

IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR YOUTH IN TRANSITION

Final Report

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FINAL REPORT

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FINAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

Improving Outcomes for Youth in Transition was a three-year project of the University of Iowa School of Social Work (UI-SSW) in collaboration with the Iowa Department of Human Services (IDHS). The project provided training statewide to public child welfare supervisors, caseworkers, and community partners who are involved in transition planning for youth who are aging out of the child welfare system.

The project was based on the key assumption that supervision is a specific area of practice with its own skill sets. Therefore supervisor training should include content in the core principles of transition planning as well as the skills for supervising caseworkers in the work of transition planning. As coaches, teachers, and mentors for their staff and leaders within their units, public child welfare supervisors must themselves understand the needs of youth in transition, successful strategies for engaging youth from a positive

youth development framework, the importance of permanent connections, and evidence-based interventions with older youth. Supervisors must also learn and model culturally competent practice, as well as practice that involves collaboration with the multitude of individuals and community entities that work with older youth both formally and informally.

Process evaluation findings

The process evaluation focused on implementation of key project components, summarized below:

Advisory Committee: The project advisory committee was formed during the first month of the project and met on a monthly basis (either by telephone conference call or in-person throughout the duration of the three-year project.

Matrix of independent living curricula: In collaboration with the University of Louisville, we reviewed the 12 independent living curricula develop for caseworkers and prepared a matrix summarizing the curricula and their coverage of core principles and unique features.

Focus groups: We conducted focus group with public child welfare supervisors in each of the eight service areas, focus groups with caseworkers in urban and rural areas, focus groups with youth who had aged out of care, service providers, and Native American families.

Key informant interviews: Interviews were conducted with thirteen individuals identified by the project advisory committee, representing foster

parents, private youth serving agencies, representatives from minority communities, public health, DHS, and advocacy organizations.

Competencies: Competencies for supervisors and workers were developed based on the review of IL curricula, focus groups, and key informant interviews. Nine competencies for public child welfare supervisors and nine competencies for public child welfare caseworkers were identified.

Supervisor training: Supervisor training was developed, field-tested, implemented and evaluated with 109 participants from across the state in a two-day training event. The curriculum and participant handbooks were developed.

Caseworker and community partner training: Training was implemented with DHS caseworkers and community partners in all eight service areas in the state, involving supervisors in a leadership role in planning and implementation. These local training events involved 418 DHS caseworkers and supervisors and 237 community partners. Participant handbooks for caseworkers and community participants were developed.

Youth involvement: Foster/former foster youth contributed to all aspects of the project, including consultation on curricula and participation in each of the supervisor, caseworker, and community trainings.

Outcome evaluation findings

Training satisfaction and usefulness: Data from self-administered trainee satisfaction surveys indicated high levels of satisfaction. Mean scores

for supervisors (n=74) ranged from 4.12 to 4.55 on a scale of 1 - 5 (1= poor, 5=excellent). Mean scores for caseworkers (n=265) ranged from 4.03 to 4.47. Mean scores for community (n=188) ranged from 4.38 to 4.73 on the same 5 point scale. Greater variation in satisfaction was found on evaluations of some of the individual workshops offered during the trainings.

Increased knowledge: With regard to the expected outcome that supervisor trainees will demonstrate increase in knowledge of transition planning and core principles from pretest to posttest, analysis of matched pretests and posttest indicated that across all supervisor trainings, between 92.9% and 100% of participants demonstrated an increase in knowledge from before to after the two-day training. For caseworkers, results from the analysis of pretest to post-test scores indicate that 80% of caseworkers demonstrated significant knowledge gains from before to after the one-day training.

Increased utilization of knowledge and skills: The expected outcome that supervisors will utilize knowledge and skills learned in training in their supervisory practice with workers was measured through a comparison of results from a self-administered questionnaire during training and approximately six months after the training. At baseline, across all groups of supervisors, the skills taught in training were being used by between one-half and two-thirds of supervisors. At the six-month follow-up, these skills were reportedly being used by 65%-74% of supervisors.

Improved transition planning with youth: The expected outcome that transition planning based on core principles will improve from prior to the grant to the end of the funding period was measured through interviews with youth who were in the process of transitioning out of care. The interview procedures were approved by the University of Iowa's Institutional Review Board. Baseline data were collected through interviews with a sample of youth in care over age 17 in 2007, prior to the statewide training project. A second set of interviews was conducted with a sample of youth in care over age 17 in 2009, after the statewide training was completed. After receiving a list of all eligible youth in the state between the ages of 17.3 and 17.9, we stratified the list by eight service areas and drew a sample of 12 youth from each service area. We reviewed the information about the youth's current location according to DHS records, sent letters to each youth and followed up with phone calls. With both cohorts this turned out to be a very complex evaluation component, due to the fact that the living situations of many youth had changed.

In 2007, out of 96 youth selected for the sample, 22 youth were able to be interviewed. In 2009, out of 95 youth selected for the sample, 15 youth were able to be interviewed. This large rate of attrition was due to a variety of factors. Youth were asked a variety of questions about their plans for after turning 18, the planning activities they had engaged in, whether they had had a formal transition planning meeting, and how they felt about the

planning process so far. The youth were also asked to give advice to both child welfare workers and other youth in care about the transition process. We compared youth in foster homes with youth in group care, and differences in the youths' transition planning experiences from pre-training (2007 interviews) to post-training (2009 interviews). We also summarized the youths' recommendations to DHS workers and other teens leaving care.

A number of key themes emerged from the youth interviews:

1) There were variations between foster and group care youth, with youth in family foster care largely reliant on their DHS worker and transition planning specialist, and in some cases their foster parents, for most transition information and planning; whereas youth in group care received much of their information through classes and group sessions in the group care facility.

2). Prior to training, there was much more variation in the youths' descriptions of the planning process. In the 2009 interviews, it appears that youth received more information and from a variety of different sources. In general, more youth in 2009 described finding the transition planning process to be helpful. There were many more positive comments about the planning process from these youth, compared to the youth interviewed in 2007.

3) We examined youths' changes in perspective from 2007 to 2009 to see if they described a more empowering experience with regards to the transition planning process. While not all youth reported negative

experiences in 2007, some of their experiences were disheartening. They shared instances of being discouraged from pursuing their own interests, or felt like workers thought they were destined to fail. Youth in 2009 generally shared more supportive experiences working with various transition professionals. They described having more contact, feeling listened to, and being challenged to identify their own goals, all of which are reflective of a positive youth development perspective

4) When asked to describe the top 3-5 things that they want adults that work with youth in foster care that are turning 18 to know, youths' comments to DHS workers reflected a desire to be empowered by their workers. The most frequently mentioned recommendation "to be listened to," and to be understood or have what they say be taken in to consideration in the planning process. Youth also wanted to be encouraged to make *their own* choices, to be part of deciding what was best for them. They wanted to be able to give input and have options from which to choose.

5) Youth had a variety of advice for other teens transitioning out of foster care. A common theme was to be thoughtful and proactive about the planning process. They encouraged other teens to plan ahead and take the process slowly, rather than rushing to leave care at age 18. Youth advised other teens to take advantage of services or resources available to them. Many of the youth also talked about maintaining connections with important

and helpful people in their lives. Youth talked about the same themes of empowerment and choice in sharing their thoughts with other teens.

Lessons learned

Some important lessons learned from this project are:

- It was important to seek input from a variety of stakeholders before developing and implementing a large scale training effort.
- Although all four core components – positive youth development, permanent connections, cultural competence, and community collaboration---were successfully integrated into our training, we had to make choices and reduce the amount of content to fit the number of training days available.
- The process of beginning with supervisor training and involving supervisors as leaders in planning and implementing training for their caseworkers and community partners appears to have been a successful strategy—one that builds the leadership skills of supervisors while reinforcing their role as teacher, mentor, and community partner.
- Involve youth who have experienced transition out of foster care in shaping and providing training to helpers. Though there are logistical complexities in having youth at training, they have a unique impact as trainers.

- Training may need to be adapted to meet the different needs and service systems across locales. Convening planning committees in each service area was useful in ensuring that the training was relevant to local needs.
- While much progress appears to have been made in highlighting the needs of youth aging out of foster care and in developing services for this population, we cannot be complacent. Many youth could not be found at their address of record. Continuing efforts are needed to assist all youth who are transitioning out of care to successful adulthood.

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Introduction and Overview

Overview of the community, agency, population and problem

Improving Outcomes for Youth in Transition was a three-year project of the University of Iowa School of Social Work (UI-SSW) in collaboration with the Iowa Department of Human Services (IDHS). The project provided training statewide to public child welfare supervisors, caseworkers, and community partners who are involved in transition planning for youth who are aging out of the child welfare system.

The University of Iowa School of Social Work is a fully accredited school of social work, with four campuses located around the state. UI-SSW is also home to the National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice (NRC), which has provided training, technical assistance and evaluation services in child welfare nationally for more than 30 years. UI-SSW, through its NRC,

developed and implemented the training program, with assistance from a variety of stakeholders, including: a project advisory committee; youth from Elevate, an organization of foster and former foster youth; the IDHS Transition Planning Program Manager, who was the state child welfare agency representative on this project; transition planning specialists, a group of eight IDHS employees who work in specific service areas to assist in planning to youth transitioning out of case; and consultants with special expertise in issues related to the needs of youth in transition.

The project was based on the key assumption that supervision is a specific area of practice with its own skill sets. Therefore supervisor training should include content in the core principles of transition planning as well as the skills for supervising caseworkers in the work of transition planning. As coaches, teachers, and mentors for their staff and leaders within their units, public child welfare supervisors must themselves understand the needs of youth in transition, successful strategies for engaging youth from a positive youth development framework, the importance of permanent connections, and evidence-based interventions with older youth. Supervisors must also learn and model culturally competent practice, as well as practice that involves collaboration with the multitude of individuals and community entities that work with older youth both formally and informally.

We conceptualized this project as a multi-level training, beginning with building knowledge and skills for supervisors, then moving to the next step of

training caseworkers, with supervisors as co-facilitators. Iowa's public child welfare workforce is relatively small, with approximately 115 supervisors and 750 caseworkers statewide. Training at both levels had the advantage of providing consistent content, and including supervisors as co-facilitators would help to reinforce their roles as coaches and mentors. Because there was no specific training provided to line staff in transition planning, this grant afforded an excellent opportunity to build skills at the supervisory and line staff levels sequentially.

Originally we had intended to conclude the project with a statewide training to which a variety of provider agencies would be invited. However, during the course of implementation we realized that many of the complexities around transition planning have to do with local systems. Therefore, we reconfigured the statewide roll-out as a series of localized events. Instead of one statewide training event, we implemented a community day in each of the state's eight service areas. Supervisors and mid-managers in each service area shaped the format and content of that community day, based on local needs. Throughout the development and implementation of this project we also kept the core principles for transition planning, positive youth development, cultural competence, collaboration, and permanent connections, at the forefront.

Need for the project

The needs of older youth, especially those who are transitioning from foster care to independence and adulthood, have only relatively recently been seriously addressed by child welfare services. This is in response to startling statistics on the number of youth who “age out” of foster care every year, approximately 20,000 nationally (U.S. DHHS, 2003). This is not by intent, but rather the result of a system that has long focused its limited resources not only on the “front end” of the child welfare system but on the youngest and seemingly most vulnerable children.

However, there is ample evidence to suggest that youth who enter adulthood by aging out of child welfare services are equally vulnerable, though in different ways. Relative to their peers who grow up in stable homes, youth who age out of foster care are disadvantaged economically, emotionally, and physically. The needs of older youth have been recognized in the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, and now long overdue efforts are underway in states to address the unique needs of older youth in transition.

Supervising child welfare workers in transition planning with older youth requires a unique set of skills. As coaches, teachers, and mentors for their staff, public child welfare supervisors must themselves understand the needs of youth in transition, successful strategies for engaging youth from a positive youth development framework, and evidence-based interventions with older youth. Supervisors must also learn and model culturally

competent practice, as well as practice that involves collaboration with the multitude of individuals and community entities that work with older youth both formally and informally.

On any given day, Iowa has 600 youths over the age of 16 in foster care or group care; each year approximately 280 leave the foster care system as legal adults. About 23% of older youth in care are minority youth, a percentage that is disproportionate to the percent of minority youth in the general population. The myriad of issues facing youth who “age out” of foster care are often portrayed in grim terms. We know that these youth are usually financially destitute and with limited human capital in terms of employment skills, or educational attainment (Blome, 1996), and are usually without safe and/or stable housing (Courtney et al, 2001). Because most of these youth did not have permanency resolution, they often lack positive support from family and peers, even though many return to their families-of-origin in which the youth experienced maltreatment. We also know that many older youth in care have been identified with special medical, emotional, behavioral, and developmental issues (Wattenberg et al., 2001). A higher proportion of youth from the foster care population compared to the general population become involved in the criminal justice system (Courtney et al., 2001) and are more likely to experience pregnancy and parenting at young ages (Nollan et al., 2000), and drug or alcohol use (Robins, 1996). Furthermore older youth in care are disproportionately members of racial

and ethnic minorities (Adler, 2001; Kemp & Bodony, 2000; Davis, 1992; Curtis & Denby, 2004), and may face additional problems due to discrimination in employment, housing, and other areas.

As part of the Chapin Hall Center for Children, University of Chicago's Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth, recent data are available on former foster youth in Iowa. The picture that is presented is a profile of youth who have experienced child maltreatment, often of multiple types, youth who have experienced multiple placements and re-entries into care, as well as histories of running away from placements (Chapin Hall Center for Children, 2005). This study also documents a higher propensity for experiencing grade retention, suspension, and expulsion from school, involvement with the juvenile justice system, being a victim of violence, and needing mental health services among older youth in care. Yet interviews conducted with these youth suggest a remarkable level of satisfaction with their care, with their relationships with family members, both foster and biological, and fairly strong levels of social support. Ninety-percent of former foster youth interviewed reported being optimistic about the future (Chapin Hall Center for Children, 2005).

If one looks at these youth solely from a problem-focused perspective, it soon becomes overwhelming. While not denying that youth aging out of foster care face many hurdles to economic, social, and emotional well-being, a positive youth development approach that recognizes the strengths and

capacities of each youth in the context of cultural factors and needs, that seeks to build permanent connections and supports with and for the youth, and that engages a larger community as collaborative partners, offers a path to a more promising future for youth aging out of foster care.

Overview of the Program Model

Improving Outcomes for Youth in Transition had three specific goals:

- 1) To strengthen the quality of public child welfare supervision to improve outcomes for Iowa youth in transition from foster care to independence;
- 2) To demonstrate a training model that engages supervisors and their workers in a learning and team-building process around the needs of youth in transition;
- and 3) To improve outcomes for youth in transition nationally, through varied dissemination activities. (A logic model illustrating the project's key inputs, activities, outputs, short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes is included in the Appendix.)

To accomplish the goals, the following project activities/interventions were implemented:

Statewide project advisory group

Beginning in the first quarter of the grant, we identified participants and began to convene a monthly meeting of a project advisory committee. The

advisory committee included members of the IDHS training committee which also served in an advisory capacity to the University of Iowa's federal child welfare grant on improving recruitment and retention in public child welfare. We added two transition planning specialists and two project consultants who work with Iowa's youth initiatives to this committee. The advisory committee met on a monthly basis throughout the three years of the project, with at least two meetings each year in-person, the others via telephone conference calls. The advisory committee offered ongoing feedback on all aspects of project implementation, and also helped to ensure consistency with the various training activities of IDHS.

Focus groups and key informant interviews with various stakeholders

In preparation for developing supervisor training that would be responsive to the needs of public child welfare supervisors in Iowa we conducted a series of focus groups in each of the eight service areas around the state with IDHS supervisors, seeking input from as many supervisors as possible. In addition, we conducted focus groups with caseworkers in rural and urban areas, with a small group of IDHS social workers called transition planning specialists, with youth who had recently aged out of foster care, with Native American families, with and providers of aftercare services for youth in care. We also conducted interviews with key informants

representing foster parents, public health, IDHS administration, advocacy organizations, and organizations serving primarily minority youth and families. A summary of the focus groups and interviews is included in the Appendix.

Review of 12 independent living curricula

In addition to gathering information through focus groups and interviews, we conducted a systematic review and analysis of the content of the twelve independent living curricula for caseworkers developed by previous Children's Bureau grantees. This activity was accomplished in collaboration with the University of Louisville. A matrix summarizing key elements of each curriculum, organized according to the four core principles of transition planning, was used in specifying competencies for supervisors and caseworkers and in curriculum development. A copy of this matrix is included in the Appendix.

Competencies specific to transitional planning

Information from the focus groups, interviews, and review of independent living curricula were all used to inform the development of competencies for supervisors and a complementary set of competencies for caseworkers. We shared these with the project advisory committee and revised them in accordance with feedback. The competencies, used in guiding

curriculum development, focus on improving practice with youth in transition by promoting stronger youth involvement in case planning and decision-making; engaging a youth-centered team for strengthening the youth's permanent social or family-like connections and providing support for life skill development; approaching the youth's preparation for adulthood from a positive youth development perspective; understanding the youth's cultural heritage and incorporating this in transition planning; strengthening collaboration among the various entities involved in transition planning and support; and addressing the complex needs of youth. The list of competencies is included in the Appendix.

Curriculum for supervisors

At the time we began this project, UI and IDHS had been developing and implementing a statewide training program for Iowa's supervisors and mid-managers as part of a federal grant on improving recruitment and retention in public child welfare. The focus on supervision was based on a substantial body of research demonstrating the importance of supervision and supervisory support in promoting job satisfaction and retention of child welfare employees (Curry, D., McCarragher, T., & Dellmann-Jenkins, M., 2005; Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Landsman, 2001; Mor Barak, Levin, Nissly, & Lane, 2006; Rycraft, 1994). The multi-phased supervisory curriculum was designed to engage supervisors at all career stages in honing skills as

reflective practitioners in organizational leadership and supervision. We envisioned the transition project as complementary to the work in progress, permitting a special focus on developing supervisory skills in this content area.

The supervisory curriculum provides theoretical foundation, concrete application, and emphasis on the improvement of client outcomes through enhanced organizational effectiveness. Material is presented in the context of a comprehensive model of child welfare supervision, acknowledging the various roles of the supervisor in the unit (administration, education, consultation, counseling and evaluation), the contextual factors influencing supervision (e.g., law, policy, economic conditions, and political realities), and the role of the supervisor in the organization (advocating for resources for staff and clients, negotiating relationships with community providers, and responding to client and community concerns).

Our approach to curriculum development was based on sound principles of adult learning, emphasizing practical application of useful concepts and best practices, using case-based applications and providing adequate time for collegial interaction. The training integrated measurable outcomes and learning objectives and supported the IDHS practice model and redesign initiatives. Supervisors were provided tools for self-assessment of their own supervisory behaviors as well as detailed task analyses of worker competencies which could help them develop individual and unit plans with

their staff. We also developed easy to use resources to share with staff and provided supplemental reference materials and web-based resources for use in direct on-the-job application.

The supervisor training was delivered in two full consecutive days of training. The first group of trainees was considered the pilot. Following this training, we reviewed the process and training evaluations (described later in this report) and revised the curriculum accordingly. The training was provided to three other groups of supervisors, approximately 25 supervisors in each training group.

Training for IDHS caseworkers and community partners

A unique feature of our training model was to provide a leadership opportunity for supervisors in transition planning by involving them closely in implementing training for caseworkers and community partners in their respective service areas. Planning for the caseworker and community trainings began on the second day of each of the four statewide supervisor trainings. Supervisors from the same service area worked in teams to complete a planning questionnaire for the community rollout, recommending goals for the community day, suggesting topics for training and facilitated discussion, and drafting a suggested invitation list. Supervisors were also invited to volunteer for a planning committee if they so desired. After completion of the statewide supervisor trainings, we compiled results for each

service area and contacted the eight service area managers (top regional administrators) asking them to appoint a planning committee. Our suggestion was that each committee might include one social work administrator (supervisor of front line supervisors), the IDHS community liaison, the transition planning specialist, and some or all of the supervisor volunteers. Our recommendations were accepted, and some service area managers chose to add to the basic committee a decategorization coordinator, a juvenile court officer, and/or facilitators of the local Elevate (foster youth) chapter.

As part of the community training, we requested data on demographic characteristics and outcomes for older youth in care in each service area. We analyzed and presented these data for each worker and community training. This gave training participants a sense of what the youth population in their own service area looked like.

The UI team of co-trainers and a consultant hired to manage coordination for the rollouts, travelled to each service area and met with the eight planning teams, reviewing recommendations made by the supervisors and discussing the best way to approach the community rollout. Questions guiding the discussion included: 1) Where is your service area currently in terms of community collaboration to improve outcomes for youth in transition?; 2) Where do you want to be a year from now? What are your priorities?; 3) How could training and/or facilitation resources help?; 4) Who

do you need to have at the community day to make that happen?; 5) What would constitute success for a day of training?; 6) What kind of preparation would need to be done to facilitate a successful day?; and 7) How should youth be involved in the day?

A similar planning process was used for the worker training. At the statewide supervisor trainings, we asked supervisors to review the content of their two-day training and recommend which topics would be most useful for a one-day worker training. While engaging all of the supervisors in this initial process, we emphasized the importance of their role in coaching and reinforcing best practice. When we met with the regional planning committees, we proposed one full day of training, but offered some options about the relative emphasis on training topics and offered some workshop options to allow for worker choice. We also gave the committees the choice about whether to involve child protective assessment workers in the training; all decided not to include the assessors but several committees expressed interest in having a half-day assessment worker training available in the future. The committees were very engaged in thinking about how best to use the day. All of the committees decided to include a youth panel.

Also in relation to the worker and community training, our early focus groups revealed the need for training on supporting the transition of youth with complex needs into the county systems of MR/DD/MI. Since these systems are locally administered by Central Point of Contact (CPCs)

coordinators, we used the worker training for this purpose. We recruited two IDHS liaisons to these CPCs to make workshop presentations at seven of the eight worker trainings (Polk County chose a different model for their day) The liaisons invited the local CPCs to participate in the workshop to answer specific local questions.

Following the planning process, regional trainings of caseworkers and community partners were conducted in each of Iowa's eight service areas. A summary of evaluation reports from these trainings is included in the Appendix.

Youth involvement

The project tried to incorporate the youth perspective in many different ways. As the training began, a series of PowerPoint Pictures and Stories of Iowa Youth in Care were set to run on a timer.

We tried to make the training room rich with the voices of youth. We did this by:

- Placing on each table pictures of older youth in care, representing the positive youth development areas of ability and identity
- Using youth facilitators and youth presenters
- Showing our slide show, "Pictures and Stories of Iowa Youth in Care" during registration and breakfast prior to the training.

- Asking youth to create posters representing the PYD areas of ability and identity. We posted these at every worker and community training.
- Showing videos with the youth perspective during the training. One of the most powerful videos was shown during the Permanency section of the training. “Voices of Youth” was made especially for the training by the Iowa Elevate group. *Elevate* staff and participants developed a music video for the section on permanent connections, presenting their songs and poetry about dislocation and multiple moves, fear of attaching to a new family, grief over the loss of sibling connections and hope for reconnection and success. A link to an electronic version of this material is posted on our website.
- In our confirmation letters to the workers prior to training, we asked each of them to bring some key information about an older youth they were serving on their caseload. In the Positive Youth Development section of the training, we asked the workers to write this information on a cut out paper doll (using paper of various skin tones), and to also write down one strength and one challenge the young person faced. Later in the training we asked them to identify one service, support or opportunity they would seek for this youth following the training. We posted

these dolls in the room, and kept them up for the follow-up community day.

Dissemination activities

We began early dissemination of the project through presentations at several conferences and meetings, including the following:

- PI Miriam Landsman, Training Director Lisa D'Aunno, and Training Consultant Sue Tew presented at the Pathways to Adulthood National Independent Living/Transitional Living Conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota May 9-11, 2007.
- The PI and Training Director participated in a statewide forum on Youth Permanency in Iowa on May 24, 2007.
- PI presented "A Strengths Perspective on Working with Youth in Transition from Foster Care" at the 2nd Biennial World Conference, Society for Korean Children and Youth Studies, Lawrence, Kansas, July 18-23, 2008.
- PI and Training Director wrote article entitled "Improving Outcomes for Youth in Transition," for a special issue of *Training and Development in Human Services Journal*.
- Training Director presented a day-long institute on legal and practice issues for youth in transition at the 7th annual statewide conference on disproportionality in Iowa's child welfare and juvenile justice systems, December 3-5, 2008.

The institute was attended by educators, juvenile court officers, a CASA volunteer and a state legislator.

- PI and Training Director are members of the Permanency Subcommittee, a statewide group addressing the permanency needs of youth in Iowa

Additional dissemination activities of our curricula are underway include posting the training manuals for supervisors, caseworkers, and community partners on our newly redesigned website:

www.uiowa.edu/~nrc.fcp. Hard copies of these materials will be available upon request. We are also sending copies of these materials to the Child Welfare Information Gateway. We are also writing an article for publication which is based on interviews with youth in care before and after the training program.

Collaboration

Improving outcomes for youth in transition was a highly collaborative venture involving many individuals and organizations in Iowa whose work is related to youth transitioning out of foster care. Many IDHS staff were involved in implementing the training. Training Coordinator and Transition Planning Program Manager assisted in all aspects of project development and implementation; Transition planning specialists assisted in developing training materials and participated as co-trainers; Supervisors participated

in focus groups that were used in developing the training, participated in the two-day trainings, and assisted in planning and co-facilitating training for caseworkers and community partners in their service areas; Social work administrators and Service Area Managers assisted in planning and implementing training for caseworkers and community partners in their service areas and gave opening remarks at each of the community days, communicating IDHS's commitment to improving transition outcomes and inviting the community to join in closer partnership.

With regard to youth, two young adults, one who had aged out of foster care and another who was adopted as a teen, served as curriculum advisors; one of these advisors attended each training session as a resource and co-facilitator. Youth panelists from the statewide foster care youth group called *Elevate* presented their perspectives at the closing session of each training event. *Elevate* staff and participants developed a music video for the section on permanent connections, presenting their songs and poetry about dislocation and multiple moves, fear of attaching to a new family, grief over the loss of sibling connections and hope for reconnection and success. A link to an electronic version of this material is posted on our website.

One of our project consultants, a trainer in positive youth development, served as a co-trainer and was also involved in our curriculum development and advisory committee. Another project consultant who coordinates

aftercare services for youth in transition also served on the project advisory committee.

Overview of the Evaluation

Evaluation design, data collection and analysis

Both processes and outcomes were evaluated in this project. The process evaluation focused on timely completion of project activities and attendance at scheduled trainings. The outcome evaluation identified short-term and intermediate outcomes measured during the project, and the longer-term outcomes that we would expect to see. Short-term outcomes measured in this project included: satisfaction with the content and usefulness of training; increased knowledge of transition planning and core principles by supervisors; and increased knowledge of transition planning and core principles by caseworkers. Intermediate outcomes identified at the beginning of the project included: utilization of knowledge and skills by supervisors in supervising their workers; utilization of knowledge and skills by caseworkers; increased self-efficacy in youth; and improved transition planning based on core principles. The outcomes that we would hope to see in the longer-term include: incorporating transition planning as a standard aspect of supervision; incorporating transition planning into IDHS training plans; integration of the training content into the UI School of Social Work's

child welfare coursework; and overall, improved outcomes for youth transitioning out of care.

Process measures on completion of activities were obtained by documentation during advisory committee meetings and reported through semi-annual progress reports. Attendance at trainings was measured using attendance sheets at all trainings.

Outcome data were obtained through self-administered surveys of training participants regarding their satisfaction with the content and usefulness of the training; pre and post knowledge tests administered before and after each training program; and self-administered surveys regarding utilization of skills and knowledge at six months post-training.

To evaluate the outcome of whether transition planning practice changed from before to after the statewide training was completed, two cohorts of youth in care who were over 17 years old were interviewed—one cohort in 2007, the second in 2009. The study procedures were approved by the University of Iowa's Institutional Review Board. We used stratified random sampling to select 12 youth from each of the state's eight service areas who were between the ages of 17.3 and 17.9, who did not have a diagnosis of mental retardation, and who were not residing in a juvenile detention facility. The latter two criteria were established to ensure that the youth was capable of giving informed consent and without coercion. We sent a letter to each of the 96 youth explaining the study and letting them know

that a researcher would be following up by telephone to provide more information and to find out if the youth was interested in participating in the study. We prepared a script for the follow-up phone calls to cover all aspects of the study procedures and to make sure that the youth understood the concepts of voluntary participation and informed consent. For those who agreed to participate in the interview, a time and place for the interview were arranged. The interviewer made an additional contact prior to the agreed upon time to confirm the appointment. During the face-to-face interview, written informed consent was obtained, and the interviews were audio-taped with the youth's permission. Transcripts were transcribed and analyzed to identify key themes and to examine the extent to which transition planning had changed during the study period. A separate summary of findings from this study is included in the Appendix.

Problems encountered in implementation of the evaluation plan

We experienced some challenges in implementing the evaluation plan. With regard to pre and post test on knowledge and use of knowledge and skills taught in training, not all participants completed both the pretest and posttest. However, we had a sufficient number of matched pairs to have confidence in the results.

During the course of the project we decided to eliminate a couple of the outcome measures. We had planned to implement a follow-up survey of

caseworkers to measure the extent to which they were using the knowledge and skills learned in training, but because the training was structured as a one-day event, we were not able to administer a follow-up survey with this group. In addition, we had originally planned to measure changes in self-efficacy in the youth involved in the project, but the evaluation team decided against this—in part due to the small number of individuals and the lack of an appropriate measurement tool.

With regard to the youth interview study, making contact with the youth turned out to be quite a challenging task. Many of the youth were no longer at their address of record. Some had returned home, several had run from their placement, some had their cases closed, and a few were in jail. Multiple attempts were made to find every youth, but ultimately we were able to complete interviews with fewer than 25% of the youth originally identified for each sample.

Project Implementation / Process Evaluation

The following components of the process evaluation are presented below, with a brief description of each activity, the outputs associated with that component, contextual events or community changes affecting the activity, facilitating factors for that activity, challenges/barriers regarding the activity, and lessons learned about how to deal with these challenges.

A. Project advisory committee.

The project advisory committee was formed during the first month of the project and met on a monthly basis throughout the duration of the three-year project. The advisory committee was built from the DHS training committee, which oversees all training activities for the public child welfare agency.

Outputs:

Four new members were added to the advisory committee: two IDHS transition planning specialists and two project consultants who work with youth in transition and aftercare services in Iowa.

The advisory committee met 12 times each year for three years. Six of the meetings were in-person meetings convened in Des Moines. The remaining meetings were convened via telephone conference calls.

Contextual events or community changes:

Over the course of the project, we witnessed more attention and more initiatives focused on the population of youth aging out of care. While at the beginning of the grant we felt that we were struggling to “sell” the importance of the issue, we found that interest in this area grew over time.

Facilitating factors:

At the time we began this project, the advisory committee had also been

serving in a similar capacity for UI's federally funded child welfare grant on improving recruitment and retention in public child welfare. Thus members were already familiar with the UI staff and were able to move very quickly to this new project. We also found that adding four specialists with particular expertise in the issues facing youth in transition was very helpful in guiding the content of the training effort.

Challenges/barriers:

There were no specific challenges with this activity. The in-person meetings tended to be more engaging, but participants were all cognizant of the resource and time constraints. Having a balance between telephone and in-person meetings seemed to work well to keep the committee engaged yet not overburdened.

Lessons Learned about how to deal with challenges:

As noted above, participation on an advisory committee is an additional task that individuals have to build into their work schedules. Using time and resources efficiently are important, yet including some face-to-face interaction was important in order to make the best use of the committee.

B. Review of 12 independent living curricula

This activity consisted of reviewing the curricula produced by all 12 independent living training projects for direct service workers and creating a matrix to highlight the areas covered by each curricula as well

as unique features of each. We collaborated with the University of Louisville in this activity. All 12 curricula were reviewed.

Outputs:

A matrix summarizing the 12 curricula and their coverage of core principles and unique features was produced and disseminated to the other grantees and the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Youth Development. A copy of this document is included in the Appendix.

Contextual events or community changes:

None relevant

Facilitating factors:

Coordinating efforts with the University of Louisville was an efficient method for completing this activity that otherwise would have been duplicated at both sites.

Challenges/barriers:

Ten of the curricula were readily available, but acquiring copies of two of these curricula took some time and effort.

Lessons Learned about how to deal with challenges:

Grantees within the same cluster area might be planning to conduct similar activities. In this case we learned about the University of Louisville's plan to conduct a similar analysis at our initial grantees meeting, and we were able to plan our collaboration on this activity. Providing opportunities to learn of planned activities in initial grantees'

meetings might be a useful strategy for enhancing such collaborative work.

C. Focus groups with supervisors, workers, youth, and providers

This activity consisted of conducting focus groups with public child welfare services in all eight service areas around the state, with workers in rural and urban areas, with key youth serving providers, representatives of minority communities, and with youth who have experienced transition. A summary of focus group findings is included in the Appendix.

Outputs:

Eight focus groups with public child welfare supervisors were conducted.

Two focus groups with line staff, representing urban and rural areas, were conducted.

One focus group of aftercare service providers was conducted.

Three focus groups were conducted with youth who had recently aged out of foster care

One focus group of Native American families was conducted.

Contextual events or community changes:

The focus groups were conducted early in the project, as a basis for gathering information about transition planning from the perspectives of a variety of stakeholders. At the time we conducted the focus groups, there was not as much interest/emphasis on the needs of older youth from

the perspective of many in the public child welfare system. Over time, however, this changed considerably.

Facilitating factors:

Our child welfare training project on improving recruitment and retention in public child welfare had laid some groundwork in our ability to organize these focus groups efficiently.

Challenges/Barriers:

Scheduling the focus groups presented some logistical challenges, but we were able to accomplish these within our planned time frame.

Lessons Learned about how to deal with challenges:

Our experience with planning and conducting focus groups has taught us that it is important to be flexible and accommodating to the needs of stakeholders.

D. Key informant interviews:

Key informant interviews were conducted with a variety of stakeholders involved with the transition planning process. This information was used, along with focus group data, in the development of competencies and the training curricula.

Outputs:

Key informant interviews were conducted with thirteen individuals identified by the project advisory committee and others. These individuals represented foster parents, private youth serving agencies,

representatives from minority communities, public health, DHS, and advocacy organizations. A report summarizing key findings is included in the Appendix.

Contextual events or community changes:

As with the focus groups, key informant interviews were conducted early in the project, as a basis for gathering information about transition planning from the perspectives of a variety of stakeholders. We found through this process that the youth serving community was very open to talking about the challenges of transition planning, and that there were a variety of perspectives on how to improve transition planning. Some of the significant disparities are between how DHS sees its role compared with other entities, and the perspectives of the minority community compared with the traditional service provider community.

Facilitating factors:

The project advisory committee helped to identify the key individuals involved with youth transition issues around the state.

Challenges/barriers:

The only challenge we experienced was in having to reschedule several interviews at least once in order to accommodate competing demands on the participants. Once the interviews began, however, participants were very forthcoming with their thoughts on the questions posed.

Lessons Learned about how to deal with challenges:

We learned that reaching out to a broad range of stakeholders yielded valuable information, and that flexibility is essential in order to accommodate the many demands on peoples' time.

E. Develop competencies

Competencies for supervisors and workers were developed based on the review of IL curricula, focus groups, and key informant interviews. The list of competencies is appended to this report.

Outputs:

Nine competencies for public child welfare supervisors were identified.

Nine competencies for public child welfare caseworkers were identified.

Contextual events or community changes:

The competencies were developed from information obtained from focus groups, key informant interviews, and the independent living curricula for caseworkers. These competencies also had to be reconciled with the realities of the IDHS service provision. The most contentious competency involved the extent to which caseworkers should be expected to engage with youth in transition, in light of high caseloads and the fact that most of the direct services to youth are provided by private agencies. We did maintain this competency.

Facilitating factors:

Using a breadth of material gathered --including the focus group and interview data and the independent living curricula—helped to clarify the

most important competencies for supervisors and caseworkers. It was also useful to draft the competencies among our project team and then share this draft with the project advisory committee—providing a springboard for discussion.

Challenges/barriers:

As noted previously, there was considerable discussion about what it meant for caseworkers to “engage” with youth in transition. This discussion helped to shed light on some of the significant system barriers to effective transition work with youth.

Lessons Learned about how to deal with challenges:

Through extended discussion we were able to define engagement with youth in a way that kept this construct as an important one that was also manageable within the constraints of DHS services. It was important to have a discussion and work through the issues with the group.

F. Develop, pilot, implement supervisor curriculum

Training was implemented with all public child welfare supervisors in the state of Iowa. The training occurred in four groups, consisting of two consecutive training days each. The first group served as a pilot training; this was followed by revisions prior to the second group. Training materials are included in the Appendix.

Outputs:

Two-day training curriculum for supervisors was developed.

Participant training handbook was developed

109 public child welfare supervisors and administrators participated in training

Contextual events or community changes:

While we were trying to schedule our training, IDHS had a number of other training initiatives that had to take priority over the transition training. Therefore our training dates had to be scheduled and rescheduled more than once.

Facilitating factors:

Having previously completed statewide training for supervisors through our Recruitment and Retention project, many of the structures and process were already in place. The IDHS Training Coordinator was very helpful in all aspects of training implementation. Once final dates were scheduled, the training went very smoothly.

Challenges/barriers:

As noted above, other initiatives occurring simultaneously within IDHS required that we postpone our training. In the end, however, we were able to conduct four separate two-day trainings to include all public child welfare supervisors. Late in the planning stage, IDHS managers expressed concern that assessment supervisors might resist participating in full two days of training related to foster care. In response we re-ordered the presentations to assure that the first day was most relevant to

the assessment process (positive youth development and cultural competence), designed a day one workshop for them to highlight the aspects of supervising permanency for youth that affected their work (especially documenting and preserving permanent connections at the time of placement), and offered assessment supervisors the option to leave after the first day. The response from most of the assessment supervisors to the tailored training was enthusiastic.

Lessons Learned about how to deal with challenges:

Flexibility is key to successfully implementing a statewide training initiative, especially within the public sector. These agencies are continually faced with new demands and must respond quickly to changing circumstances. By taking additional steps to assure the relevance of transition training to the up-front assessment process, we were able to reach a broader audience and potentially have an impact on permanency planning for youth from the first contact with the family.

G. Develop, pilot, implement caseworker and community partner training

Training was implemented with DHS caseworkers and community partners in each of the eight service areas in the state of Iowa, involving supervisors in a leadership role in planning and implementing these trainings. In most cases one day of caseworker training preceded either a

half-day or full-day of community training. Training materials are included in the Appendix.

Outputs:

Caseworker participant training handbook was developed

Community participant training handbook was developed.

418 caseworkers and supervisors participated in caseworker trainings.

247 community partners participated in community trainings.

Contextual events or community changes:

In appreciating the differences across service areas, each caseworker and community event was designed by a planning committee for that area.

Facilitating factors:

Having local planning groups helped to insure that the training for each area would be responsive to local needs and circumstances. We also hired a consultant to manage the logistical arrangements for the locally-based caseworker and community trainings, including finding good training locations, arranging for food, equipment, etc. This freed project staff time to focus on the content and training delivery issues.

Challenges/barriers:

Due to caseload demands, not all caseworkers were able to participate in the local trainings. With the available resources, we were not able to convene local trainings more than once and we were limited to one day of training. We also had to maintain some limits on the number of

community partners whom we could accommodate at the community event. Overall we had sizable turnouts for each training event.

Lessons Learned about how to deal with challenges:

Even though we had hoped to reach every caseworker, it is not realistic within time, resource, and schedule constraints. We did feel that we reached a lot of individuals who work with youth in transition, even if we were not able to reach all of them. The training helped to generate more interest in this population.

H. Youth Involvement

Youth involvement was an important component of our project. Two young adults, one who had aged out of foster care and another who was adopted as a teen, served as curriculum advisors. We worked with the Elevate group—a group of foster and former foster youth, many of whom have aged out of foster care themselves—to participate in our training program. This group originated in Des Moines, but branched out throughout much of the state over the course of our project. Elevate youth from Des Moines participated in each of the supervisor trainings and gave a presentation at the end of each of the training sessions. Elevate youth from local chapters participated in the regionally based trainings for caseworkers and community partners as well. In one service area where there was no Elevate chapter, a group of former foster youth affiliated with the local community college participated in the local training, quite successfully.

Outputs:

Youth participation was achieved in each of four supervisor trainings

Youth participation was achieved in each of eight worker and community trainings

Contextual Events or Community Changes:

Over the course of our project, Elevate expanded from its original base in Des Moines throughout most of the state of Iowa. Elevate has received considerable attention in the state and nationally through its advocacy work.

Facilitating factors:

Having youth participation in the project--from curriculum guidance through co-training-- proved to be very important in communicating the aspirations and needs of youth transitioning out of care to supervisors, caseworkers, and community partners. We hired a consultant to assist with the logistical arrangements for the locally-based caseworker and community trainings. This freed project staff time to focus on the content and training delivery issues.

Challenges/barriers:

The logistical issues involved with youth involvement were considerable, as they included scheduling, arranging transportation, and adult supervision. We also found that although we made a number of efforts to meet with the youth presenters in advance of the trainings to provide

coaching and to try to expand the scope of their presentation, the youth presenters really wanted to tell their own stories.

Lessons Learned about how to deal with challenges:

Hiring a consultant to handle the logistical arrangements for the locally-based caseworker and community trainings was a very useful strategy, as these arrangements were very complex and time consuming. With hindsight, we think that perhaps a more formalized training with youth participants might have been helpful.

Project Outcome Evaluation

A. Immediate outcome No. 1

Expected outcome: Trainees will express satisfaction with the training content and anticipated usefulness of the training

Data: Post-test surveys measuring satisfaction and usefulness were administered at the conclusion of each of the two-day supervisor trainings and at the conclusion of the one-day worker and community trainings.

Findings: Satisfaction data from the supervisor training were available for 74 respondents. Mean satisfaction scores on the training content ranged from 4.12 to 4.55 on a scale of 1 - 5 (1= poor,

5=excellent). With regard to individual workshops, there was greater variation in satisfaction scores, with the workshop on youth with complex needs having a mean of 3.30 compared with the workshop on resources for transitioning youth, which had a mean of 4.67.

Caseworker and community partner training was completed in the eight service areas. With regard to IDHS caseworkers, based on 265 respondents, mean satisfaction scores on the training content ranged from 4.03 (to 4.40 on a scale of 1 - 5 (1= poor, 5=excellent). Mean satisfaction scores on usefulness of skills learned ranged from 4.29 – 4.47 on a scale of 1-5, with higher scores indicating stronger agreement on usefulness of the skills. With regard to community partners, based on 188 respondents, mean responses to training satisfaction items ranged from 4.38 to 4.73 on the same 5 point scale, indicating high satisfaction.

Interpretation of findings: We believe that the data indicate that the training content presented to supervisors was on target with their needs and presented in ways that will facilitate their using the material when supervising staff. With regard to caseworkers, overall the trainings were well received, though perhaps lower than we would have liked among some of the caseworker groups. This might reflect the fact that we only had one day available for the caseworker training. The community day differed across service areas, including a

variety of participants based on the needs of the area. Community participants, however, seemed particularly pleased with the training. Further details about training satisfaction are included in the appended evaluation reports.

B. Immediate outcome No. 2

Expected outcome: supervisor trainees will demonstrate increase in knowledge of transition planning and core principles from pretest to posttest.

Data: Pre and post knowledge tests were administered at the beginning and end of the two-day training. Items were developed specifically to test participants' knowledge gain in content taught.

Findings: Analysis of matched pretests and post-tests indicate that across the four trainings, between 92.9% and 100% of participants demonstrated an increase in knowledge.

Interpretation of findings: The data suggest that the training was successful in communicating core content to public child welfare supervisors, and the high percentage of participants demonstrating an increase in knowledge suggests that supervisors were engaged in the program. Further details about the knowledge test analysis are found in the appended evaluation reports.

C. Immediate outcome No. 3

Expected outcome: caseworker trainees will demonstrate increase in knowledge of transition planning and core principles from pretest to posttest.

Data: Pre and post knowledge tests were administered at the beginning and end of the one-day training. Items were developed specifically to test participants' knowledge gain in content taught.

Findings: Results from the analysis of pretest to post-test scores indicate that 80% of caseworkers demonstrated significant knowledge gains.

Interpretation of findings: The data indicate that the training was successful in communicating core content to public child welfare caseworkers, though the knowledge gain was lower than it had been for the supervisor training. This difference could be attributable to the fact that only one day was available caseworker training compared with two days for supervisor training. Further details about the knowledge test analysis are included in the appended evaluation report.

D. Intermediate outcome No.1

Expected outcome: supervisors will utilize knowledge and skills learned in training in their supervisory practice with workers

Data: Baseline data on use of skills taught in the training were collected through a self-administered questionnaire during the supervisor training sessions. The survey was re-administered to supervisors during the caseworker trainings to assess change in the use of knowledge and skills.

Findings: Baseline data on frequency of use of skills were collected at the supervisor training through a self-administered survey. These data suggested that across all groups of supervisors, the skills taught in training were being used by between one-half and two-thirds of supervisors. At the six-month follow-up, these skills were reportedly being used by 65%-74% of supervisors.

Interpretation of findings: We were pleased to see a sizable increase in the % of supervisors who report using the skills taught in our training from baseline to the six-month follow-up. While the self-report format is admittedly not an objective measure of use of skills, this provides some further evidence that supervisors were receptive to the content of the training. Further details about use of skill are found in the appended evaluation report.

E. Intermediate outcome No. 4

Expected outcome: transition planning based on core principles will improve from prior to the grant to the end of the funding period

Data: This outcome was measured through interviews with youth who were in the process of transitioning out of care. Baseline data were collected through interviews with a sample of youth in care over age 17 in 2007, prior to the statewide training project. A second set of interviews was conducted with a sample of youth in care over age 17 in 2009, after the statewide training was completed. After receiving a list of all eligible youth in the state between the ages of 17.3 and 17.9, we stratified the list by eight service areas and drew a sample of 12 youth from each service area. We reviewed the information about the youth's current location according to DHS records, sent letters to each youth and followed up with phone calls. With both cohorts this turned out to be a very complex evaluation component, due to the fact that the living situations of many youth had changed.

Findings: A fuller summary of findings from the youth interviews is included in the Appendix. Here we note some information about the sample and recruitment, and the key themes that emerged from the analysis of the qualitative interviews. In 2007, out of 96 youth selected for the sample and to whom letters were sent, 22 youth were able to be interviewed. In 2009, out of 95 youth selected for the sample, 15 youth were able to be interviewed. This large rate of attrition was due to a variety of factors. In 2007, 37 of the 96 youth were eliminated from the sample after an initial review of their current circumstances found

that they had been discharged home, were on the run, were in a detention facility, had already aged out of care, or had no contact information. Out of the remaining 59 youth, 37 were eliminated due to additional changes in their circumstances that were discovered by the researchers while attempting to make contact with them. In 2009, out of the original 95 sampled, 47 youth were immediately eliminated for similar reasons, and during efforts to make contact with these youth, another 34 were removed from the list due to further changes in the youths' life situation. The recruitment process in itself yielded important information about the many transitions that occur with the population of older youth in care.

Youth were asked a variety of questions about their plans for after turning 18, the planning activities they had engaged in, whether they had had a formal transition planning meeting, and how they felt about the planning process so far. The youth were also asked to give advice to both child welfare workers and other youth in care about the transition process. We compared youth in foster homes with youth in group care, and differences in the youths' transition planning experiences from pre-training (2007 interviews) to post-training (2009 interviews). We also summarized the youths' recommendations to DHS workers and other teens leaving care. Key themes that emerged from the interviews included the following:

1. There were variations in services received between youth in group versus family foster home care. Youth in family care seemed largely reliant on their DHS worker and transition planning specialist, and in some cases their foster parents, for the majority of transition information and planning; whereas youth in group care participated in many classes and group sessions as part of their treatment program that addressed transition planning needs.
2. While youth in group care, in general, received more transition education in their group setting, there were still noticeable differences between the youths' descriptions of planning prior to and after the transition planning training. Prior to training, there was much more variation in the youths' descriptions of the planning process. Some 2007 youth had clear transition plans, but these plans seemed to have more to do with the characteristics of the youth, than necessarily the services they received. Other youth were very vague about their plans, and did not articulate the concrete steps that would be needed to implement their plan. Several youth described receiving inadequate information that prevented them from taking advantage of an available service.
3. In the 2009 interviews, it appears that youth received more information and from a variety of different sources. In general, more youth in 2009 described finding the transition planning

process to be helpful. There were many more positive comments about the planning process from these youth, compared to the youth interviewed in 2007.

4. We examined youths' changes in perspective from 2007 to 2009 to see if they described a more empowering experience with regards to the transition planning process. While not all the 2007 youth reported negative experiences, some of their experiences were disheartening. They shared instances of being discouraged from pursuing their own interests, or felt like workers thought they were destined to fail.
5. Youth in 2009 generally shared more supportive experiences working with various transition professionals. They described having more contact, feeling listened to, and being challenged to identify their own goals, all of which are reflective of a positive youth development perspective
6. When asked to describe the top 3-5 things that they want adults that work with youth in foster care that are turning 18 (like DHS caseworkers and counselors) to know that would be helpful as they work with the teens, youths' comments to DHS workers reflected a desire to be empowered by their workers. The most frequently mentioned recommendation "to be listened to," and to be understood or have what they say be taken in to consideration in

the planning process. Youth also wanted to be encouraged to make *their own* choices, to be part of deciding what was best for them. They wanted to be able to give input and have options to choose from.

7. Youth had a variety of advice for other teens transitioning out of foster care. A common theme was to be thoughtful and proactive about the planning process. They encouraged other teens to plan ahead and take the process slowly, rather than rushing to leave care at age 18. More specifically, the youth advised other teens to take advantage of services or resources available to them, like finishing school and addressing any problems they were experiencing. Many of the youth also talked about maintaining connections with important and helpful people in their lives.
8. Finally, as with their advice to DHS workers, youth talked about the same themes of empowerment and choice in sharing their thoughts with other teens.

Interpretation of findings: The analysis of these interviews seemed to indicate positive changes in the transition planning process between 2007 and 2009. How much of this can be directly attributed to the training of public child welfare supervisors, caseworkers, and community providers offered through this grant versus other initiatives focusing on youth transitioning out of care

cannot be determined conclusively. We also must acknowledge the potential influence of selection bias—are the youth that we were able to interview representative of the larger population of youth in transition, or is the fact that we were able to reach them indicative of a potential bias? We cannot answer this question. We do feel that our project has played an important part in bringing attention to the needs of youth in transition and in educating a large number and variety of individuals who work with this population to better serve youth.

Results and Recommendations

Results

Improving Outcomes for Youth in Transition experienced many successes over its three years of implementation. We have identified a number of ways in which the project has had a positive impact:

- Training of supervisors increased the ability of public child welfare supervisors to mentor their workers in the important area of working with youth in transition, thereby enhancing the likelihood of positive outcomes for youth.

- Supervisor training was based on a model of supervision as a specific area of practice, based on a sound conceptual strength-based framework, and consistent with the supervision model used in our concurrent project on improving recruitment and retention in public child welfare. Thus we believe that this training will have a lasting impact on supervisory practice.
- The project used a method of training supervisors first, then developing planning teams to organize and implement training for caseworkers and community partners. Supervisors had opportunities to assume a leadership role in the area of improving services to youth in transition in their own communities and with their staff. This process reinforced the leadership role of supervisors and allowed the community trainings to be tailored to local needs.
- The method of bringing supervisors from various areas of the state for the two-day training helped to promote communication across service areas and across new and experienced staff. Supervisors have few opportunities to meet with peers across the state in learning and networking settings. They very much appreciate such opportunities.

- Caseworkers and community partners who work directly with the population of youth aging out of care were able to benefit from local training provided through this project.
- Local service areas had the opportunity to examine the network of services to youth and to plan for improving services to youth in transition through the community day. Most of these events were held at community colleges, which had good meeting rooms and parking facilities. Individuals from a variety of agencies and all levels came to the community event, and many child welfare staff viewed this event as a chance to share training with their partners. Foster and former foster youth positively influenced the development of the training curricula and had an impact on supervisors, caseworkers, and community partners through their participation in the training events. Though having youth participation is not without challenges, we have found that these opportunities are empowering for the youth and sensitizing for the trainees.
- We were able to successfully integrate the four core principles into our training activities as planned: positive youth development, permanent connections, cultural competence, and community collaboration.

- Supervisors and caseworkers demonstrated improvements in their knowledge about the situation of youth in transition, as measured by pre and post-tests.
- Supervisors demonstrated an increased use of skills taught in the training program, as measured by follow-up self-reports six months post-training.
- In response to requests by trainees for practical tools, materials were developed with an eye toward usability. Many of the tools are available on the website, either directly or through links.
- Interviews conducted with youth who were in the process of transitioning from out-of-home care to independence suggest that transition practice has improved over the course of this project.

Recommendations

Reflecting on our experience with this project, we were able to accomplish a lot within three years. In part we believe that this is attributable to the fact that we had another Children's Bureau funded project on improving recruitment and retention in public child welfare already in place when we began transition training. We were able to utilize a number of the existing structures and relationships, thereby expediting the time frames to accomplish our goals with the youth in transition project. Without that

groundwork already laid, three years may not have been sufficient to accomplish as much as we did: supervisor training statewide; caseworkers training and community-based training in each of Iowa's service areas. Thus we would recommend extending the length of time for future training projects.

We have found that gathering information from stakeholders prior to developing and implementing a training program is an important part of the process. This helps to ensure that the training is responsive to participants' needs and helps to get "buy-in" for the program. Our recommendation is to include a process for gathering input from stakeholders prior to any substantial training program.

We were able to successfully integrate the four core components—positive youth development, permanent connections, cultural competence, and community collaboration – into our training for youth in transition. In retrospect there is much more material that could have been included, but we were limited in the number of training days. In particular, we had to limit the training in cultural competence to race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation—and were not able to address the cultural aspects of spirituality and differently-abled youth. We could easily have spent an entire day on cultural competence, but we simply did not have sufficient training time.

The process of beginning with supervisor training and involving supervisors as leaders in planning and implementing training for their

caseworkers and community partners appears to have been a successful strategy—one that builds the leadership skills of supervisors while reinforcing their role as teacher, mentor, and community partner.

Youth participation is an essential part of developing and implementing training in the area of youth transition from care. Despite some of the logistic and programmatic challenges, no voice is more compelling than that of youth who have experienced the transition process themselves. Therefore we recommend that training in this area consider including youth in a variety of capacities, and especially participating in the training of providers.

Despite the appeal of replicating training programs, our experience tells us that training must always be adapted to the unique situations and service delivery systems of states and localities. Even within a state-administered child welfare system, we found that different areas of the state were at different stages of readiness with respect to transition services. Convening local planning committees helped to tailor this training to the needs of the service area.

In Iowa we have made much progress in the way that we work with older youth who are transitioning out of care. The core principles that were an important part of this training project: a positive youth development approach, building permanent connections, cultural competence, and community collaboration—were all actualized through our curriculum and

training events. The interviews conducted with youth in 2007 and 2009 seem to reinforce the fact that transition practice in Iowa has changed. Whether this change is a direct result of this project or a combination of this project with other simultaneous initiatives cannot be ascertained.

There is a caveat, however. Our experience with trying to reach youth for interviews revealed important challenges. The situation of many older youth in care seems to change frequently, as many youth were no longer at the residence of record, some appeared to have no contact information, and for some we could not verify where they were currently living. For youth whom we could not reach, their transition experience might have been very different from the youth we were able to interview. This suggests the importance of ensuring that the improvements in transition planning evidenced in these interviews are reaching all youth who are aging out of care.

When we began the project, it was difficult to generate enthusiasm about training to work with youth who were aging out of care. We are pleased to know that there is much more enthusiasm now and many initiatives underway in Iowa that focus on this particular population. We hope that the lessons from our project will be useful for other states and localities.

Appendix

REFERENCES

INDEPENDENT LIVING CURRICULUM MATRIX

FOCUS GROUP AND INTERVIEW SUMMARY

COMPETENCIES FOR SUPERVISOR AND CASEWORKERS

CURRICULUM FOR SUPERVISORS

PARTICIPANT MANUAL FOR CASEWORKERS

PARTICIPANT MANUAL FOR COMMUNITY PARTNERS

LOGIC MODEL

EVALUATION OF SUPERVISOR TRAINING

EVALUATION OF CASEWORKER AND COMMUNITY TRAINING

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEWS WITH YOUTH

ARTICLE: IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR YOUTH IN TRANSITION

STRENGTHS PERSPECTIVE ON WORKING WITH YOUTH

MATERIALS FOR YOUTH INTERVIEWS

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