

## **Creating Access to Opportunities for Youth in Transition from Foster Care: Youth Perspective**

**A Capitol Hill forum presented by the American Youth Policy Forum**

**February 20, 2015**

Each year, approximately 26,000 young people in foster care will turn 18 and "age out" of the child welfare system. These youth face numerous obstacles as they transition to adulthood like homelessness, unemployment, difficulty accessing postsecondary education, and financial instability. The American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) recently conducted research into these challenges and released an issue brief, [\*Creating Access to Opportunities for Youth in Transition from Foster Care\*](#), highlighting best practices and policies.

This was the second of two AYPF forums discussing the transition from foster care to adulthood. The first, on January 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015, looked at these challenges from the perspectives of state policymakers. During the February 20<sup>th</sup> forum, two youth panelists shared their experience with foster care and accessing postsecondary education. Two additional presenters described how their programs support youth, like those on the panel, once they leave foster care.

AYPF's Erin Russ and Garet Fryar began the forum with a presentation of their findings in *Creating Access to Opportunities for Youth in Transition from Foster Care*. The 2008 Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act gave states added flexibility to address the needs of transitional youth, leading AYPF to ask how states are using this opportunity to implement policies supporting transitioning youth. Through their research, three categories of need emerged – sustainable social capital, permanency supports, and postsecondary opportunities. Sustainable social capital is the idea that many youth in foster care do not know where to begin when trying to access resources like mentors and life-skills coaches to ease their transition into adulthood. There is a need for networks, connections, and relationships that empower youth to advocate for themselves. Permanency supports include housing, financial stability, transportation, and healthcare. Without these general supports, it is difficult for young people to make long-term decisions. And finally, foster care youth lack access, support, and exposure to postsecondary educational opportunities.

The overall theme of AYPF's findings was that foster care youth do not have singular needs. Rather, they have a variety of needs that require comprehensive, wraparound support. In order to address these challenges, AYPF made several recommendations. Policymakers should highlight a range of postsecondary options, develop and coordinate services that address multiple needs at once, engage youth in the decision-making process, and change the conversation from the transition from foster care to a conversation about *transitioning to new opportunities*. Russ' and Fryar's presentation set the context for the forum discussion.

**Mary Lee, National Transitional Living Coordinator for Youth Villages**, began the discussion with a brief history of [Youth Villages Transitional Living program](#). Created in 1999 with a grant from The Day Foundation, Youth Villages is a comprehensive program designed to help youth ages 17 to 22 make the transition from state custody to an independent, adult life. Since 1999, Youth Villages has served over 7,600 youth in Florida, Georgia, Massachusetts, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Tennessee. On any given day, the program serves approximately 830 youth.

### ***Full-Service Support***

Youth Villages focuses on a wide range of needs including permanency, education, employment, housing, independent living skills, and youth involvement. Ms. Lee said the intensity of services is what makes Youth Villages unique and successful. Each participant is assigned a transitional living specialist who provides comprehensive services, from teaching youth how to ride the bus to working with the Department of Human Services and forming relationships with housing authorities. Transitional living specialists are on call 24/7 and meet with their clients at least once a week. They are the go-to person for all of their clients' needs. Educational coordinators help participants access educational opportunities, and job training programs connect them with their local business communities.

Therapists are also involved in the Youth Villages program, provide motivational interviewing, substance abuse help, child/parent psychotherapy, and help for victims of domestic abuse. As new therapeutic needs arise, Youth Villages adds new need-based services to the program.

### ***Program Evaluation and Outcome Data***

To ensure Youth Villages is successfully helping young people transition to independence, Ms. Lee stressed the importance of conducting satisfaction surveys and follow-ups after youth leave the program. Youth Villages administers satisfaction surveys every two months while clients are in the program and follow-up surveys six, 12, and 24 months after discharge. The follow-up surveys look at maintenance of stable housing, educational and/or employment status, criminal involvement, and pregnancy/parenting rates. This data is used to evaluate Youth Village's success and find areas in which improvements can be made.

Significant pieces of data collected as of December 2014 include:

- At discharge, 87 percent of participants went to a home while zero percent went to a psychiatric hospital and only three percent went to detention or correctional facilities.
- Overall, 90 percent of participants were satisfied with the Youth Villages program.
- At six and 12-month follow-ups, 88 percent of clients were successful. And at 24 months, 84 percent were successful. Youth Villages defines "success" as living with family or independently at the time of follow-up.
- At follow-up, more than 75 percent of clients consistently reported no trouble with the law. This is significant because according to the [Midwest Evaluation of](#)

[\*the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth\*](#) (Midwest Study), in part conducted by Chapin Hall; nearly half of former foster youth surveyed had been arrested as adults by age 21.

- At the two-year follow-up, more than 83 percent of clients were in school, graduated, or employed.

In 2012, Youth Villages released a [10-Year Report](#) detailing their success. Since then, they have partnered with [MDRC in an outside evaluation](#) of their Transitional Living program.

### ***Youth-Driven***

Ms. Lee highlighted the valuable role participants play in Youth Villages' success. In monthly peer-to-peer sessions, young people express their needs and goals and contribute ideas on how to improve the program. She also stressed the importance of giving youth leadership and advocacy opportunities because this empowers young people and gives a face to the statistics, making local communities aware of this special population of youth.

**Michelle Morgan, a student at the University of Memphis**, shared with the audience her positive experience with Youth Villages. Ms. Morgan entered the foster care system when she was 16, and Youth Villages reached out to her when she was 18. She admitted that she was unsure of Youth Villages at first, but joining the program was one of the best decisions she has ever made. When she entered the program, Ms. Morgan was trying to live independently and support both herself and her one year-old child. For her, Youth Villages provided support in several areas of her life, especially financially and educationally. She struggled with budgeting, so her transitional living specialist taught her how to budget, helped her find daycare and a job, and even helped her potty train her child. She met with a mentor regularly who was a great, important support system when she just needed someone to talk to.

### ***Education Focused***

Ms. Morgan's transitional living specialist suggested that she participate in the Youth Villages scholarship program. To receive scholarship money, Youth Villages required Ms. Morgan to have a job and participate in community service activities. She was a volunteer tutor at the University of Memphis for three semesters, and she also volunteered at Le Bonheur Children's Hospital. Ms. Morgan expressed that the scholarship money and financial services she received from Youth Villages were the most significant factors to her success.

Thanks to the vital support from Youth Villages, Ms. Morgan is pursuing a Teaching All Learners major, which will certify her to teach grades K-6 or special education K-12. After obtaining her bachelor's, it is her dream to teach the 5th grade. Ms. Morgan closed her speech saying, "If Youth Villages never came into my life – without their services and the things they taught me – I can honestly say I don't know where I'd be right now."

**Sheemeca Berkley, Great Expectations Advisor for Northern Virginia Community College**, discussed how the [Great Expectations](#) initiative helps Virginia's current and former foster youth gain access to a community college education. Launched in 2008, Great Expectations is an initiative of the Virginia Foundation for Community College Education. Great Expectations is offered at 18 of Virginia's 23 community colleges and currently serves 435 enrolled students.

### ***One-Stop Shop***

Like Youth Villages, Great Expectations is a comprehensive service designed to help foster youth transition to independent, successful adult lives. Services offered include individualized tutoring, help with college admissions and financial aid applications, career exploration and coaching, job preparation, life skills training, personalized counseling, and help with daily needs like transportation, housing, and food. Students generally only have to work with one or two advisors or counselors, making it fast and easy to access the Great Expectations services. Each college has a student advisory board that helps bring awareness to campuses about student needs and ensures Great Expectations services are meeting those needs.

At Northern Virginia Community College, Ms. Berkley is one of eight full-time Great Expectations advisors, and she personally serves more than 70 students, whom she calls her children. She is their go-to person when they need any help at all, whether it is personal or academic. She requires her students to participate in community service and attend at least one Great Expectations event, which are usually fun get-togethers with other foster care youth in the program. Great Expectations' goal is to retain students in the program. In addition to academic tutoring and counseling, students are required to obtain mid-semester progress reports from their professors to make sure they keep up their grades and are able to stay in school.

Ms. Berkley recognized that some students she encounters in Great Expectations are not academically prepared for college, and college is not for everyone. However, that does not stop her from helping those students. She helps them find a trade, enrolls them in developmental classes, and pushes them to become successful even if that means not getting an associate's degree. She stressed the importance of letting the students have their own voice when it comes to making these decisions. She provides them with all the information they need, discusses the options, and acts as a support system every step of the way.

**Marianna Langenbeck, a student at Northern Virginia Community College**, discussed the many doors the Great Expectations program has opened up for her. After being in foster care for 10 years and living in six different foster homes, Ms. Langenbeck decided when she was 18 that she wanted to live independently and continue to receive services for foster care youth. When Ms. Langenbeck was a freshman in high school, she had no idea where her future was headed. She knew she did not want to live paycheck to paycheck, but she did not know where to begin when it came to obtaining postsecondary education. During her senior year, she learned about Great Expectations from her independent living coordinator, and she decided to try out the program because it seemed

like a great option for youth who wanted to live independently from foster care but have support services at the same time.

### ***Opportunities and Support***

Ms. Langenbeck described how Great Expectations opened up many doors for her, from education to leadership and advocacy opportunities. She will graduate this spring with an Associate's degree in General Studies, and she plans to continue her education in the field of cosmetology at the Paul Mitchell School and become a skin care aesthetician. Ms. Langenbeck is on the Great Expectations advisory board at Northern Virginia Community College. This has been a very rewarding role because she is able to help raise awareness for Great Expectations, tackle issues to help the program constantly improve, and connect with other foster youth and share advice with younger youth in the program. She has also learned extensive communications skills and serves as the spokesperson at various Great Expectations fundraising events.

Above all, Ms. Langenbeck is grateful for the never-ending support she has received as a student in the Great Expectations program. She said that growing up in foster care, she never had a large or consistent support system, and she found that in Great Expectations. She is proud to see how far she has come since joining the program, and credited the program's mentors and advisors who went above and beyond to support her in every way they could.

### **Q&A**

***To the students: If you used any other federal programs during your time in foster care, were there any barriers or problems that you experienced with those programs?***

Marianna Langenbeck – In Virginia, you have 60 days after leaving foster care to decide whether or not you want to go back to foster care or continue to live independently. I personally think they should extend it to 90 days because 60 days goes so fast. I know it's not that much more time, but it gives people more time to figure out whether or not they can make it living on their own.

Mary Lee – I think the way Chafee funding is being utilized is still an issue in several states. There's still a gap in how it's being used in general. We should utilize more pay for performance.

***To the program directors: We've seen that for-profit colleges are targeting a lot of these young people, often leaving them vulnerable to financial instability and with degrees that some employers do not view as credible. What's your experience with seeing this?***

Sheemeca Berkley – Luckily, we're able to get in to the Virginia Department of Social Services to help steer students back to our state programs.

Mary Lee – It's really up to the young people at the end of the day. It's important to inform the students and show them their options and support them after they've had the bad experiences.

***For Mary Lee: How is Youth Villages funded, and do you have a sense of your per youth cost?***

Cost is driven by staff salaries and each location's cost of living and travel expenses. Each young person costs roughly \$46/day, and they are generally in the program between nine and 12 months. It's important to remember you're investing in these young people. And this money needs to come out of multiple systems' budgets, not just the child welfare budget. Tennessee has been very resourceful in finding the money.

***For the program directors: Is foster care participation a strict requirement for participating in these programs?***

Mary Lee – To participate in Youth Villages, the youth do not have to have worked with child welfare or aged out of foster care. A lot of our funds come from philanthropic donations, so we have flexibility in who we serve.

Sheemeca Berkley – Great Expectations is only for youth who were in foster care any time after the age of 13. It breaks my heart when a student comes to me for help, and I can't help. I try to steer them in the right direction of someone who can.