

# TRANSITION AGE YOUTH HOUSING AND SERVICE ROADMAP

*A BEST PRACTICES FRAMEWORK*

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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 28<sup>th</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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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## Notes

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