

*Improving Economic  
Opportunities for Young  
People Served by the  
Foster Care System:  
Three Views of the Path  
to Independent Living*

**P h a s e 3**

**Conference Proceedings**

# Economic Opportunities Forum Proceedings

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Dallas, Texas

**Conducted by**

The University of Southern Maine  
Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service

The University of Oklahoma  
National Resource Center for Youth Services

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## **Introduction**

In October, 1997 The Annie E. Casey Foundation in collaboration with Casey Family Services and Casey Family Program sought to define the current knowledge base regarding how youth are transitioning out of foster care. A grant was awarded to The National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement (NCWRCOI), at the University of Southern Maine and the National Resource Center for Youth Services (NRCYS), at the University of Oklahoma. Together, the two centers sought to examine effective practices and policies that strengthen employment opportunities and meet the educational needs for youth in foster care.

In March of 1998, a forum was convened in Dallas, Texas to help formulate a programmatic and research agenda to address gaps in knowledge about the most effective and efficient strategies to enhance the economic opportunities for youth leaving foster care.

The two specific questions addressed by the forum included:

1. What are the strategic interventions or services that youth in care need to assist them in their transition to self-sufficiency?; and
2. What strategies should be promoted for the support of higher education and economic opportunities for youth in transition?

A select group of participants including youth with experience in the foster care system, researchers, employers, foster care parents and Independent Living program specialists were invited to the forum. The diversity of perspectives contributed to a lively interchange as the group discussed the most critical factors for preparing foster care youth for adult life. The youth were invited as “experts” and were considered equal partners as forum participants in discussing barriers to economic success and formulating potential solutions.

As a backdrop for the development of a comprehensive plan, the participants were asked to review two papers prepared by the NCWRCOI and NRCYS. The first, *Improving Economic Opportunities for Young People Served by the Foster Care System*, was a review of the most recent literature. A companion paper, *Opportunities for Foster Care Youth in Transition: Three Views of the Path to Independent Living* provided a continuation of the study by documenting the results of three separate national surveys sent to independent living coordinators, youth in care, and key informants.

The forum structure consisted of panel discussions and small group breakout sessions. A panel of youth were asked to share their experiences about what had helped and hindered their educational and employment aspirations while in the foster care system. A panel of employers and youth employment experts presented strategies and problems on integrating youth in care into the job market. The small group sessions addressed the questions presented above using a technique facilitated by NRCYS to ensure group participation. The forum concluded with attendees developing an action plan.

This document presents the Proceedings from the Dallas forum. It is organized in two parts. The first part is a summary of the forum highlights, including comments made by individual participants during forum presentations. The second part is a summary of the comprehensive plan for improving economic opportunities for youth in foster care developed by the group. While the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Casey Family Program and Casey Family Services requested specific recommendations for investing in the issues of the economic status of young people leaving the foster care system, the recommendations developed by the group far exceed the work that could be carried out by one foundation. Instead, these recommendations should be treated as a national

agenda for foster care youth to be carried out by collaborations between public agencies and national service organizations, such as the Child Welfare League of America with a number of private foundations in conjunction with the youth themselves at the local, state and federal levels.

## Day One

### Data Presentation

Elizabeth D. Jones, Ph.D. and Al Sheehy, M.A.  
Muskie School of Public Service

Study results from the paper *Opportunities for Foster Care Youth in Transition: Three Views of the Path to Independent Living* were presented. Survey responses were collected from three different groups:

1. youth who are currently or were formerly served by the foster care system (N=249);
2. public and private agencies who provide transitional/independent living (IL) services (N=26); and
3. key informants comprised of researchers, policy makers and service providers (N=11).

The data presentation focused on educational and employment issues. Findings of the surveys, and responses to the presentation follow.

### Educational Issues

Although youth in foster care plan to attend college, they are not enrolled in college preparatory classes in high school. Issues raised by the forum participants during this discussion included the following:

- Lack of guidance - Youth in foster care need more guidance regarding college preparatory classes, and need to start taking them before the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> grade, in order to avoid playing “catch-up”. Social workers often do not provide advocacy for youth; they may be unaware of how to work with schools and accept youth dropping out. Casey youth have a higher graduation rate. Why? Social workers more focused? Educational consultants?
- Lack of training/decision making power of foster parents - Foster parents are often unaware of educational funds and counseling, therefore they are unable to effectively advocate for youth. In Connecticut, foster parents cannot make educational decisions for a foster child in their care if the child is in special education classes - the state assigns a surrogate parent to make educational decisions.
- Tracking foster youth - Young people in special education classes are often “tracked” into vocational education rather than college; minority youth may also be more frequently tracked to vocational training.
- Lack of stability - Stability in education requires stability in placements; one youth commented that because she had attended 11 different high schools, she will be graduating late. School records are often difficult to track down; no one seems to be responsible for records and youth lose credits. Who is responsible? Schools? Social Workers? Foster Parents? Credits do not transfer from residential treatment to high schools, and there are no college preparatory classes in residential facilities.
- Emancipation age of 18 - Eighteen year old cutoff forces people to drop out and get jobs to support themselves. Most youth in foster care will be slightly behind and will not graduate until ages 19-22. Eighteen is an arbitrary age, with no meaning in Western culture, where adolescence extends far beyond the teenage years. An attendee from the Casey program

stated that there is a need to be with youth until they graduate high school, which is often past the age of 18.

## **Employment Issues**

Aspirations for youth in care are no different from those of other youth. Barriers can be categorized as internal (cognitive, behavioral) and external (environmental - lack of transportation, multiple placements). The survey focused on the external barriers that youth in care encounter.

- Need for transportation - Lack of transportation is a common problem faced by youth in care. Some states magnify the issue by barring foster youth from driving until age 18 (a youth told of how youth in care in the state of California organized to successfully overturn this law).
- Need for support/training for foster parents - Foster parents need training on how to support young people with employment, help youth keep jobs, and develop pre-employment job skills. Families have a critical role in helping children move from school to work.
- Policies that discourage employment/savings - Youth who save “too much” are penalized by having to contribute to AFDC (limits on savings in Texas are being worked on so that savings greater than \$1000 are not taken by the state). Welfare restrictions on the biological family carry over to youth in custody, which can prevent youth in care from accumulating savings. Youth sometimes deliberately fail in employment to avoid getting cut off from state aid.
- Lack of job/IL skills - Independent living skills are not formally taught until age 16. States can begin at a younger age, but they must use their own money. There is a wish to expand IL programs to younger youth, but financial resources are stretched to the limit. School to Work Legislation (1995) starts to target younger students. Age 12 is an appropriate age for youth to begin to think about careers. Vocational training, if completed, results in positive economic benefits, but often training is not completed. Youth need to have job experiences as teens; studies show teens who work have better transition into the adult workforce
- Lack of jobs - There is a need to increase contact with local and private businesses, and to work with businesses to employ youth in care. Job Corps is an accessible resource, with increased funding every year.

## **Youth Panel**

*A panel of 9 youth ages 16-24 currently or previously served by the foster care system: Carl Douglas, Melat F., Lizmarie German, Charlotte Kellis, Celyne Krauss, Alonzo Moorner, Alfred Perez, Caroline Vasquez, April Yachninich, Joshua Z.  
Facilitated by Marty Zanghi, M.S.W., Muskie School of Public Service*

Prior to the session, the youth were asked what they wished most for the panel. They replied that they wanted:

*To be heard;  
To learn something from each other; and,  
For something to happen, other than a lot of talking and a paper.*



**What are the needs, in your opinion, of youth in care today as they make their transition to young adulthood?**

- Mandatory IL programs - Youth suggested that independent living programs be mandated and monitored closely by social workers and/or guidance counselors.
- Support services - Both emotional and financial support resources are needed. These can range from individual guidance counselors, foster parents, or teachers who are encouraging individual youth, to programs designed to assist youth with IL or financial support, (i.e. WAY scholarship program [Work Activities for Youth], YAC [Youth Advocacy Committee]).
- Housing - Difficulty finding affordable housing is a common problem. Rental assistance was mentioned as a need. A strong desire was expressed for programs that allow young people to “practice” independent living, such as programs that provide apartments and guidance to youth while they are living in the apartments.
- Educational advocacy - Financial assistance for post-secondary education is lacking. Youth also described wanting help with school applications and college visits. School consistency is a major issue, several youth reiterated the importance of school stability, and the educational and emotional disruption caused when they were forced to change schools.
- Mentorship and guidance - Youth valued mentors, both assigned and unassigned. There were various opinions regarding whether mentors should be matched ethnically, for some it was important for others it did not matter. It was suggested that common career interests might make a match more suitable. When describing what made a good mentor, some youth expressed that mentors need to show they care by “going the extra mile” (i.e. checking on homework, committing to the relationship over an extended period of time). Youth stated that it was critical that mentors be persistent, that they be there for “the long haul”; that the mentor continue to support their mentee no matter how much a youth “messed up” or acted out. It was important that youth be able to express themselves to their mentors, and that they be able to trust their mentors. Mentors at times do not realize how important they are (mentees are more often satisfied than mentors think they are).

**What hindered you and what helped you in the foster care system?**

<b>Hindered</b>
Not being taught any IL skills
Multiple changes of schools
Unsuitable placements - need better screening of foster parents, more options for youth who are parents
Uncaring system - youth received a form letter telling her she was no longer in system
Multiple placements

  

<b>Helped</b>
Programs focusing on bringing out successes and strengths, centering on hopes and dreams rather than “fixing” behaviors or problems
Learning how to advocate for self
Social worker having high expectations of youth (having to prove self in order to enter an IL program)

Learning IL skills such as budgeting, job seeking skills, cooking

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Strong relationships with teachers, social workers, mentors (assigned or unassigned)

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Being employed - allowed youth to leave group home and to feel "normal"

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Someone talking to me and telling me that what I had gone through was not my fault

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Learning the system and taking advantage of everything the system could offer

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Someone who insisted on youth having goals and a plan

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Having an advocate to make sure youth could attend one high school for four years

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### **Why aren't Independent Living programs being utilized?**

- System mentality - should I move on, move back or stay
- “Another class, oh no,” programs need better publicity, stipends for attending help
- Fear - 16 year olds are scared, only 2 more years, fear of reaching adulthood/emancipation
- Lack of knowledge - people do not know programs exist
- The age... at 16, kids live in the present, 18 seems so far away
- Older youth need to reiterate message to younger kids - they need to hear the value of these programs from us, not adults

### **What one message do you want to leave the group with?**

- Put to use what we've said.
- Try to work on it - trying makes us feel good, even if it takes a while.
- Put kids in placements that fit. Send kids into IL earlier. Give kids scholarships, funds.
- Nothing changes. All talk, no action!
- We live in it, we know it - you are seeing it from outside.
- More resources needed for youth exiting care, support services. Should age out at 21, not 18.
- More programs for kids who are out of care, after 18. Need networks, a net for kids, for every one of us.
- Don't get frustrated, stick with the kid, you might not know what good you are doing.

### **Focus Question Brainstorming**

*Facilitated by James Walker and Peter R. Correia, III  
University of Oklahoma*

Forum participants divided into small groups to generate solutions to two focus questions:

1. What are the strategic interventions (Stuff/Actions) or services that youth in care need to assist them in their transition to self-sufficiency?
2. What strategies should be promoted to support education and economic opportunities for youth in transition?

The lists of solutions were posted so that the entire group could view each intervention. Forum participants then placed related interventions into categories. The following tables show the ideas generated by the small groups, grouped into categories created by the entire group.

**Focus Question 1: What are the strategic interventions (Stuff/Actions) or services that youth in care need to assist them in their transition to self-sufficiency?**

Real Life 101	Community Responsibility to Youth	Comprehensive Educational Services	Training and Accountability for All Players	Extended Services	Youth as Resources	Healing	Housing
Begin teaching social skills when youth enter foster care	Connection to 1 or more community citizens for "long haul"	Educational stability	Recruitment with IL focus	Ability to re-enter care	Youth helping youth	Making peace with the past	Housing pre & post
Real world orienteering R.O.P.	Community connection and relationships	Educational support	ILP training for all players	2 <sup>nd</sup> chance aftercare services	Post care alumni mentoring	Connection with birth family	Safe affordable housing
Living and work skills	Links to community resources	Identify one person to track school records	Education, training for staff	Uniform extended services 14-23	Hot line for youth	Chemical dependency	
Progressive life skills/expectations	Partnerships with employers	Improve literacy	Foster parent training/independent living	Extend age range beyond 18 or 21	Peer support	Developmental disabilities	
Opportunities for practicing life skills/IL	Mentor/caring adult support network	Education/training once started must be able to continue	Caregiver involved NILA (National Independent Living Assoc.)	Health care support			
Job retention skills	Build support services between schools, DSS, ILP	Comprehensive educational support & dollars	IL coordinated and transition planning	Provide health care			
Provide more work experience opportunities	Transportation	Educational advocate					
Support for programs like YAC	One consistent, unconditional supporter	Post secondary \$\$\$ for education and training					
Connect foster care with the world of work	Destigmatize foster care experience	Technology skills & utilization					
Practice work skills							

**Focus Question 2: What strategies should be promoted to support education and economic opportunities for youth in transition?**

Partnerships with Private Industry	Systems Collaboration	Transferable Tangible Skills for 21 <sup>st</sup> Century	*Educational Advocacy	Stability	Extended Support Services	Show Me the \$
*Policy to Reflect Realities						
Engage business community	Contract mutual expectations	World of work skills	Long term, stable educational advocate	Contract mutual expectations	Transportation	*Post-secondary scholarships
Educate employers about unique needs of youth	*Schedule appointments after school hours	Work experience early and often	Educational advocate from entry	Better recruitment & placement	Extended services including housing and transportation	*State University, community college etc. tuition waivers
*Job fairs & college visits/job exploration	Eliminate causes of school disruption	Tangible & transferable skills tech & college prep	Advocating for appropriate educational services	Stable placements	Child care for parenting workers	Assist youth w/seeking financial aid earlier than 12 <sup>th</sup> grade
Partnerships with private industry	*Education as primary focus of plan	Develop entrepreneurial skills/opportunities	Developmentally appropriate extracurricular activities	Limit school transitions (even if placement changes)	Experienced youth helping youth	
Voucher system for trial employment	Contract specifying mutual expectations	Early instruction on money management	Testing for developmental disabilities	Specialized IL training for caregivers	*Mentoring	
Internships for youth (in government)	Collaboration between Department of Education and Social Services	*Job resource center	Identify, assess and support youth's strengths	Bio-family involvement/interruption		
Connect foster youth to school-to-work	*Community Schools	Labor market preparedness for 21st century	Tutoring			
Graduated employment opportunities with pay	Target outreach	Funds for interviews and work clothes	Literacy/educational stability			
Job newsletter (regional) for youth in/out of foster care	School-business partnerships	Utilization of technology				
Connect minority business and minority youth						
Supported work situations						
Strategic linkage of jobs and youth						

\*Youth identified as a priority

## ***Day Two***

### **The Employer Perspective**

*Employers Panel including:*

*Jim Gann, Red Lobster Restaurant*

*Glenn Eagleson, New Ways Workers*

*Jim Callahan, The Sar Levitan Center for Social Policy Studies*

*Jim Gann, Red Lobster*

Red Lobster makes a practice of employing 1-2 foster youth at each restaurant in Oklahoma. Lack of job experience is not necessarily a liability, new workers have no “bad habits.” The first job a young person has can encourage them to think about what they want to do in the future.

- The chain and the youth help to serve each other’s needs. Youth provide the restaurant with a work force, the corporation provides seminars, job building skills, and work experience.
- The corporation hires foster children because there is a need for employees; youth in care are not treated any differently from other youth.

To assist youth in getting jobs, workshops are given on interviewing skills.

- Youth often find interviews difficult, self-esteem may be low and a lack of eye contact and “slouching” can put off the interviewer.
- Role-playing interviews with youth can be very helpful, practicing makes situation less intimidating.
- A portfolio is a useful tool that can help structure an interview, giving youth something to talk about.

The foster care system needs to support youth adequately. There is a need for:

- transportation;
- job coaches;
- uniform acquisition;
- stable placements; and,
- accessible contact people.

Businesses do not want foster care to become a workplace issue. They can provide jobs, but not the support systems that youth need. Job coaches are an excellent example of ongoing

assistance for foster youth; there is a lack of training of youth in keeping a job after they obtain a job.

Restaurant needs will be growing in the next 10-20 years. Red Lobster cannot be a social service agency, but can be an avenue for youth in care to get into life.

*Glenn Eagleson, New Ways Workers (see appendix A for handouts)*

New Ways Workers connects young people from educational and training institutions to the workplace, and employers to schools and community organizations. A guiding principle of the organization is that:

**youth need sequential, developmental, early and intentional series of work-based opportunities.**

Exposure to work at an early age is a goal. Youth need to practice job skills, and just like other skills if they do not learn things on the first try, they need to be able to try again.

- Expectations are kept high for all workers.
- Young people rise to meet expectations set out for them.
- If youth need to be connected with support services they are, but expectations at work are no different.

New Ways Workers is an employer driven program, in that it focuses on providing specific services to employers so that the workplace can offer meaningful work-based learning opportunities.

- Youth are helped to identify important experiences within the work setting, and are helped to get the most they can out of employment.
- It is important to view work-based competencies as being just as important as educational competencies.

Different segments of the system need to come together to agree on needed competencies, and how to develop these capabilities.

*Jim Callahan, The Sar Levitan Center for Social Policy Studies, Johns Hopkins University*

Sar Levitan does not endorse any particular model, many models can work. Rather than replicating models, the following key features have been found to be part of successful strategies in generating employment opportunities for youth.

- Continuity of connection with a caring adult that follows employment
- Focus on centrality of work connection with employers
- Offer options for skill development
- Hands on experiential training with employers
- On-going support through all first jobs
- Provide incentives and recognize success
- Build in opportunity for leadership development for youth
- Leadership and governing opportunity for youth
- Connection with extended services, such as housing, healthcare support

While many social service agencies have seen funding cuts the last few years, there are sources of funding that can be tapped into!

- State aid education funds
- Pell grants
- JTPA - 8% funds
- JTPA Summer work program
- TANF funds
- Welfare to work grants
- HUD
- Juvenile justice

When designing programs, we need to ask ourselves how we can become part of the system. Services should be community based, use existing resources, use a community anchor (a center where connections are made) and be designed to fit employer needs and local labor market needs.



## **Next Steps and Recommendations**

Forum participants divided into small groups to generate suggestions for a comprehensive action plan for policy makers and researchers.

### **Systems Changes**

#### *Raise Age of Emancipation/Extend Services:*

- Support national effort to raise emancipation age to at least 21 years of age nationwide
- Provide extended services and re-entry for children in out-of-home placements until at least 23 years of age through organized mechanism (case manager)
- Dense networks of support for young adults/parents through their mid 20's

#### *Increased Focus on IL in Foster Care System*

- Integration of independent living issues into all aspects of foster care
- Agencies need to take ownership of IL philosophy. Provide services through creative means

#### *Stabilize Foster Care Placements*

- Stabilize placements for youth by developing and creating a contract that includes an accountability mechanism (youth involved, ombudsman, etc.) among all caregivers, service providers, families and youth that clarifies roles, expectations, long term goals for youth that includes "crisis intervention" strategies.
- Always keep communication optional or available between biological siblings

#### *Educational Access*

- Support college tuition fee waiver (like the Texas program) nationwide
- National scholarship fund for foster care youth
- Target outreach for foster youth at colleges and universities
- Supported system of educational advocates
- Policy change - work with departments of education and social services to establish educational advocates
- Education = support from collaborative team to show interest and youth's success and future

## **Programmatic Changes**

### *Expand Independent Living Services/Programs*

- Find ways to expand IL services to younger and older (post IL) youth
- Independent living training and support services for 14 to 21 year olds
- Extended support and aftercare services
- Supervised independent living programs
- One stop shopping for adjunct services - i.e., clearinghouse for housing, transportation, financial aid, health care
- Support for young parents
- Coordinated network of services for youth after leaving care

### *Mentors*

- Community-based Mentoring clearinghouses
- Identify an adult outside the child welfare system (mentor or advocate with training and support) who is responsible within a structured plan for understanding and monitoring a young person's educational goals/plan throughout the length of foster care and who connects with the broader community.
- Targeted mentoring and safety nets for those youth most likely to be lost or isolated

### *Housing*

- Guaranteed housing
- Look at Transitional Living Program Models

## **Collaborate with Community, Schools, Agencies and Businesses**

### *Partnership with Community:*

- Identify existing collaborative efforts (including private sector, education, etc.) and partner to include youth in foster care
- Educate community on foster care issues in order to gain support
- Engage the broader community via existing efforts and strategic new ones (e.g., forum on this issue; youth on boards) in becoming informed about ways to include and "train" or educate the broader community about how to be responsive, participatory and "equal partners."

### *Partnership with Schools:*

- Create a coordinated, cooperative partnership between child welfare and educational systems
- Quick and accurate transfer of information
- Greater flexibility of schools to allow for more school stability

### *Partnership with Businesses*

- Youth need a sequential, developmental, early and intentional series of work-based opportunities
- Connections with private sector employees
- Community-based vocational training and support with linkages to employers
- Community collaborative efforts between employers, IL services, private and public agencies. Identify and develop mechanisms to address collaborative issues.
- Collaboration with workforce development, PICs, School-to-Work, etc. for job linkage, scholarships (One-Stop Shopping)

- Partnerships with industry to develop internships, job opportunities

### **Training of Foster Parents, Social Workers and Service Providers**

- Training for foster parents re: independent living
- Recruitment, training, and coordination of care among caregivers with the expectation that a primary focus will be on preparation for adulthood
- Screening of foster parents with clear and articulated expectations
- Foster-parents, caregivers, service providers training and education for independent living that is community specific and regionally adapted
- Competency-based training for foster parents. Develop a model tool and incentives to bring them to a para-professional level.

### *Technical Assistance*

- Technical assistance to states on improved utilization of IL resources and other resources to support IL
- Technical assistance to advocates and legislatures to ensure that IL resources get to the right people

### **Funding**

- Consultation of how to access available funding streams
- Funds available for foster care youth nationwide
- Identify states that are not spending their full allocation of money and explore creative ways to invest

### **Research and Evaluation**

- Look at impact of managed care on service quality and outcomes
- Gather research on effective programs to develop a policy agenda
- Impact of For-Profits on issues: safety, quality and outcomes
- Internet dialogue forums to continue discussion
- Pilot control studies on:
  - Educational advocate activities and successes over time,
  - Mentoring activities over time and the role they play
  - Re-evaluate state independent living plans

### **Youth Involvement**

- Youth involvement and leadership as decision makers in every aspect of identifying their goals/plan; participating in policy determination; etc. Training and ongoing "tools" for young people

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**Focus Question 2: What strategies should be promoted to support education and economic opportunities for youth in transition?**

Partnerships with Private Industry	Systems Collaboration	Transferable Tangible Skills for 21 <sup>st</sup> Century	*Educational Advocacy	Stability	Extended Support Services	Show Me the \$
*Policy to Reflect Realities						
Engage business community	Contract mutual expectations	World of work skills	Long term, stable educational advocate	Contract mutual expectations	Transportation	*Post-secondary scholarships
Educate employers about unique needs of youth	*Schedule appointments after school hours	Work experience early and often	Educational advocate from entry	Better recruitment & placement	Extended services including housing and transportation	*State University, community college etc. tuition waivers
*Job fairs & college visits/job exploration	Eliminate causes of school disruption	Tangible & transferable skills tech & college prep	Advocating for appropriate educational services	Stable placements	Child care for parenting workers	Assist youth w/seeking financial aid earlier than 12 <sup>th</sup> grade
Partnerships with private industry	*Education as primary focus of plan	Develop entrepreneurial skills/opportunities	Developmentally appropriate extracurricular activities	Limit school transitions (even if placement changes)	Experienced youth helping youth	
Voucher system for trial employment	Contract specifying mutual expectations	Early instruction on money management	Testing for developmental disabilities	Specialized IL training for caregivers	*Mentoring	
Internships for youth (in government)	Collaboration between Department of Education and Social Services	*Job resource center	Identify, assess and support youth's strengths	Bio-family involvement/interruption		
Connect foster youth to school-to-work	*Community Schools	Labor market preparedness for 21st century	Tutoring			
Graduated employment opportunities with pay	Target outreach	Funds for interviews and work clothes	Literacy/educational stability			
Job newsletter (regional) for youth in/out of foster care	School-business partnerships	Utilization of technology				
Connect minority business and minority youth						
Supported work situations						
Strategic linkage of jobs and youth						

\*Youth identified as a priority

## ***Day Two***

### **The Employer Perspective**

*Employers Panel including:*

*Jim Gann, Red Lobster Restaurant*

*Glenn Eagleson, New Ways Workers*

*Jim Callahan, The Sar Levitan Center for Social Policy Studies*

*Jim Gann, Red Lobster*

Red Lobster makes a practice of employing 1-2 foster youth at each restaurant in Oklahoma. Lack of job experience is not necessarily a liability, new workers have no “bad habits.” The first job a young person has can encourage them to think about what they want to do in the future.

- The chain and the youth help to serve each other’s needs. Youth provide the restaurant with a work force, the corporation provides seminars, job building skills, and work experience.
- The corporation hires foster children because there is a need for employees; youth in care are not treated any differently from other youth.

To assist youth in getting jobs, workshops are given on interviewing skills.

- Youth often find interviews difficult, self-esteem may be low and a lack of eye contact and “slouching” can put off the interviewer.
- Role-playing interviews with youth can be very helpful, practicing makes situation less intimidating.
- A portfolio is a useful tool that can help structure an interview, giving youth something to talk about.

The foster care system needs to support youth adequately. There is a need for:

- transportation;
- job coaches;
- uniform acquisition;
- stable placements; and,
- accessible contact people.

Businesses do not want foster care to become a workplace issue. They can provide jobs, but not the support systems that youth need. Job coaches are an excellent example of ongoing

assistance for foster youth; there is a lack of training of youth in keeping a job after they obtain a job.

Restaurant needs will be growing in the next 10-20 years. Red Lobster cannot be a social service agency, but can be an avenue for youth in care to get into life.

*Glenn Eagleson, New Ways Workers (see appendix A for handouts)*

New Ways Workers connects young people from educational and training institutions to the workplace, and employers to schools and community organizations. A guiding principle of the organization is that:

**youth need sequential, developmental, early and intentional series of work-based opportunities.**

Exposure to work at an early age is a goal. Youth need to practice job skills, and just like other skills if they do not learn things on the first try, they need to be able to try again.

- Expectations are kept high for all workers.
- Young people rise to meet expectations set out for them.
- If youth need to be connected with support services they are, but expectations at work are no different.

New Ways Workers is an employer driven program, in that it focuses on providing specific services to employers so that the workplace can offer meaningful work-based learning opportunities.

- Youth are helped to identify important experiences within the work setting, and are helped to get the most they can out of employment.
- It is important to view work-based competencies as being just as important as educational competencies.

Different segments of the system need to come together to agree on needed competencies, and how to develop these capabilities.

*Jim Callahan, The Sar Levitan Center for Social Policy Studies, Johns Hopkins University*

Sar Levitan does not endorse any particular model, many models can work. Rather than replicating models, the following key features have been found to be part of successful strategies in generating employment opportunities for youth.

- Continuity of connection with a caring adult that follows employment
- Focus on centrality of work connection with employers
- Offer options for skill development
- Hands on experiential training with employers
- On-going support through all first jobs
- Provide incentives and recognize success
- Build in opportunity for leadership development for youth
- Leadership and governing opportunity for youth
- Connection with extended services, such as housing, healthcare support

While many social service agencies have seen funding cuts the last few years, there are sources of funding that can be tapped into!

- State aid education funds
- Pell grants
- JTPA - 8% funds
- JTPA Summer work program
- TANF funds
- Welfare to work grants
- HUD
- Juvenile justice

When designing programs, we need to ask ourselves how we can become part of the system. Services should be community based, use existing resources, use a community anchor (a center where connections are made) and be designed to fit employer needs and local labor market needs.

## **Next Steps and Recommendations**

Forum participants divided into small groups to generate suggestions for a comprehensive action plan for policy makers and researchers.

### **Systems Changes**

#### *Raise Age of Emancipation/Extend Services:*

- Support national effort to raise emancipation age to at least 21 years of age nationwide
- Provide extended services and re-entry for children in out-of-home placements until at least 23 years of age through organized mechanism (case manager)
- Dense networks of support for young adults/parents through their mid 20's

#### *Increased Focus on IL in Foster Care System*

- Integration of independent living issues into all aspects of foster care
- Agencies need to take ownership of IL philosophy. Provide services through creative means

#### *Stabilize Foster Care Placements*

- Stabilize placements for youth by developing and creating a contract that includes an accountability mechanism (youth involved, ombudsman, etc.) among all caregivers, service providers, families and youth that clarifies roles, expectations, long term goals for youth that includes "crisis intervention" strategies.
- Always keep communication optional or available between biological siblings

#### *Educational Access*

- Support college tuition fee waiver (like the Texas program) nationwide
- National scholarship fund for foster care youth
- Target outreach for foster youth at colleges and universities
- Supported system of educational advocates
- Policy change - work with departments of education and social services to establish educational advocates
- Education = support from collaborative team to show interest and youth's success and future

## **Programmatic Changes**

### *Expand Independent Living Services/Programs*

- Find ways to expand IL services to younger and older (post IL) youth
- Independent living training and support services for 14 to 21 year olds
- Extended support and aftercare services
- Supervised independent living programs
- One stop shopping for adjunct services - i.e., clearinghouse for housing, transportation, financial aid, health care
- Support for young parents
- Coordinated network of services for youth after leaving care

### *Mentors*

- Community-based Mentoring clearinghouses
- Identify an adult outside the child welfare system (mentor or advocate with training and support) who is responsible within a structured plan for understanding and monitoring a young person's educational goals/plan throughout the length of foster care and who connects with the broader community.
- Targeted mentoring and safety nets for those youth most likely to be lost or isolated

### *Housing*

- Guaranteed housing
- Look at Transitional Living Program Models

## **Collaborate with Community, Schools, Agencies and Businesses**

### *Partnership with Community:*

- Identify existing collaborative efforts (including private sector, education, etc.) and partner to include youth in foster care
- Educate community on foster care issues in order to gain support
- Engage the broader community via existing efforts and strategic new ones (e.g., forum on this issue; youth on boards) in becoming informed about ways to include and "train" or educate the broader community about how to be responsive, participatory and "equal partners."

### *Partnership with Schools:*

- Create a coordinated, cooperative partnership between child welfare and educational systems
- Quick and accurate transfer of information
- Greater flexibility of schools to allow for more school stability

### *Partnership with Businesses*

- Youth need a sequential, developmental, early and intentional series of work-based opportunities
- Connections with private sector employees
- Community-based vocational training and support with linkages to employers
- Community collaborative efforts between employers, IL services, private and public agencies. Identify and develop mechanisms to address collaborative issues.
- Collaboration with workforce development, PICs, School-to-Work, etc. for job linkage, scholarships (One-Stop Shopping)

- Partnerships with industry to develop internships, job opportunities

### **Training of Foster Parents, Social Workers and Service Providers**

- Training for foster parents re: independent living
- Recruitment, training, and coordination of care among caregivers with the expectation that a primary focus will be on preparation for adulthood
- Screening of foster parents with clear and articulated expectations
- Foster-parents, caregivers, service providers training and education for independent living that is community specific and regionally adapted
- Competency-based training for foster parents. Develop a model tool and incentives to bring them to a para-professional level.

### *Technical Assistance*

- Technical assistance to states on improved utilization of IL resources and other resources to support IL
- Technical assistance to advocates and legislatures to ensure that IL resources get to the right people

### **Funding**

- Consultation of how to access available funding streams
- Funds available for foster care youth nationwide
- Identify states that are not spending their full allocation of money and explore creative ways to invest

### **Research and Evaluation**

- Look at impact of managed care on service quality and outcomes
- Gather research on effective programs to develop a policy agenda
- Impact of For-Profits on issues: safety, quality and outcomes
- Internet dialogue forums to continue discussion
- Pilot control studies on:
  - Educational advocate activities and successes over time,
  - Mentoring activities over time and the role they play
  - Re-evaluate state independent living plans

### **Youth Involvement**

- Youth involvement and leadership as decision makers in every aspect of identifying their goals/plan; participating in policy determination; etc. Training and ongoing "tools" for young people

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