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SERVICES FOR YOUTH TRANSITIONING FROM FOSTER CARE: VIEWS OF FOSTER YOUTH AND FOSTER PARENTS

BACKGROUND

The 2008 Legislature included a budget proviso for the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) to survey foster youth and foster parents about how well current services are meeting the needs of youth aging out of foster care in the state.¹ The Institute contacted youth and parents in 2008 through two separate surveys.

In the spring of 2008, the Institute began contacting youth who had aged out of foster care as part of its evaluation of the Foster Care to 21 program.² The following three questions were included in the youth survey:

- *How prepared do you feel to live on your own?*
- *Is there any particular challenge that you have faced in living on your own?*
- *Is there any specific service that you feel would really help foster care youth live on their own after they turn 18?*

Also in the spring of 2008, the second annual survey of foster parents was conducted on behalf of the Braam Panel.³ The Panel agreed to add questions related the preparedness and challenges faced by foster children 17 years old or older in 2007.⁴ They also were asked what specific services they believed would benefit foster youth in living independently.

¹ ESHB 2687, Section 610 (12), Laws of 2008.

² L. Schrager. (2008). *Foster care to 21: Enrollment trends after two years*. Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, Document No. 08-12-3901.

³ The Braam Panel was created in 2004 to oversee a settlement agreement regarding Washington State's foster care system. See: <<http://www.braampanel.org>>

⁴ If the foster parent cared for more than one youth 17 years old or older in 2007, then they were asked to respond with reference to the oldest youth that they cared for that year.

SUMMARY

The 2008 Legislature included a budget proviso for the Washington State Institute for Public Policy to survey foster youth and foster parents about how well current services are meeting needs of youth aging out of foster care.

Youth who had aged out of care in the year prior to June 2007 were difficult to locate; with extensive effort, we were able to interview 20 percent of this population (169 youth). We interviewed 194 foster parents whose youth aged out during this same time period (not necessarily the same youth who were interviewed). We asked both groups about the preparedness of youth exiting foster care, the challenges they faced, and the services that help youth transition to independence.

Findings

- *84 percent of the surveyed foster youth believed they were very or somewhat prepared to live on their own. In contrast, only 46 percent of foster parents rated their foster children in these categories; they were as likely to rate them as not very prepared or not at all prepared.*
- *Foster parents and foster youth focused on money, work, and housing as challenges for transitioning youth.*
- *When asked which services are most needed by transitioning foster youth, both youth and parents identified: continued help from the state after leaving, services provided by Independent and Transitional Living providers, and improved preparation of foster youth through more classes and support.*

For the youth survey, 855 youth were identified by the Department of Social and Health Services' Children's Administration (CA) as having aged out of foster care in the year prior to June 1, 2007, or having been in care on June 1, 2007, when they were 18 years old or older. With the assistance of DSHS, the Social and Economic Sciences Research Center (SESRC) of Washington State University was able to contact 169 (20 percent) of this population.⁵ Given this relatively small sample, we cannot rely on the survey results as necessarily representative of the full population.

For the foster parent survey, 1,171 foster parents who cared for a child in 2007 were interviewed; 194 (17 percent) had provided care for youth 17 years old or older. Of the 194 foster parents, 163 (84 percent) were licensed foster parents and 31 (16 percent) were unlicensed relative caregivers.

The foster parents and youth who were interviewed were not matched pairs; in other words, the interviewed youth did not necessarily live with the parents who were interviewed.

LEVEL OF PREPAREDNESS FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING

Foster parents were asked their views about how prepared the oldest youth they had cared for in 2007 was to live independently. Foster youth were asked how prepared they were to live on their own. As shown in Exhibit 1, while less than half (46 percent) of the foster parents believed the oldest youth was very or somewhat prepared to live independently, 84 percent of foster youth responded that they were very or somewhat prepared to live on their own. Foster youth who had graduated from high school were no more likely to see themselves as prepared when compared with youth who had not graduated from high school.

Exhibit 1
Foster Parent and Foster Youth Surveys:
Preparedness of Youth to Live Independently

	Foster Parents		Foster Youth	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Very Prepared	20	10%	48	28%
Somewhat Prepared	70	36%	94	56%
Not Very Prepared	41	21%	15	9%
Not At All Prepared	63	33%	12	7%
Total	194	100%	169	100%

⁵ Twenty-four youth reached by phone refused to be interviewed.

CHALLENGES YOUTH FACE IN LIVING ON OWN

Foster parents were asked to indicate the challenges that transitioning youth face in living on their own. Overall, 150 out of the 194 foster parents (77 percent) noted at least one concern. Foster parent comments were reviewed and grouped into major topic areas; about 40 percent of foster parents indicated multiple challenges for individual youth. Exhibit 2 lists the challenges noted by at least 10 percent of the foster parents giving comments.⁶

With one exception—the high mention of chronic conditions by foster parents—the issues that

foster parents note as challenges for foster youth are likely similar to those that parents of many 17- and 18-year-olds would mention about their own children. The difference for foster youth, of course, is that many lack a family safety net to provide financial support, temporary housing, and emotional support as they transition to adulthood.

When foster youth were asked to indicate what challenges they faced in living on their own, they focused on three issues: finances, work, and housing (see Exhibit 3). Few foster youth (n=4) mentioned chronic conditions as posing a challenge in their effort to live independently.

Exhibit 2
Foster Parent Survey:
Challenges Faced by Foster Youth to Living Independently
(Number Providing Comments=150)

Challenge	N	Percentage
Financial issues (budgeting, money management)	39	26%
Chronic conditions (including developmental delay, mental health, emotional delay, physical disability, or behavioral issues)	38	25%
Employment (getting and retaining a job)	25	17%
Educational issues (including not completing secondary education, educational delays, and difficulty in college)	22	15%
Personal immaturity (including emotional immaturity, lack of confidence and self-esteem)	18	12%
Basic life skills (including household tasks, cooking, laundry, self-care)	16	11%

Exhibit 3
Foster Youth Survey:
Challenges Faced by Foster Youth to Living Independently
(Number Providing Comments=106)

Challenge	N	Percentage
Financial issues (having enough money and budgeting)	58	55%
Employment (getting and retaining a job)	23	22%
Housing and rent issues (including homelessness and difficulty paying rent)	16	15%

⁶ Challenges noted by less than 10 percent of foster parents include drug or alcohol issues (n=9), pregnancy and parenting (n=8), and housing (n=5). The complete comments made by foster parents and foster youth are available from the Institute upon request.

SERVICES TO HELP YOUTH LIVE INDEPENDENTLY

Foster parents and foster youth were asked what services would help youth exiting foster care to live on their own. Overall, 139 of 194 foster parents (72 percent) and 110 of 169 foster youth (65 percent) commented on at least one service they thought would be helpful. Exhibits 4 and 5 display the services noted by at least 10 percent of the foster parents or foster youth providing comments.⁷

The three services mentioned most frequently by both foster youth and foster parents were:

- Continued help from the state after leaving foster care,
- Services provided by independent and transitional living providers, and
- Improved preparation of foster youth before leaving foster care.

**Exhibit 4
Foster Parent Survey:
Services to Help Foster Youth Live Independently
(Number Providing Comments=139)**

	N	Percentage
Continued help from state after leaving, including follow-up (16 mentioned follow-up by caseworker or mentor)	49	35%
Services provided by Independent Living/Transitional Living providers	34	24%
Improved preparation for independent living before leaving foster care (more classes and training before leaving, more support from social workers and foster parents before turning 18)	30	22%
Transitional housing, subsidized housing, halfway facility	22	16%
Employment help, both getting and keeping a job	18	13%
Educational support, both high school/GED and college	16	12%

**Exhibit 5
Foster Youth Survey:
Services to Help Youth Live Independently
(Number Providing Comments=110)**

	N	Percentage
Continued help from state after leaving, including follow-up (18 mentioned the need for more financial support after leaving)	37	34%
Services provided by Independent Living/Transitional Living providers	28	25%
Improved preparation for independent living before leaving foster care (more support from social workers and foster parents, mandatory or improved transition classes)	15	14%
Employment help, both getting and keeping a job	14	13%
Help with money management skills	13	12%
Assistance with living options and finding housing	12	11%
Continued medical coverage	11	10%

⁷ Services that fewer than 10 percent of foster parents noted include: extending care beyond the age of 18 or allowing youth over 18 to return to care (n=10); and mentoring (n=8).

Regardless of how prepared youth believed they were to live independently, about two-thirds of foster youth mentioned at least one service they thought would help. Youth who felt not very or not at all prepared to live independently were more likely to mention the importance of services provided before leaving foster care than those youth who felt somewhat or very prepared to live on their own.

FUTURE REPORTS

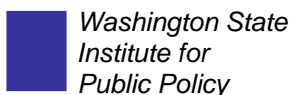
In addition to the information obtained from the foster parent and foster youth surveys, the Institute is preparing an additional report that will focus on services provided by the Independent and Transitional Living Programs (IL/TL).

Suggested citation:

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The Washington State Legislature created the Washington State Institute for Public Policy in 1983. A Board of Directors—representing the legislature, the governor, and public universities—governs the Institute and guides the development of all activities. The Institute's mission is to carry out practical research, at legislative direction, on issues of importance to Washington State.