

Ready for Life Journal Project

Summer 2009

Preliminary Analysis

Introduction

Ready for Life asked teens who were turning 18 during the summer of 2009 to record their thoughts and experiences pertaining to aging out of out-of-home placement. It should be noted that while all of the youth in this population were in out-of-home care, some were not in foster care. At least one subject was in relative placement and another was not living with biological family, but also was not in state care. Some of the specifics the youth were asked to discuss included experiences with the processes of meeting their basic needs, such as locating and maintaining housing, finding employment, transportation and managing their finances. In addition to basic needs the journal project asked children to discuss their thoughts and experiences with other common issues that face all youth such as continuing their education and involvement with peers, family and community. The project also asked the subjects who were in foster care to look back and provide insight on their overall experience with the system. What follows are some preliminary results derived from a content analysis conducted on the completed journals. The analysis searched for common themes and insights that could unite the experiences of the youth and serve as a foundation for gaining better knowledge about what factors maximize the probability that youth in out-of-home care transition to and maintain a successful young adulthood.

Transition to Adulthood

While most of the population was looking forward to becoming adults, nervousness about their new responsibilities was a common theme among this population. Many expressed that it felt like “going from a child to an adult in one day”. Regardless of their living situation prior to turning 18 years, a majority of the youth expressed feeling anxious, primarily because they felt that they did not know what to expect and also due to concerns about having sufficient resources to be able to maintain housing, obtaining employment and being successful managing their finances.

From the information provided it appeared that reaching 18 years of age may have been a better experience for youth when they did not have to be immediately concerned with the responsibilities of meeting their needs for housing, food and finances. Those who

had a good relationship with their current placement and who were able to remain there past their 18th birthdays seemed to express fewer feelings of anxiety about having to suddenly be responsible for meeting basic needs and were able to spend more time focusing on continuing their education or seeking employment. In fact, this group actually expressed feelings of concern for their contemporaries who were facing this situation. Those who were expected to immediately leave their placements expressed numerous concerns about their immediate responsibilities even to the point of stating that they felt unprepared for the change. In a number of these cases many of the youth stated that they did not have something as basic as a state-issued identification card and a few did not have the necessary documentation or funds to obtain something as fundamental as an identification. Some of the youth wrote that not having identification served as a barrier and prevented from completing basic tasks such as registering for classes so they could continue their education.

The transition to adulthood held additional challenges for youth who were pregnant and/or parenting while in foster care. A significant portion of the group stated that they had become pregnant while on runaway status and few completed their high school education. Most of the subjects who were pregnant or had children retained custody of their child(ren) (at least during the course of this project). Common topics included anxiety and stress about their preparedness for parenting, ability to provide for the child's basic needs and medical care, obtaining child care in order to seek employment or attempt to complete their education. This group of participants almost exclusively expressed that the fathers of their children were intermittently involved and providing support or not involved at all.

Experiences with meeting basic needs

Meeting basic needs essentially encompasses all of the youths' experiences, from having sufficient sources of income to be able to not only initially obtain housing and food, but the ability to manage resources to be able to continue to maintain meeting these needs. Some of the population reported that they lacked confidence in their budgeting skills because of lack of instruction. A few who received this instruction expressed that the lessons did not reflect "real life" situations and oftentimes came too late. Despite this, it appeared that a large portion of the population was able to prioritize and meet their financial obligations prior to using funds for discretionary spending.

A majority of the population reported that they received "Road to Independence" (RTI) funds and that this was a critical resource in order to be able to maintain housing, utilities, and the remainder of their basic needs. A large portion of the population also supplemented with food stamps and Medicaid. Even with these subsidies, some of the

population struggled with having enough to buy food throughout an entire month, furnish their living spaces and obtain transportation. A few in the population stated that they were not eligible for RTI funds and their statements reflected the additional barriers they faced in their attempts to become self-sufficient, such as experiences with homelessness.

Employment

A majority of the population expressed strong desires to work and be employed, however the inability to secure employment appeared to serve as one of the primary sources of frustration expressed in the journals. A majority of the youth who were not employed reported that they were unable to find work throughout the approximately three month duration of the project. Besides the current economic situation, another barrier frequently cited by youth looking to obtain employment was lack of reliable transportation. Even those who regularly used public transportation expressed that they felt limited to seeking work close to their residence.

Education

A significant portion of the participants revealed that they had not completed high school. However, a majority of the population were adamant in the belief that education was the primary path to what they felt it meant to be successful and to becoming financially independent. Youth who participated in this project expressed a strong desire and commitment to either completing their GED if they left school early or continuing to college if they had completed high school.

While the participants appeared to be strongly attached to education and aspired to professional or technical careers, many still experienced barriers to even taking the first step, such as not having funds for an application fee or having left foster care without critical documentation such as birth certificates and social security cards that left them unable to apply to attend school or delayed their entries.

Transportation

Next to employment it appeared that access to transportation was an additional source of frustration for the participants. From the information provided, it did not appear that any of the participants had access to a personal vehicle. In addition, few of the participants knew how to drive or possessed a license. The youth participants relied on

public transportation, rides from friends, family, care managers and program staff; or walking for mobility.

Foster care experiences

The general responses of the participants regarding their time in foster care fell on the continuum from positive to negative. This may be reflective of what the subjects experienced across the range of placement types (traditional foster home to group home) and the participants varying experiences regarding care managers. Most positive remarks regarding foster homes came from participants who felt included as part of the family, or who were continuing to stay in their placements after turning 18 because of supportive foster parents. Group home living appeared to be the source of most of the ambivalent or negative discussions. Comments directed at care managers is where a number of participants pointed out that that they felt their care managers did not communicate with them regularly, frequently failed to follow-up on promised actions and closed their cases without providing documents that they were going to require to move forward with such things as obtaining identification, entering school and obtaining employment.