



JIM CASEY YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES INITIATIVE

Helping youth in foster care make successful transitions to adulthood

Vision Statement on Youth Engagement

February 2003

Context

Each year, more than 16,000 young people leave foster care after reaching the age at which they become ineligible for government support (generally 18.) After years of depending on the foster care system to meet their basic needs, most are on their own.

How well have their state or county custodians prepared them for adulthood? The few statistics available to us suggest there is great room for improvement. The negative outcomes experienced by many youth after leaving care—homelessness, unplanned parenthood, joblessness, mental health problems, aimlessness—offer mute testimony to the failure of the foster care system to prepare many youth for adulthood.

At the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, we believe that it is possible to run a foster care system that prepares youth for success as adults only if youth in care are fully engaged in the system's design and operation. Because of this belief, one of the top priorities of the Jim Casey

Youth Opportunities Initiative is to support the active engagement of young people in developing the skills and leadership techniques for advocating for opportunities for themselves and for their peers.

Since the Initiative was formed in May 2001, our staff has met with scores of youth in foster care and young people who have recently been emancipated. Whenever we talked with them, we asked them what we could do to help them in their transition to adulthood. Although they came from diverse backgrounds and live in many different parts of the country, they spoke with one voice. “Involve us in designing our own destinies,” they told us over and over. “Nothing about us without us,” they said.

That is the same message that the Office of the Family & Children’s Ombudsman in the state of Washington received in interviews with 32 youth in care in 2000. In a report published last year, the office concluded that the top three priorities for youth in foster care were “feeling normal, feeling cared about, and feeling their opinions matter”—states of being that most youth growing up in intact families take for granted. “Young people said that success in foster care occurs when they are able to influence what is happening to them,” the Ombudsman’s office reported¹.

With the new resources that are being made available to states under the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, commonly known as the Chafee Act, we have an unprecedented opportunity to change the system of supports that we offer to youth in transition. In fact, the act mandates that states involve youth in the design of state programs. But the promise of this legislation will go unfulfilled unless we begin now to design and test models for actively engaging youth in transition in shaping their own destinies.

¹ Office of the Family & Children’s Ombudsman, State of Washington. “Foster Care: What Young People in the System Say Is Working.” January 2001. <http://www.governor.wa.gov/ofco/00rpt/fostercare.pdf>,

Current Practice

Some foster care systems do a commendable job of involving youth both in making decisions about their own futures and in system design. But many others simply pay lip service to the idea of youth involvement, perhaps because of the mistaken idea that young people have little to offer. The agencies may bring together a group of youth once a year to talk about what is on their minds, or circulate proposed regulations among residents of a group home, or commission an opinion survey. But few state or county agencies have established a formal, ongoing structure for engaging the youth in their custody in the formulation of policy, the evaluation of practice, or the design of individualized independent living plans, omissions that send a disturbing message to young people. As a columnist for the San Francisco Examiner once put it, “The scariest thing about young people today is how adults feel about them.”

By denying youth in foster care a meaningful role in directing their own futures, agencies make it difficult for them to gain the self-advocacy skills they will need to navigate the adult world. A young woman who became homeless the day after she was emancipated from foster care gave us an example of how this dependency played out in her life. “For 18 years, somebody else was advocating for me, and all of a sudden I was supposed to know how to advocate for myself,” she told us. “No one taught me how to go out and get anything on my own. For instance, when I left care, I thought medical service was free. I did not know who paid for my health care all those years. As a result, I now have serious debt from medical bills.”

Being in control of our own destinies is key to achieving self-sufficiency for all of us. Yet youth in foster care grow up in a system that controls every aspect of their lives, stunting the development of personal responsibility. How can a young person develop a sense of personal responsibility in the absence of opportunities to shape his or her own destiny?

The best-designed and most successful service delivery systems, whether in the public or private sector, ask the people with whom they are engaged what they need and, importantly, in what form and when they need it. Then they provide it, and follow up by asking their clients or customers if they were satisfied. Any system designed without consideration of the needs and preferences of the people who engage with it is doomed to failure. Yet many young people who have grown up in foster care complain of knowing that their views were disregarded as their case plans were being developed or their independent living goals were set. A common lament is that caseworkers offer “cookie cutter” services that may or may not be what a particular youth needs to succeed.

Youth Engagement: Our Vision

Decades of research on youth development has demonstrated over and over again that involving young people in decision-making helps them achieve mastery, compassion and health. Recent research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison provides evidence that engaging young people in decision-making has positive effects on adults and organizations as well. The Wisconsin researchers found that youth involvement enhances the perception by adults of youth’s competence, heightens adults’ commitment and energy, makes adults feel more effective and confident, and makes adults more aware of the needs and concerns of youth. The benefits to organizations include clarifying their missions and making their programming more responsive to youth in the community.²

² Zeldin, Shepherd et al. (2000). “Youth in Decision-Making: A Study of the Impacts of Youth on Adults and Organizations.” Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin-Madison Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development.

The staff at the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative believes that youth engagement is key to leveraging change in the child welfare, education, workforce, and other formal systems in which youth in transition interact. Youth engagement is also essential to improving outcomes for individual youth in transition from foster care.

We have spent many hours in recent months working with young people to empower them to become better advocates for systems change and for designing their own futures. To help bring about this change the Initiative is supporting the creation of Youth Leadership Boards in communities with which the Initiative is partnering. Youth leadership boards will be run by young people, and voting membership will be limited to young people ages 14 through 23 who are in foster care or who have recently transitioned from foster care. Members of youth leadership boards will become effective leaders and advocates by collaborating with their communities, and by improving their skills and supports. The boards will play an essential role in designing the Initiative's activities at the local level and will also be given several Initiative-specific missions:

- To advocate for greater responsiveness in the foster care system to the needs and desires of youth
- To develop new opportunities for youth who have been in foster care, including the awarding of financial grants aimed at widening opportunities for youth in transition in their communities
- To help design and administer Opportunity Passports (see companion paper)

Beyond these specific Initiative-related missions, each board will be expected to set its own agenda. Among each board's most important roles will be to serve as an arena in which individual young people can form supportive social relationships and network with each other, as well as with stakeholders. We also hope that local and state agencies, community groups, nonprofits and even residential treatment facilities and group homes will view them as resources. The boards can help

agencies assess the needs of young people in foster care and discern the reasons many youth do not take advantage of available programs and services. They can be asked to identify and create new forms of services and avenues of access that would better meet the needs of young people in foster care. And they can help agencies evaluate efforts that support young people transitioning from foster care.

Most of our boards are in their formative stages, so we do not know yet what priorities each will set for themselves. However some boards are already planning for training seminars, and social events for separated siblings—a creative response by youth to a problem that vexes many foster care systems. Already we have learned from this example of youth initiative the high level of importance that youth in transition place on maintaining their relationships with siblings.

Establishing Youth Leadership Boards in 15-20 cities, our goal over the next few years, is just a start. We hope that the lessons learned from our experience with a small number of youth-led boards will help inform the development of replicable models and their proliferation around the country. Our pilot project should generate valuable information about the level and nature of technical assistance that will be needed to help the model proliferate and become accepted policy and practice everywhere. Ultimately, we would like to see every community organization and government agency that interacts with transitioning youth form its own board.

Our project will be rigorously evaluated, and we expect the results to provide evidence of the power of youth engagement. We expect Youth Leadership Boards to expand the opportunities youth and young people have to develop relationships both with peers and stakeholders in the community and to help them build the confidence to advocate for themselves and others. The youth who participate will gain a stronger sense of control over their lives, which should lead to better outcomes in employment, education, asset-accumulation, and relationships. Beyond the

benefits to individual board members, all youth in transition should benefit from the boards' advocacy for policies and practices that ensure access to the opportunities necessary for successful transitions to adulthood. And the agencies that serve youth in care will benefit from youth engagement as research demonstrates other organizations have, by seeing their missions clarified and their programming become more responsive.

Concluding Thoughts

Engaging youth in the design of the foster care system is not just a nice thing to do. It will be an effective thing to do. With the implementation of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 just beginning in many jurisdictions, it's more important than ever before for agencies to engage with youth so that they offer programs and services that work.

“Being on a youth leadership board isn't going to solve all of our problems,” that formerly homeless young person told us. “But it definitely gives us hope that someone is listening to us.”

Youth Leadership Boards will help youth in transition accomplish all three of the goals that youth in foster care told the Washington Office of the Ombudsman matter most to them: to feel normal, to feel cared about, and to feel that their opinions matter.