

TRANSITIONAL AGE YOUTH: NAVIGATING A DIFFICULT COURSE TO INDEPENDENT LIVING

INTRODUCTION

“Transitional age youth are young people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four who are in transition from state custody or foster care and are at-risk. Once they turn eighteen, transitional age youth can no longer receive all of the assistance from the systems of care that previously provided for many of their needs.”¹ Based on recent studies and mental health evaluations, consideration is being given to make age fourteen the starting age for Transitional Age Youth (TAY).

Approximately 425 youth age out of San Diego County foster care each year. In foster care, aging out is the process of a youth transitioning from the formal control of the foster care system towards independent living. “With the exception of incarcerated youth, foster youth are the only group that is involuntarily separated from their families through government intervention. Although the primary purpose of this separation is to protect youth from harm by their caregivers, in removing them from homes the State nevertheless assumes the responsibilities associated with parenting, including preparing youth for independence (emancipation).”²

San Diego County has approximately 4,405 foster youth delineated as out-of-home care, and of these, youth in transition represent forty-seven percent, of whom:

- twenty-five percent (1,090) are 15 years and older;
- twenty-two percent (973) are 10 -14 years.³

The services for TAY are provided and supervised by several agencies:

- Child Welfare Services (CWS)
- County Mental Health Services (CMHS)
- San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE)
- San Diego County Probation Department

The primary goals of TAY programs are to assist the youth in achieving the following milestones:

- Completion of high school with a diploma or General Equivalency Diploma (GED)
- Gain work readiness, job readiness and career planning skills
- Earn a living wage
- Acquire money management skills
- Obtain safe and sustainable housing

¹ Wikipedia Article, <http://www.bing.com/reference/semhtml/Transitional_age_youth?html>

² Network on Transitions to Adulthood Policy Brief, April 2005, Issue 19, “Youth Aging Out of Foster Care.”

³ HHSa, Child Welfare Services Fact Sheet, Countywide, October 2009 Fact Sheet.

- Access needed health care (including mental health care)
- Develop sound decision making skills
- Establish permanent and dependable connections

Research shows that young people from foster care homes are far more likely than their peers in the general population to endure more homelessness, poverty, compromised health, unemployment, incarceration, and other adversities after they leave the foster care system.⁴

Within two to four years after aging out of foster care:

- fifty-one percent are unemployed
- forty percent are homeless
- thirty percent have no health insurance
- thirty percent receive public assistance
- eighty-four percent become a parent (often repeating the cycle they went through)
- twenty percent are incarcerated⁵

Like most young people who are starting out, TAY is struggling with limited resources and experience. A TAY is more likely to be living in a group home or an institution, the least “family-like” setting, rather than in a foster family home. Most TAY do not have family resources to guide them that others take for granted. Because of these detriments, they have no one to:

- help them obtain a driver’s license
- assist them in buying a car and obtaining insurance
- co-sign for a loan, guarantee their credit, or help pay a security deposit
- provide them with necessary housekeeping items
- guide them through the college admissions process
- put in a good word for a new job

San Diego County is fortunate to have a unique foster care institution – the San Pasqual Academy (Academy). The Academy provides an outstanding opportunity for TAY to achieve the required schooling in a family style living environment. The Academy’s residential program is operated through a contract agreement with New Alternatives, Inc. The San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE) provides the educational program. This setting provides TAY a safe, productive environment for transitioning into a successful, productive lifestyle.

If an Academy student has siblings, twelve to thirteen years of age, they may be enrolled in the Academy’s residential program. These siblings will attend a public school in Escondido until they are enrolled in the Academy’s high school program. This policy reinforces family unity, an experience not common in the foster care system.

The Academy has difficulty in motivating foster youth to volunteer for enrollment. The Academy has enough beds for 184 students, but the current average enrollment is around 134 students.

⁴ Information from www.fostercaremonth.org.

⁵ New America Media, <http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=...>

Another issue concerning TAY is incarcerated youth and youth released to probation supervision. As of June 30, 2009, there were 4,784 youth under the Probation Department's supervision (jurisdiction of the Juvenile Court) in San Diego County. During a youth's incarceration, their education is the responsibility of SDCOE, and their mental health issues are evaluated and addressed by County Mental Health Services (CMHS).

The SDCOE, through fully accredited on-site schools, provides a wide range of educational services at each of the Juvenile Detention Facilities. These services are designed to satisfy the needs of youth of varying ages, grade levels, academic abilities, and the educational requirements set by the State of California Education Code.

When incarcerated youth are released after serving their prescribed sentence, they are on their own. If a youth is placed on probation, some phases of the transition to adult status, including education, are still the responsibility of the Probation Department to supervise.

Several non-profit and other organizations provide transitional services for emancipated foster youth and those released from incarceration. Some of these programs provide a limited number of beds in transitional supportive housing. Therefore, waiting lists are initiated or a "word of mouth" process that is established when a vacancy becomes available. Unless the TAY has contact with a specific program provider, participation in that program is extremely difficult to obtain. Some of these non-profit organizations developed innovative programs that are pending evaluation by appropriate county agencies. For example, the Children's Advocacy Institute submitted the *Transition Life Coach (TLC) Plan* to HHSa for evaluation.

The 2009/2010 San Diego County Grand Jury (the Grand Jury) requested an audit of Mental Health Services Act (MHSA) funding for San Diego County. This audit included, "What monies are allocated to and expended for programs for the benefit of Transition Age Youth?"

INVESTIGATION

The Grand Jury investigated issues concerning TAY by:

- Interviewing representatives of :
 - County Health and Human Services Agency
 - County Behavioral Health Services
 - County Child Welfare Services
 - County Mental Health Services
 - County Probation Department
 - County Office of Education
 - Children's Advocacy Institute
 - Escondido Union High School District
 - Juvenile Court Judiciary
 - New Alternatives, Inc.
 - San Diego Youth Services
 - San Pasqual Academy
 - Second Chance
 - Voices for Children

- Visiting the following sites:
 - Juvenile Court
 - Juvenile Detention Facilities
 - Polinsky Center
 - San Pasqual Academy

- Reviewing the following documents:
 - *The Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care*, May 2003.
 - *Evidence-Based Practices in Mental Health Services for Foster Youth*, by Lynne Marsenich, LCSW, March 2002, California Institute for Mental Health.
 - County of San Diego, Health & Human Services Agency, Mental Health Services, *Mental Health Youth Transition Services Plan*, July 2000
 - San Diego County Office of Education, *Foster Youth Services Programs Year-End Report for July 2008 to June 2009*.
 - Office of Audits and Advisory Services, *Audit of the Mental Health Services Act (MHSA), Funding*, March 2010.
 - San Diego County Office of Education, *Foster Youth Services*, at <http://www.sdcoe.net/ssp/support/fys/>.
 - County of San Diego: *Juvenile Detention* (Aug. 17, 2009) at http://www.sdcounty.ca.gov/probation/juvenile_information_detained.html
 - *Foster Youth Have Rights!*, at <http://www.fosteryouthhelp.ca.gov/Rights2.html>.
 - State of California Department of Social Services, *Transitional Housing*, at <http://www.childsworld.ca.gov/PG1353.htm>.

FACTS AND FINDINGS

Fact—Set One

Programs

Fact: Transition Age Youth programs are designed to help young people to acquire skills to live independently.

Fact: Almost seventy percent of the young adults in foster care system age out with no family support and few skills to survive adequately on their own.

Fact: Because of the trauma experienced from living in a foster care system, most foster youth can be classified as having some form of mental health issues.

Fact: The programs designed to provide the training for transitional living start at age sixteen.

Fact: In addition to the Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP), there are housing placement programs to help participants practice their independent living skills in a safe environment:

- Transitional Housing Placement Program (THPP) is a licensed, community care, placement opportunity for youth in foster care.

- Transitional Housing Placement Program for Emancipated Foster/Probation Youth (THP-PLUS) is a twenty-four month transitional housing program for 18-24 year old youth who emancipated from foster care or probation.

Fact: The participation in ILSP and after school activities appropriate for a youth's age and developmental level is on a volunteer basis controlled by the participant.

Fact: The allocations and expenditures for TAY programs included in the funding of San Diego County's Mental Health Services Act satisfy proper audit standards.

FINDINGS

Finding 01: Many TAY do not obtain necessary transition training because they are reluctant to volunteer for this training.

Finding 02: Sufficient TAY programs are established and supervised by appropriate agencies; however, many of the agencies and departments practice a "silo" type of operation that does not result in maximum cooperation and sharing of information for the greatest benefit for the TAY. A "silo" type operation occurs when an agency or department develops appropriate programs, but the information is not shared with other entities that could utilize the same programs.

Finding 03: The funds for TAY programs, which are within the MHSA funding for San Diego County, are within proper audit standards.

Finding 04: TAY training should be started at the earliest possible age; some sources suggest at age five or younger.

Fact—Set Two

San Pasqual Academy

Fact: Attendance at San Pasqual Academy (Academy) is a unique placement option for youth age twelve to eighteen.

Fact: The Academy's enrollment requires a youth's voluntary application.

Fact: On average, there are fifty vacant beds at the Academy on a monthly basis.

Fact: The Academy is located in an isolated, rural area of San Diego County, which is one of the reasons that some eligible youth elect not to apply for enrollment.

FINDINGS

Finding 05: Fifty vacant beds each month at the Academy is cause for concern as many more TAY could participate in the program.

Finding 06: In order to maximize Academy enrollment, additional site tours should be scheduled, and consideration by various TAY agencies should be given to overnight and weekend visits by eligible foster youth and their siblings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2009/2010 San Diego County Grand Jury recommends that the Director of the Health and Human Service Agency, the Superintendent of the San Diego County Office of Education and the San Diego County Chief Probation Officer:

10-16: Direct the appropriate agencies/departments to establish policies and procedures that facilitate the sharing of Transitional Age Youth information.

The 2009/2010 San Diego County Grand Jury recommends that the Director of the Health and Human Service Agency and the San Diego County Chief Probation Officer:

10-17: Require case social workers and probation officers to be more proactive in assisting foster youths in making positive decisions for volunteering to participate in Transitional Age Youth programs.

The 2009/2010 San Diego County Grand Jury recommends that the Director of the Health and Human Service Agency:

10-18: Direct that the staff of the Child Welfare Services identify potential applicants for San Pasqual Academy and refer the qualified youth to the San Pasqual Academy staff.

10-19: Direct that the staff of the San Pasqual Academy conduct more on-site visits for eligible foster youth, to include overnight and weekend visits.

COMMENDATION

The Grand Jury toured the San Pasqual Academy facilities and commends the residential staff, educational staff, and youth in attendance. The overall operation of the Academy provides foster youth a safe, secure environment in which they can achieve a productive education and experience an abundance of “family lifestyle” supported activities. The Academy is a community success story.

REQUIREMENTS AND INSTRUCTIONS

The California Penal Code §933(c) requires any public agency which the Grand Jury has reviewed, and about which it has issued a final report, to comment to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court on the findings and recommendations pertaining to matters under the control of the agency. Such comment shall be made *no later than 90 days* after the Grand Jury publishes its report (filed with the Clerk of the Court); except that in the case

of a report containing findings and recommendations pertaining to a department or agency headed by an elected County official (e.g. District Attorney, Sheriff, etc.), such comment shall be made *within 60 days* to the Presiding Judge with an information copy sent to the Board of Supervisors.

Furthermore, California Penal Code §933.05(a), (b), (c), details, as follows, the manner in which such comment(s) are to be made:

- (a) As to each grand jury finding, the responding person or entity shall indicate one of the following:
 - (1) The respondent agrees with the finding
 - (2) The respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the finding, in which case the response shall specify the portion of the finding that is disputed and shall include an explanation of the reasons therefor.
- (b) As to each grand jury recommendation, the responding person or entity shall report one of the following actions:
 - (1) The recommendation has been implemented, with a summary regarding the implemented action.
 - (2) The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future, with a time frame for implementation.
 - (3) The recommendation requires further analysis, with an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a time frame for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or head of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. This time frame shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the grand jury report.
 - (4) The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable, with an explanation therefor.
- (c) If a finding or recommendation of the grand jury addresses budgetary or personnel matters of a county agency or department headed by an elected officer, both the agency or department head and the Board of Supervisors shall respond if requested by the grand jury, but the response of the Board of Supervisors shall address only those budgetary or personnel matters over which it has some decision making authority. The response of the elected agency or department head shall address all aspects of the findings or recommendations affecting his or her agency or department.

Comments to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court in compliance with the Penal Code §933.05 are required from the:

<u>Responding Agency</u>	<u>Recommendations</u>	<u>Date</u>
Director, Health & Human Services Agency, County of San Diego	10-16 through 10-19	8/9/10

Responding Agency	Recommendations	Date
Chief Probation Officer County of San Diego	10-16, 10-17	8/9/10
Superintendent, San Diego County Office of Education	10-16	8/9/10