

TRANSITION: TEAMS IN ACTION



ON THE GROUND

Innovative Projects Serving Foster Youth

Project HOPE

Alameda County WIB, Department of Social Services Partner to Create a Better Way to Serve Emancipating Foster Youth

By Thou Ny, Employment Consultant for Project HOPE



The Alameda County Workforce Investment Board (ACWIB) prepares aging out and emancipated foster youth for adulthood and the labor market through a County-wide partnership with the child welfare system. Alameda County is home to some 700-800 youth in foster care who are between the ages of 16 and 18. Each year, approximately 200 to

250 of these youth age out the foster care system into the labor market. However, national research has shown that some of the youth are likely to emancipate into homelessness and unemployment, which is a serious concern for Alameda County Social Services administrators.

Project HOPE, approximately two years in the making, is one of the first programs in the nation to address the needs of foster youth by connecting County Children and Family Services with Workforce Investment Act services. Aimed at incorporating employment preparation services into the child welfare system, Project HOPE has altered the disconnected landscape between child welfare and the workforce systems. More importantly, it has found a way to bring much needed resources to aging out foster youth and the foster care system. Prior to Project HOPE, the County's workforce investment and child welfare systems did not have a history of engagement with each other. Today, both systems are working together to integrate their programs to reduce transition barriers for foster youth.

How Project HOPE was Created

In early 2002, the ACWIB and the County's Department of Children and Family Services formed a transition care committee and initiated numerous discussions among key administrators to address emancipation issues. Over the next several months, members of the committee enlisted other members from within the child welfare services and external community organizations to help identify the needs of transitioning foster youth, and develop and promote a framework for action.

Together, the committee members set an ambitious goal to integrate WIA services into the child welfare system so that transitioning-age and emancipated foster youth can be better prepared for the labor market. The effort was eventually named Project HOPE, **H**elping **O**ur young **P**eople with **E**ducation and **E**mployment.

Once the program design was formulated, Program Finance Specialist, Rosario Flores, with the support of the newly formed partnership, approached the Alameda County Workforce Investment Board (ACWIB) and requested funds to start Project HOPE. Specifically, they asked for support to create two full-time positions, an employment consultant and a staff person, for direct service delivery and program implementation.

The employment consultant's work was to be three-fold; he or she would act as a liaison between agencies, be responsible for connecting foster youth to WIA programs, and develop a systemic framework to integrate the county workforce development and child welfare systems. The full-time staff person was to facilitate meetings among community stakeholders and to develop connecting infrastructures between the two systems. ACWIB allocated monies, and Project HOPE was launched and grew into a full-fledged program.

Project HOPE was later selected by the Governor's Foster Youth Employment Training and Housing Taskforce, an inter-agency collaboration between the Employment Development Department, the California Department of Social Services, and the California Workforce Investment Board to be one of the three statewide foster youth pilot initiatives. The support from the taskforce enabled the project to work towards its goals as well as to develop a possible framework for other workforce development and child welfare practitioners to help reduce homelessness among aging out foster youth.

Project HOPE Offers Foster Youth an Array of Employment and Preparation Services

Through interagency collaboration between the County’s workforce development system and the child welfare system, Project HOPE offers transitioning and former foster youth an array of employment and educational preparation services made available by the Workforce Investment Act. By connecting foster youth to WIA youth funded programs, youth can participate in academic enhancement or job preparation activities. Working in conjunction with the County’s Independent Living Skills Program, the project assisted many aging out youth into jobs, housing, and higher education. To expose foster youth to a variety of community services, Project HOPE also connects them to the One-Stop career center system in Alameda County.

Project HOPE has been a Big Success

Since its inception, Project HOPE has had excellent outcomes. It has reported 100% enrollment and placement in direct service delivery from its inception through April 2004. “Lo and behold. Many are now getting jobs,” Flores reports, emphasizing that “the main word here is collaboration.” Without the two systems working together and leveraging resources, the project would not exist today. (Also, on a monthly basis, Project HOPE staff participate in ongoing dialogues about transition at the Governor’s Foster Youth Employment Training and Housing Taskforce in Sacramento.)

A Multifaceted Approach Contributes to Project HOPE’s Success

Flores explains that Project HOPE’s success stems from its many-faceted approach, which includes adequate staffing, regular communication among stakeholders, strong support from top administrators, and customized education for foster care social workers and WIA service providers



The first component is adequate staffing. “A full-time paid staff person to make the liaison work and to conduct the necessary publicity campaigns is essential,” Flores maintains, as is the

employment consultant. Flores refers to the employment consultant as a “change agent” who puts a working system in place before moving on. “When the consultant leaves, you have an ongoing referral process and network in place, with the question of getting resources to youth always at the center,” she explains.

Regular communication among all the stakeholders is also a key strategy. “Roundtable discussions with key individuals and organizations, on at least a monthly basis [have been vital],” says Flores. The monthly meeting is great vehicle for the transition care committee or Project HOPE advisory team to address and resolve challenges. The institutional and programmatic challenges among the two systems are enormous. Without these monthly meetings to keep the partners and advisors engaged with ongoing technical issues, problems, and successes, progress would have been slow.

Representatives from Casey Family Programs, the National Center for Youth Law, and others have been very instrumental in the exploration and navigation of the WIA and child welfare systems. Their knowledge of transition issues and workforce development and child welfare policies is a tremendous help to the whole effort.

Another major key to the success of Project HOPE is the strong support that top administrators in the County’s workforce development and child welfare systems offer. Without their support, institutional barriers cannot be reduced, and therefore integration cannot take place as easily. The administrators help the project move forward within the organizational structures, which in turn helps to generate support and reduce other external barriers from the greater community. Project HOPE would have a lesser degree of involvement and participation from the community if the top administrators were not interested.

An additional integral component of Project HOPE has been a campaign to educate foster care social workers, many of whom were unaware of what the WIA and the One-Stop Career Centers had to offer. “Caseloads are so large, and it’s hard for youth to understand that they have to start employment planning as early as 16. So [the process] starts with educating the social workers,” Flores points out.

A great deal of preparation went into creating the educational materials for the foster care social workers. During the initial stages of Project HOPE, the employment consultant spent a considerable amount of time understanding the challenges of foster care system, particularly the needs of the child welfare workers. Child welfare workers have a lot on their plate, so information about employment must be presented within the contexts of their work. Fortunately, WIA services fit perfectly into the child welfare workers’ efforts to help youth transition into adulthood, so getting information about WIA services to child welfare workers is a matter of navigating the system’s organizational structure. With ample support from top administrators, Project HOPE has access to Child Welfare Unit meetings and other transitional programs for presentations about employment and WIA services.

On the workforce side, although foster youth are named in the Workforce Investment Act as youth with critical barriers to employment and self-sufficiency, WIA service providers know very little about the child welfare system and foster youth. Therefore, the other half of Project HOPE's educational work involves introducing WIA service providers to the child welfare system and the needs of foster youth. Here, too, Project HOPE staff dedicated a great deal of time and effort to understanding the landscapes of the WIA system and the needs of the service providers.

Project HOPE was strategically designed to have a strong foundation in the WIA-funded efforts. Because it was initiated and funded in part by the Alameda county WIB, the Project HOPE staff have been able to bring the majority of the WIA-funded youth service providers in Alameda County to participate in its efforts. Each participating program was asked to specifically designate a case manager to handle foster youth referrals from the child welfare system generated by the HOPE referral process.

Foster Youth Peer Mentors Help Transitioning Youth Navigate One-Stop Centers

Because of the variety of resources and social services available at the One-Stops, transitioning-age foster youth can benefit tremendously from these centers. However, since the services offered at these centers are for adults, accessing these services can be very intimidating for youth. To introduce foster youth to One-Stop services, Project HOPE integrated three peer educators (foster youth employment specialists) at various sites in Alameda County, including the City of Oakland. The peer educators are former foster youth who understand various issues affecting their peers. As crucial team members, they play a key role in making the centers more youth friendly to foster youth as well as assisting them with navigating available resources and help them access other community services as needed.

What Does Project HOPE Mean to Foster Youth in Alameda County?

The labor market can be very competitive and obtaining a job requires a tremendous number of skills. Not only do youth need the skills for a specific occupation, but also they require the skills involved in obtaining and maintaining a job. Many studies of foster youth show that up to 50% are not adequately prepared for the labor market's challenges. As a result, these youth are not employable, and many do end up becoming homeless caught in other negative situations. By leveraging WIA resources such as the One-Stop Career Centers or WIA-funded youth programs, more options and opportunities are being offered to aging-out foster youth during their transition into adulthood.

For more information about Project HOPE, please contact Rosario Flores, Program Finance Specialist Alameda County Workforce Investment Board (510)259-3827

RFlores2@acgov.org