

Aging Up, Not Out:

Moving Youth from Foster Care to Employability



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When a young person lacks a stable home life, the child welfare system exerts great effort to find him or her a suitable living situation that will keep him or her off the streets. Often it seems that just getting young people in out-of-home placement to their 18th birthday with some measure of stability is a major success.

But too often these youth are unprepared academically, emotionally or financially for either further education or the workforce. What are their opportunities for a bright future if they are eminently unemployable?

The Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) confronted this issue head on in 2006 after the KidsVoice advocacy organization filed a lawsuit seeking additional transitional support for youth aging out of the child welfare system. When DHS Director Marc Cherna realized how few of these young people were successfully moving into higher education or the workforce, he placed JoAnn Hannah in charge of a dedicated effort to improve the situation. As manager of the Independent Living Unit, Hannah has spearheaded the development of a system that has reached more than 1,000 youth since 2006.

Today, DHS has a completely different approach to independent living services for youth. Its workforce development programs, traditionally limited to GED assistance and summer employment programs, have blossomed into a network of motivating, competently staffed options that provide real-world training and employment opportunities.

SYSTEM DESIGN

Hannah began by tackling the specific issue involved in the KidsVoice lawsuit: supporting college opportunities. DHS now employs five educational liaisons, five caseworkers and two Youth Support Partners (YSP), all involved in mentoring high-school students to help them get into and succeed in college.

But not all youth in the child-serving system want to go to college, and workforce preparation for youth exiting the child welfare system continues to be in short supply. Traditional independent living programs lack expertise in this area, so when DHS entered into a partnership with Casey Family Programs, it proved invaluable in providing the expert guidance that DHS and the providers required.

Casey Family Programs, the nation's most prominent foundation focused on supporting change in the child welfare system, had already committed grant assistance to DHS. When Howard Knoll joined the foundation's staff, bringing more than 20 years of hands-on experience in youth employment, he met with Hannah to discuss how to create a meaningful workforce development system.

Given child welfare workers' primary focus on emotional and behavioral stabilization, "workforce issues are not traditionally addressed in independent living programs," Hannah said. "Look

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around nationally, and you'll see programs teaching life skills, banking, getting a driver's license, and maybe how to write a resume, but not much on the things that help you keep a job. It hadn't been done here before, but we thought it needed to be done, because the ultimate life skill is to be able to support yourself financially."

Knoll began making monthly trips to Pittsburgh for the purpose of overseeing the introduction of workforce development principles and programs. He has a vast knowledge of what works in youth employment, and he doesn't mince words. Upon observing the limited workforce development capacity among existing independent living providers, he began holding workshops for these agencies. At the same time, he and Hannah began building an additional set of supportive initiatives.

"At a certain point," Knoll explained, "social work practice must be coupled with long-term career and life planning and skills acquisition to serve this older youth population. The question was, what can Allegheny County do to establish an independent living program that achieves this goal? My recommendation was to try to anchor all the experiences [provided for youth] in preparation for adulthood, not in trying to fix problems from childhood that are often unresolvable."

One of the first innovations was the establishment in 2007 of the Bridge of Pittsburgh, a center specifically serving transition-age youth who had experienced foster care. Consistent with Knoll's emphasis on giving youth a voice in the programs that serve them, in 2008 the Bridge began accepting "members." Membership is not required to attend Bridge programs, but members receive individualized planning services and select a youth advisory board that participates in program decisions.

In 2008, DHS held a one-day workforce development symposium at which youth, child service providers and workforce experts interacted as teams to plan program improvements. Two major ideas emerged from this event: a mobile service that could deliver employment programs at various sites, and a "street team" of youth who came through the system successfully and had credibility with young people still in the system.

Through implementation of these ideas, and engagement with the broader workforce development community, DHS built, virtually from scratch, over a five-year period, a system of supports to help youth move beyond their unstable backgrounds to stable employment. The following describes some of the results.

SYSTEM COMPONENTS

The system comprises five components: One program was created specifically for this initiative; the other four programs are offered by existing youth service providers. The five providers are the Bridges, YouthWorks, Circle C, HFI Institute and Family Resources. Each is described in greater detail below.

The Bridges

Sharlene Gray, Director of the Bridge of Pittsburgh, wasn't at the meeting in which Cherna assigned Hannah to work on transition issues, but she clearly remembers its impact.

Around 2005, while running a training program for out-of-school youth in downtown Pittsburgh, Gray noticed an influx of youth with foster care experiences. "We realized that this population had greater support needs than other youth, and we did not feel adequately equipped to deal with those needs," she said.

Thinking that an office specially targeted at the foster care population might be a good idea, Gray had preliminary discussions with Reggie Young and Jonathan Walkush of DHS's Office of Community Services (OCS) to pitch the idea. Walkush and Virginia Joyce of Arbor Education and Training (now ResCare), Gray's employer, developed the concept, hoping to get DHS Children, Youth & Families (CYF) staff interested as well. Then Hannah showed up with her new mission of enhancing workforce programs for youth in transition, and from there things moved quickly.

That was in late 2006; the Bridge of Pittsburgh became reality a few months later with support from DHS and the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry's Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funds. Once word of the new center got out, the floodgates opened. In less than five years, the Bridge of Pittsburgh has received more than 900 referrals and signed up 700 members, ages 16 to 24.

The Bridge is a one-stop shop offering basic education, SAT preparation, computer training, work skills development, housing assistance, mentoring and more. But—as befits Gray's marketing background—the Bridge website's description of services lists a more enticing item above all those: "Potential to earn cash." It's only \$3 per hour, but clients get paid for attending sessions. The stipend not only helps with transportation and food cost, but reinforces what is perhaps the most important lesson that the program teaches: To earn income, you have to show up and work. It especially gets members to show up on Wednesday, which is payday.

There are now three Bridge centers — downtown Pittsburgh, New Kensington and McKeesport/Mon Valley. Former corporate manager Malik Swain directs the other two sites, teaching youth what real-life work settings are like and persuading companies to hire them. Swain can pay the employee's salary during a trial period, though he sometimes has to assure surprised employers that the Bridge is a legitimate program, not a scam.

In McKeesport, Swain and five staff — a GED instructor, a program coordinator, a job developer, a youth coach and an administrative assistant — serve 60 foster youth a year with DHS support and an additional 80 youth with WIA funds. Many have taken jobs at Kane Hospital or the McKeesport Housing Authority.

Swain, who walked away from a promising corporate career in search of a greater sense of accomplishment, has found it at the Bridge. “The job is tougher than I thought,” he said. “The youth we serve here are used to fending for themselves. Sometimes they come in with attitudes, but that’s their way of saying they need help. We have to bypass the lashing out, not take it personally, and get to the root of the problem. Not a day goes by without my feeling I’ve made a difference here.”

Swain said that gaining trust and convincing young people that they have valuable skills are the biggest challenges. He told of one 260-pound boy, living at the Auberle residential facility, who lumbered into the Mon Valley Bridge office. Despite his size, he was extremely shy, but the staff discovered that he liked drawing and used that career interest as a motivator. He completed his GED with the highest score in his class, even spoke at the Bridge’s graduation ceremony, and then rejoined his father in South Dakota, planning to study graphic design.

What keeps school dropouts coming back to the Bridge offices? Swain thinks the relative lack of structure helps. “It’s not like having classes with bells,” he explained. “Youth get individual attention, and staff is always willing to speak with them. It’s an environment in which everyone can participate.”

YouthWorks

In October 2010, YouthWorks, which has been equipping Pittsburgh-area youth for work readiness since 1994, began offering its week-long “JumpStart Success” career preparation program to youth in transition, with a \$125 stipend for candidates who complete the 30 hours of training. (No shortcuts — the youth have to attend the whole program and pay attention before they get paid.) Lunch is provided on site.

Program Manager Keith Johnson suspected that one student was particularly deprived when he saw how much the young man ate at lunch. Upon inquiring, he learned that the student, age 19, was homeless, having moved out of a troubled Pittsburgh neighborhood where he frequently heard nearby gunfire. When Johnson explained résumé preparation later in the week, this youth became particularly excited, saying, “I never even knew what a résumé was.”

This young man got more than a résumé—he got a summer job at a downtown shoe store, where he became a top salesperson because he could relate to other young people looking for the newest Air Jordans. “If I hadn’t gotten connected to this program and made friends here,” he later told Johnson, “I’m not sure which way I would have gone.”

YouthWorks became the answer to one of the two top program ideas that emerged from the 2008 workforce development symposium—the portable employment program. YouthWorks did not respond to the original DHS request for proposals, but was recruited by Hannah after the winning bidder proved unable to fulfill the contract. YouthWorks takes programs to various locations around the county, including the Bridge sites, and offers the full JumpStart Success curriculum at its downtown office.

JumpStart Success “backs into” the career training process, said YouthWorks Pittsburgh Executive Director Dara Ware Allen, by having youth consider first what lifestyle they would like and then what it takes to get there. The program includes an honest look at the drug trade, as many youth think it’s a path to quick money and overlook the realities of criminal involvement in a dangerous activity that actually provides scant financial reward.

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Supplemental services beyond the initial week of JumpStart Success include training in financial management, entrepreneurship and life skills; field trips to job sites, career fairs and postsecondary schools; and needs assessment career counseling sessions through a partnership with Jewish Family and Children’s Services. YouthWorks staff help the young people obtain Social Security and identification cards, learn check writing, study for driving tests, and/or acquire suitable clothing.

With the foster care clientele, YouthWorks goes into great detail on employer expectations, since these youth often have not learned the basics that others tend to pick up from their parents. “They have to learn how to conduct themselves around adults and what is acceptable behavior,” Allen noted. “We’ve had youth smoking marijuana on breaks—they think it’s the same as smoking cigarettes.” Those who smoke legally get chided by Johnson during money management sessions about why they spend so much on tobacco when they might not know where their next meal is coming from.

Johnson noted that foster care youth are often unprepared for personal responsibility—partly because caring professionals in the child welfare system tend to do things for them—but he has seen one singularly positive trait in this population. “With other youth,” he said, “when you tell them what they need to do, it goes in one ear and out the other. With this group, tell them once, and most of them get it. Having been bounced around so much, these young people appreciate an opportunity and take advantage of it.”

In fiscal year 2010–2011, Youthworks served 110 youth from DHS’s Independent Living Initiative. The completion rate for JumpStart Success was 95 percent, and 64 percent of those no longer in foster care moved on to employment or postsecondary education.

The Street Team

The other concept that originated at the 2008 symposium, a “street team” of youth who could make workforce development presentations to their peers, was energetically embraced by Circle C, a well-respected group home and foster care provider. Circle C was already a partner in DHS’s workforce efforts, having made employment preparation a priority in its services to youth in transition.

The Street Team consists of five youth, ages 16–24, who have gone through the system themselves and are guided by a team leader. The team delivers its presentations, on opportunities and resources for youth aging out of the system, to various audiences ranging from teenagers in group homes to professionals in agency and school settings.

“The process of hiring team members took some time,” said Circle C Executive Director Rich Knouff, “because we needed youth who had been in the system and would be able to relate to the youth they would be talking to. They spend a lot of time developing and practicing a variety of types of presentations, both to youth and to adult staff, so that as many people as possible will be aware of the resources available to youth aging out of the system.”

Teenage audiences—especially the boys—are often skeptical at first, but they become engaged as they realize that the presenters, such as squad captain Cortez Carey, have backgrounds like their own. Carey passed through foster care, kinship care, a failed adoption and various group homes, getting suspended from two high schools along the way, but his focus changed after

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staff at a Family Links residential facility helped him apply for and obtain his first job. Carey heard Street Team leader Meghan Jarpe speak at a meeting on independent living opportunities and decided to apply. He spends about 18 hours a week delivering presentations and serving as a peer mentor to group home residents.

“You can see a difference in the boys’ body language” when the Street Team members start telling their stories, Jarpe said. “They start nodding as they realize that the speakers understand what they are going through. We are getting their attention a lot better than if it were me speaking.”

At its presentations, the Street Team distributes jump drives containing a virtual encyclopedia of information, encompassing health, education, employment and housing. The employment section offers guidance on résumé development, applying for jobs, interviewing and supportive resources. As of November 2011, the Street Team had made 58 presentations and distributed 600 jump drives. In a survey of 200 youth attending Street Team presentations, 86 percent said they had learned new information, and 81 percent said they would use the jump drive.

The Street Team actually provides workforce development on two levels: Team members become skilled professionals themselves, developing their presentation and interpersonal abilities while fulfilling the responsibilities of a paying job; meanwhile, their efforts recruit and educate their peers for other workforce development opportunities.

In addition, the Street Team arranges themes, speakers and activities for quarterly events at which Circle C invites youth from residential facilities throughout the county to a gathering at which they can all learn and socialize together.

HFI Institute

On a Wednesday evening, inside the oversized glass windows of a former automobile showroom, 18 young people in the DHS child-serving system sit around a table, listening to a presentation on entrepreneurship. The session is part of the Youth Workforce Development program at Holy Family Institute (HFI), a social service agency that provides services to families and children, including residential and educational programs for youth in the foster care system.

To practice their communication skills, the students split into pairs, interview each other, and then report on their interviews. Their range of abilities is immediately obvious: Some are articulate and seem college-ready, while others struggle to read the interview questions or give up trying to say “entrepreneur” after several tries. But when the lecture resumes, the high level of attentiveness is unmistakable.

In 24 three-hour sessions over a 12-week period, the youth will cover basic career development skills, earn their 10-hour Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) general industry safety certificate, and get hands-on experience in carpentry and in automotive repair and maintenance.

Nineteen-year-old Darryl (not his real name), currently in HFI’s residential program as a condition of probation, is especially responsive to the entrepreneurship training. He’s an aspiring rap musician with demo tapes available on the Internet. “This program is helping me get in tune with myself,” he says. He hopes to move on to a music production school so that, “if I don’t make it as a rapper, I can help others.”

Esther, in HFI’s care by a judge’s order following a period of truancy, doesn’t envision an automotive or carpentry career — she is attending a nearby high school and plans to pursue a teaching degree — but has chosen to attend for the social experience and personal development opportunities. “I’m learning what to do in a work setting, how to deal with other people, how to go into an interview with a positive attitude,” she said.

HFI’s van picks up other students not residing at the agency’s group homes and transports them to each session. Some have even been referred from the Mon Valley Bridge, 25 miles away; they take a bus downtown, and the van meets them there.

Louis, age 20, has a shorter van trip, from the city's West End. A veteran of 14 years in the CYF system, he said his decision to attend came from "thinking what I can do to have a better life and stay off the streets and out of jail. I want to be able to start a business and ignore the negative."

The program has generated impressive community support, too. BNY Mellon, the City of God Foundation and the Hearst Foundation provided grants; a nonprofit organization in the area where HFI's group homes are located has sponsored students; and Home Depot has contributed uniforms and equipment.

Last summer's cohort had its own mini-entrepreneurship experience, running a car wash and detailing operation under the guidance of automotive instructor and professional auto detailer Matt Pierson. For \$15, the "Pit Stop" team provided thorough service (including tire shining, glass cleaning and interior vacuuming) in 20 minutes. Each team member earned \$20 per night. Pierson required excellence in caring for tools (e.g., if a team member rolled up the hoses carelessly, he left them that way for the students to deal with the following day).

"Often these youth are thrown at jobs without enough preparation," said Elizabeth Stephenson, HFI's Director of Residential Services. "They lack the boss-pleasing skills that most of us learned from our mothers and fathers, and they can have a hard time taking criticism."

Along with hands-on work detailing autos and building dry-walled rooms, the students work through professional-level curricula and go on field trips to automotive and Carpenters' Union training sites. Former school district administrator Ron Zangaro serves as Program Coordinator,

assisted by Workforce Readiness Coordinator Ivan Thorpe, Stephenson, Pierson and former military instructor Bill Kortas as carpentry teacher.

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The program's first three sessions, from January to September 2011, served 43 youth, 19 of whom obtained jobs during or after the program. Six entered the food industry; three were hired to work at

PNC Park, where one individual earned employee-of-the-month recognition for outstanding customer service.

Family Resources

Family Resources, one of Pittsburgh's longest-established child-serving agencies, settled on a simple but ingenious way to enhance workforce readiness for at-risk youth: Employ them. Since 2010, the agency has been employing 25 to 30 youth ages 14 to 21, receiving services from DHS, in part-time internships throughout the agency's programs.

Most of them assist with after-school activities offered by the Beverly Jewel Wall Lovelace Children's Program, which Family Resources offers at numerous sites across Allegheny County. The interns receive a stipend and typically rotate through a variety of responsibilities that may

include tutoring, activity leadership, food service or janitorial work. Those more interested in office work than in direct service can do data management or field inquiries at Family Resources' headquarters.

Participants also attend weekly sessions where they cover practical issues related to career success, including finances, conflict management and workplace relationships. And there's an additional incentive for good performance: At many workplaces, the best interns have landed permanent jobs.

"We tell them that [full-time employment] is a possibility, but you have to make the decision to do what's necessary to achieve it," said Program Director Rose Smiley. "I see their level of commitment in our goal-setting conversations, whether they call me if they have to change their schedule, whether they apply the information they've learned in training, and whether they manage themselves in a way that shows they are capable."

Smiley pointed out that supervising interns who arrive with no résumé and no work experience requires a different approach: "I discuss areas of strength and concern with them and then put the needed supports in place to help them. But we don't change the expectations around accountability."

Those who decide to pursue full-time jobs at Family Resources go through the same process as other candidates. One young woman is already succeeding as an employee, and two more youth are currently in the hiring process.

While growing in competence and self-confidence, youth interns also benefit from a two-way mentoring experience, both learning from their supervisors and becoming role models to younger children in the program.

One of the most impressive aspects of DHS's emerging youth workforce development system is its interrelationships. Circle C refers residents to YouthWorks for JumpStart Success; YouthWorks takes workshops to the Bridge sites and group homes; the Bridges refer prospects to HFI; and the Street Team goes just about everywhere, enhancing awareness of a whole network of resources.

MAKING IT WORK

As the providers were all entering somewhat uncharted territory in their quest to make transition-age foster care youth employable, it was natural for them to depend on each other. They also depended heavily on the experience of Howard Knoll, particularly in structuring essential but potentially risky features such as providing stipends and giving youth a voice in program development.

“He has an unlimited number of ideas,” said Allen of YouthWorks, “and was very helpful to us as we made program adjustments. Each time he came to town, we had a list of things to run by him. His input on starting a youth advisory council and helping youth feel that they are members of the program, rather than coming to a mandatory service, has had an impact on other areas of our work, too.”

Said Johnson, the YouthWorks program manager: “We tend to structure something based on what we feel the youth need or want; Howard emphasized listening to young people’s voices and finding out exactly what they want. Keeping that in mind helps us both develop and implement the program better.”

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Stephenson said that HFI relied on Knoll for help in establishing an implementation model and achievable project goals. She also benefited from his experience regarding effective ways to keep students coming back once they started attending. Smiley credited her discussions with Knoll with helping Family Resources incorporate flexibility, creativity and, especially, a relationship-building component, so that at-risk youth could flourish in their work environment.

“Howard has a vast knowledge of the world of workforce development,” Hannah stated. “Talk about something you want to do, and he’ll tell you where something like it has worked before and the person he knows to contact there.”

According to Hannah, the significant systemic changes that have resulted in programmatic success could not have happened without strong leadership at the top. “Without Marc [Cherna]’s ideas and support, we would still be back where we were in 2006, with limited programs and no workforce integration,” she said. Hannah also noted that making the Independent Living Program part of DHS’s Executive Office facilitated collaboration among personnel from several DHS offices, which helped to make all relevant services available.