

# Emancipation Research Project

## 2007-2009 Compilation of Findings

### Executive Summary

Honoring Emancipated Youth (HEY) conducted a two-year study entitled *The Emancipation Research Project* (ERP) examining the transition process from foster care to independence in San Francisco County. The ERP consisted of 27 in-depth interviews and more than 20 informal conversations and group discussions held in 2008-2009 with professionals and youth involved in the county's dependency system. These professionals included current and former foster youth, advocates, policy makers, managers, line staff and others. Each in-depth interviewee was asked the exact same questions, and then HEY compared these answers to inform both research and analysis. Many topics were discussed, including personal emancipation experiences, official transition planning, and perceptions of stakeholders' roles.

In the first phase of the ERP from 2007-2009, HEY produced twelve informative articles and resource tools based on the data contained within the interviews and the themes that emerged. These documents also include recommendations to the various professionals involved in the transition process from foster care to independence. This Executive Summary focuses on the information presented in this set of materials and the recommendations made by HEY. The Executive Summary was preliminarily released in spring 2010 and finalized in August 2010 after feedback from HEY's collaborative partners. Please note that additional information will continue to be released by HEY based on ERP data and findings.

#### Community Benefits of the Emancipation Research Project

Ultimately the community received many benefits of the ERP. Stronger community networks resulted through sharing information and education on relevant policy and laws. The ERP also led to many new referrals for youth resources to professionals and other capacity-building opportunities. Numerous new resources have been created including forms, best practices, and success stories based on the data about youth needs.

The ERP has enabled HEY to communicate problems between policy and practice to high and mid-level management involved in the transition process. During these discussions and other ERP conversations, HEY has worked to advocate for better access to services for youth, better communication between parties, and reliance on youth development and best practices for empowerment.

#### Emancipation

During the emancipation process a foster youth transitions from his court-supervised placement to independence. This legal process is governed by California Welfare & Institutions Code (WIC) section 391, which states a list of prerequisite tasks for emancipation. These requirements include providing the youth important identification documents and written information on the history of their dependency case; assistance with health insurance, housing, employment, and education; as well as assistance in maintaining relationships based on the youth's best interests.

## Emancipation Professionals

The ERP focused on the various roles that different professionals play in the transition from foster care to independence. In order to best analyze the emancipation process a clear understanding of each player's roles and responsibilities was examined.

Child Welfare Workers (CWW) are employees of the San Francisco Child Welfare Department, Human Services Agency. These social workers balance a median caseloads of 22 foster youth. The CWW's role is to balance stated and best interests, for both the youth and the agency. Their work focuses mainly on the safety, permanency, and well-being of a youth as they are ultimately responsible to ensure that all tasks listed in Welfare & Institutions Code 391 have been completed.

Dependency Attorneys advocate for the stated interests of the youth (their client) throughout their dependency. Each foster youth is entitled to one Dependency Attorney.

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) are volunteers appointed by a judge to make recommendations to the court on what is in the best interests of the youth. CASAs may actually recommend actions contrary to a youth's expressed desire (stated interest) as they advocate for the best interest of the youth.

Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP) Workers support the youth in following his or her own plans for the future. They provide education and resources to help youth become self-sufficient. Their services are available to current and former foster youth, as well as foster youth who may be dependents in other counties, but who reside in San Francisco. In San Francisco, the Department of Human Services contracts with other groups to provide ILSP workers, and they are not city employees.

## Misconceptions regarding Roles and Responsibilities

Many misconceptions exist about the differing roles various people play in a foster youth's life, leading to costly confusion and inefficiency in the dependency system. Each foster youth's case is unique and results in difficult transition planning because specific tasks to support the transition to independence can never be assigned to specific roles for all situations. Particularly problematic are the "gaps" that occur and disagreements between agencies regarding who should be "filling in the gaps."

### Child Welfare Workers

In particular, HEY unearthed mixed definitions of the Child Welfare Worker's role. HEY compiled and summarized common misconceptions each group (youth, child dependency attorneys, CASAs, and ILSP workers) had about the role of the Child Welfare Worker (CWW). It then researched the official role of the CWW by speaking with workers themselves, their management, and the Human Services Agency (HSA), which oversees them. In addition, it reviewed official policy and manuals. HEY then developed responses to clarify the CWW's role and rectify incorrect or misleading assumptions.

The limitations on CWWs by the legal requirements governing their role in the youth's independence process also were largely unknown. By law the CWW (social worker) must fulfill each of the required tasks listed in WIC 391. However, all other professionals involved recognize that the CWW needs additional support so it is necessary to define the boundaries of social work and assign tasks based on standards.

Ultimately the CWW focuses on the safety, permanency, and well being of a youth during their transition. Youth prefer for their CWW to act as a mentor who provides personal service; but the official standards that govern CWW often limit this capacity. CASAs are also often unaware of the limitations arising from the official standards governing CWW roles. Attorneys in general lacked knowledge about the laws that regulate CWW actions and roles including frequency of correspondence, delineations of roles, and confusion regarding reassignments. HEY believes this is directly attributable to the lack of an established protocol governing these communications between attorneys and CWW.

In light of the misconceptions found, HEY recommends CWW responsibilities should be clearly outlined to both the youth as well as other emancipation professionals. Additionally, clarification should be made regarding reassignment of CWWs, policies and practice regarding out of county placements, and efforts should be made to prevent reassignments of CWWs or provide youth with more options in these circumstances.

Youth must understand the possibility that the CWW may be unable to respond to calls immediately. CWWs should assist the youth to identify another suitable adult to fill their mentor/friend role after emancipation and attend body language and other trainings to facilitate expression of care and ensure youth feel CWW are accessible and concerned.

### **CASAs and Dependency Attorneys**

The ERP also discovered misconceptions regarding CASAs and attorneys. HEY recommends that CASAs clarify that they are volunteers to advocate for the "best interests" of the youth (regardless of whether the youth disagrees with the plan or recommendations). CASAs and youth should be sure to clearly communicate regarding the youth's expectations and preferences including how often the youth would like to meet and talk by phone and which activities each person values and why. Youth should also know who they can contact with CASA complaints and training should be frequently evaluated and available.

As with all other emancipation professionals, attorneys should consistently explain their roles, mandated requirements about contact, and explain the end of the "official" relationship once the youth leave foster care. Attorneys should also explain the youth's rights to change their attorney and the right of the attorney to choose to no longer represent the youth.

## Need for Improved Communication and Information Sharing

The ERP discovered a great need for better communication and information sharing across systems to improve the transition process. Current problems arise from inadequate communication sharing between the many professionals involved in any youth's transition process as well as practical difficulties that arise in the emancipation process.

HEY identified particular areas for improvement including the use of the Transitional Independent Living Plan (TILP), Growth Opportunities Achieve Lifelong Success (GOALS) meetings, and ex parte hearings.

### Improved use of the TILP and ideas for streamlined information sharing

In California, and San Francisco, the formal tool currently used to help a youth plan for aging out of care is called the Transitional Independent Living Plan, or TILP. The TILP is the official record of a youth's plan for his life after foster care. Recently redeveloped in 2008, the TILP is a two-page form used by San Francisco Child Welfare Services to engage the foster youth, the CWW, and the caregiver or foster parent in developing goals to accomplish during six-month periods leading up to and exiting foster care.

While ILSP workers may be the primary party to assist youth to achieve the goals of their plan, they do not have direct access to the TILP because they are not legally recognized within the form. In San Francisco, ILSP workers are contracted employees and not city employees. Accordingly they do not have database access and must rely on personal communication with the CWW each time the TILP is updated. Conversely, when an ILSP worker completes tasks or changes goals with the youth, they have no way to update the official form.

Many professionals described the TILP as an official form, but not the real working plan. Two other plans co-exist for the youth on top of the TILP: the CWWs case plan and the GOALS meeting. HEY recommends that at a minimum the plans of ILSP and CWWs should be merged, granting ILSP limited access to some case-planning documents, specifically the TILP. This could be achieved by providing ILSP access to the San Francisco Human Services Agency Child Welfare Service's Content Management System. However, HEY recommends a youth-friendly, online case management tool that would be accessible for the youth to change their goals and all involved parties to access necessary information.

Even though CWWs rely heavily on ILSP workers to help youth complete tasks to prepare for independence, ILSP workers often feel disconnected from the CWW's master plan for a youth. ILSP Workers and CWWs must work together and clearly communicate regarding transition planning for youth. HEY recommends the redesign of existing communication protocols as well as restructuring of the ILSP responsibilities to address this issue.

Overall, youth are generally pleased with the service they receive from ILSP workers and feel close to and supported by their staff. HEY recommends additional funds be made available so ILSP may be able to fully address the needs of youth including an increase of the workers available for youth who drop in and hiring more specialists to work on specific areas.

## GOALS Meetings and improved communication

Growth Opportunities Achieve Lifelong Success (GOALS) meetings are designed to help youth plan for emancipating out-of-care. San Francisco County created the idea and structure of GOALS meetings independently, as they are not state mandated. A first GOALS meeting should be held when a youth turns 16-1/2, and then again at six-month intervals until aging out-of-care, at about age 18-19. Two staff members of the San Francisco County Family and Children Services collaborate to plan and organize the GOALS meetings: the CWW assigned to the case, and the GOALS Coordinator, who is not a case-carrying social worker and whose primary responsibility is to schedule and facilitate GOALS meetings.

Though the CWW and the Coordinator plan the meeting, the meeting is intended to be youth-led, meaning the foster youth decides whom to invite and which topics on which to focus. Attendees may be the Child Welfare Worker, the ILSP worker, foster parents, group home staff, the attorney, the CASA, their biological family, or any other person. The youth leads the discussion, and is stewarded through a series of topical goals, mirrored by the requirements of WIC 391. Topics may include: Housing, Employment, Education, Income, Permanency and Family Relations, Legal Documents, Mental Health and Health Insurance. During the meeting, action items, in the form of measurable objectives, are assigned to attendees.

The ERP revealed the GOALS meeting was highly regarded among most (but not all) interviewees. GOALS meetings are a unique practice of San Francisco County to assist youth to plan for emancipation out-of-care. During HEY's research, each ERP participant was asked, "Have you ever heard of GOALS meetings?" and then, "What do you think of them?" While many positive responses were received in general, interviewees expressed concerns with poor counseling for youth, scheduling, differing objectives, lack of accountability on tasks, and poor pre-planning before the meetings occur.

HEY recommends that scheduling options need to be expanded for GOALS meetings to allow for more flexibility for the youth and participants (currently one meeting time is given with little notice). Invitation practices need to be improved to ensure that all stakeholders are included within the youth-led framework. A focused agenda should be prepared and shared with all attendees in advance of the meeting. Specific persons should be assigned follow up on the specific tasks discussed at the GOALS meeting. And youth should be offered different examples of a "successful emancipation" during (or before) the first meeting. HEY notes that GOALS meetings should be one strategy to help a youth plan, but that caregivers, ILSP workers, CWWs, and other professionals working with youth in transition should all play active roles in the planning process before, during, and after GOALS meetings. Ultimately HSA should continue to communicate its intention to reduce emancipations by increasing reunifications, guardianship, adoption, and other types of permanency.

## Ex Parte Dismissal Hearings

An ex parte hearing is an emergency court hearing in which only one party appears before a judge to request a dismissal from foster care, or emancipation, without the youth's presence. The ex parte hearing is an important tool utilized by dependency attorneys when timing is critical. Most commonly, the ex parte hearing is necessary to take advantage of a Transitional Housing Placement Program (THP-Plus) apartment opening.

In San Francisco only about 110 THP-Plus housing spots are available, yet over the last ten years an average of 150 eligible youth emancipates each year. Youth who attend school or are working must have their dismissal hearing documents in hand to be eligible for THP-Plus assistance. Due to this high demand CWWs attempt to anticipate when the THP-Plus housing approval letter might arrive so they can reserve the youth's dismissal hearing date with the court; but this is not always possible. When it is not possible to coordinate these two events, the ex parte hearing is used to dismiss the youth. However HEY recommends ex parte hearings not be used as a solution to these issues because of the risk invited that all 391 requirements might not be completed.

HEY urges creative solutions to de-incentivize the THP-Plus program from demanding immediate placement in order to fulfill contracts and maintain full allocations. What should be made available is a transitional temporary placement, or a method to "hold" the THP-Plus placement while awaiting hearing. Again, improved communication and information-sharing can facilitate increased success in the transition process.

## Opportunities for Greater Success

The ERP also identified key areas as opportunities for greater success in the transition to independence. These areas highlight the need to improve gaps in planning practices: missing partners in the planning process, failure to include alternative housing plans to avoid return to birth parents, and needed improvement to better address mental health needs.

### Missing partners: Group home staff

Most participants in the ERP identified caregivers—in particular group home staff—as the party absent from the transition planning process. Efforts have been made to reduce the number of group home placements; however, they continue to be a prominent placement option for youth. Thus the involvement of group home staff in the transition process is crucial, and requires an understanding of their roles and responsibilities.

While many group home workers believe they are legally unable to teach youth life skills such as cooking and laundry because of liability and risks, group homes do in fact have flexibility under the law to determine which types of chores and activities are allowed or prohibited. Foster youth are entitled to be involved in ILSP starting at age 16, and in fact some group homes require ILSP participation. HEY recommends that ILSP participation be encouraged and facilitated, but not required for effective participation. Additionally ILSP participation should not be restricted as a form of discipline; in fact withholding the right is illegal. Good communication between ILSP workers and group home workers would provide tremendous benefits to both parties and allow for more successful youth transitions.

HEY believes that all caregivers should be primary supporters in a youth's transition to independence. HEY recognizes that caregivers need not be specialists, but should be provided simple education so they can refer and facilitate access to ILSP or other programs. HEY encourages all group home staff to have annual meetings with ILSP to refresh themselves about each other's programs and services. They should also have regular communication regarding new programs and policies, and upcoming events and opportunities. HEY advocates for better training of all parties on best practices, clarification of legal responsibilities and roles, and constant communication between ILSP and caregivers.

### **Return to birth parents after emancipation**

The ERP discovered a tendency of some emancipated foster youth to return to their birth parents once they have aged out of the system. Several youth and professionals cited this occurrence, either from their personal experience, or those of acquaintances and colleagues. As foster youth were removed from their families due to the substantiation of abuse or neglect, this is an alarming finding. They emancipate only because reunification is not considered a safe option for them as they age-out of care. If emancipated youth return to their parents by their own choice, out of necessity or for any reason, it is important for the foster care system to recognize this tendency and consider alternatives that would support a youth's reunification while system support is still available.

Frequently youth return to their birth parents to avoid homelessness because housing plans fall through. These youth may become re-traumatized and may not have access to housing or other services available prior to emancipation. In order to prevent the choice between an unsafe housing arrangement with their family and homelessness, youth should include a "Plan B" in case a reunification attempt fails or a transitional housing program placement fails.

HEY supports reunification as a primary objective and believes that families often need education and support to create safe environments for their children. HEY also supports permanency and believes biological families and other relatives should be considered as permanent connections. However, HEY also recognizes that in some cases reunification may not be a safe or appropriate option. If emancipation is the only option, HEY encourages all emancipation professionals to provide resources to families *before* the youth emancipates, helping them seek supportive services through other avenues. If the youth plans to return to the family, HEY recognizes the benefit to allow a youth to return home and "test" the placement while they are still eligible for the supportive services offered by the child welfare system. HEY supports youth and family access to all necessary resources for reunification and advocates for early emancipation planning.

## Needed improvements for emancipating youth with mental health needs

One of the most influential factors contributing to homelessness for emancipated foster youth is mental health needs. A high number of youth have significant mental health problems when they enter foster care, and after leaving care youth experience disproportionate rates of trauma. Interviewees identified the problem of the lack of continuity of care for emancipated youth not directly linked to adult services through SSI or other programs.

ILSP case managers explained that, while in care, foster youth are referred to youth mental health services through their social worker. After emancipation, however, former foster youth do not necessarily have one assigned person to provide resources and referrals to mental health services. While aftercare workers recognize this need, they lack information about available services and processes. They often do not have the scheduling capacity to provide referrals due to high caseloads. ILSP workers expressed a desire to have a better system of communication between adult and youth mental health services *before* a youth emancipates. ILSP workers worry about youth's ability to keep the housing that they have connected the youth to, if the youth lacks the mental health supports they need. They also wanted more education on the services to which they could refer emancipated foster youth.

Information and training for aftercare workers are key, but the focus should be on connecting the youth *before* emancipation to ensure continuity of care. Youth who require new or different assistance *after* emancipation need mental health aftercare specialists they can access through ILSP, as are currently available in the areas of housing, education, and employment.

To reduce the risk of homelessness among emancipated youth with mental health needs, HEY advocates for better information sharing across systems, direct lines of communication between adult and youth mental health and aftercare workers, and better resources for ILSP workers.

## Conclusion

The information presented in the first phase of the ERP from 2007-2009 contains rich insight into the transition process from foster care to independence and the individuals involved. Although many areas for improvement were identified including the need for increased communication among the professionals involved and their youth as well as a need for greater information sharing between systems, the ERP also discovered many promising practices in San Francisco like the GOALS meeting. The ERP provides an opportunity for missing partners to take a more active role in the transition process and current partners to strengthen transition plans to include needed mental health services and housing alternatives. Ultimately the need for better understanding of roles and responsibilities of the professionals involved in the emancipation process paired with more efficient planning and information sharing will provide youth with the greatest opportunities for success in independence.