

TRANSITION: TEAMS IN ACTION



ON THE GROUND

Innovative Projects Serving Foster Youth

Fostering the Future:

San Mateo YTAT and Center for Venture Philanthropy Collaborate on Innovative Initiative to Help Youth Transition to Independence

YTAT Connection

At the first YTAT meeting in San Mateo County, the Center for Venture Philanthropy's (CVP) program manager and the New Ways to Work staff who were facilitating the meeting saw the possibility for CVP's new initiative, Fostering the Future (FTF), to be linked to the YTAT efforts in the county.

Venture Philanthropy Model

CVP's model is well suited to the collaborative approach that YTAT supports. A branch of the Peninsula Community Foundation, CVP has developed a model of venture philanthropy based upon selected principles effectively used by venture capitalists. It is defined by a spirit of opportunity and by the willingness to seek out and support new solutions to long-standing challenges. While CVP's social venture funds focus on large issues affecting the communities in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties, the Center is well-positioned to draw upon national cutting edge approaches, focus on system change, use long-established connections with other community players, monitor the progress of any project closely, and build a strategy for sustainability.

Fostering the Future

In 2003 two events drew attention to foster care issues in San Mateo: the death of a child while in foster care, and the federal mandate for repair of the nation's foster care system. The events created what Carol Gray, CVP's executive director, calls, "a burning

platform - a collision of events precipitating immediate and concentrated corrective action. The convergence just kind of got things happening - quickly."

In January of 2004 the CVP met with the San Mateo County Human Services Agency (HSA) leadership "to see how we could best work together" said Gray. "We saw a place where our kind of philanthropy could be helpful and *they* were very excited to see philanthropy at the table. As a community foundation, we know all the players and the leadership - both in government agencies and local nonprofits. It seemed that we could effectively help the County move forward as they worked on their System Improvement Plan." This and subsequent meetings helped the CVP staff see where the County was concentrating its efforts, and where CVP might fill a gap. "During the first few years of their improvement plan, HSA needs to focus on safety. We all saw that. We decided we would concentrate our efforts on helping young people transition well when they 'age out' of the 'system at around age 18," said Gray.

After these and hundreds of hours of other discussions, CVP launched its six-year social venture fund, *Fostering the Future: Successful Transitions for Youth in Foster and Kin Care*. Fostering the Future is a pooled investment fund with dollars supplied by the Peninsula Community Foundation endowment fund, individual donors and grants from other foundations. Its primary goal is to create a model that will not only help young people in foster and kin care become

successful adults but also effect changes in the current youth-serving systems that will support transitioning youth for many years to come. These goals will be met by a partnership of nonprofit and government agencies working together with a cadre of youth in foster and kin care to

1. improve the youths' academic performance,
2. develop their self-advocacy skills and those of their caregivers,
3. enhance their caregivers' parenting skills,
4. create permanent bonded relationships with at least one caring adult, and
5. strengthen their independent living skills.

At the core of the fund, is an asset coach model. Three new staff members will join partner nonprofits to work with youth who are in either foster or kinship care (or who have already emancipated from the foster care system) in Redwood City or East Palo Alto. These coaches will not be case workers, but will focus on helping each young person develop his or her personal plan for forward movement over the next period of time in that youth's life. Emphasis will be placed on each young person's developmental assets and strengths rather than deficits and weaknesses.

Assets are defined as the elements needed for full, healthy youth development. According to the Search Institute, these elements "address support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity." The Search Institute refers to research that shows "every child needs between 31-40 assets before there is a significant drop in at-risk behavior." The FTF collaborative partners, CVP staff and the participating funders support the goal of developing self-sufficiency, and have confidence in the asset concept as a vehicle for reaching that goal.

The young people who decide to join the program will form a youth network and will work together to plan activities and educational opportunities that they deem to be of value. The groups will be age-specific (11-13, 14-17, and 18-25) and will meet on a regular basis in both gender-specific and mixed-gender groups. As a

natural outgrowth of the work, the asset coaches will support permanency planning, helping particularly the older youth develop a sense of belonging to a community and having a lifelong relationship with at least one caring adult.

Collaboration with Other Organizations

Fostering the Future is a partnership that proposes to weave together the strengths and vision for change of several community-based organizations and government agencies. Eight organizations are involved in the partnership: Youth and Family Enrichment Services, Edgewood Center for Children and Families, Legal Aid Society of San Mateo County, San Mateo County Office of Education, Human Services Agency of San Mateo County (Adolescent Services and Workforce Development divisions), San Mateo County Community College District, San Mateo County Health Department (Mental Health Services), and Child Advocates of Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties.

Monitoring Effectiveness

Another distinctive feature of the Center for Venture Philanthropy's approach is the close monitoring of the program. Instead of looking at results on an annual basis, CVP reviews data quarterly. They have found that the more frequent assessments help them to make course corrections more effectively and provide investors with accountability. Gray explains, "A quarterly report will be sent out to the partnering nonprofits and investors. We will pull the data, put it in a graphic format, and analyze it, comparing it to the targets and milestones that we all agree to in our annual memorandum of understanding."

YTAT Connections

Staff at CVP and San Mateo County's Human Services Agency saw Fostering the Future as the natural "home" for YTAT. Not only did they see that a strong collaboration of youth-serving agencies was already in place and working to effect better transitions, but they also recognized that YTAT would provide the collaborative with the opportunity to share

information and learn from the other YTAT counties as well as take advantage of statewide resources in arenas such as evaluation and database design.

For more information on the Center for Venture Philanthropy, visit
www.pcf.org/venture_philanthropy/