adults outside of the foster care system, and limited connections to resources in our community.

A disproportionate number of high-risk foster youth leave care directly from group homes. While group homes house less than 7% of Los Angeles County's foster care caseload overall, they house 18% of youth who are still in care by age 18. Foster youth in group homes have high rates of behavioral and mental health needs, multiple foster care placements, and juvenile justice involvement, putting them at significantly greater risk when they exit care.

Though required by law, half of all Los Angeles County foster youth leave care without proper transitional planning. The Transition to Independent Living Plan (TILP) is the foundation upon which a youth's transition into our community is built. The TILP determines where a foster youth is to live, work and attend school, and receive other services after age 18. Over the last year, across three courtrooms at Edelman Children's Court, CWI, working with the Children's Law Center and Alliance for Children's Rights, evaluated 700 case planning reports for foster youth aged 14 and older. Fewer than half of older foster youth in Los Angeles County have fully completed TILPs. Twenty percent of TILPs fail to address a youth's progress in graduating from high school. Fewer than 30% describe or assess a youth's employment skills, experience, or future job plans. Over 60% do not address whether a youth has a stable adult connection, one of the most important protective factors for youth leaving care. Though directly responsible for youth and likely most aware of a youth's needs, fewer than 10% of foster parents attend hearings to assist with planning a youth's departure from County care.

With incomplete or missing TILPs, youth leaving Los Angeles County foster care are left to find shelter, food, work, and the other basic necessities of life on their own. The absence of transitional plans for half of all older foster youth virtually assures that they will experience a service gap in stable housing, employment, education, and health care. While some youth find and access services on their own, others never obtain needed support. Providing every foster youth with a meaningful transition plan that is specific to their needs and addresses the youth's basic necessities of survival lies within Los Angeles County's existing capabilities, and is, indeed, an already mandated requirement. The failure to ensure that adequate planning is undertaken and the resulting service gap that youth leaving foster care confront is unnecessary and solvable.

Existing Services and Programs for Transition Age Youth

Over the last 20 years, funding to support transition age youth has increased nationwide. Los Angeles County dedicates over \$13 million annually to its three major transitional housing and service programs for former foster youth: a) the Independent Living Program (ILP) funded through the federal Chafee Foster Care Independence Program; b) the Transitional Housing Placement Plus Program (THP-Plus) funded through the State; and c) transitional and shelter programs funded through the U.S.

Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD Housing). ILP, THP-Plus, and HUD Housing serve youth for a maximum of 18 to 24 months and up to age 21 or 24. Under the three major housing and service programs, Los Angeles County imposes varying entry and outcome requirements on youth, such as having or completing a high diploma or GED, enrolling in a post-secondary or vocational training program, and having or finding a job. Each program allows varying diplomas of youth independence and levels of supportive and case planning services.

Only a minority of transition age youth enroll in and complete housing and supportive service programs successfully. Within the first year of leaving foster care, one-in-five youth report a period of homelessness. Entrance requirements, such as having a high school diploma or GED fail to account for the 40% of youth who have not acquired a high school diploma or GED by age 19. Youth leaving foster care without a high school diploma and work experience confront one of the most difficult job markets for all youth, regardless of backgrounds, in decades. Existing employment requirements fail to reflect the realities of former foster youth or even of their non-foster peers. Fewer than one-in-seven former foster youth work every month in the year immediately following their exit from care. By age 24, former California foster youth who work earn only \$690 per month, compared to \$1,535 for youth nationally. High-risk former foster youth confront even greater difficulties in finding employment and getting an education.

Foster youth with significant risk factors have poorer outcomes. Los Angeles County foster youth with juvenile justice involvement prior to exiting care are more likely to be incarcerated as an adult, with two-thirds spending some time in jail within four years of exit. Only 10% of foster youth with a juvenile justice background report consistent employment. Among all foster youth, 17% receive outpatient mental health treatment within four years of exit from care. By age 19, 21% of youth are already parenting, complicating employment and education efforts.

Los Angeles County's THP-Plus program reports short average stays among former foster youth who enroll, including premature program exits and high youth turnover. According to the program's recent annual report, one-fourth of youth stay in THP-Plus fewer than six months and one-third of youth are asked to leave due to noncompliance with program rules and placement expectations (e.g., enrolling in higher education or securing and maintaining employment). The high turnover rate disrupts case plans, perpetuates housing instability, and wastes program resources. Housing and service providers confirm similar difficulties with Los Angeles County's other transitional housing and service programs.

In addition to failing to provide adequate transitional planning for foster youth at age 18, other Los Angeles County practices result in otherwise avoidable service gaps for

former foster youth in housing, employment, and education. Many County housing and service providers operate both group homes for pre-18 foster youth and transitional programs for post-18 youth. Though older foster youths' individual needs, strengths, and histories are known to the providers in whose group homes youth reside, and though group home providers express a strong desire to continue to serve youth in their care after age 18, few youth transition directly from providers' pre-18 group homes to providers' post-18 transitional age youth housing and service programs. As described by providers, few foster youth living in group homes can meet the requirements to gain admission to transition age youth programs and, of those in group homes who can meet those requirements, few are likely to meet the ongoing performance expectations to remain in the program. Though one of the highest risk groups in child welfare, group home foster youth rarely move directly to transitional housing programs at their 18th birthday, and instead, endure an unnecessary break in housing and support.

Another service gap persists among youth who leave transitional housing and service programs and enter shelter care programs. Providers report that coordinated case planning between transitional housing and service programs and shelter care programs is a rarity. When a young person leaves a transitional housing program voluntarily or involuntarily, services are duplicated or dropped altogether and care is fragmented. In addition to a service gap, the absence of coordinated case planning between providers means that youth use up and repeat valuable portions of the 18 to 24 months of services to which they are entitled and move closer to 21- to 24-year-old age cutoffs for services.

Current data for transition age youth reflects youth who have come in contact with housing and service providers. Data does not reflect outcomes for youth in Los Angeles County who never reach housing and service providers – particularly high-risk transition age youth who are most in need of service but who are also most isolated and difficult to serve

The Child Welfare Initiative's Work

In early 2010, CWI brought together over 35 executive and senior staff from Los Angeles County's major transition age youth housing and service providers. In addition, CWI asked the Corporation for Supportive Housing to bring its expertise and experience into the process. Shelter care, transitional housing, and permanent supportive housing and employment, education, and mental health providers expressed a strong desire to provide more flexible services, and agreed that high-risk youth are underserved. Working with CWI, the group agreed to identify ongoing funding and program barriers to serving youth effectively; and to develop a best practice framework and policy

recommendations for expanding the capacity, availability, and range of housing and service options for transition age youth.

CWI conducted site visits and staff interviews with housing and service providers, along with other child welfare advocates and stakeholders. CWI assessed internal program practices that impede flexible case planning and the service of greater numbers of high-risk youth. National and local literature and research was evaluated, experts both in and outside child welfare were engaged, youth outcomes in transitional housing and service programs across California were reviewed, and promising and effective program practices for working with youth nationwide were evaluated.

CWI created two research tools – a) the Service Inventory to develop uniform information on Los Angeles County housing, services, program requirements, and funding streams for transition age youth, and b) the Effective Practices/Barriers Survey to identify existing practices in Los Angeles County that produce positive outcomes for youth and barriers to the expansion of those practices. Over 35 housing and service providers completed the Service Inventory, and 15 of the largest providers completed the Effective Practices/Barriers Survey.

CWI held focus groups with transition age youth. Over a two-month period, outside the presence of providers, CWI interviewed more than 80 youth in transitional housing and service programs, as well as in shelter care. CWI asked youth what services and practices they feel are most useful in achieving their goals, what program requirements or rules are least supportive, and what recommendations they have for improving housing and services.

To identify government-imposed barriers to flexible case planning and to serving greater numbers of high-risk youth, CWI examined public funding requirements. CWI reviewed Los Angeles County's existing housing and supportive service contracts and requests for proposals for new contracts. To determine the source of funding restrictions in Los Angeles County contracts, CWI reviewed federal and state law and regulations governing transition age youth programs. CWI then compared those federal and state requirements with the restrictions that CWI found in County contracts. CWI interviewed the senior staff and leadership of public agencies that oversee services for transition age youth in Los Angeles County, including DCFS; the Los Angeles County Chief Executive Office; the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA); and the Los Angeles County Commission for Children and Families.

With three convenings in 2011, CWI brought together a range of stakeholders to share both CWI's ongoing work and obtain feedback on CWI's preliminary recommendations for improving program practices and funding streams. In May 2011, CWI gathered over

25 housing and supportive service providers to discuss initial findings concerning provider-based and government-imposed barriers to improving housing and service case planning and capacity. CWI provided the first outline of this Framework, along with proposals for serving more high-risk youth. In August 2011, CWI assembled the senior staff and leadership of Los Angeles County's public agencies that oversee transition age youth services. CWI shared its findings and recommendations for amending public contracts in order to remove a number of government-imposed barriers to flexible case planning and to helping high-risk youth. In September 2011, CWI hosted its third and largest convening, bringing together over 40 housing and service providers, policymakers, government agency leaders, private funders, and others. CWI shared its recommendations on implementing best practices and developing individual provider- and government-funded programs and policies that support those practices in order to improve youth outcomes.

Transition age youth, especially those at greatest risk, need providers, public and private funders, advocates, and policymakers to work together. Understanding youths' complex needs is essential to effective service programs, practices, and policies.

Young People Have Individual and Shifting Needs

The transition to adulthood for all young people is difficult, regardless of whether they have lived in foster care. Young people cycle between attending school, working, and living independently. The safety net for non-foster youth can be remarkably adaptive, reshaping itself to the momentary needs of the youth. Non-foster youth often rely on a safety net of family help ranging from financial assistance, short- or long-term housing, advice, patience, and other emotional support. Support toward lifelong goals of well-being, self-sufficiency, and productivity is available often at the youth's own pace.

Foster youth have similar, if not identical, lifelong goals. However, they have less support and greater needs. Rather than entering adulthood with a flexible family safety net of services and supports, foster youth must build one. Given that foster youths' needs are likely to be greater, their safety net must be stronger and more adaptive than what their non-foster peers require. Rather than families, housing and supportive service providers offer foster youth a safety net. Those providers must recognize that the youth that they serve need a network of services that is more individualized, flexible, and adaptive than what other youth require.

Young People Require Freedom and Responsibility

While foster youth enter adulthood with different needs from non-foster youth, they are likely to have the same developmental requirements for independence. Like other youth, foster youth require time to develop internal controls to make decisions in their best interest. Part of that development requires experiencing setbacks and mistakes as youth practice decision-making. Housing and supportive service providers must work with youth to reduce the risk and harm from setbacks and mistakes, particularly those that involve dangerous or injurious circumstances. However, providers must expect setbacks and mistakes, and allow youth to practice independence, and with practice, develop the internal controls they need to succeed.

Individualized, Flexible Services Require Funding Stream and Public Contract Support

Much of Los Angeles County's funding for most transition age youth programs sets unrealistic entry criteria and performance outcomes that many youth are unable to meet. For example, recovery-based programs often require that youth are clean and sober from drugs and alcohol on their own before considering them for admission. Mental health programs may require that youth have a specific qualifying diagnosis from a prescribed list, and lacking that qualifying diagnosis, refuse to admit youth in spite of a host of other similar mental diagnoses. Youth are forced to leave many housing and service programs after 24 months or by a specific age, regardless of their need or progress.

Many of Los Angeles County's funding and contract provisions that limit youths' ability to access and finish programs and providers' ability to help youth are not required by state or federal law, but are self-imposed. Funding streams would be better spent if the entry and performance outcomes imposed by Los Angeles County reflected the extent to which young people achieve individualized goals, or reach milestones that signal meaningful progress in meeting those goals, rather than abstract targets that have little connection to the realities of youth.

Nearly all Los Angeles County housing and supportive service contracts mandate that providers meet aggregate, program-wide targets. Examples of aggregate targets include, a) 75% of youth will be employed within 12 months, b) 75% of youth who do not have a high school diploma or GED will obtain one by the time they exit the program, c) 80% of youth will have a greater hourly wage at the time of exit from the program, or d) 80% of youth will move to permanent housing at the end of the program. Such targets bear little connection to the actual availability of jobs, the timing and requirements for enrollment in an external school or educational program, or the availability of permanent supportive housing units. Such targets allow little room for the individual

needs and abilities of foster youth. Instead, targets force providers to develop case plans that serve the objective of a program meeting its aggregate requirements rather than a case plan meeting the individual needs of a youth.

With existing funding restrictions and contract requirements, providers are encouraged to turn away youth who may need their services but appear likely to drag down the outcome percentages that Los Angeles County requires in its funding contracts. Providers may and do accept foster youth who leave care without a high school diploma or GED, who lack employment experience, and who have significant risk factors; however, a provider agrees to help that young person knowing that the youth is likely to damage the provider's ability to meet county contract requirements. Los Angeles County's array of funding and contract requirements means that providers inevitably limit the number of youth with multiple needs whom providers choose to serve. The sad irony is that the youth in whose name housing and service programs are often established – transition age youth at risk of homelessness – are among the youth least likely to be helped.

CWI's Best Practices Framework

Working with providers and County agencies, CWI identified programmatic and policy solutions essential to improving the outcomes and expanding the capacity of existing services. This Best Practices Framework sets out core principles critical for individualized, flexible, and adaptive services that can better meet the needs of both youth who do access programs and of high-risk youth who access programs too infrequently. The Framework outlines practice and policy changes that will improve our ability to move former foster youth closer to well-being, self-sufficiency, and productivity; and expand our capacity to serve high-risk youth.

Removing Internal Barriers that Impede Best Practices for Transition Age Youth

Internal barriers are individual provider requirements, practices, and structures that prevent or impede programs from serving transition age youth effectively, especially youth most at-risk. Housing and service providers and transition age youth identified two types of internal barriers: a) criteria that limit access to services or admission to housing, and b) program rules that are consistent challenges for youth to meet. Internal barriers are often related to a provider's unique values or philosophy, or organizational capacity and structure, rather than to achieving specific outcomes. However, internal barriers may also be linked to external barriers, such as public funding restrictions and contract requirements.

Criteria that limit access to services or admission to housing include: a) not accepting certain types of transition age youth, such as youth who are pregnant or parenting, youth who have serious mental health or behavioral issues, or youth who have substance abuse problems, and b) requiring or preferring youth with a high school diploma or GED, a current job, or prior work experience. Reasons given for excluding youth include lacking the organizational capacity to provide sufficient supervision, treatment, or support; while reasons for requiring or preferring youth with existing educational attainment or employment experience include admitting youth most likely to meet a program's requirements and outcome standards, or working with "motivated" youth.

Program rules that are consistent challenges for youth to meet include: a) "house rules," such as curfews, room checks, making meals, and overnight guest policies; and b) program structures, such as attending school and having a job simultaneously, or undergoing therapy or counseling. For house rules, providers describe the need to protect the safety and comfort of youth and staff. In support of such rules and requirements, providers cite a desire to promote certain values or a philosophy independent of youths' actual needs, developmental stage, or goals.

In Los Angeles County, providers acknowledge that many of their internal barriers are not developmentally appropriate or tailored to meet youths' individual needs. To evaluate their program, providers must ask:

1. Are the program's criteria for admission, along with the program's rules and structure, serving the youth that are identified in the program's objectives?
2. Is the program serving youth most in need of its services?
3. Can the program's capacity be expanded to serve greater numbers of youth overall, and greater numbers of youth most in need of its services?

Addressing the actual needs of every youth is essential to ensuring that the supports providers offer are meaningful to achieving needed outcomes. Providers should approach case planning for every youth with the following four core practice principles:

1. Youth driven process;
2. Individualized planning;
3. Developmentally appropriate, non-punitive programs;
4. Services focused on realistic outcomes.

Youth Driven Process

Working with housing and supportive service providers, CWI found that case planning for youth often focuses on: a) the youth's problems and/or, b) specific services in which the youth will participate while in a program. Often absent from case plans is evidence that a youth's preferences and stated needs have guided the plan's development, implementation, and adjustment. Without clear and detailed evidence of adherence to a youth's preferences and stated needs, program structure and funding parameters largely drive case planning. Such case planning practices lead to selecting youth that fit best into existing programs, rather than taking youth as they are and adjusting programs to meet their individual needs.

A planning and service delivery process that helps youth use their own strengths to achieve their own goals produces both confidence in youth and concrete strategies for moving beyond the adversity of the youth's past. As youth develops skills, providers must adjust services to the youth's progress. A youth driven process stands in contrast to the approach where a young person's goals are shaped into pre-set, existing services.

Individualized Planning

Individualized planning is a process that engages the youth, along with the youth's family and other supports outside the program, to support the youth's goals. Planning should address key life domains that the youth, family, informal supports, and service providers identify and that impact the youth's individual needs. The youth should set short- and long-term goals with participation from all parties providing a direct service or informal support to the youth.

Key elements of an individualized plan include: a) the youth's description of goals and desires for his or her future, b) the youth's starting point of strengths and abilities, relationships, interests and plans for the future, against which a provider's success in supporting the youth's progress is measured and evaluated regularly, c) a crisis and safety plan, d) an identified minimum safety net, and e) a means to educate, train, and support connected adults in the youth's life who are willing and able to help the youth navigate the provider's program and the world outside that program.

Hallmarks of an individualized plan are: a) *deliberate* action steps that are b) *relevant* to the youth's identified interests and desired goals. *Deliberate* action steps are ones that explain what specific individuals are responsible for implementing distinct steps. Key individuals include the youth, the provider's staff, and importantly, adults who are part of the youth's life but not connected directly to the provider. *Relevant* action steps are ones that the provider reviews with the youth regularly (e.g., minimum of 3-6 month

increments) to evaluate the feasibility of existing goals and services and to adjust them as the youth progresses.

Supports that exist outside the provider's direct services are an indicator of individualized planning, and are particularly useful in helping the youth overcome hurdles and cope with difficult situations. Building on natural supports from the youth's own network of relationships helps ensure that the provider's services are flexible and meet the youth's developmental needs. Incorporating outside adults, such as relatives, school administrators, teachers and school-based services, and employers reduces the youth's reliance on the provider's services and enhances the youth's acquisition of independent living skills.

Providers may fail to identify outside supports both because of inattention to and the difficulty of recognizing a youth's own network of relationships. In some instances, providers may not ask youth about their key adult relationships. In other cases, providers investigate but cannot easily determine the nature of the relationship. Providers should ask youth: a) who the people in the youth's own network of relationships are; b) how connected the youth feels to each person emotionally; c) what the nature and reciprocity of support with each person is; and d) what the youth's expectations for the longevity of each relationship are. Foster youth often have complex relationships; good techniques for diagnosing the strengths and weaknesses of those relationships can improve staff understanding and the individualization of services.

Every case plan should include deliberate and relevant action steps for the youth's transition from the provider's program to independent living or to continued support elsewhere, especially if the youth is leaving the provider's program unsuccessfully. Coordinated transitional case planning with deliberate and relevant action steps across varying providers and programs must be undertaken while the youth is still in the provider's program. From the start, every case plan should identify a specific staff person responsible for the youth's transition out of the provider's program and for joint planning between one provider and another.

An identified transitional facilitator is especially useful. Working with the youth and acting as a life coach, a transitional facilitator is a proactive case manager, operating with a small caseload and using interventions and practices known to be effective in helping the specific youth meet his or her case plan goals. The transitional facilitator advocates on behalf of and coaches the youth as the case plan is drafted and later adjusted to fit the youth's needs.

Developmentally Appropriate, Non-Punitive Programs

Often providers require strict compliance with individual program rules. Providers note that strict compliance ensures safety, promotes the efficient use of limited program resources, and teaches youth the “natural consequences” of breaking rules. Providers enforce curfews, room checks, group cooking, and food shopping requirements. While rules may reflect a provider’s philosophies and values, they may not be developmentally appropriate for the youth’s age, and may do little to address the youth’s individual needs or to help the youth move closer to self-sufficiency. Rules that are neither developmentally appropriate nor responsive to individual needs are highly likely to force the youth to leave a program unsuccessfully, resulting in an inefficient expenditure of public resources and a program’s inability to meet its mission as effectively as it might otherwise.

While essential for any housing or supportive service program, rules should be appropriate to the population that provider serves. The establishment and enforcement of rules should be seen through the lens of any deliberate and relevant action step in an individualized plan. The provider should show, in a deliberate way, that the particular rule is relevant to the youth’s achievement of a specific case plan goal. Teaching “natural consequences” is a vague and non-specific goal, and enforcing a rule in order to have a youth learn natural consequences is very likely punitive. Rules should complement the program’s mission and be enforced in a manner that is non-punitive and tied directly to a youth achieving a specific, well-defined case plan goal. The youth’s developmental needs should be assessed regularly to ensure that the youth’s needs are met appropriately. Programs and services should also be directly tied to the youth’s developmental needs.

Services Focused on Realistic Outcomes

Two reforms are critical to serving greater numbers of high-risk youth more effectively: a) Los Angeles County providers must change their practices and policies in existing programs to ensure that they are producing desired outcomes for youth, and b) Los Angeles County public agencies must change their funding and contract performance measures to reflect realistic outcomes that demonstrate individual and incremental successes of youth. Public agencies must establish funding and contract performance measures that allow providers sufficient flexibility to tailor their services to work toward outcomes that are meaningful to the youth. Providers must employ case planning principles that address the individual needs of youth; goals that are not tailored to a youth’s individual goals and developmental stage push a youth farther behind.

Removing External Barriers that Impede Best Practices for Transition Age Youth

External barriers are program requirements and/or practices imposed on programs by public contracts, government agencies, and/or private funders. CWI assessed Los Angeles County's funding and contract performance measures to identify how these external barriers impact transition age youth negatively. CWI examined existing service contracts and requests for proposals. CWI asked providers what funding and performance measures limit their flexibility most when responding to all youth and when serving youth most in need. Then CWI determined what government-imposed barriers pose the greatest obstacles to adhering to the core practice principles in this Framework. While barriers exist at all levels of government – federal, state, and local – CWI focused on the top five external barriers that the County has imposed and that lie within its ability to change.

As stated earlier, Los Angeles County has three major transitional housing and supportive service programs for former foster youth – a) ILP funded through the federal Chafee Foster Care Independence Program; b) THP-Plus funded through the State; and c) HUD Housing funded through the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. Within these three programs, removing the following County-imposed external barriers would improve youth outcomes in existing programs and increase the number of high-risk youth who access those programs significantly.

1. ILP: 24-Month Program Length

The federal ILP funding stream limits ILP services, including housing, to 18 to 21-year-old transition age youth, for a maximum of 36 months of program services. However, Los Angeles County has imposed its own program service limit of 24 months on the ILP housing program, due in part to the County's definition of transitional housing as lasting 24 months. High-risk youth are likely to require more than 24 months to reach their employment, education, and housing goals. For example, youth who are parenting a child may need more time and support to obtain a high school diploma or GED, meet other education requirements, or find stable and suitable employment. Likewise, youth with mental disabilities may need longer services. Removing the County's 24-month time limit on the ILP housing program length would not impact the total funding allocation for this program; it would, however, allow more high-risk youth to be served for a longer period, if needed.

Recommendation: Remove Los Angeles County's 24-month limit on accessing ILP housing services and only use the federally mandated 18 to 21 age requirement to allow 18-year-olds who enter the ILP housing program up to three years of support.

2. ILP: Operation Expense Restriction

The federal ILP funding stream can support a range of supportive services to transition age youth. Unfortunately, Los Angeles County allows providers to use ILP funds for only housing-related expenses. While the County's restriction on ILP funding may be an effort to encourage providers to find support from private funders for non-housing-related expenses, the decision to restrict what are otherwise relatively unrestricted federal program funds harms providers' ability to pursue private dollars for former foster youth programs. Many private funders are willing to support programs that can be shown to be sustainable or, at the very least, can leverage public dollars. Los Angeles County's restriction on the ILP program funds prevents providers from showing that public dollars can do either.

For example, a foundation may wish to support a program that helps former foster youth obtain their GED. However, the foundation's guidelines do not allow grantees to receive the foundation's funds for more than two years, after which grantees must demonstrate that the program will be independently sustainable. Under the federal ILP funding stream, a provider might show that two years of foundation support would allow for the hiring of staff and development of the educational program. Then after two years of foundation support, federal ILP funds for supportive services would ensure that the GED program continued. However, Los Angeles County's additional restrictions on how a provider may spend federal ILP dollars do not allow the foundation's limited dollars to be leveraged and prevent an independently sustainable program from being established.

Under a more flexible funding structure, providers could commit to using ILP funds to support programmatic sustainability. Providers could seek other private or public dollars to support housing operations. Under Los Angeles County's existing funding structure, providers are unable to move public dollars to different program cost centers, and therefore, are unable to pursue maximum private or public support.

Moreover, the current Los Angeles County restriction forces dollars into a program area that may not need them. A provider may not need all ILP funding to go to housing operations in order to meet the needs of youth. However, the provider must put ILP dollars into housing operations, regardless of where dollars might be better spent.

Recommendation: Remove Los Angeles County's expense restriction on federal ILP funding to allow providers to use ILP funds for both housing operations and supportive services in order to maximize the leveraging of private and public dollars.

3. THP-Plus: Employment Requirement

While the State of California has regulations and guidelines on THP-Plus, counties are free to set their own THP-Plus requirements and outcome expectations. Los Angeles County has established employment requirements in its THP-Plus contract that 50% of youth must have a job when they enter the program, and that youth who are unemployed at program entry must find a job within 60 days. The County's THP-Plus employment requirement is not aligned with the individual needs of youth, especially high-risk youth, who may be unable to find or maintain employment within such a short timeframe, nor are Los Angeles County's THP-Plus employment requirements linked to prevailing employment rates among youth generally. Los Angeles County's THP-Plus employment requirement forces providers to serve youth who are already employed or can be employed quickly. Youth with no prior work experience – as is the case for the majority of youth exiting foster care – often require more time to learn work skills that support permanent employment and more than 60 days to find a job.

Recommendation: Remove Los Angeles County's THP-Plus requirement that 50% of youth must already have a job when they enter the program, and that youth who are unemployed at program entry must find a job within 60 day. This change will allow THP-Plus to accommodate the needs of former foster youth with no prior work experience and prevailing unemployment rates among youth generally.

4. THP-Plus: Youth Interview Requirement

The Los Angeles County THP-Plus Request for Statement of Qualifications (RFSQ), which drives the provider application and procurement process for THP-Plus, encourages providers to conduct a Youth Interview as part of the admission process. A sample format of this Youth Interview is included as an exhibit in the RFSQ and contains assessment factors related to the youth's mental health history, work experience, appearance, behavior, cognition, impulse control, speech, dress, hygiene, affect, and rate and flow of speech.

The Youth Interview may be useful and essential in assessing the immediate safety of the youth and the safety of staff and other youth if the youth is admitted into the program. However, front-loaded admissions assessments of mental health, work experience, dress, hygiene, and affect that take place prior to more thorough assessments of strengths and needs, and deliberate and relevant case planning, rarely result in useful or accurate evaluations. This type of admissions assessment often encourages the enrollment of higher-functioning youth, and excludes high-risk youth from receiving the critical housing and supportive services they need.

Recommendation: Amend Los Angeles County's THP-Plus requirement for a Youth Interview to allow providers to use this tool during the admission process to assess the immediate safety of the youth, the safety of staff and other program youth if the youth is admitted, and to conduct more thorough assessments in later case planning.

5. ILP, HUD Housing, and THP-Plus: Aggregate Outcome Requirements

All three of Los Angeles County's major housing and supportive services contracts contain youth outcome targets focused on aggregate measures, regardless of youths' ability to achieve those targets, or of youths' actual needs, employment backgrounds, and educational levels. Outcome targets include requiring 75% of youth find employment, 80% of youth find permanent housing, and 65% of youth complete educational courses.

As a result of Los Angeles County's aggregate outcome requirements, providers cannot admit significant numbers of youth to programs or must ask significant numbers to leave if those youth risk impacting a providers' ability to meet a contract's outcome targets negatively. Providers are forced to select the "safest"

youth. Providers lack flexibility to show individual milestones that a youth has achieved as proof that the program is worthwhile and addressing a genuine need.

A more effective evaluation of outcomes for youth under Los Angeles County's ILP, THP-Plus, and HUD Housing contracts would require that 100% of youth have an individualized service plan within 30 days of entering the program that incorporates the youth's individual vocational, educational, employment, housing, health/mental health, and psychosocial goals. Then, based on negotiations between the contracting provider and the County, a given percentage of youth would have to achieve a given percentage of goals specified in their individualized plan by program exit. For example, as negotiated between the contracting provider and the County, a given percentage of youth would: improve one or more educational functioning level by program exit; improve their basic skills, work readiness skills, and/or occupational skills; increase long-term post-program earnings, rather than pre-post earnings, and average earnings change in six months from program exit; and rate the program as "excellent" or "good."

Under Los Angeles County's ILP, THP-Plus, and HUD Housing contracts, measures of a provider's performance should be based on a provider's past performance to ensure that outcome standards are realistic. The County should assess the provider's outcomes in the last reporting period, and then raise outcome targets for the next reporting period as negotiated between the County and provider.

Likewise, Los Angeles County should examine program performance, caseload, and efficiencies (e.g., number of clients served, cost per client served, cost per client improved) across similar providers and create benchmarks to compare across providers and make necessary performance adjustments. The County should assess outcomes from providers that provide high-risk youth similar services, then develop a benchmark of performance outcomes for this group that differs from a group of providers that may serve more high-functioning youth.

Los Angeles County should allow providers to negotiate performance standards at the start of each contract cycle. When a contract is first awarded, the County should negotiate realistic performance standards with the provider based on a) the types of youth served, b) other providers' experience and performance in serving similar populations, and c) external factors, such as economic or housing market conditions, that impact performance measures. The County should adjust employment outcome standards based on local economic conditions, such as the

unemployment rate, average earnings, and employment growth in specific sectors.

Los Angeles County should adjust providers' performance standards periodically to reflect a) the percentage of youth who obtain employment or increase their wages over time, b) local average earnings for youth, and c) local employment growth or decline in sectors where many youth seek entry-level jobs, such as the retail and service industries. Working with a provider, the County should negotiate employment outcome standards based on youth characteristics that impact employment attainment, such as the level of educational and skill attainment at program entrance. Outcome standards should be adjusted to account for youth who do not have high school diplomas or GEDs at program entrance.

Within the ILP, THP-Plus, and HUD Housing contracts, Los Angeles County should consider including incentive structures to providers that expand services for high-risk youth. Incentives could include: a) when contracts begin, upfront cash bonuses to providers for serving higher shares or greater numbers of high-risk youth; b) when contracts end, backend cash bonuses to providers for serving high-risk youth and meeting performance standards or achieving better-than-expected results; and c) non-cash rewards to providers, such as adjusted performance measures, program discretion, reduced reporting requirements, and increased funding flexibility for serving high-risk youth.

Recommendation: Change Los Angeles County's aggregate outcome requirements in the ILP, THP-Plus, and HUD Housing contracts to allow providers to measure youths' progress along a continuum in meeting their case plan goals; to incorporate mixed strategies for ongoing performance adjustments, based on a program's past performance, youth served, as well as economic and other conditions; and to provide incentives to encourage more and better services for high-risk youth.

Conclusion

Since beginning its work, CWI has seen critical improvements in lowering both external and internal barriers to best practices for transition age youth. Los Angeles County's ILP contract previously included a performance measure that encouraged providers to enroll all youth into mainstream benefits, which contradicted self-sufficiency goals in a large number of youth's case service plans. Housing and service providers often implemented this contractually-imposed, aggregate performance measure by requiring

youth to apply and receive cash or welfare assistance, regardless of their individual needs. With input from CWI, LAHSA has amended the ILP contract to ensure that providers no longer require youth to enroll in public assistance programs, like General Relief or Food Stamps, if there is not a need for the individual youth to do so.

LAHSA's most recent round of TAY housing and service discretionary grants incorporated CWI's recommendation to improve performance standards for TAY programs by using more individualized benchmarks, which enhance case planning flexibility. As part of their Transition Age Youth Housing Stabilization contract, LASHA allowed providers to propose their own performance and outcome standards for transition age youth housing and services. LAHSA and DCFS have requested CWI's assistance to implement the recommendations in this Framework for better measuring performance and outcomes in programs for transition age youth, with the goal of considering these changes in the upcoming contract renewal process for the ILP housing program.

CWI has also partnered with two of Los Angeles County's largest transition age youth housing and service providers – Hillside and Hathaway-Sycamores – to implement this Best Practices Framework to serve more high-risk youth. Targeting 20 high-risk youth that providers have identified as likely to fail out of their programs, CWI is utilizing case reviews, program observations, and interviews with staff and youth to assess each provider's practices, and to identify service areas where the core principles of the Framework are most in need of implementation. CWI is working with both providers to develop improved data and outcome measures that track the individualized needs, services, and outcomes for youth, especially high-risk youth.

CWI understands critical work remains. That work lies within our local control and ability to take up. Los Angeles County's existing programs and funding are capable of serving greater numbers of transition age youth more effectively. Outcomes for the 1,100 youth who reach age 18 and who are still in our care can be dramatically improved. The commitments we have made to those youth, including the most vulnerable, can and must be kept.

Acknowledgments

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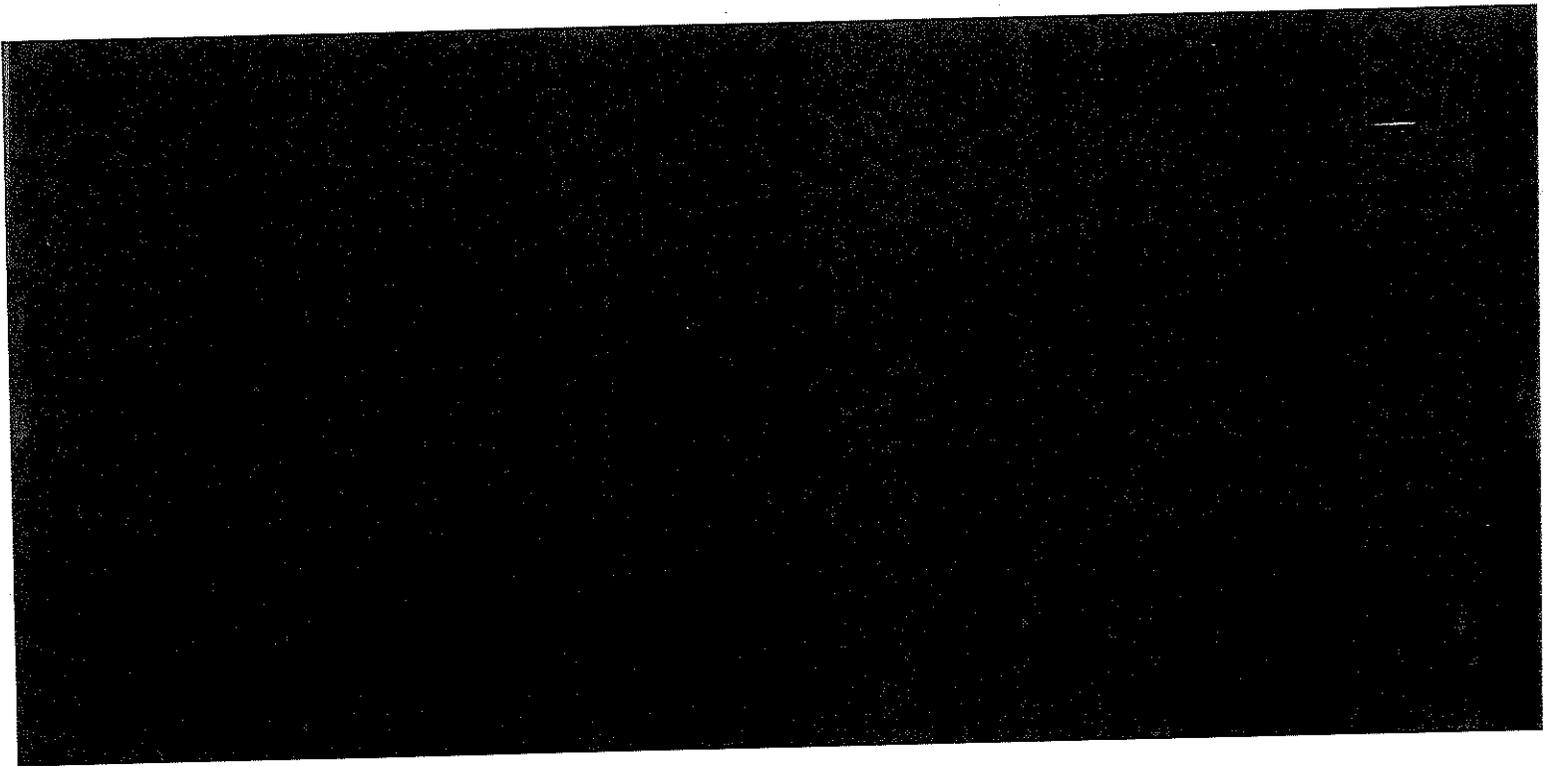
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Notes

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Transition Age Youth Housing and Service Roadmap: A Best Practices Framework

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ANDREW BRIDGE BIOGRAPHY

Andrew Bridge attended Wesleyan University, graduated from Harvard Law School, and is a former Fulbright Scholar and Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Resident.

Andrew is currently Executive Director of the Child Welfare Initiative in Los Angeles, California. Established by a consortium of leading private foundations, individuals, and other philanthropic organizations, the Child Welfare Initiative focuses on the fundamental reform of our child welfare systems. Working with public officials and private organizations, the Initiative investigates and implements innovative strategies, policy changes, and programmatic reforms aimed at bettering outcomes for children in and aging out of child welfare. The Initiative also seeks to develop positive relationships between child welfare officials and families living in the community and to enhance services available to children and families in need. Emphasis is placed on the most effective use of private funding to catalyze meaningful and sustainable improvements in these areas.

Andrew began his legal career representing children in Alabama state psychiatric hospitals and mental health facilities, including those children housed at the Eufaula Adolescent Center. He later returned to the system that raised him and became Executive Director of the Alliance for Children's Rights in Los Angeles where he worked to expand free legal services to children in foster care and in poverty. There, he played a critical role in streamlining foster children's adoptions and establishing National Adoption Day, along with improving foster children's access to medical care, and ensuring their right to see and speak with a social worker on a regular basis. Andrew is also the former Managing Director of Child Welfare Reform at The Broad Foundation.

He continues to advocate for foster children's educational opportunities, is a founding director of the New Village School focusing on the needs of girls in foster care and in impoverished Los Angeles communities, and is a trustee of the St. Anne's Home for pregnant and parenting teens.

Andrew's first book, *Hope's Boy*, a memoir about his young mother's struggle with mental illness and his childhood in foster care, was a New York Times' Bestseller, Washington Post Book of the Year, Los Angeles Discovery Book, and People Magazine Critic's Choice Book. He is completing his second book, *Headed Home*, which revisits the boys, now men, who grew up in Alabama state psychiatric hospitals and mental health facilities, and who were his first clients as a children's rights attorney.

January 14, 2007

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The Lost Children

By ANDREW BRIDGE

MY mother never explained to me how she met that short, thin man with the pockmarked neck, why she decided to let him move in with us or what made her leave me with him that day when she went to work. I guess she didn't have any other choice. But when she got home and found that her 6-year-old son had been beaten, thrown against the wall, slashed on his back repeatedly with an electrical cord — all because I had changed the television channel — she knew enough to throw that man out.

Sadly, Quachaun Browne wasn't as lucky. One year ago this month, prosecutors say, 4-year-old Quachaun was beaten to death by his mother's companion. As in the case of 7-year-old Nixzmary Brown, whose mother and stepfather are about to go on trial in her death, workers at the city's Administration for Children's Services were investigating the family but they were unable to save the child. This failure has resulted in some positive changes at the agency. The number of children removed from their homes and placed in foster care is the fewest in decades. But unfortunately, this number is now rising at a significantly faster pace since Nixzmary's death, up by about 55 percent in 2006 over the first 10 months of 2005.

In 1995, Los Angeles County's foster care system underwent a similar upheaval after a 2-year-old boy was returned to his family only to be beaten to death months later. Just as New York has done, officials in Los Angeles redoubled training, took over individual cases and hired frontline workers, then descended on communities to root out failing families. The system bloated to 70,000 children under the county's supervision. Officials soon discovered that taking children was easier than returning them. As a result, thousands of children languished in foster care for years.

New York City's system has some critical differences, but the rising number of children taken into foster care this year suggests that we're still focusing more on removing children than on helping families stay together. No wonder social workers find mothers reluctant to ask for help. They're afraid their children will be taken from them.

Friends, family and neighbors share these fears and often resist calling child welfare until it's too late. Social workers would be more effective if the bureaucracy that employed them understood that even failing families may have something valuable to offer their children.

That afternoon with the man with the scarred neck was a long time ago; I am now a lawyer and I've spent

my career working on behalf of the frightened children who fill our nation's foster care systems. When I ask them about their lives they almost always answer that they want nothing more than to be returned to their mothers, who want nothing more than to be given back their children. As long as a mother is not abusive, child welfare succeeds most when it finds the means to help mothers.

Like so many mothers I have worked with, my mom was poor and never graduated from high school. Fortunately for me she got rid of that man before he had the chance to kill me — though for her bravery he returned and raped her. Within a year, she and I were living in a motel, foraging for food from trash bins.

As we slid deeper into poverty, child welfare officials offered little more than threats that I would be taken from her. A social worker eventually arrived with a police escort. While my mother screamed on the sidewalk, I was hustled into a waiting car. She loved me but she lacked the resources to care for me. I remained in foster care until I was 18.

That was decades ago, yet child welfare has changed little. In the glare of public scrutiny, officials too often respond with reforms that drive up the number of children taken from their families. One can barely comprehend the evil of an adult who murders a child, but few parents, even those tangled in child welfare systems, are monsters. If greater trust existed between impoverished communities and child welfare systems, if mothers felt that calling child welfare meant more than losing their children, if their neighbors felt the same, help might arrive more often in time to prevent a tragedy.

Andrew Bridge, a lawyer, is the author of the forthcoming "Hope's Boy."

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Op-Ed

A safer foster system

L.A. County hasn't adopted key reforms that could help protect young children most at risk.

March 24, 2013 | By Andrew Bridge

Just before my 7th birthday, a police car rolled up alongside me as I was running an early morning errand for my mother. An officer leaned out the window and asked if my name was Andy. He then asked me to get into the car, and we drove the short distance back to the squalid motel where my mother and I were staying. Leaving me in the car, the officer jumped out to join a woman who was arguing on the sidewalk with my screaming mother.

By then, my mother and I had been evicted from a string of apartments. We'd gone on to live with friends, then with strangers before finally getting a room in the motel. At night, we ventured outside, eating from dumpsters and trying to hide from a pack of men that my mother's schizophrenic delusions told her were hunting us.

I hopped from the car and tried to intervene, but I was pulled from my mother's arms, shoved into the woman's car and taken to MacLaren Hall — Los Angeles County's infamous, now closed facility for children in foster care.

DOCUMENTS: The report on child deaths

I spent the 11 remaining years of my childhood in the foster care system, moving from MacLaren to a loveless foster home. Good at school, I graduated from high school, attended college on a scholarship, then law school.

As hard as it would have been for me to see it that way when I was a ward of the county, I was one of the lucky few.

Children who wind up in foster care are among the most vulnerable people in society. And the system just keeps failing them. This was driven home powerfully once again recently in a confidential report commissioned by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. Detailing 16 deaths of children in the system, the report documented how children were placed in homes known to be dangerous and how county workers were sometimes incompetent or failed to follow investigative procedures. It detailed numerous "systemic recurring issues" that were "in need of immediate remedial attention."

A Times Investigation: Innocents Betrayed

The report described failures at the system's front end, the point at which allegations of abuse or neglect are received, and at the back end, the point at which children are removed from their parents or guardians and placed under county care. In addition to the children who died — often very young — the report documented how many other children in foster care were in unsafe or unsuitable settings and denied opportunities to thrive.

If these latest revelations follow the usual course, advocates will demand another round of leadership changes. But that would be the wrong approach. In the last 15 years, the Department of Children and Family Services has had eight directors. It's hard to build continuity with that sort of turnover. It would also be a mistake to suddenly descend on at-risk families, plucking children from their homes and swelling the number of children in county care.

So what should be done? The report offers a number of recommendations, but it neglects two crucial ones.

Of the deaths looked at in the report, 11 of 16 involved children 5 years old or younger. More than a third of all allegations of abuse or neglect in the county involve children in this age group, and nearly 50% of all children who enter county foster care are 5 or younger. While noting overall failures to investigate and evaluate risks, the report pays scant attention to these facts.

Very young children are particularly vulnerable. They have the fewest contacts outside of a home. They are less likely to be in school. They can be easily moved, even hidden, from investigators. They have far less ability to articulate their circumstances to others. While some procedures are in place for evaluating young children's cases, the county ought to determine why safeguards failed and then heighten them for this age group.

One step toward addressing these problems would be for the county to move away from reliance on a single emergency response worker's assessment and require multiple people to evaluate a child's circumstances. The idea is something like peer reviews in medicine, which

allow doctors to assess their approaches to a patient's illness. Other foster care systems, such as in New York and Illinois, have adopted this reform successfully. Los Angeles has been tragically slow.

A second failing of the report involves service providers. It makes some important recommendations, including more effective identification, coordination and vetting of those who take in foster children. But most of its focus is on larger providers who run group homes or otherwise care for multiple children. Scant mention is made of the kind of providers most children end up with: unrelated foster parents or family members who agree to take them in. As of January, 76% of children under county care were living with unrelated foster parents (32%) or with family relatives (44%). Individual providers are responsible for feeding and clothing a child, getting a child to the doctor and school, and navigating a complex bureaucracy to ensure that a child's needs are met.

Los Angeles County needs to take immediate steps to monitor and improve the care that children receive in individual homes. National census data indicate that households caring for foster children face huge challenges. They are larger than households without foster children, have lower levels of education and have lower incomes. They are more likely to receive public assistance. It is difficult to imagine how to improve foster care without intensely considering the situations of those who provide the bulk of it.

The county also needs to develop strategies for identifying families with the parenting qualities needed and for eliminating those who don't have them. If a particular foster home repeatedly asks that children in its care be relocated, or if children in a particular home are more likely to fail at school or aren't taken to doctors when they need to be, then the county should no longer place children in those homes. This seems like basic logic; yet according to the report, the county lacks the means to track outcomes from individual homes.

I know how lucky I was. I was taken into the system because I needed to be, and even if my situation was far from perfect, I was at least safe and physically provided for. But those basic elements of care shouldn't have to depend on luck.

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