

## **Improving Outcomes for Youth in Transition Focus Group Summary The University of Iowa School of Social Work**

The following summary is based on key findings from focus groups conducted with DHS supervisors, workers, transition specialists, and youth, as well as interviews with key informants as part of the federal child welfare grant on improving outcomes for youth in transition. Following the discussion of participants and summary of key findings, we propose a set of competencies for supervisors and workers around which to build the training.

### **Participants**

NRC staff and consultants conducted sixteen focus groups with a total of 150 participants, including:

- Eight (8) focus groups of DHS child welfare supervisors, one in each service area, with a total of 89 supervisors participating.
- Two (2) focus groups of DHS caseworkers, one in a primarily rural service area and the other in a service area with a substantial urban population. A total of 26 caseworkers participated.
- Three (3) focus groups of youth who recently aged out of foster care. Two of the groups were held in Central Iowa and the other in Eastern Iowa. A total of 12 youth participated, including four youth of color and one physically disabled youth.
- A focus group of Transition Specialists, with 8 participants.
- A focus group of Native American families in Sioux City, with eleven participants.
- A focus group consisting of 4 representatives of aftercare provider agencies.

In addition, NRC staff conducted interviews with thirteen key informants identified by the Iowa DHS Training Committee and others. These informants represented the perspectives of foster parents, private youth serving agencies, public health, DHS, and advocacy organizations. Three of the key informants represented provider agencies which primarily serve minority youth.

### **Findings**

Key points are organized according to various questions posed by facilitators and interviewers.

*What are the most pressing needs for youth in transition?*

- Respondents easily identified multiple pressing needs for youth in transition, including financial support, housing, health and mental health care and health insurance, educational attainment, job readiness, transportation, having all of their “vital documents”, getting a driver’s license
- Even though it is harder to achieve in foster or group care, youth need opportunities to develop their unique talents and interests through participation in extra-curricular activities, art, music or performance opportunities, paid or volunteer jobs, etc.

- Beyond the common needs for youth transitioning out of care, mental illness, emotional disturbance, and/or developmental delays pose even greater challenges for youth to achieve independence.
- Youth leaving care need positive, supportive relationships with adults, someone to turn to for help even with common challenges faced by young adults
- High caseloads keep workers from doing sufficient planning and skill development for youth leaving care, creating a sense that many of these youth are destined for failure
- Due to their high level of vulnerability, youth leaving care need to be able to return to care voluntarily if their plan for independence fails
- There is a gap between life skills that youth may be taught while in care and experience in practicing these skills and learning from mistakes.
- Youth leaving care need to be understood as youth--our expectations that they will be able to create and adhere to plans may not be realistic when most youth of that age are also not developmentally prepared but have their family as safety net
- Youth would like to be better informed about health coverage, financial resources and the changes that occur when they leave care, as well as other programs and how to access them. Youth are concerned about transportation since many of their goals depend on reliable transportation. They expressed a need for mentors or sponsors; one idea suggested was a hot line to get advice from other youth.

*How is the transition process working currently and how can this be improved?*

- Currently transition planning tends to be treated as an event that occurs at a particular age, usually resulting in a document that focuses on housing, education and means of support
- Participants discussed the fact that the Department's prioritizing young children in care has resulted in older youth being seen as a lower priority in terms of workers' time and available resources.
- Supervisors generally see their role as providing their workers with information, tracking progress in transition planning, and assisting workers with barriers that come up (courts, schools, adult services), but acknowledge that high workloads and the Department's focus on young children present barriers to solid transition planning
- Some participants discussed the idea of specialized caseloads, allowing those workers most skilled in working with teens to focus on this population; however, the Department's trend appears to be in the opposite direction of more generalized caseloads
- Because many caseworkers have few teens on their caseloads, transition planning is more difficult because they are not doing this regularly, have to learn new regulations, etc.
- There is widespread consensus that to be more successful, the work of transition planning should begin earlier in the youth's life.
- The amount of time spent managing disrupted placements is often a barrier to effective transition planning, distracting both workers and youth.
- The role of the transition planning specialist seems to be unclear in different service areas. Some participants believe that the transition planning specialist should be handling all issues related to transition; the transition planning specialists express their role as providing support and information to workers to assist in their work with youth in transition.

- There is widespread acknowledgement that youth in transition would benefit from support/training in social skills, not only life skills such as balancing a checkbook or completing a job application
- Participation in aftercare services would be helpful for many youth; however, an effective recruitment strategy may be needed to help youth see how the program will benefit them.
- There are mixed feelings about the Ansell life skills assessment—some feel that it's too cumbersome, some don't use it, some feel that as a self-report it may not be reliable and valid. Some youth experience the assessment as a test that they “pass” or “fail,” used to determine whether they are ready to leave care.
- Participants acknowledge that foster parents end up doing a lot of the one-on-one work in preparing youth for transition, and that the Department should be doing more to prepare and support them, and clarify expectations.
- Youth in care express the feeling that they are unimportant. They know that their caseworkers have a heavy workload but would like more contact, even if by phone. They would like caseworkers to talk to them directly, not just communicate through foster parents and service providers. They would also like to know when their worker is leaving. And they would like their workers to treat them as people with potential, not just problems.

*How engaged are youth in planning for their own transition?*

- There is consistent agreement that transition planning, when done, is more often led by the worker than by the youth. Some participants feel that youth are left out of the planning; they are not present at the meetings when most decisions are made.
- There is considerable variation across services areas and counties in how transition plans are made and the degree to which youth are involved in developing a plan and whether meetings specifically for transition planning are held
- Youth provided varied opinions about transition planning. Some acknowledge “going along with the plan” just to be free of the child welfare system as soon as possible. Others would like workers to spend more time with them in helping them to prepare to leave care, and to be able to stay in touch after they leave care.
- Youth feel unprepared for many situations that they will be facing—for example, some placements don't permit them to hold jobs, they are inexperienced in learning how to make their own choices because things are decided for them

*How do youth-serving agencies in your community work together (or not) to support youth transitioning out of care?*

- Issues of agencies working together to support youth in transition came up frequently, particularly with regard to county mental health services for youth turning 18 and the educational system.
- In some communities, county mental health services will not participate in transition planning until the youth turns 18, which makes planning difficult.
- In some areas, DHS staff express frustration with the public schools, believing that schools tend to give up too easily on youth in care, do not encourage youth to complete school, and do not collaborate with DHS.

- However, there is considerable variation among service areas in how community agencies are working together, with some having established effective community partnerships for transition planning.
- Some participants expressed the view that rural areas don't offer a range of services and don't have enough services, but others felt that small counties work better together because they are more aware of the individuals needing services in their communities
- Some participants expressed the notion that the maze of services is confusing even to them; it is even more overwhelming for youth who are expected to navigate it.
- Some participants believe that DHS staff at all levels, but especially supervisors, must be more visible in the community and involved in collaborations with community entities.
- Many participants suggested identifying a person (such as a CASA or community mentor) or agency to reach out to the youth at various intervals after the youth has left care. That person/agency could be assigned well before the youth ages out and the youth encouraged calling on that person for help, if needed.

*Do minority youth experience unique challenges in transitioning?*

- Overall, DHS staff did not identify specific challenges in transition for minority youth; more often they identified commonalities for all youth in care or described the challenges more in terms of class than of race/ethnicity.
- Some participants felt that African-American and Native American youth had the advantage at the time of transition in that their families and communities welcomed them back
- Some participants expressed a dearth of interpreters and services for non-English speaking youth, which made it quite problematic to work with non-English speaking youth
- Some supervisors believed that their workers lacked training and experience with minority groups
- Minority consumers and providers were vocal in identifying unique challenges that youth of color faced in transitioning out of care.
- Minority youth expressed not being able to talk about issues of racial or religious discrimination that they experienced with their caseworker
- Minority providers stated that cultural competence training and more minority staff at DHS are needed to more effectively serve youth of color
- Native American participants noted special challenges for youth who may need special assistance in establishing tribal membership and connections, for both financial and emotional support. Native youth may suffer from a loss of cultural identity and may need a re-introduction to their culture.
- Some respondents noted that gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and questioning youth struggle to find acceptance in foster homes, sometimes leading to running away and placement disruptions

*Do youth transitioning from state care to adulthood have permanent connections?*

- Participants acknowledged the importance of supports and permanent connections, and stated that many youth leaving care do not have positive connections.
- Many participants further acknowledged that youth for whom permanency is unresolved return to their biological families, and that youth would be better served if reestablishing connections was part of transition planning
- Where possible, consideration should be given to preserving connections to biological families, including siblings and extended families, through visitation and attendance at significant family events such as funerals.
- Some youth are able to maintain permanent connections with foster parents; other youth break connections as they approach 18 out of fear of the future
- Participants discussed different successes in pursuing non-traditional connections (with former teachers, ministers, etc.) and the need to think creatively in this area.
- Some participants discussed the potential use of family team meetings to engage youth in transition planning and to build permanent connections

*Are there specific content areas that you would like to see included in a curriculum for transition planning?*

- adolescent development and behaviors
- mental health issues and developmental disabilities
- preventing placement disruption and mitigating the effects of placement and adoption disruption
- strategies for reconnecting youth with families and/or significant adults in their lives
- cultural sensitivity training
- knowledge of services and policies for youth who are leaving care
- strategies for allowing kids to take risks and learn from them
- best practices in transition planning, including how to achieve an effective “handoff” to adult services
- tools for helping DHS staff track the transition planning process
- planning for youth transitioning from different settings—residential, group, foster care
- how to make the independent living assessment more usable
- engaging youth more in their own transition planning
- real life scenarios, including kids of different abilities--those headed for college and those need adult services and strategies for obtaining services
- how to work more effectively with the educational system
- working with foster parents in transition planning
- some electronic and/or web based resources with current information on services and policies
- developing volunteers as youth mentors

From these key findings, we propose a set of competencies for supervisors and caseworkers to serve as the basis for the training program. These competencies focus on improving practice with youth in transition by promoting stronger youth involvement, strengthening permanent connections into adulthood, understanding the youth’s cultural heritage and

incorporating this in transition planning, and strengthening collaboration among the various entities involved in transition planning.

## **Proposed Supervisor Competencies for Improving Outcomes for Transitioning Youth**

1. Uses supervision and the supervisory relationship to promote positive youth development approach to work with youth/adolescents.
2. Coaches staff in the importance of and the skills necessary to support youth in identifying and sustaining permanent connections.
3. Advocates for/allocates resources which respect the diverse needs of youth.
4. Uses supervision to assure culturally competent practice with youth.
5. Ensures that DHS is an effective partner on the transition planning committee.
6. Develops and sustains collaborative community relationships (including foster parents and group care providers) that support youth in transition.
7. Coaches workers to incorporate knowledge of adolescent development, characteristics, behaviors, and social challenges into assessment and case planning.
8. Recognizes indicators of mental illness and developmental disabilities and provides consultation to workers
9. Supervises workers in implementing policy and programs relevant to adolescents in transition.

## **Proposed Caseworker Competencies for Improving Outcomes for Transitioning Youth**

1. Involves and supports youth in an ongoing process to develop skills, resources, knowledge, and attributes that the youth defines as necessary for survival and success.
2. Supports youth in establishing relationships and maintaining permanent connections.
3. Understands the unique cultural self-identity of youth and incorporates this understanding into case planning.
4. Effectively collaborates with youth, the youth's support system and with community agencies in developing, implementing, and evaluating a transition plan.
5. Advocates for youth's needs with outside agencies (i.e., schools) as warranted.
6. Understands the factors that contribute to placement stability and implements strategies to achieve placement stability (including sensitive management of placement transitions).
7. Demonstrates knowledge of adolescent development, characteristics, behaviors, and social challenges through thoughtful assessment and case planning.
8. Recognizes indicators of mental illness and developmental disabilities and initiates evaluation and potential service planning.
9. Demonstrates current knowledge of policies and programs relevant to adolescents in transition.