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California Connected by 25: Efforts to Address the Housing Needs of Transitioning Foster Youth

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The California Connected by 25 Initiative is a collaborative effort of five foundations to improve the life prospects of youth transitioning out of foster care in California. Counties participating in CC25I aim to improve policies, programs and outcomes for transition-age foster youth in seven focus areas: K-12 Education; Employment/Job Training/Post-Secondary Education; Financial Competency and Asset Development; Housing; Independent Living Skills Programs; Personal/Social Asset Development; and Permanency. Four counties – Fresno, San Francisco, Santa Clara and Stanislaus Counties – are early implementers of the Initiative.

This report documents the Initiative's progress made by each of the early implementing counties in the area of Housing. These efforts to increase the likelihood that former foster youth will secure safe, appropriate long-term housing during early adulthood interact with several other CC25I focus areas. Efforts to expand the housing options for transitioning youth is building increasingly on the lifelong connections between youth and caring adults established through the permanency work that begins while youth are still in care. Furthermore, former foster youth who are safely and stably housed are far more likely to continue their education, maintain gainful employment and participate more fully in their communities as adults.

The Housing Challenges Faced by Transitioning Foster Youth

The link between having spent time in the foster care system and experiencing housing instability or homelessness in early adulthood is well documented. Studies from across the United States find that between 14 and 36 percent of former foster youth have spent some time being homeless within the first few years of leaving care and in California, 65 percent of youth who were emancipated from the foster care system have an "imminent housing need." Relative to their peers who have not been in care, former foster youth are more likely to experience multiple living arrangements, be unable to pay rent, or be evicted in early adulthood. Former foster youth face additional challenges in their quest to live independently, and without a family safety net, these challenges are often insurmountable. For example, skeptical landlords will not rent to youth without a credit history or an adult co-signer and the required move-in costs usually exceed available savings. Transitioning foster youth may not know how to negotiate relationships with landlords and roommates or how to budget finances so that an apartment can be maintained.

Despite the availability of federal funding through the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, fewer than half of former foster youth report having received some type of housing support through their local independent living program. Passage of the Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 could address some of this shortfall by providing federal funds for states that continue foster care payments through age 20, payments which could also be applied to transitional or supportive housing accommodations. The expansion of the Transitional Housing Placement–Plus (THP-Plus) program, which provides state funding to localities to develop housing options for former foster youth through age 24, has proven to be one of the most successful efforts to address the housing challenges faced by former youth in California. The number of THP-Plus funded transitional housing units available to former foster youth in California increased tenfold from 50 in 2003 to 500 in 2007, and then doubled to 1,000 units in 2008. Localities throughout California and the rest of the nation are expanding their transitional housing capacity for former foster youth through a variety of housing models, most with some type of integrated support services.

At the forefront of this work, CC25I counties are working to ensure that every foster youth who emancipates from the child welfare system has access to a variety of housing options that are supportive and flexible enough to meet the developmental needs of young adults. Through partnership with foster youth, caregivers, and community programs, as well as through full utilization of available housing funding streams, CC25I counties are increasing local housing capacity and expanding access to resources and opportunities for transitioning foster youth to experience independent living.

Key strategies utilized in the CC25I Housing focus area include outreach to and collaboration with other housing organizations and initiatives to develop local housing resources that meet the needs of transitioning youth; utilization of available funding (such as THP-Plus dollars) to increase transitional housing capacity; and development of host family models of transitional housing that build on efforts to establish permanency and lifelong connections for foster youth. The early implementing counties have been supported in these efforts by funding and technical assistance from a variety of sources including CC25I, the THP-Plus Statewide Implementation Project, and the Foster Youth Housing Initiative.

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County Progress in Reaching CC25I Housing Objectives

Counties are still implementing new data tracking strategies that will allow ongoing assessment of the housing indicators identified by CC25I: the percentage of foster youth with a plan for where they will reside after they leave foster care; the percentage of former foster youth who have housing during the transitional period; the percentage of former foster youth who feel their housing is safe; the percentage of former foster youth in long-term housing; and the percentage of former foster youth who experienced a period of homelessness in the past year. However, CC25I counties have made substantial strides toward the intermediate goals of the Initiative as detailed below and in **Table 1**:

Goal: Expand housing and transitional housing capacity and resources available to transitioning foster youth.
Progress: THP-Plus funding to early implementing CC25I counties increased from $837,000 in fiscal year 2006/07 to over $6 million in fiscal year 2008/09 and the number of transitional beds funded in these counties increased from 31 to 231. In fiscal year 2007-2008, these four counties operated 263 units of transitional housing with THP-Plus support.

Goal: Develop a continuum of housing supports and link youth to the services that best meet their needs.
Progress: CC25I counties are partnering with other public agencies, housing organizations, and community service providers to develop and operate transitional housing units as well as provide case management and other support services that meet the varied needs of former foster youth.

Goal: Incorporate permanency and lifelong connections concepts into transitional housing models.
Progress: Early implementing CC25I counties are offering a variety of housing models, including host family units that build on permanency and lifelong connection efforts.

Though continued growth in THP-Plus funding is uncertain, counties are actively pursuing strategies that will facilitate further expansion of transitional housing units available to former foster youth in the future.

Table 1: Overview of THP-Plus Goals and Accomplishments, by County, 2006-2009

County	Planned Units (2006 proposal)	# Units THP+ Allocated 2006/2007	# Units Operating July 2006 – June 2007	# Units THP+ Allocated 2007/2008	# Units Operating July 2007 – June 2008	Planned Units (2008 proposal)	# Units THP+ Allocated 2008/2009
Fresno	10 host family units	0	0	20	20 host family units, served 8 youth (served 20 youth by August 2008)	75 host family and scattered site models	20
San Francisco	40-60 units, mixed model types	31	80 scattered site, single site and host family units, served 100 youth	111	127 scattered site, single site and host family units, served 140 youth	250 mixed model types	111
Santa Clara	50 units, mixed model types	0	57 scattered site, single-site and host family units, served 66 youth	80	96 scattered site, single site and host family units, served 135 youth	80 mixed model types	80
Stanislaus	Unspecified number of host family units	0	20 host family units, served 20 youth	20	20 host family units, served 29 youth	25 host family and scattered site units	20

Individual counties have also implemented additional strategies to support transitioning foster youth in planning for and securing stable housing post-emancipation:

Fresno County

- Is currently reaching out to the housing community (local renter associations, building developers, housing authorities and property management companies) to inform them of the housing needs of transitioning foster care and probation youth and encourage the collaborative development of scattered site housing resources.

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San Francisco County

- Established the nonprofit "Friends of the SF ILSP" to raise additional funds for housing and educational support during the transitional period.
- Integrated the assessment of housing needs into all GOALS emancipation conference meetings for foster youth age 16 and up.

Santa Clara County

- Created a Transition Housing Liaison position, a former foster youth who case manages participants in the THP-Plus program and provides support services and referrals. An additional MSW position was later created to assist with this work.
- Utilized one-time CalWORKs funding creatively to provide housing assistance for transitioning foster youth, particularly parenting/pregnant youth or those at risk of homelessness.
- Is developing an assessment tool to monitor self-sufficiency skills among THP-Plus participants in order to better prepare youth for life after transitional housing has ended.

Stanislaus County

- Is developing an employment services component to be integrated with their transitional housing efforts to help transitioning foster youth find and keep employment, ensuring that they can afford stable housing in the future.

Key Lessons Learned

Host family and roommate dynamics can be a challenge. Misunderstandings and interpersonal dynamics among youth and adults in host family or shared housing models can escalate to the point of crisis. One strategy to prevent this type of crisis in host family settings is to require both host "parents" and the youth to attend the initial THP-Plus information meeting to bring all parties to consensus on the program's housing agreement. Mediation support for youth and families could help mitigate crises in host family settings and other preventive strategies - such as regular mediation meetings, avoidance of shared bedrooms, and limits on the number of roommates allowed - could help reduce the likelihood of problems in other types of shared housing.

Case management for housing participants can be critical. Intensive case management is essential in supporting the successful participation of former foster youth in the THP-Plus program. CC25I counties employed a variety of strategies to enroll and case-manage local THP-Plus participants. Some utilized contracted service providers to case manage youth, others used ILP or Aftercare staff, and one county hired a former foster youth to case-manage as the Transitional Housing Liaison.

Support services for housing participants, and for host families, are beneficial. Some CC25I counties have found it a challenge to ensure that youth receive the support services they need to remain stably housed. Coordination among housing providers, case managers, ILP staff and other service providers was key to ensuring that participating youth received the appropriate support services. Counties identified some particular supports needed among their THP-Plus participants, including mental health services and youth empowerment training, as well as expanded opportunities for youth participants and host family parents to engage in social activities.

Transitional housing participants can benefit from money management assistance. Most transitional housing requires youth to pay an increasing share of their rent over time to prepare them for the financial responsibilities of independent living in the future. Linking housing participants to financial asset development programs early on can prepare them for this transition by teaching budgeting skills and encouraging savings behavior through matched accounts. These efforts can also identify when youth require employment services to help secure and maintain work so both earnings and savings can increase over time.

Transitional housing must accommodate the needs of youth attending post-secondary education and training programs. Transitional housing work requirements must be flexible to accommodate the limited capacity to work among former foster youth who are attending college or other post-secondary education and training programs. CC25I counties have found it necessary to reduce the number of work hours required or to waive the rent phase-in of THP-Plus participants who are attending educational programs on a full-time basis. In some cases, youth are encouraged to save a portion of their financial aid payment to promote asset development despite the absence of earnings. A continuing challenge in this area is reconciling the short-term nature of the THP-Plus program (youth can usually participate for a maximum of 24 months) with the needs of youth who are attending four-year colleges and may require housing assistance for a much longer period of time.