

A close-up photograph of a person's hand holding a yellow sticky note. The person's face is blurred in the background. The sticky note has the text 'A New Approach' written on it in a bold, grey font.

A New Approach

The Importance of a Career Approach to Employment Services for Youth in Foster Care

The Need for a New Approach to Employment Services

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A Report on Works Wonders™ from Foster Forward, in partnership with Rhode Island College, Children's Bureau and Workplace Center, Columbia University

Emerging from the research is the understanding that there is a lack of effectiveness in workforce programs that serve youth in foster care. This is in great part due to the emphasis of current employment practices on getting a job rather than developing a career. Although the focus on getting a job responds to the immediate need for an income, it undermines economic self-sufficiency because it leaves youth unprepared to sustain and advance in employment. It creates the potential for youth to cycle from one low paying entry-level job to the next rather than following a career path that leads to economic self-sufficiency and provides the social and emotional benefits that come from meaningful employment. A career approach responds to the limitations of current programs that focus on job placement and moves practice closer to reaching the goal of economic well-being as youth in foster care enter adulthood.

Current federal legislation makes clear a national commitment to supporting the future economic well-being of youth in foster care. **This commitment is exemplified by mandatory funding for independent living services that includes:**

Support for education and employment for youth in foster care 14 – 21 years of age.

The option for states to extend foster care until age 21 with the requirement that each youth has a transition plan that incorporates workforce supports and employment services.

Vouchers to older adolescents in care to help pay for post-secondary education.¹

The commitment is also exemplified by legislation that provides job training and vocational services for all vulnerable workers but with specific supports to help youth, including those in foster care, stay connected to employment.²

Despite the intent of federal legislation, youth in foster care continue to remain unprepared for securing meaningful careers and avoiding the consequences of living in poverty. **Current estimates show that:**

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Only 45% of youth in care graduate from high school, yet by 2020 more than 2/3 of jobs will require at least a high school diploma.

UNEMPLOYMENT

Unemployment estimates for transitioned youth are as high as 60% and, if they are working, chances are they are earning less than \$25,000 a year – not enough to cover basic needs.

HOMELESSNESS

By age 24, 24% of former foster youth report being homeless at some point after leaving care.

To a significant extent, complex contextual factors outside the jurisdiction of the legislation, such as labor market forces, undermine the realization of its intent. Equally important to the effective implementation of policies, is the way in which they are translated into practice. The available evidence shows that the impact of either the independent living services based in foster care agencies or community-based jobs programs is minimal for foster youth once they transition into the adult world of work.³ Even in instances when employment outcomes were better for youth in foster care who participated in agency-based vocational services than those who did not, employment outcomes did not match those of youth who were not in care.⁴

¹ Title IV-E of the Social Security Act (P.L. 96-272); Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (P.L. 110-352)

² Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (H.R. 803; Pub.L. 113-128)

³ Courtney & Heuring, 2005; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, ACF, 2008; Edelstein & Lowenstein, 2014; Naccarato, Brophy & Courtney, 2010; Jones, 2014

⁴ Okpych & Courtney, 2014; Montgomery, Donkoh, & Underhill, 2006

A Career Approach to Support Youth in Foster Care



AN EARLY START

The hallmarks of a career approach include:

When the goal of employment programs is to simply place youth in jobs, services are typically targeted toward older adolescents who are preparing to leave foster care. In contrast, if the goal is to help youth connect with a career, it is important to begin as young as possible. Vocational development starts as early as preschool, when children first become aware of the idea of work. In middle childhood, children not only have an awareness of different professions, but recognize that each profession carries specific requirements. As youth move through adolescence they learn to evaluate their abilities in relation to the requirements of a profession. This process is an essential component of identity development that all youth go through to mature into stable, productive adults including connecting with employment successfully.⁵

Youth in foster care are often disrupted in their vocational development as a result of challenging life circumstances caused by poverty, families (birth or foster) that lack the skills and social networks to support their children in academic and vocational attainment, schools that do not offer resources for career exploration and planning, and limited exposure to career choices among others.⁶ If employment support is withheld until youth are ready to transition out of care it may be too late to repair the disruption, further jeopardizing connections to the adult world of work.



INDIVIDUALIZED SERVICES

Career readiness preparation helps youth to identify a career goal, plan a career path that specifies the incremental steps to gain the training and work experiences needed to achieve the goal, and obtain the skills, knowledge and support to take the specified steps. This process begins with a comprehensive assessment to determine the individual's starting point on the career path and identify the potential barriers to employment that need wraparound support while careers are pursued (e.g., mental health conditions, juvenile or criminal justice involvement, parenting responsibilities). Youth must then be provided with opportunities for career exploration to expose them to the diversity of professions so that a suitable match can be identified.⁷ The key to effective career planning is matching an individual's skills, abilities and interests.

⁵ Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011; Erikson, 1963; Marcia, 1980; Hartung, Porfeli, & Vondracek, 2005; Howard & Walsh, 2011; Sing, Turner & Kaewchinda, 2012; Staff & Mortimer 2007

⁶ Blustein, Chaves, Diemer, Gallagher, Marshall, Sirin, & Bhati, 2002; Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000; Faas, Benson, & Kaestle, 2013; Gottfredson, 1981; Purtell & McLoyd, 2011; Sewell, Haller, & Ohlendorf, 1970.

⁷ Akabas, S. H., Gates, L. B., & Oran-Sabia, V., 2006; Gottfredson, L. S. 1981

Relational competencies are the social skills necessary for positive, productive relationships in all domains of an individual's life, including work.⁸ Research documents the importance of relational competencies in preparing youth in care for employment. For example, Works Wonders™ is a five-year project funded by the Administration of Children and Families (ACF), implemented in Rhode Island through Foster Forward in partnership with the Workplace Center, Columbia School of Social Work, Rhode Island College, and The Voice Youth Leadership Board. A component of the project evaluated the impact of services designed to build relational competencies on career readiness and employment status. The results showed that youth were more likely to increase their engagement in career readiness activities and be employed as their capacity for conflict resolution and teamwork, two relational competencies essential to the workplace, increased. Because relational competencies are social, the implications for career services are that groups, along with individual services, are needed to learn and practice these skills.

A career approach takes into account the challenging life circumstances that affect career decisions and the ability to seek, secure, and sustain work.⁹ Career services need to be coordinated with case management and clinical services to ensure that supports that respond to the life circumstances that affect employment are provided. For example, employment specialists need to be aware of restrictions on possible work set by probation for youth in foster care with court involvement. Career goals and the education or training to reach the goals are inseparable. Career services need to connect with schools to ensure alignment of training with the youth's career goals. This approach stands in contrast to traditional employment services for youth in foster care that tend to be isolated from other supports. For example, goals related to employment are often not integrated with educational goals or into overall service plans.

Research demonstrates that youth are more likely to make successful connections to competitive employment after leaving foster care when they engage in on-the-job training while in care.¹⁰ These work experiences – volunteer work, internships, or competitive employment – provide the opportunity to build employment-related skills and engage in developmentally appropriate career exploration in settings best-suited to a youth's needs.¹¹

The mandates to prepare youth for the world of work have significant implications for staffing patterns and expertise. Foster care agencies are not workforce development providers; workforce development, however, does not typically respond to the unique needs of youth in care. Thus, it remains within the responsibilities of the foster care agency to ensure that the career development needs of youth in care are well served, and, once employed, to help youth negotiate accommodation, coordinate wraparound supports, and problem solve around the issues of balancing personal lives with work or school.



OPPORTUNITIES
TO LEARN
AND PRACTICE
RELATIONAL
COMPETENCIES



INTEGRATED
SERVICES



CONNECTING
WITH THE WORLD
OF WORK



BUILDING STAFF
CAPACITY

⁸ Hadley, A. M., Mbwana, K. & Hair, E. C. (2010)

⁹ Clark & Davis, 2000; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Freundlich & Avery, 2006

¹⁰ Casey Family Programs, 2004; Clark & Davis, 2000; Naccarato & DeLorenzo, 2008

¹¹ Gottfredson, 1981; Hartung, Porfeli & Vondracek, 2005; Lent & Brown, 2013; Clark & Davis, 2000; Cobb & Alwell, 2009; Freundlich & Avery, 2006.



IMPLICATIONS
FOR POLICY AND
PRACTICE

Current federal policy lays the framework for a career approach to employment services for youth in foster care. Significant changes in the translation of policy into practice are needed to fulfill its intent to promote economic self-sufficiency and well-being for youth in foster care. Practice needs to transition from a focus on job placement to career development. This requires moving beyond the simple provision of skills and knowledge relevant to job-seeking to comprehensive, developmentally appropriate career services supported by program operations that integrate a career approach both internally and with external systems, and on-going professional development opportunities for staff to carry out their roles.



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