



Works Wonders™

Practice Standards for Replication



A program of



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Acknowledgements

Foster Forward is thankful for the support our Board of Directors for their stewardship and for the determination and dedication of our staff throughout the five year demonstration project to help build and refine the work to achieve better career development outcomes for youth.

Foster Forward is grateful for the leadership and investment of the Children's Bureau staff, particularly our program officer Catherine Heath, and the consultants who helped to push us to excel and remember to view our projects not just at the ground level, but the systems level as well.

Foster Forward truly appreciates our colleagues in the youth services grantee cluster – the D.R.E.A.M.R. Project in Clark County, NV; the Connections Project at the YMCA of San Diego, CA; and the Adult Connections project at the Children's Home + Aid Society of Illinois, Chicago, IL – for their peer support and willingness to be a part of a learning community to advance all our work.

Foster Forward would like to acknowledge our partners for their determination to start strong and finish stronger, all the while keeping the young people served at the center of the work. Partners include but are not limited to: The Voice Youth Leadership Board, the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families, the Workplace Center at Columbia School of Social Work, and Rhode Island College.

Most importantly, we'd like to thank all the young leaders who help to guide the work and all the youth project participants who participated in the demonstration project. Your leadership, expertise, and skills are what truly made this project a success. Your work will benefit youth who come behind you so that they can receive the very best support in exploring what they want to do with the rest of their lives.

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For more information on Works Wonders™ go to www.fosterforward.net/workswonders. You can also contact us at 401-438-3900 or via email at [kat.keenan@fosterforward.net](mailto:kate.keenan@fosterforward.net).

Executive Summary

In 2011, Foster Forward and its partners – the RI Department of Children, Youth and Families, The Workplace Center at Columbia School of Social Work, Rhode Island College School of Social Work, and The Voice Youth Leadership Board – were awarded a five year grant from the Children’s Bureau to help youth impacted by foster care develop skills to strengthen and manage relationships. As part of our final report the partners have developed a series of products designed to help advance the field of child welfare’s work with youth in foster care as it relates to career development and employment engagement.

The primary purpose of Works Wonders™ is to prepare young people to successfully transition to the adult world of work by actively engaging them in career readiness activities, identifying and minimizing barriers to success, and by building team work, active listening, and conflict resolution skills. Works Wonders™ moves beyond a transference of skills and knowledge relevant to job-seeking toward a comprehensive, developmentally appropriate career service. The program integrates a career approach both internally and with external systems and is supported through the continuing professional development of its staff.

The final report that follows provides practice standards for replication that can be used by other states or jurisdictions to learn more about Works Wonders™ and whether it might be right for them to replicate. Included in this document are highlights of the needs of the population, an overview of the program model, discussions on implementation feasibility that include cost and sustainability, as well as a summary of evaluation findings.

The collaboration created a series of additional materials that can be used by the field to better understand the model, its successes and our challenges. These documents are available at the Foster Forward website (www.fosterforward.net/workswonders), as well as will be made available through the Children’s Bureau Discretionary Grants Library. These materials include:

- A Program Model Infographic that breaks down the five program elements into an easy to digest format.
- Two video testimonials that highlight individuals’ successes that were emblematic of the intervention’s impact.
- A five part Brief series that include:
 - Works Wonders™: an Empowerment and Employment Intervention for Youth in Foster Care;
 - Engaging Foster Youth as Leaders: Lessons from the Works Wonders™ Youth Participatory Process;
 - The Challenges of a Little Agency Doing Big Data Collection;
 - Works Wonders™: A Cost Study; and

- The Importance of a Career Approach to Employment Services for Youth in Foster Care.
- Program Brochures
 - One made for youth
 - One for providers, employers, and other partners
- Works Wonders™ Toolkit & Training Guide

Also developed is a working manuscript to be submitted for peer review, entitled: Components of Effective Career Readiness Programming for Youth in Foster Care. This is not yet available for public dissemination. The evaluation of Works Wonders™ assessed the impact of a career readiness preparation program as a strategy to support youth in foster care gain economic self-sufficiency. The results demonstrated that this program was effective in enhancing youths' career preparation, connecting them with jobs and supporting a sense of self-determination. Youth who participated increased their engagement in career exploration, work readiness activities, job search activities, and job retention activities during their program participation and these increases persisted through a one year follow-up post-enrollment.

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Introduction

This document was developed as a tool to help the child welfare community learn more about the Works Wonders™ Project, its approach and findings. This set of practice standards can be used as part of any interested parties' due diligence to learn more about each component of the services, its rationale and can help determine if Works Wonders™ could be the right program for the youth they serve. Foster Forward and its partners on this project value being a part of the child welfare learning community and welcome questions and dialogue on the project, as well as questions about what we have done since full implementation as a stand-alone program.

Works Wonders™ History

Works Wonders™ was developed through a cooperative agreement with the Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. In 2011, Foster Forward was awarded a five year demonstration grant to support the effective implementation of strategies to help youth at risk of aging out of foster care—or youth who were 18 to 21 years of age and still involved with child welfare—develop skills to strengthen and manage relationships. Works Wonders™ promotes increased well-being, career development and employment engagement, relational competency, and self-determination for youth in and who have aged out of foster care so that they can achieve success as they transition to adulthood.

At the onset, Works Wonders™ began as a Randomized Control Trial, but it was quickly realized that first the intervention needed to be successfully built and then assessed for implementation feasibility of the service. Through a formative evaluation, independent evaluators were able to detail the impact of Works Wonders™ on young adults' employment status and well-being. Works Wonders™ is a combined strategy of an educational and peer support training, and one-one-one support from an employment specialist. The results indicate that Works Wonders™ had a significant positive impact on career readiness on participants' career readiness and work status. Works Wonders™ was successful in building relational competencies, such as active listening, team work and conflict resolution. Success was also achieved by reducing life circumstances that have the potential to undermine work and school, and by providing the skills and knowledge needed to be successful in the world of work.

Need for Works Wonders™

An increasing body of national data on the aging out population shows them at greater risk for incarceration, unemployment, early pregnancy and parenting, poverty, mental health problems, and homelessness.¹ Samuels explores in her study on ambiguous loss the notion that these outcomes not only are indicative of the childhood trauma experienced by these youth, but are

¹ Courtney, Mark & Heuring, D.H. 2005 "The transition to adulthood for youth aging out of the foster care system", In D. W. Osgood, E.M. Foster, C. Flannagan, and Gr. Ruth (eds), *On Your Own Without a Net: The Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.

also related to the trauma experienced while in care and the loss of their connections and membership to family systems that are shown to buffer against the increased risks noted above.² In Rhode Island, the experiences of these vulnerable youth mirror that of their peers nationally. Older youth in RI are much more likely to languish in care, to be placed in congregate care settings, and age out of the foster care system if their most recent entry in to foster care occurred after age 12.

Research suggests that the ability of youth in foster care to develop and maintain permanent relationships is at risk, regardless of whether they age out of the system or achieve permanency. Fractured and disrupted family systems coupled with multiple placements, and the trauma that these young people experience mean that all young people whose lives have been impacted by foster care are at risk of not developing the relational skills needed to successfully connect to the workforce and build healthy supportive relationships as adults.³ Therefore, during the research phase, Works Wonders™ focused its target population on youth ages 16-21 who were most likely to age out and those youth who had aged out and were participating in the state's voluntary aftercare services– YESS.

Works Wonders™ Goals

Works Wonders™ aims to accomplish the following:

- Youth complete the E² (Employment and Empowerment) – 10-12 hour peer support and educational class-based training.
- Youth meet one-on-one with an employment specialist to:
 - Establish a career and educational plan
 - Develop/Refine a career portfolio
 - Cover Letter
 - Resume
 - Job Application
 - Sample W4
- Youth are connected to experiential learning opportunities that advance their career/educational plans.
 - Informational Interviews
 - Job Shadows
 - Internships

The goals outlined above are the minimum goals of Works Wonders™. Youth often participate in more than one work experience as they explore their interests and advance in their relationships

² Samuels, Gina M. 2008. *A Reason, a season, or a lifetime: Relational permanence among young adults with foster care backgrounds*. University of Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall.

³ Ibid.

with employers. It is important to remember that we don't stop working with youth once a goal is met. The premise of Works Wonders™ is to continue to work with the youth to advance their goals, minimize their barriers to success, and help youth achieve positive outcomes in work and school.

Works Wonders™ Program Overview

The primary purpose of Works Wonders™ is to prepare young adults for the world of work. The Works Wonders™ Employment Specialist strives to ensure that a youth is actively engaged in career readiness activities, is working diligently to address and minimize barriers to success, and is building team work, active listening, and conflict resolution skills so that they can be successful at work and school. Works Wonders™ believes it is critical to success that the Employment Specialist is with the young person through all five steps of the program, from enrollment to employment (see Appendix A for the Works Wonders™ Program Model). This continuity of relationship between staff and client help to build rapport and trust, enabling both to provide honest and constructive feedback throughout the process.

The Employment Specialist works with youth upon referral to help them understand the potential value of career development and employment engagement. Participation is voluntary, but if the youth opts to enroll in Works Wonders™ the Employment Specialist will schedule them for their E² Training. This classroom based training is taught by the Employment Specialist, allowing them time to get to know the participants and their skill levels better. For additional information on the E² Curriculum, please see Appendix A and the *Works Wonders™ Toolkit & Training Guide*.

After the 10-12 hour E² Training (can vary based on class size, needs, and delivery of an optional financial unit) youth begin to meet one-on-one with the Employment Specialist for 12 weeks. During this time, youth are supported in exploring career interests and educational pathways for success. Youth complete career readiness activities, such as building a resume, practice with application completion and drafting cover letters. As youth progress through the coaching process, experiential learning opportunities are identified. These experiences are meant to help young people explore different areas of interest, as well as help young people build a foundation of skills. Whenever possible, employer sites are identified that align with the youth's identified career and educational plans. These work based learning opportunities shouldn't be seen as a "one and done." Young people should be afforded numerous opportunities for exploration.

Once youth have completed their 12 weeks of career coaching they may still need occasional guidance and support. For many of our young clients, a change in life circumstances can sometimes set them back on their paths. Having the ability to check back in as needed with the Employment Specialist is critical for their longitudinal success.

Case Example: Maria

Maria, 17 years old and still in high school, was living in a group home and preparing to enroll in nursing school. In working with her employment specialist, Maria completed a job shadow with a nurse. After spending several hours with her employer mentor she reported back to the employment specialist that she realized that she is not a people person, does not like interacting with people, and couldn't see herself pursuing a career in nursing. The employment specialist was able to coach her through a process of identifying what she thought she liked about the medical field, helping Maria to realize that what she liked most was science and lab work. The employment specialist then set up an informational interview with the state's medical examiner who talked to Maria about how she could use her love of chemistry and medicine in a career that was not as people facing. Thrilled by these new prospects, Maria changed her career and education plan and is no longer pursuing nursing, but forensic science. Through multiple experiential learning opportunities, Maria was able to safely explore her interests without incurring lost time and money enrolling in nursing school.

Program Description

Works Wonders™ Eligibility

A client is eligible for Works Wonders™ services if the:

1. Youth is between the ages of 16-21 at the time of intake.
2. Youth is currently in foster care, an extension of care program, or who has aged out of foster care. Youth can reside in different environments, such as group settings, foster homes, or living independently.
3. Youth experiences reunification with biological family during the course of their participation in Works Wonders™.
4. Youth experiences adoption during the course of their participation in Works Wonders™.
5. Youth does not have current legal status in the United States and/or is in the process of becoming legalized.

If a jurisdiction would like to more intentionally target the implementation of the model to a subsection or high risk population, the Works Wonders™ evaluation results did show that the intervention successfully reached the young adults with significant vocational and non-vocational challenges. As we have transitioned in Rhode Island from a research project to a full-fledged program, we have intentionally layered the Works Wonders™ Program on to our voluntary aftercare services (serving aged out youth ages 18-21), targeting those most disconnected youth who are not in school and not working, or who are underemployed. As we are able to increase our scale and scope, we will provide the full intervention model earlier and avail it to all those who are eligible.

This model is not appropriate for and has not been tested with youth with developmental disabilities.

Step 1: Referral & Enrollment

Works Wonders™ operates on a referral basis. The way in which referrals are made will depend on the structured implementation of the intervention. Referrals can be accepted from child welfare case managers, CASAs, mentors, community provider staff, as well as youth self-referrals. Participation in Works Wonders™ is voluntary. Given that youth in foster care often feel mandated to participate in programs, it is vital to success that youth are given decision making control for their own lives. This ensures more active participation and commitment to the program steps. The voluntary nature of the program means that youth should not be court-ordered to participate, though we encourage working collaboratively with the court systems so they are aware of the available resources.

In the referral, the Employment Specialist collects basic demographic information, contact and secondary contact information of adult supporters, and data pertaining to their child welfare involvement (see Appendix B). In an initial meeting with the participant after enrollment, the Employment Specialist will collect a baseline assessment that includes basic career planning information, what vital documents they are in possession of and those they need, education level, career goals and areas of interest (see Appendix B). Some young people are hesitant to engage in the program, sighting various vocational and non-vocational life challenges as barriers to participation and/or employment. At this initial meeting the Employment Specialist will often assist young people with troubleshooting challenges and encourage the potential client to consider all the benefits of career development and employment engagement. Once the young person agrees to participate, they are scheduled for the next available E² Training date.

Step 2: E² Training

The E² Training provides the forum for learning skills and strategies for self-advocacy, getting and keeping jobs, and maintaining stable, positive relationships (relational competencies) that help to ensure success at work. Led by the Employment Specialists, the E² Training meets at least once weekly and combines classroom instruction with peer-to-peer interaction. Length of class times and occurrences vary to accommodate different age groups and life circumstances. For those older youth who are ages 18-21 who are not in school and not working, 2-3, 4 hour classes in which lunch is provided, helps to maintain engagement and ensure completion. For younger youth who are still in school, a 2 hour class one day week for 5-6 weeks, 3, 4 hour Sunday classes or 2 hour classes twice per week for 3 weeks facilitate completion. While initial efforts looked to

ensure dosage and duration, practical adjustments were made to maximize youth engagement.

What distinguishes the E² Training from other groups for participants in foster care is that the group is non-therapeutic and strengths based, combining concrete skill development, information and mutual support. The structure and content of the training are evidence informed, enhancing the potential of the group to provide the support that will most effectively empower participants to reach their career goals.

The development of the training is guided by principles of supported employment. Supported employment promotes career development and assists individuals in securing and sustaining employment through individualized services that match a participant to a specific job based on interests, preferences, skills and abilities. Supported employment also relies upon mutual support. There is strong evidence for mutual or peer support as a best practice for youth seeking to gain entry into the labor market. Peer support provides a network for motivating individuals to overcome challenges to employment caused by mental health conditions or other life circumstances, sharing information about jobs and work experiences, learning new skills and offering emotional support.

Consistent with a positive youth development framework, Works Wonders™ also depends on the development of trusting peer relationships and the utilization of a Youth Leader to co-facilitate groups with the Employment Specialist. Based on our experience, as well as the research on youth development, the use of peer support and modeling can facilitate participant engagement and connectedness, though utilizing Youth Leaders is not without its challenges to implement. Please see the *Engaging Youth as Leaders: Lessons from a Youth Participatory Approach* for more on the opportunities and challenges with utilizing youth leaders.

Each session begins with the Peer Support Component (generally the first 20 minutes of the training each day), followed by the Educational Component. The agenda outline includes:

- A. Welcome and Purpose: Participants are introduced to one another, ground rules are set and reviewed, and a highlight of the days topics of conversation are outlined.

- B. Peer Support Component: The purpose of the Peer Support Component of the E² Training is to:
 - Provide social support: There are four dimensions of social support important to **succeeding** in employment:
 1. *Instrumental support* or the things people do for one another. In the context of peer support, this might be when participants volunteer to help each

other complete a job application, search for jobs online, or explore career options.

2. *Informational support*: This support provides the information needed to be successful in the school/training and employment process. For example, job leads will be shared during this time.
3. *Feedback*: Participants will offer each other feedback about their experiences in moving through the employment process. They can help provide a perspective on what is usual and what is not, and help brainstorm ways to respond to challenges.
4. *Emotional support*: Participants can serve as emotional support because of their shared experiences and mutual understanding of the challenges to transitioning to the world of work from foster care.

- Create the opportunity to build a career and employment network. Participants should use this time to exchange job/internship leads and other information about employment and training opportunities.
- Practice relational competency and self-advocacy skills. The training provides a context for working as team, practicing effective communication and resolving disagreements. It also is an opportunity for participants to identify their needs related to career exploration, career development and employment and take action to get those needs met.

C. Educational Component: The greatest portion of each session is dedicated to the educational content. Content is presented in a combination of didactic, discussion and structured exercises and activities through a prepared curriculum. The Educational Component of the E² Training focuses on information and skills needed to:

1. Transition into the adult world of work (e.g., how to get jobs, how to be a good worker and succeed in the workplace, how to understand workplace policies);
2. Manage challenges to employment (e.g., how to request a workplace accommodation, how to prepare a disclosure plan);
3. Ensure that careers fit interests and that individual needs are met on the job (e.g., how to build self-determination).

See Appendix A for an outline of the curriculum. The curriculum was developed by Foster Forward and the Workplace Center at Columbia School of Social Work in partnership with members of the Voice, Rhode Island's youth advocacy board for children and youth in foster care. The E² Curriculum is one component of the *Works Wonders™ Toolkit & Training Guide*.

During the E² Training youth complete a series of hands on activities that help them to move along the continuum of career education and employment engagement. Key components include:

- A. *Career Exploration: Works Wonders™* uses the *RIASEC Inventory* as its career interest inventory. The *RIASEC Inventory* asks young people to think about their likes and dislikes across six career areas.⁴ Participant's scores are then used to identify potential occupations that might be of interest to them. Foster Forward has found this career interest inventory to be easily understood by the participants and a simple to complete tool that helps both the young person and the Employment Specialist to explore career options and start career planning together.
- B. *Career Education and Planning*: Participants are introduced to online career exploration tools. Planning is based on exploring the diversity of professions and matching a career to one's skills, abilities, and interests. Participants walk through a CareerEd worksheet that coordinates education and training with their career goals. Participants learn how to advocate for their plan in a variety of settings (e.g., school, case worker, etc.).
- C. *Career Portfolio Items*: Participants complete resumes, cover letters, and complete both paper and online applications for practice. Worksheets are provided in the *Works Wonders™ Navigator* to assist with brainstorming and development.
- D. *Interview Skills*: Participants role play different interview scenarios and then discuss what they see as being the correct approach in a work setting. Young people are provided sample questions that are commonly asked in an interview and practice answering those questions in the role play.
- E. *Ecomaps*: Participants work to complete an ecomap assessment in the training that helps them identify the vocational and non-vocational supports in their life. Youth draw a visual representation of their networks of support that the Employment Specialist uses to assess numbers of those who are in the youth's network and the quality of those relationships. This ecomap is scanned in to the electronic database and returned to the youth. The Employment Specialist will refer back to this document during the one-on-one coaching sessions.
- F. *Money Management and Budgeting*: Participants are provided with an overview of money management skills to help them meet their financial responsibilities. The concept of a budgeting is also introduced as young people prepare for managing their finances and building financial capacity.

⁴ The RIASEC Inventory is adapted from the O*NET Interest Profiler, Version 3.0, developed by the U.S. Department of Labor and available through JIST Works.

Each participant is provided a *Works Wonders™ Navigator* to have during the training. This document is divided into sections that correspond to the individual units of the Educational Component. The navigator provides worksheets, role play scripts, and handy reference materials that young people can utilize throughout the training and beyond. The *Works Wonders™ Navigator* is a part of the *Works Wonders™ Toolkit & Training Guide*. To ensure that youth have the materials needed for class, the Employment Specialist holds on to each participant's navigator until the training is complete, at which point the young person is free to take it with them.

Upon completion of the E² Training, youth received a \$50 stipend. Foster Forward uses AMEX/MC/VISA gift cards rather than checks as most youth feel more gratified with this. Additionally, for youth without bank accounts it minimizes check cashing utilization (note, for those without checking accounts the Employment Specialist refers the participant to our ASPIRE financial capability program which helps them utilize mainstream banking and build assets).

Step 3: Career Coaching

The Employment Specialist supports and reinforces the E² Training activities by providing an individualized approach to help participants develop career goals and find work experiences that match their interests. The Employment Specialist works intensively with the young person, meeting in person at least twice during the 12 weeks, with weekly check ins by the youth's preferred communication method (e.g., text, Facebook, phone). The Employment Specialist can use the Career Coaching Planning tool (see Appendix B) for assistance in framing early conversations. It is encouraged that the Employment Specialist touch base more frequently in person, particularly if the participant is considered a disconnected youth (not in school and not working). He/she/ze may require more frequent meetings early on or additional time beyond 12 weeks. While this is encouraged, the Program Coordinator must pay special attention to the case load of the Employment Specialist to ensure that the staff has sufficient capacity. The Employment Specialist serves approximately 60 youth throughout one year, with approximately 15 youth at a time per quarter.

Specific goals for the Employment Specialist are to ensure that participants:

1. Utilize their career interest inventory and ecomap to facilitate development of an individualized career and education plan. CareerEd plans should contain short and long term goals, tracking next steps and progress toward goal attainment.
2. Complete a Career Portfolio that consists of a resume, cover letter, application, and sample w4 completion.
3. Connect youth to experiential learning opportunities that match their interests or build their skills to help advance their CareerEd plans. Prior to the start of the work based learning placement, the Employment Specialist should provide one-on-one mock

interview preparation so the young person feels prepared for the initial employer meeting.

4. Provide support to overcome challenges to employment caused by life circumstances. This can include referrals to community agencies, help connecting to assistance programs, obtaining work appropriate clothing, finding transportation, etc.

Each coaching session and progression in the development of the career portfolio is noted in the data tracking system. Career coaching sessions are exploratory yet goal focused, grounded in the concept of youth voice and choice. The central operating philosophy of Works Wonders™ is to help young people explore their interests, imagine their futures, develop a plan to get there, and identify supports systems that can be activated to help along the way.

Works Wonders™ isn't just about getting young people jobs and checking off a box, we want them to explore what they want to do with the rest of their lives. The youth in Works Wonders™ have educational and training experiences that differ widely from one another. It is therefore necessary to remain as broad and inclusive as possible in the approach to assisting youth in their career development activities. Being more responsive to an individual's strengths, goals, and opportunities for growth allows Works Wonders™ to deliver an unspoken message of possibility and high expectation for the youth's achievements, whatever that might mean to the youth. There are a variety of outcomes with each youth, and aspirations that are as unique as the youth we serve.

Step 4: Experiential Learning Opportunities

Learning skills in the E² Training is important, but young people also need a safe place to test those skills in a real world setting. Experiential education is important for young people to start where they are at skill wise and apply the lessons they've learned in the classroom setting in a real world context to learn and grow.

The Employment Specialist works with youth to connect them to employers willing to provide this test environment. Whenever possible, the work experience should be aligned with the CareerEd plan, though sometimes that may not be possible. Prior to the work experience, the young person completes a learning agreement (see Appendix B) so that they are able to begin the opportunity with a clear sense of what they hope to accomplish. When appropriate, this learning agreement should be shared with the employer to ensure that everyone is working toward the same objectives (though in some cases confidentiality may supersede the benefit of sharing with the employer). This learning agreement is important from a labor perspective, illustrating that any labor provided by the young person to the employer was for educational purposes and was not exploitative in nature.

Experiential learning opportunities are defined broadly in Works Wonders™ and youth receive stipends for their participation:

1. *Informational Interviews (\$25 gift card)*: The young person with guidance from the Employment Specialist develops questions to ask of a professional in their field of interest. A meeting is set with an identified person or multiple people in a specific industry and the young person has a chance to find out more about the field, how the interviewee progressed to their current position, and what skills they needed to develop to be successful. This is also a good opportunity for the young person to practice their communication techniques, sharing information about their own skills and aspirations.
2. *Job Shadows (\$25 gift card)*: The Employment Specialist and the young person using the CareerEd plan identify industries or professions that the participant is interested in learning more about. The young person then follows around a willing mentor to get a better idea of the responsibilities that the position entails. Young people get to see professionals engage with colleagues, observe work place dynamics and see what the day in and day out duties of that job are first hand. In a job shadow the young person is not actively engaging in tasks themselves, but is there to observe and ask questions.
3. *Internships (\$10 per hour, up to 40 hours)*: An internship is often a higher level work experience where the young person engages hands on in the work/services being offered by the employer. Young people can use this experience to determine if they have an interest in a particular career, to create a network of contacts, and/or to gain hands on experience in their field of interest. Employers can use this opportunity as a safe way to test out whether the young person has the skills and competency to take on full-time employment at their respective business, though this is never promised or a guarantee made to the young person.
4. *Paid Employment (employers pay rate)*: Some youth are ready at the start to search for, apply to, and obtain paid employment. In this scenario, young people are hired by the employer, paid by the employer, and have all the rights and responsibilities therein of being in the labor market. The Employment Specialist should help youth identify employment opportunities in the youth's field of interest whenever possible and can support young people in submitting resumes, applications, and in practicing for interviews.

During the work experience the Employment Specialist connects with the employer and young person to check on progress and troubleshoot any issues. Upon completion of the work experience the learning agreement is finalized by soliciting reflections from the young person on

what they have learned and what they will do next in their CareerEd plan.

Step 5: Employment, Education & Vocational Training

The Employment Specialist's role is to facilitate the young person's plan in partnership with them and if this includes finding a job right away or pursuing additional training or education then it is absolutely in their wheelhouse of responsibilities.

In addition to creating the plan, the Employment Specialist can offer assistance with researching, applying for, and enrolling in education and vocational training programs. The Employment Specialist in their coaching sessions can assist with applying to college, applying to jobs and practicing interviews right before the big day.

The Employment Specialist works closely with providers at educational and employment agencies to discuss the participant population and prepare them for any potential barriers or challenges that the population is likely to encounter. The Employment Specialist provides context on the effects of trauma and how employers and educational institutions can best support youth in and who have aged out of foster care. It is the responsibility of the Employment Specialist to maintain communication with the participant and the employers, at the early stages of the work experience, training, or employment to assist and provide job coaching as needed.

The Employment Specialist may also choose to organize larger group meetings with educational and vocational providers, including tours of facilities, job fairs, etc. as a means of helping young explore their options.

Employer Cultivation

One critical function of the Employment Specialist is to cultivate and maintain relationships with employers. The Employment Specialist, using a young person's CareerEd plan as a guide, identifies and outreaches to appropriate employers or professionals, explaining the Works Wonders™ Program, describing the benefits to the young person and the employer, as well as the supports offered during the placement. The Employment Specialist works to arrange the first meeting and depending on the placement and the young person's needs may stay to provide on-site job coaching. The Employment Specialist then follows up with employers directly during and after completion to gather feedback on the success of the work experience placement.

The Employment Specialist, in addition to doing individualized employer cultivation, works to establish relationships with larger employers in the state's growth industries. The Employment

Specialist cultivates connections within the various sectors' training pipelines to ensure that Works Wonders™ participants, as appropriate, are able to be competitive in the economy.

Case Example: Jose

Jose started Works Wonders™ at 19 years old. He was working part-time at a major clothing retailer and had taken a break from college because it was too expensive. Jose was struggling to get by and keep food in the house. He was also trying to help provide for his younger siblings. Jose, with support from the Employment Specialist was able to learn useful job tips such as interviewing and enhancing his resume. Using his interest and skills in technology, coupled with his very personable customer service skills, Works Wonders™ helped connect Jose with a paid full-time job with the Paul Masse Chevrolet Dealership. The partnership with the Paul Masse group was established prior to meeting Jose. Our team was able to work with the employer to assess their needs and what they were looking for in an employee. When Jose finished class he was a natural fit so we helped him prepare. To see a video clip of Jose's story and hear what he has to say about the difference Works Wonders™ has made in his life visit www.fosterforward.net.

As noted above, the learning agreement approach to the work experiences can help employers to satisfy labor obligations around the use of interns. It is important to note that in operating Works Wonders™ Foster Forward agrees to insure and indemnify the young people in their work experiences (with the exception of paid employment), relieving most liability from the work site. Foster Forward's ability to do this is instrumental in bringing on larger employers who look to reduce their liability. That said, employer sites need to be aware that in the event of an accident on site, they may still be liable for workers compensation claims.

Closure Meeting

Works Wonders™ is built as a 12 week intervention; however the underlying principle of the program is to begin work with youth based on what their skill set is and to work with them as long as they need in order to progress along their career development and employment engagement continuum. After young people complete all five program steps, a follow up assessment (see Appendix B) is completed and a closeout meeting is scheduled to make final adjustments to and ensure that the participant feels comfortable progressing with their CareerEd plan. The young person is then closed out from the program and informed that at any time if they experience a change in their life circumstances they can outreach to the Employment Specialist for follow up assistance.

Youth Engagement

Works Wonders™ was developed as a youth participatory model from the initial concept design, installation, and implementation. A youth participatory model was operationalized at Foster Forward by involving youth in all aspects of planning, decision making and evaluation. From inclusion into decision making about participant's stipends, curriculum and navigator content, and survey questions, youth offered their unique perspective to assist Works Wonders™ in becoming successful. As Works Wonders™ changed from a Randomized Control Trial to a formative evaluation, youth remained actively engaged in using data and feedback to help make mid-course corrections and adapt the program to better meet youth needs and achieve outcomes. Youth leaders were also engaged in the E² Training, helping to co-facilitate the peer support component and specific modules (varied based on youth leader interests and strengths), as well as helping to refine these materials as the project progressed. Engaging young people as leaders in the program brought many advantages and provided growth opportunities for us as an organization. To read more about this please see: *Engaging Youth as Leaders: Lessons from the Works Wonders™ Youth Participatory Process*.

Youth leaders helped to construct, and refine overtime, our youth engagement and retention approach to program participants. This includes:

- Providing a \$50 stipend to youth for completing the E² Training.
- Providing stipends for youth during their work experiences.
- Offering meals and snacks to youth during the E² Training.
- Creating a barrier assistance fund to assist youth with overcoming vocational and non-vocational life circumstances that keep youth from participating or finding work.
- Leveraging community donations to establish a *Dress for Success Clothing Closet* where youth can find stylish, work appropriate clothes and accessories for free.
- Establishing a computer lab in our offices to ensure youth can engage in job search activities and soliciting computer donations to give to young people for use at home.
- Assisting youth with transportation through bus passes, leveraging normalcy dollars available through our Teen Grant program to help pay for driving lessons and licensing fees, and connections to our asset match program – ASPIRE – where youth can save and match for vehicle and insurance purchases.

Like paid Foster Forward staff, volunteers and subcontractors must be able to pass a background check and be clear of any child abuse and neglect substantiations. This was relevant for our Youth Leaders, particularly since we required that youth leaders be aged 18 or older. For young people who had prior offenses this was potentially prohibitive, so through a partnership with the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families, we would do an additional screen on those

youth who came back with a disqualifying condition. Our partners at the child welfare agency would conduct a case review and then make a determination of eligibility to serve as a youth leader. It was important for us to not exclude young people for having committed past offenses but we also needed to balance the safety and well-being of the youth we served. We had tried to engage younger leaders, but given our state's small size there were often challenges with a youth leader still being in care and co-facilitating training for their peers.

Staffing

Program Coordinator

The Program Coordinator oversees daily operation of the program and its infusion across the array of agency programs. The Program Coordinator is responsible for connecting with local, state, and federal opportunities in workforce development; ensuring that the Works Wonders strategy for youth in and who have aged out of foster care provides a career pathway to employment, education, training and support services. He/She/Ze supervises the Employment Specialist and ensures a person centered career and education planning for each client that is consistent with individual CareerEd plans. The Program Coordinator helps to facilitate job/work obtainment and retention, requiring on-going outreach to new employers and the business community.

Education & Experience: The Program Coordinator should have a minimum of a Bachelor's degree in related field and a minimum of 5 years of experience providing employment services to individuals is required. Previous experience supervising people, using data to benchmark and monitor program progress, and demonstrated success in grant fundraising is required. Demonstrated success in working with youth ages 14-21 with a positive youth development approach, preferably youth in and who have aged out of the foster care system. Knowledge of education systems and their intersection with workforce development, established knowledge of employment and training programs to include interviewing techniques, vocational and employment related assessments and counseling and use of labor market information to connect participants to jobs is desired. The ideal candidate demonstrates a strong commitment to the inclusion of all individuals in the work place and the ability to support individuals in their efforts to become valued and productive employees. Preferred knowledge of employment support for individuals with challenges such as mental or physical disability.

Attributes & Competencies: Ensuring the Works Wonders™ Program Coordinator has the right qualifications helps to ensure that management of the program not only adheres to the evidence base, but also is strengthened and improved by data. When assessing candidates, screen for an applicants' competencies:

- Interpersonal savvy up, down, sideways and in and outside of the organization;

- Proven ability to work with adolescents using a positive youth development framework;
- Creative thinking and problem solving;
- Business Acumen to understand how businesses work and what strategies and tactics will work to engage them as partners;
- Developing Direct Reports and Others helping them achieve their professional development goals and will help employees build strengths where they might currently experience challenges;
- Adheres to an appropriate and effective set of values and encourages others to act in line;
- Excellent at informing people so they have what they need to do their jobs, engage as partners effectively, and can support the vision of the program;
- Innovation management that allows creative ideas and suggestions to improve the work without simultaneously rejecting all current/past practices.
- Process management;
- Humor;
- Patient yet persistent;
- Strong organizational and planning abilities;
- Strong time management skills;
- Knowledge of child welfare policies;
- Strong knowledge of state and federal work place laws;

Duties & Responsibilities:

- Follows internal protocols for delivering services, including intake processes, development of individual plans, business development procedures, and participant outcomes.
- Identifies individual and aggregate challenges to employability and job retention; assists staff and clients in resolving and mitigating barriers by identifying the need for other services and benefits.
- Facilitates connections of clients to statewide network of youth centers, as well as other educational and employment efforts, specifically sector based strategies, in the community as appropriate.
- Assists employer partners with accessing incumbent worker training grants and other opportunities that support local employers with hiring youth participants.
- Liaison with business personnel regarding: support needs of participants placed; participant's work performance; and building natural supports.
- Supervise Employment Specialist to ensure duties and responsibilities are met.
- Tracks program indicators and outcomes, and utilizes process management to organize people and activities to achieve desired results.
- Ensure all data, case files, records, reports, and forms are completed accurately and completely at all times.
- Serve as a trained trainer for the staff on the curriculum, evidence-based tools, and protocols regarding one-on-one coaching.

Employment Specialist

The Employment Specialist facilitates person centered career planning, assists with the development and creation of jobs that are consistent with individual career planning, and provides support to facilitate job/work obtainment and retention. The vigor and intensity of the Employment Specialist's workload is in constant flux depending on the individual clients' needs. The time frame through which most youth should complete is finite, so the need for the Employment Specialist to be able to multitask and work flexible hours is critical. In the field of social work people often say, meet their client where they are at. In Works Wonders™ we also mean that literally, so having access to reliable transportation is a must so that the Employment Specialist can meet young people at their homes, schools, or in a location in their local community.

Education & Experience: The Employment Specialists hired for the program should have a minimum of a Bachelor's degree in social services/education/employment services or a related field. The candidate should have a minimum of 2 years of experience training in group setting; proven experience working with adolescents, preferably youth in or who have aged out of the foster care system; established knowledge of employment and training programs to include interviewing techniques, vocational and employment related assessments, and use of labor market information to connect participants to jobs. The ideal candidate demonstrates a strong commitment to the inclusion of all individuals in the work place and the ability to support individuals in their efforts to become valued and productive employees. The candidate should have a license and access to transportation to ensure meetings happen where most convenient for the client.

Attributes & Competencies: Ensuring the Works Wonders™ Employment Specialist has the right qualifications goes beyond meeting education and experience requirements. When assessing candidates you should also screen for an applicants' competencies:

- Interpersonal savvy;
- Proven ability to work with adolescents using a positive youth development framework;
- Creative thinking and problem solving;
- Comfort around higher management;
- Humor;
- Reflective practice;
- Client focused;
- Patient yet persistent;
- Strong organizational and planning abilities;
- Strong time management skills;
- Ability to set and maintain boundaries with clients;
- Capable of working efficiently and at a fast pace;
- Group facilitation skills;

- Knowledge of child welfare policies;
- Strong knowledge of internet search tools;
- Proficiency in Microsoft Office programs;
- Comfort working with diverse populations in various environments;
- Strong knowledge of state and federal work place laws;

Duties & Responsibilities:

- Follows model protocols for delivering services, including intake processes, development of individual plans, business development procedures, and participant outcome.
- Interviews, advises, and guides a diverse population of clients to ascertain employability; interprets and explains regulations, rules, policies, and procedures to clients; may determine client eligibility for services; apprises clients of their rights, benefits, responsibilities, and obligations under program participation;
- Masters E² Training Curriculum, prepare for and teach modules in a group setting.
- Assesses client's education, work experience, skills, abilities, qualifications, and job interest; assesses client readiness for job referral, classroom training, on-the-job training, and/or support services; attempts to match clients with available employment, training, or other opportunities/services.
- Works one-on-one with participants to develop goals and objectives in a personalized employment plan and to identify barriers and challenges to employability and job retention.
- Assists clients in finding and maintaining meaningful employment consistent with their goals.
- Works closely with community providers and/or caregivers to provide communication about each client's progress in achieving his/her work goals.
- Travels to clients' employers and/or potential employers and other locations in the community; locations will vary, depending upon the needs of the individuals.
- Meet regularly with client in their home setting or a location that is most convenient for them on a regular basis.
- Prepares and maintains case files, records, reports, and forms accurately and completely, and keeps them up-to-date at all times.

Youth Leader

The Youth Leader is critical position within Works Wonders™. Foster Forward tried two approaches to engaging the youth leader, one as paid staff and another as a subcontractor. Our lessons from the research project were that there wasn't sufficient work to employ a Youth Leader full time, often leading to role confusion and diminished capacity as we increased the number of training sessions offered. During the formative period, we switched to a subcontracted model, allowing us to train and support multiple youth leaders and

accommodate multiple training sessions at one time. It also gave the youth leader the ability to focus on school that in the paid staff model they found difficult.

Like paid Foster Forward staff, volunteers and subcontractors must be able to pass a background check and be clear of any child abuse and neglect substantiations. This was relevant for our Youth Leaders, particularly since we required that youth leaders be aged 18 or older. For young people who had prior offenses this was potentially prohibitive, so through a partnership with the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families, we would do an additional screen on those youth who came back with a disqualifying condition. Our partners at the child welfare agency would conduct a case review and then make a determination of eligibility to serve as a youth leader. It was important for us to not exclude young people for having committed past offenses but we also needed to balance the safety and well-being of the youth we served. We had tried to engage younger leaders, but given our state's small size there were often challenges with a youth leader still being in care and co-facilitating training for their peers. For more information on these issues see our brief: *Engaging Youth as Leaders: Lessons from a Youth Participatory Approach*.

Experience: Successful candidates are young adults with some work experience and lived experience in foster care. Placement type while in foster care did not matter, though we did find that those who had experience in group homes and those who had additional leadership development training through our ASPIRING Young Leaders Program, were that much better equipped to co-facilitate the training. This is in part due to the over reliance of congregate care settings for teens in Rhode Island. Those who had a prior experience in congregate care felt more relatable to the current clients we were serving.

Attributes & Competencies: Ensuring the Works Wonders™ Youth Leader has the right competencies was of the utmost importance, given their limited work histories:

- Strong self-knowledge and willingness to reflect and grow;
- Willingness to learn new skills such as classroom management.
- Time management skills;
- Ability to develop strong peer relationships;
- Willingness to share personal experiences to help motivate others;
- Active Listening skills;
- Interpersonal Savvy;
- Humor;
- Ability to establish and maintain boundaries;
- Creative thinking and problem solving/conflict resolution;
- Work effectively with a team;
- Ability to self-advocate and self-care techniques;

- Ability to maintain composure;

Duties & Responsibilities:

- Master E² Training Curriculum;
- Help prepare for set up and activities for each module;
- Co-facilitate modules as agreed upon with Employment Specialist;
- Provide feedback to Employment Specialist on ways to improve training, materials, activities, etc.
- Help participants practice completing application and job searches.
- Provide information to clients on how to be successful in school/training and employment.
- Assist youth with managing challenges in their placement settings or in developing an advocacy plan to communicate more effectively with their caseworkers.
- Share personal experiences or experiences of others you know in moving through the career development and employment engagement process.
- Provide support and understanding for shared challenges in transitioning to the world of work from foster care.

Works Wonders™ Data Collection

Foster Forward utilizes a web based relational database operated by Social Solutions called Efforts to Outcomes (ETO). Sites looking to adopt Works Wonders™ should identify a relational database product that will allow them to maintain participant specific records. Should a site already have a relational database, they will need to verify that it is adaptable to the program specifications of Works Wonders™. The database used to track Works Wonders™ should be highly customizable, allowing an administrator to create forms, specify demographic and other data collection fields, and run reports. Sites should seek a product that offers its users advanced support services as some of the reports that facilitate the process of Works Wonders™ are beyond the scope of what a Program Coordinator or Database Manager may be able to easily build. Reports are pivotal to tracking survey completion, staff performance and workload, and to demonstrating fidelity to the model. They also help teams to make mid-course corrections to the elements of Works Wonders that are not prescribed. Foster Forward is able to provide technical assistance in the building of Works Wonders™ data collection tools in other relational databases, and guidance on structuring reports.

Just as important as having the right database is hiring the right people to enter and manage the information in it. Sites should look to hire Employment Specialists who are detail oriented and comfortable with data entry and cleaning. Candidates for Program Coordinator or Director should

demonstrate value for data driven decision making and experience in engaging others in that process.

Due to the data collection elements required in Works Wonders™, an agency that is considering replication will need to consider who will be responsible for the maintenance of the relational database. Foster Forward has a full-time Program Evaluation Coordinator who is responsible for all of the aspects outlined above; creating forms and other data collection fields, creating and running reports, managing ETO, and orchestrating data cleaning. Sites may consider utilizing a staff member within the agency who is already dedicated to program evaluation, as this role within Works Wonders™ would not necessitate a full-time equivalent. If there is no one within the agency who could take up this work, sites should either seek to hire a Program Coordinator who has the skill set to manage this aspect of the project directly, or a part-time Program Evaluation/Database Management staff person. Note that this will impact budgetary considerations that are outlined below.

Works Wonders™ Tools

Included in this section are explanations of additional tools used in the implementation of Works Wonders™. A copy of these tools can be found in the Appendix B.

Works Wonders™ Intake

The *Works Wonders™ Intake* is completed at the first meeting between the Employment Specialist and the participant and contains demographic and other basic questions about their work and school history. A follow up to this brief questionnaire is completed at the closure meeting. The Employment Specialist can simply ask the participant the questions and note their answers in the database.

Works Wonders™ Baseline and Follow-Up Assessment

The *Works Wonders™ Assessment* has been adapted from the assessment used during the research phase to focus on the areas of impact that were successful. The baseline is conducted in the first class and the follow up is at the one year mark of program enrollment. A stipend of \$25 is offered for the completion of the follow up survey. If a young person takes a baseline at their first meeting with the Employment Specialist but doesn't enroll in and finish the class per the normal schedule, a new baseline should be completed after 45 days.

The baseline and follow up assessment contains 22 questions that assess current and historical education and work status, inclusive of assessing career development and employment engagement activities. The assessment also measures the young persons' sense of active listening, team work, and conflict resolution and which documents they are in possession of that

would facilitate employment. Finally the assessment explores challenges the young person perceives with obtaining employment. Interviewer instructions are also available to facilitate completion and can be found in the appendix as well.

Works Wonders™ EcoMap

Everyone needs some type of support whether it's at home, at school, at work or elsewhere. Works Wonders™ uses an EcoMap, a diagram/picture that shows different connections in an individual's life, between people, places, and/or systems. The EcoMap is used as a tool to help young people identify supports that may be key to being able to advocate for themselves and reach their goals. The EcoMap is completed in class and the young people are asked to identify vocational and non-vocational supports, as well as look at how the different relationships in their lives might come and go.

The Employment Specialist will then utilize the EcoMap in the one-one-one coaching process to complete the form included in Appendix B. This form helps to quantify and categorize the relationships for evaluative purposes, but also helps the Employment Specialist to work with the young person on leveraging or building their networks of support.

Works Wonders™ Employment Support Log

Each contact between the Employment Specialist and the participant is logged in an online relational database. Each log contains the young person's name, the method of contact (e.g., text, email, in person), the date of contact, the date of next contact, the reason for the contact – with a specified list of categories, time spent during contact, with whom the contact was made (e.g., youth, employer, case worker), any employer cross reference, any educational institution cross reference, and notes to qualitatively summarize the interaction.

Works Wonders™ Employer Log

When the Employment Specialist is cultivating new employers it is important to keep track of key information about each entity. This is created once per entity, but should be updated with any changes. Works Wonders™ tracks employer contact information, key contacts, descriptions of services, types of experiences the employer is willing to offer, what industry the employer falls under, and any specific issues, concerns, or considerations that need to be factored in prior to placement of a young person.

Youth specific conversations with an employer can be tracked in the Employment Support Log through an employer/educational institution cross reference.

Works Wonders™ Career Portfolio

The Career Portfolio in Works Wonders™ is completed only once per participant, but is updated regularly as the young person progresses in their development.

The Career Portfolio is where the career and educational plan is recorded, tracking job goals, areas of interests, and steps needed to advance the goals. The results of the young person's career interest inventory (noted above and completed in class) are included in the Career Portfolio as well. The Career Portfolio contains the young person's summary of their CareerEd plan, resume, cover letter, any letter of recommendation, sample W4 completion, and any sample or real applications for employment completed. Copies of all these materials are scanned and attached to the online client file. We have found this particularly useful as a means of helping to provide to young people should they lose their own copies.

Finally, the Career Portfolio contains information about the participant's experiential learning opportunities, including a copy of their Learning Agreement (see Appendix B), the place, date and type of experience, the hours completed in total, and the duration of the work experience.

Cost & Sustainability

The full cost of designing, installing, implementing, adapting, and evaluating Works Wonders™ during the five year research project was \$1,922,454.

- Foster Forward staffing costs for the five-year period, including fringe were \$971,910, 50.6% of the total project costs.
- Research and evaluation, as well as audit costs of this project budget represented 41.7% (\$801,805) of total expenses.
- Direct benefits to youth that included incentives, food, youth leader stipends, and barrier assistance amounted to \$66,971, or 3.5% of the budget during the project's duration.
- Occupancy costs incurred represented \$39,059 or 2% of the budget.
- Travel and mileage for staff to meet with participants represented \$34,456 or 1.8% of the budget.
- Supplies and materials accounted for .4%, or \$8,253 of total operating budget.

Using the total number of dollars spent (\$1,922,454) and the total hours of service provided per youth or young person (9,826 hours), we determined that the cost per youth, per hour was \$195.65. The average number of hours of service was 24.5 (SD=23.62). The average cost per youth for the full duration of the Project was \$4,794.13. This is inclusive of evaluation costs that again represented 41.7% of the budget. With this removed, the per youth cost of service is \$2,794.

The average yearly operating program budget was \$233,328.79. As Foster Forward refined the model and staffing array there has been achieved efficiencies and decreased costs, while seeing our number of young people served increase.

Since rolling out Works Wonders™ as a program in April of 2016, Foster Forward has been able to run and sustain the program with a budget of approximately \$200,000 per year. From a staff perspective, this includes one Coordinator and one Employment Specialist, plus portions of administrative staff time. With this staff complement, Works Wonders™ is able to serve up to 120 young adults per year at a cost of roughly \$1,700 per participant. This cost per participant includes the direct cash benefits paid to the young person for their work experiences, making this a cost efficient model that the evidence shows moves the needle for young people's career development and employment engagement success. A jurisdiction looking to replicate the Works Wonders™ model would also need to factor in startup costs to their overall budget, inclusive of computers, desks, database development, evaluation and technical assistance, etc. For more information on cost and sustainability, see the brief: *Works Wonders™ Cost Study*.

To date, Foster Forward has secured funds to sustain this work through state workforce dollars, local foundation support, corporations, and banking institutions. Foster Forward will also be looking to leverage state child welfare dollars through future competitive contracts to serve youth in and who have aged out of foster care.

Organizational or Jurisdictional Readiness

The Children's Bureau structured the cooperative agreement to maximize success, allowing for a planning and installation year. This afforded Foster Forward time to not only develop and test materials, but to ensure that practice, organizational, and system implementation drivers were in place.

System Partners

In a system of federal and state child welfare mandates one might argue that the imperative for improving outcomes should rest solely with the county or state child welfare systems. Foster Forward believes that private partners have an incredibly important role in partnering with those systems to do this work. The flexibility in hiring and staff hours of availability, the nimbleness and ability to fundraise and leverage other resources – such as clothing, computers and other items needed for barrier assistance, paying stipends and for hourly work experiences for participants, securing insurance certificates and being able to ensure labor law compliance through learning agreements are just some of the ways in which private agencies can bring tremendous value-add to state and county systems.

Foster Forward has been able to mobilize more quickly around at risk populations than the bureaucratic state and local contracting processes normally allow. For example, Foster Forward was able to assess that while effective for most youth aging out of foster care, the Rhode Island After-Care Services was not effectively serving approximately one quarter of the youth. These youth were highly disconnected (not in school and not working) and were failing to meet the parameters for receiving after care services, but were clearly in need of additional support. Upon the completion of the research project, Foster Forward was able to leverage outside resources to support and enhance the investment the state was making to the aged out population and improve outcomes for youth who otherwise were being left behind. While these are some of the hardest to serve youth, Works Wonders™ is successfully moving them along a career exploration and employment engagement continuum. Jurisdictions with extended foster care or after care services might find it compelling to layer this intervention on to their existing supports.

Practice and Organizational Implementation Drivers

Assessing whether your organization or jurisdiction is ready to promote the uptake and sustainability of Works Wonders™ will require looking at the current conditions or environment you are proposing to implement the program in, assessing the processes in place to not only implement but maintain and improve the program, and evaluating the practice, organizational, and system drivers that are needed to succeed. Geographic considerations should be a factor in determining the scope of program implementation. Staff need to be able to provide services to young people in locations that are easiest and most convenient for the youth. This may mean that from enrollment through all steps in the program that staff travels to where the young person/people are to deliver the intervention. This will have implications on staffing and scale for jurisdictions.

To assess whether your organization is primed for implementation of Works Wonders™ one should be able to answer *YES* – or have action plans in place to get to *YES* – to the following Practice and Organizational Readiness Questions:

- Does the organizational leadership – inclusive of the Board of Directors – believe in the value of youth empowerment and the importance of career readiness and employment engagement for this population? In early implementation these leaders may be needed to help leverage employer support and to build connections to the labor and training agencies that child welfare organizations may not be as familiar with.
- Does all staff at the organization understand the importance and differentiation in youth serving programs from programs that serve younger children in the system? There is a

philosophical, policy, and practice difference in how you provide services and supports to younger children and older youth whose lives are impacted by foster care. Valuing and establishing policy and practices that encourage youth to build their protective factors and minimize their risk factors are critical to the success of implementation.

- Does your organization have access to a group of young people that they can actively engage in the program? Waiting on referrals, particularly early on, can slow progress and dampen staff momentum. Having connections to identified groups of youth in and who have aged out of foster care prior to launch can help achieve early successes that build enthusiasm for the program.
- Does your organization value a positive youth development approach that incorporates youth voice and choice? Taking developmentally, trauma informed approaches to working with participants are critical to the success of the program. This also means that if a youth is considered “disconnected” that you don’t give up but work creatively to engage that youth in a manner that honors their voice in the process.
- Does your organization provide youth leadership opportunities or support the empowerment of youth as leaders in the work? The youth participatory process was essential to us putting the pieces of the puzzle together to best engage and serve the young people.
- Does your organization have the financial capacity to plan, implement and sustain the program with required direct and support staff, as well as direct and indirect cost lines? Sustainability should include leveraging the development department, your Board of Directors, and all members of your leadership team.
- Does your organization value data driven decision making and using performance measures to assess progress toward outcomes?
- Does the organization have a data system or ability to fund the implementation of a relational database system that can be used to track program fidelity and be used for continuous quality improvement?
- Does the organization have the appropriate infrastructure in place to support staff training and ongoing assessment? Providing initial and ongoing training, supervision, and professional development opportunities to staff is critical to ensuring connections to labor market trends, employer needs, and advancements in practice.

- Does your organizational hiring practice incorporate youth voice and assess potential employees based on not just work experience but behavioral and technical core competencies? Involving youth in the hiring process has been critical to ensuring we find staff that are able to successfully relate to and engage with clients.
- Do organizational partners, including child welfare agencies and labor and training systems, value career exploration and employment engagement for the population? Do they buy in to the need for additional supports that are not a one-size fits all model? Without stakeholder buy in, success can be strained and limited. Even if all stakeholders are not bought in, having allies is important to maneuvering past roadblocks.

System Implementation Drivers

A key consideration when gauging organizational or jurisdictional readiness are the system drivers that might impact implementation. While a system does not need to be able to answer YES to all of these questions for an organization or jurisdiction to be ready, it is important to understand what elements of your system might support or impeded implementation and success.

- Does the leadership in the jurisdiction believe and establish policies for a youth-focused system that is led by youth, is positive and future oriented, developmentally informed by adolescent brain research, and normalcy focused?
- Does the direct care staff in the child welfare agency have the training and education in adolescent brain development, positive youth development approaches, and normalcy to effectively implement youth-focused policies into their everyday practice?
- Do resource families and congregate care providers in the jurisdiction have policies and practices in place that support normalcy for youth in foster care? Also consider what tools you as a youth advocate have for elevating deviations from youth friendly practice to address concerns.
- Are the court systems in the jurisdiction supportive of a youth serving system that lets young people's voices be a part of the conversation and transition planning process?
- What does the state's Chafee plan say about the value of youth career development and employment engagement?

Evaluation Findings

The evaluation of Works Wonders™ assessed the impact of a career readiness preparation program as a strategy to support youth in foster care gain economic self-sufficiency. The results demonstrated that it was effective in enhancing youths' career preparation, connecting them with jobs and supporting a sense of self-determination. Findings suggested that it did so through its influence on challenging life circumstances that had the potential to undermine work, developing the skills to secure work and on the relational competencies important to getting and keeping jobs. Career readiness and self-determination were greater to the extent that challenging life circumstances decreased, skills increased and, relational competency improved. Youth were also more likely to be working as challenging life circumstances decreased and relational competency increased. Importantly, the influence of life circumstances, skills and relational competency on career readiness, self-determination and work tended to persist over time. Highlights of specific findings were:

- Youth increased their engagement in career exploration, work readiness activities, job search activities and job retention activities during their program participation and these increases persisted through a one year follow-up post-enrollment.
- The proportion of youth employed following program participation increased significantly from 38.3% to 52%. Further, there were significant increases in the proportion of those who both worked and stayed connected to school or training important to progressing in their careers.
- Career readiness, self-determination and employment were affected by several factors: 1) work history: This finding is consistent with the evidence base that consistently shows the importance of work experience while in care to future employment success; 2) life circumstances: Youth who experienced a reduction in challenging life circumstances during program participation were significantly more likely to show increased career readiness, increased self-determination and were working at program completion; 3) Several relational competencies significantly affect outcomes. Youth who increased their capacity for positive problem solving in the face of conflict and learned not to respond submissively to conflict were more likely to increase career readiness activities and be working. Self-determination increased for youth who increased their ability to work in a team.

These findings have significant implications for practice. First, the strong relationship between life circumstances and positive outcomes reinforces the need for coordinated services. Second, it is essential that career readiness preparation is not provided in isolation from wraparound

support. Third, career readiness preparation benefits from both a group component to build relational competency as well as an individual component that responds to the unique set of life circumstances experienced by each youth. Finally, career readiness preparation needs to prepare youth for all aspects of employment, not just how to find a job. For example, the importance of job retention skills to work outcomes was demonstrated by this study.

Works Wonders™ Training and Technical Assistance

Foster Forward is interested in helping other organizations and jurisdictions implement Works Wonders™. We will provide on-site training and technical assistance to agencies wishing to learn more about Works Wonders™ philosophies, development, implementation, and assessment approaches. Most training can be completed in two days. Foster Forward is happy to extend the training to assist with further development in an area that an organization deems needing more support in, such as effectuating a peer support curriculum or developing their database. At this time, we do not offer a train the trainer model. All trainings are to be conducted by staff of Foster Forward.

Our training includes, but is not limited to the following:

- An overview of Works Wonders™
- Comprehensive review of the *Works Wonders™ Toolkit & Training Guide*.
- Technical assistance with setting up data and outcomes tracking.
- Peer support and ongoing technical assistance.
- Review of facilitator reflections in early implementation (used to help refine facilitator practice and make mid-course adjustments as needed – see Appendix B).
- Troubleshooting how to overcome barriers.

Key Recommendations for Next Steps:

1. Look for opportunities to hardwire Works Wonders™ into the Chafee Independent Living Services array to support advancements of career readiness for youth.
2. Continue to embed Works Wonders™ into the state workforce development landscape, including WIOA, local workforce investment boards, or initiatives out of the Governor’s Office, such as the Governor’s Workforce Board.
3. Continue to publicize evaluation findings through additional research, webinars, and presentations.
4. Recruit and support other sites that would be primed for replication to implement Works Wonders™– leveraging the replication tools – and evaluate with Randomized Control Trial protocols.
5. Continue to locally evaluate the impact of Works Wonders™ in Rhode Island through a results based accountability framework with an eye on population level outcomes.