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Integrating Emancipated Foster Youth Into Society

Issue

Does the Human Services Agency of San Mateo County operate an adequate program to integrate emancipated foster youth into society?

Summary

In California foster children become emancipated and freed from the supervision and care of the foster care system on their eighteenth birthday. Although deemed to be capable of living independently as productive members of society the fact is that many of these youth are not ready to survive in society on their own. Many, if not most of them, lack family or other means of financial and emotional support; they lack sufficient educational or vocational training to obtain adequate employment to become self-supporting and, as a result, they often end up homeless.

In San Mateo County the Human Services Agency (HSA) administers a federally funded law designed to assist foster children and integrate them into society. The Adolescent Services Department operates four major programs for this purpose; the Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP), the Transitional Housing and Placement Program (THPP) the Independent Living Program Aftercare Services Program and the Workforce Investment Act Program (WIA).

Participation by eligible foster youth in any or all of the above programs is voluntary. The Adolescent Services Department recruits foster youth into the programs at age 15 and in the future expects to recruit 14 year-olds. The children may stay in the programs even after emancipation until they reach their 22nd birthday. Currently about 170 adolescents between the ages of 16 and 21 participate in one or more of the programs and 75 of those are emancipated.

The County recently has placed more emphasis and manpower upon these programs and the services offered are improving. However, affordable housing for emancipated youth is a major problem and many of them have to be placed outside of the County. Furthermore, a substantial number of eligible youth still do not participate in any of the programs and there is a need to recruit more of them into the programs.

The Grand Jury recommends that more staff be assigned to the programs, that more effort be devoted to outreach and recruiting of youth into the programs and that additional affordable housing and transportation options for emancipated youth be obtained. Also, WIA staff members should be reclassified as permanent employees (to reduce high turnover) and the planned survey of all program participants should be completed in order to evaluate the effectiveness of current programs and provide a base for follow-up studies.



Integrating Emancipated Foster Youth Into Society

Issue

Does the Human Services Agency of San Mateo County operate an adequate program to integrate emancipated foster youth into society?

Background

The federal government partially funded the Independent Living Program (ILP) for the first time in the 1980s when Section 477 of Title IV of the Social Security Act was enacted. The Act has been amended several times since. The law is implemented in California through the California Department of Social Services and administered by the counties. The state enforces a minimum of restrictions and specifications and each county has a great deal of flexibility in administering its ILP.

The law now applies to foster children and emancipated foster youth aged 14 through 21, with the goal to enable eligible youth to achieve self-sufficiency before leaving the foster care system and to support themselves following emancipation. Among programs and activities authorized by the law are programs to enable participants to obtain a high school diploma or its equivalent, obtain vocational training, receive individual and group counseling, and develop a written, transitional independent living plan. Instruction in basic living skills such as money management, consumer skills, transportation, and health care is to be provided as well. Finally, the Act allows for expenditures for training youth in interpersonal and social skills.

The Grand Jury interviewed the San Mateo County Human Services administrative staff handling Adolescent Services, Independent Living Program, and Foster Care Services. The Grand Jury visited programs and interviewed administrative staff in charge of Independent Living Programs and emancipated foster children in both Alameda and Santa Clara Counties. Interviews were held with agencies that fund these programs in San Mateo County. In addition, Grand Jury members held discussions with staff members of agencies providing social and educational services to emancipated foster youth, and listened to several emancipated foster children tell their stories.

Findings

San Mateo County administers the Independent Living Program through its Adolescent Services Department. This department offers several programs that support current, former and emancipated foster youth to become self-sufficient, successful adults. The four major services available for these adolescents are: Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP); Transitional Housing and Placement Program (THPP); ILP Aftercare Services; and Workforce Investment Act (WIA) services. These programs are all housed in one location with the teams all working together to provide a coordinated array of services to current and former foster youth.

The staff currently begins recruitment of potential program participants at 15 ½ years of age, so that by the age of 16, they are enrolled in the programs. As of February 2005, there were approximately 170 adolescents between 16 and 21 years of age participating in one or more programs. Seventy-five of those are emancipated and are no longer active in the foster care system but continue to receive some services.

Adolescent Services would like to begin referrals as early as 14 ½ and develop some programs appropriate for that age. This early-age focus is in the planning stages and will be designed to enroll young teens before they are lost to the system.

Adolescent Services claims a need to have a set of social workers specifically assigned to 14 ½ to 19 year olds and housed with Adolescent Services. Previously, there was no concerted effort by social workers and probation officers who are responsible for referring eligible youths into Adolescent Services programs to do so because of the time and paperwork involved. Now social workers and probation officers are better informed through annual meetings and training involving these services. The Grand Jury interviewed administrators who believed that, by hiring social workers as Adolescent Services staff, teens would benefit from an improved referral process and from the increased stability and mentoring from full-time staff.

The full time staff consists of:

- Two social workers assigned to adolescents from the foster care system.
- Two employment service specialists, one working with youth aged 15-18 to develop their educational and vocational goals, and the other working with youth aged 19-21 to provide post-emancipation services to assure self sufficiency.
- One social worker who acts as an aftercare specialist working with former foster youth to provide information and referral services.

Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP)

ILSP provides mentoring and regularly scheduled classes in life skills training such as budgeting, finances, social skills, daily living skills, transportation, housing, financial aid, and computer skills. Students receive \$20 per class as a financial incentive for participation. Current and former foster youth ages 15 ½ to 18 are eligible to participate

in this program. The students are encouraged to attend classes for two years to prepare for self-sufficiency, college, and career planning.

In 2003, only 25 youth participated in these classes. As of February 2005, 50 youth attended evening ILSP classes at the College of San Mateo. This is about half the number of foster youth who are eligible to participate. The primary reasons for the difference between eligibility and enrollment include:

- An existing stable placement that is already providing the necessary skills
- Conflicting school or personal schedules
- Current placement out of the county
- Lack of adequate transportation to ILSP classes

Classes follow a regular term schedule and are held twice a week. Students attend one night a week to learn ten major competencies. Plans are now underway to modify the curriculum by offering college bound and vocational oriented classes and by separating junior and senior levels.

Approximately 85% of the participating students are expected to graduate from high school. Adolescent Services anticipates that 35 students will graduate in June 2005. In 2004, all 17 ILSP graduates completed high school, 14 attended college, and two enrolled in vocational training programs.

Staff informally asks for feedback from participants, but is now planning a survey of participants to gauge the effectiveness of the overall program. The Grand Jury learned that some participants feel that with open entry, classes become repetitive as new students join the classes. Other feedback from youth and agency personnel suggests that the ILSP should provide better outreach and engagement with foster youth to encourage participation and follow-up to evaluate program outcomes. Some of the planned changes under discussion will respond to these recommendations and complaints.

Transitional Housing and Placement Program

San Mateo County has one of the highest housing costs in the nation. To support the average cost of a one-bedroom apartment, an adolescent would need to earn about \$22 an hour. A national study by the Child Welfare League of America found that 50% of foster youth experience at least one episode of homelessness during the first year after leaving foster care. An analysis of the projected number of adolescents leaving the San Mateo County foster care system and the current local capacity of transitional housing demonstrates a significant need to expand supportive housing options for adolescents emerging from foster care.

The Transitional Housing and Placement Program (THPP) is administered through Youth and Family Enrichment Services and provides an opportunity for mature foster youth between the ages of 16 and 19 to experience a greater level of independence prior to emancipation. Twenty-four beds are available for youth exiting the system for the next one to two years. To be accepted in THPP, teens must write an essay of intent, have

extensive interviews, attend both school and work regularly, be drug and alcohol free, and participate in individual and group sessions.

ILP Aftercare Services

The ILP Aftercare Services program is a collaborative effort between HSA and Youth and Family Enrichment Services aimed at emancipated foster youth ages 18-21 who are no longer considered active in the foster care program. There are currently 75 emancipated foster youth on the aftercare case list, up significantly from its beginning enrollment four years ago. Aftercare Services develops an individualized plan to assist with resources and referrals to housing (emergency and transitional), employment readiness, health insurance and financial assistance with health and dental expenses, counseling (mental health, domestic violence, substance abuse), transportation, and aid in resolving legal and debt issues.

Housing is a big concern for these young people. Currently there are 29 youth seeking stable housing. Of those, 10 have an immediate need and are in very unstable housing. Former foster youth are offered housing through the Transitional Housing and Placement Program, which provides two beds at Daybreak, a shelter for transitioning youth, and one bed at Jeremiah's Promise, a transition program for former foster youth. The Human Services Agency has also made exceptions based on extenuating circumstances and allowed payment for youth to stay for a short time at a local motel during crisis situations. Between 2001 and 2003, 25 Section 8 Housing vouchers were available for use by former foster youth. The vouchers provided two years of subsidized housing. However, due to budget reductions at the federal level, funding for the vouchers is no longer available. Additionally the county used to offer \$500 a month for a year to emancipated youth sharing an apartment. This has also been cut.

The full-time aftercare social worker also coordinates services with the Mental Health Association when a transitioning youth is identified as needing mental health assistance.

Maintaining contact with emancipated youth is a barrier to providing ongoing services. The HSA contracted with the Youth and Family Enrichment Services Agency to provide outreach services to homeless youth, including former foster youth. Efforts to reach youth include street-based community outreach, mailings to last-known contact addresses, and presentations to partner agencies (e.g., Court appointed Special Advocates (CASA), Probation).

W.I.A. Youth Education and Employment Services

Established in 2004, the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) Youth Services offers one-on-one, intensive employment and educational services with a goal of advanced educational opportunities, higher wage jobs and increased retention within those jobs. Overall, the WIA program has served 122 clients (78 aged 14-18; 44 aged 19-21) at a cost per client of \$901 for the first year of the program.

Employment preparation provides individualized vocational consultation. Youth attend vocational classes and are linked with the services of the Peninsula Works One-Stop

which includes assistance in filling out job applications, resume writing, interviewing techniques, networking methods, developing work ethics, coaching toward job advancement, and career exploration.

Educational planning includes accessing financial aid and scholarships, exploring colleges and major courses of study, filling out college applications, understanding the college matriculation and transfer processes, exploring vocational training options, and accessing internships.

At present, approximately 65 current and former foster youth ages 15-21 participate in this program with the assistance of two full-time employment services specialists. All the youth in the ILSP classes are eligible to participate in this program and have recently been targeted for outreach. As a result, the number of participating youth ages 15-18 has doubled in size.

Because this program has grown quickly, there have been challenges with conducting outreach, developing programs, developing intake and tracking procedures while providing the needed services. Additionally there was 100% turnover in the case manager position during the first seven months of initial program development. The turnover is due in part to the status of the employees as "short-term" county employees who receive no benefits. In an effort to stabilize the position, administration plans to recommend a change to permanent employee. The caseload for each case manager is approximately 30 youth and there is no administrative or program assistance.

Ninety-five percent of the 15-18 year olds are enrolled in school and 25% are seeking employment. For the 19-21 year olds 50% are enrolled in school, 29% are employed, and 21% are seeking employment.

In California and in San Mateo County less than 25% of emancipated youths enroll in college (only 7% in a four-year college) and two-thirds of those fail to graduate. However, the county encourages the connection to the Smith Scholastic Society, a support program for university-bound former foster youth run by the University of California at Santa Cruz. There are 17 youths actively involved in this program with 5 more in the process of enrolling. Recently, a group of five 14 -15 year olds with two staff visited UC Santa Cruz to learn what college life could become for them.

Permanence

San Mateo is one of four counties in the state offering a pilot program for the Youth Permanence Project. Operating on the premise that all youth, no matter how self-sufficient, can benefit from a stable and caring relationship with a trusted adult, the project identifies youth in need of a permanent connection. Youth permanence is a key component of the System Improvement Plan for Child Welfare, with the goal of placing youth in non-institutional settings whenever possible. Additional goals include assisting youth to reconnect to lost family members and recruiting more in-county foster homes for adolescents. Youth who are current and former foster youth are also involved in training

prospective foster parents. San Mateo works monthly with Catholic Social Services of Seattle, Washington to do intensive searches for relatives of older youth in the system.

Conclusions

Adolescent Services took several important steps to provide for a coordinated transition for adolescents moving from foster care to independence.

- Adolescent Services houses all programs related to education, housing, job training, and mentoring in the same office building, with a staff that is selected and trained to work together.
- The substantial increase in program participation in the ILSP, Aftercare and WIA programs indicates that outreach has been successful and these programs are meeting the needs of their participants.
- Adolescent Services has planned programs and activities that include outreach before emancipation and continue through program exit or “aging out.” This is a clear indication that management and staff recognize the need to remedy the problem of youth “slipping through the cracks,” a situation almost inherent in a transient or troubled age group.
- Adolescent Services would like to move social workers dedicated to foster youth in these programs under this department’s control. This would increase the number of referrals and provide youth with important services.

The problem of available and affordable housing is growing, with more emancipated youth placed out of the county in lower-cost areas. Without monthly stipends and Section 8 vouchers, available housing continues to be a serious problem.

Agency staff funded under various federal acts receive none of the benefits awarded to full-time county employees. The county should reassess whether these employees can and should be reclassified as regular employees so as to avoid high turnover. The caseloads for the WIA staff are high with over 30 adolescents each. Additional staffing may need to be added to maintain adequate monitoring of participants. It is expected that rates of employment and college admissions will rise as the WIA program stabilizes its staff and has a chance to fully implement its programs.

Although the increase in ISLP participants is a hopeful sign, a substantial number of eligible foster youth are not participating. Continued outreach must be done with youth who do not attend due to conflicts with their personal schedules. The lack of adequate transportation to get students to evening classes must also be addressed.

The problems facing foster youth as they become emancipated are still difficult to overcome. They are challenged by homelessness due to lack of stable and affordable housing situations, and unemployment based primarily on the need for workplace skills. The educational programs that could alleviate the lack of marketable skills exist in the

county. Taking advantage of those programs is difficult when a young person is also worrying about housing, transportation, and many other types of critical support systems.

Recommendations

The Board of Supervisors should direct the Human Services Agency Director to:

1. Transfer two or more social workers who are dedicated to youth in the ILSP, ILP Aftercare Services, THPP, and WIA Youth Education and Employment Services, into Adolescent Services from Children and Family Services.
2. Increase housing options for current and emancipated foster youth.
3. Reclassify the Workforce Investment Act staff to permanent status.
4. Complete the planned Adolescent Services survey of all program participants to gauge the effectiveness of the programs and find areas where improvements could be made and provide a base for follow-up.
5. Provide improved transportation options to Independent Living Skills Program participants.
6. Develop better outreach programs to inform and involve eligible participants not currently participating in Adolescent Services programs.



COUNTY OF SAN MATEO
Inter-Departmental Correspondence

County Manager's Office

DATE: September 2, 2005
BOARD MEETING DATE: September 13, 2005
SPECIAL NOTICE: None
VOTE REQUIRED: None

TO: Honorable Board of Supervisors
FROM: John L. Maltbie, County Manager
SUBJECT: 2004-05 Grand Jury Response

Recommendation

Accept this report containing the County's responses to the following 2004-05 Grand Jury reports: Proposition 36, Children and Family Services, and Integrating Emancipated Foster Youth into Society.

VISION ALIGNMENT:

Commitment: Responsive, effective and collaborative government.

Goal 20: Government decisions are based on careful consideration of future impact, rather than temporary relief or immediate gain.

This activity contributes to the goal by ensuring that all Grand Jury findings and recommendations are thoroughly reviewed by the appropriate County departments and that, when appropriate, process improvements are made to improve the quality and efficiency of services provided to the public and other agencies.

Discussion

The County is mandated to respond to the Grand Jury within 90 days from the date that reports are filed with the County Clerk and Elected Officials are mandated to respond within 60 days. It is also the County's policy to provide periodic updates to the Board and the Grand Jury on the progress of past Grand Jury recommendations requiring ongoing or further action. To that end, attached is the County's responses to the Grand Jury's reports on Proposition 36 issued June 14, 2005, Children and Family Services issued June 16, 2005, and Integrating Emancipated Foster Youth into Society issued June 30, 2005.

Integrating Emancipated Foster Youth into Society

Findings:

Staff is in general agreement with the Grand Jury's findings. The Grand Jury recognized that Adolescent Services has taken several important steps to provide for a coordinated transition for adolescents moving from foster care to independence.

Recommendations:

The Board of Supervisors should direct the Human Services Agency Director to:

- 1. Transfer two or more social workers who are dedicated to youth in the ILSP, ILP Aftercare Services, THPP, and WIA Youth Education and Employment Services, into Adolescent Services from Children and Family Services.**

Response: Disagree. Adolescent Services is part of Children and Family Services (CFS). Currently, there are three Social Workers assigned to cover the Permanency Planning (PP) cases in the unit. Caseloads in this unit, as in all CFS units, are determined by a workload standard that is uniform across all CFS units. The unit currently justifies three Social Workers based on the caseload size. In addition to these three workers, Independent Skills Living Program and Employment Services staffs team with the Social Workers to provide expanded services to these youth. As caseloads grow in this unit, additional Social Workers will be assigned as needed.

- 2. Increase housing options for current and emancipated foster youth.**

Response: Agree. The Board of Supervisors (BOS) authorized \$750,000 to support the development of a transitional housing unit for these youth at the June budget hearings. The BOS also authorized \$180,000 in stipends to assist emancipated youth with housing, school, training, and employment. This program will be implemented over the next several months. HSA will be analyzing the service needs of emancipated youth and reporting back to the BOS in December 2005.

- 3. Reclassify the Workforce Investment Act staff to permanent status.**

Response: Agree. Two Extra Help positions will be converted to permanent ESS positions in the September budget revisions, to be covered by a combination of Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and Children and Family Services funding.

- 4. Complete the planned Adolescent Services survey of all program participants to gauge the effectiveness of the programs and find areas where improvements could be made and provide a base for follow-up.**

Response: Agree. Adolescent Services completed a survey with ILP youth towards the end of the program term, with general questions on what they thought about the program. Several youth focus groups were also held to gauge the effectiveness of these programs. The results of these surveys were used to improve the curriculum for 2005-2006 ILP training. Assessment of survey information will continue, with changes to be made as necessary.

- 5. Provide improved transportation options to Independent Living Skills Program participants.**

Response: Agree. Current transportation systems will be reviewed to develop plans for better utilization of existing resources. Expanding the use of bus passes and offering mileage to foster parents could increase the options available to older youth to help them become more independent and experienced in using the public transportation system. Payment of mileage expenses to foster parents for transporting youth to the evening Independent Living classes will also be explored.

- 6. Develop better outreach programs to inform and involve eligible participants not currently participating in Adolescent Services programs.**

Response: Agree. As the Grand Jury report notes, there has been an increase in the number of youth participating in Adolescent Services Programs. Participants in the ILP have gone from 25 to 50 in the last two years. This year, a new contract with College of San Mateo was completed to further expand the ILP program. Another opportunity for growth is the Transitional Housing Program; brochures and information notices will be developed and sent to emancipated youth and youth currently in active Adolescent Services cases.