

# Transition Planning with Adolescents: A Review of Principles and Practices Across Systems

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## Executive Summary

This paper addresses the need for improved transition planning with adolescents in foster care. A review of best practices across other youth-serving systems leads to a number of recommendations for child welfare systems. The research was conducted through a philosophical lens of transition as a physical, emotional, and psychological process rather than an event. An emphasis is placed on a critical need to integrate permanency and transition planning practices which are viewed within the framework of adolescent development. Adolescent brain development research highlights unique opportunities for youth development during the transition from foster care to adulthood.

Themes emerge from the literature and provide vital input to the development of a new approach to transition planning in child welfare. Many exemplary transition planning practices are already occurring in some states' child welfare systems, some of which are highlighted in this paper. Literature on youth transition planning in the fields of special education, mental health, juvenile justice, and international child welfare systems has a great deal to contribute, and four practices deserve to be highlighted.

- The Transition to Independence Process (TIP) System, developed by Rusty Clark, modifies the core values of the system of care approach into seven guidelines that direct the transition process. The process is implemented by transition facilitators who play a significant role in the success of transition planning (Clark, 2004). Numerous sites have implemented this

model and had great successes in aiding youth in transition (Clark et al., 2008).

- Person-Centered Planning, which comes in many forms with various titles, has produced substantial benefits for youth in transition. All Person-Centered Planning models share similar features: creating a circle of formal and informal supports; focusing on talents, strengths, and interests of the young person; identifying the young person's dream and developing a long-term plan for realizing that dream; establishing roles and commitments of team members; and empowering the young person to work toward his or her goals (Clark & Davis, 2000).
- Fostering self-determination in young people can aid them in having successful transitions throughout their lifetime. Programs that facilitate self-determination in young people focus on teaching those in transition how to set goals, solve problems, make decisions, advocate for themselves, and manage their own well being (Wehmeyer, 2001). This paper highlights various methods to help youth lead self-determined lives in which they control their future.
- Resiliency building approaches to transition planning have also been found to be effective in improving outcomes for young people. Such approaches entail nurturing a sense of purpose within young people, helping them to develop interests, social competence, problem solving skills, positive self identities, and advocacy skills. When young people are able to develop resiliency gradually and have a sense of

being in control over their lives, transition will be more manageable.

***The research supports the following recommendations:***

1. Permanent connections are essential to youth successfully transitioning from care. Transition planning must include permanency as a goal, which can be achieved by the youth and facilitating professional who should jointly search the youth's family of origin and the community for potential and existing relationships and then allow opportunities for these relationships to grow. Policies and practices should support ongoing efforts to connect youth with supportive adults as early as possible and to help these relationships become lifelong and perhaps legal.
2. Transition planning must address the many experiences foster youth have had which often lead to a loss of identity and a distrust of the permanent connections they will need to achieve economic stability, health, and well-being. Youth require help to develop the skills and tools to understand and manage their unresolved feelings of grief and loss. Allowing them this opportunity will begin to create a sense of closure and may allow them move forward in their lives. Transition plans need to address the development of a healthy sense of self, an understanding of the importance of family, and the skills needed to build and maintain healthy relationships.
3. Transition plans must be developed through a strengths/needs-based assessment of the young people's developmental abilities. This assessment should be conducted before the transition planning begins and then repeated at regular intervals to measure the effectiveness of efforts made to address any developmental delays.
4. All plans must be strengths based and directed by the young people, for instance, a person-centered planning model. This does not mean simply having youth present at decision-making meetings, but including them in conversations, and when appropriate, allowing them to lead the meeting.
5. It is imperative that adults prepare youth so they are able to be involved in their own transition planning. This may involve having preparation meetings before the actual planning process begins. As youth experience their voices having equal consideration to the adult voices and see their plans developing, their participation will then be truly meaningful. Young people will take ownership of and responsibility for plans created with them, but not one created for them.
6. Planning must be facilitated by skilled professionals who have a clear understanding of adolescent development, knowledge of the processes of major life transitions, and cultural competence and awareness. This can be achieved only through adequate and comprehensive training of the professionals who are facilitating young people's transition planning.



7. Systemic support of transition planning is a necessity. The administration of transition planning by skilled professionals should be supported by the system they are working within. A transition policy can strengthen and allow for sustainability in common practice. Policy also allows for consistency for all youth receiving services.
8. Self-determination and resiliency must be fostered in young people to ensure their success as adults by providing them with skills that will serve them throughout all their major life transitions, not just the one from adolescence to adulthood. Young people will need real-life opportunities to build these abilities, which will require systems to give young people room to make mistakes.
9. Plans and services must be the result of a collaborative effort on behalf of all agencies currently involved in young people's lives, as well as those that young people will be involved with in the future. These may include mental health systems, educational entities at both secondary and postsecondary levels, and correctional systems.
10. Barriers to cross-systems information sharing must be overcome in order for all services to work together to serve youth and adults holistically, instead of the current fragmented plans and services operating in isolation of each other.
11. Transition plans need to be accompanied by clear lines of accountability regarding who is responsible for ensuring the plan is carried out. A plan is ineffective if there is no follow through by people willing to help youth accomplish their goals.

## Introduction and History of Independent Living Services

Transition planning is a critical component in working with young people as they move into adulthood. All youth, regardless of where they live or with whom, can benefit from a planned and thoughtful discussion around the transition to adulthood and self-sufficiency. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoption Act of 2008 (Public Law (P.L.) 110-351) mandated for youth in foster care that “during the 90-day period immediately prior to the date on which the child will attain 18 years of age, or such greater age as the state may elect under paragraph (8)(B)(iii), whether during that period foster care maintenance payments are being made on the child's behalf or the child is receiving benefits or services under section 477, a caseworker on the staff of the state agency, and, as appropriate, other representatives of the child provide the child with assistance and support in developing a transition plan that is personalized at the direction of the child, includes specific options on housing, health insurance, education, local opportunities for mentors and continuing support services, information on designating a health care agent, and work force supports and employment services, and is as detailed as the child may elect.”

Current trends in the foster care population highlight the need for transition planning for older youth. Over the past

several years, the number of children and youth in foster care has declined from 510,000 in 2006, 491,000 in 2007, and 463,000 in 2008. However, despite this decrease, the number of youth exiting care through emancipation or running away has increased from 31,566 in 2006, 34,327 in 2007, and 32,840 in 2008. (AFCARS preliminary estimates for FY 2006, 2007, and 2008). Currently, there are limited data about the outcomes of young adults who age out of foster care; however, the information from

***While the creation of a transition plan might be seen as a singular event, the process of transitioning is often not.***

the limited studies and anecdotal information indicates that these youth are the most at-risk of becoming teen parents, incarcerated, and homeless. The goal of transition planning is to ensure that the resources and services necessary to assist young people make a smooth transition to adulthood are available based on their individual needs and goals. To assist states in meeting the mandatory transition planning provision of P.L. 110-351, National Resource Center for Youth Development and the Muskie School of Public Service, the University of Southern Maine, have collaborated to provide states with information on assisting youth as they transition to adulthood.

While the creation of a transition plan might be seen as a singular event, the process of transitioning is often not. For example, a

youth may move out of a foster home on a certain day, but the process of finding, selecting, and establishing a new residence may take many months of preparation and transition. In addition, effective transition planning requires families, youth systems, and the community to be clear and responsible for following through on the commitments developed in the plan.

This document contains a literature review of resources to facilitate a holistic approach to, and current practice models in, transition planning. In order to understand the current requirement of a transition plan in the context of child welfare, a short history of independent living services is presented below.

### ***History***

Transition planning for youth aging out of foster care has been a national concern since 1986. With the passage of Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1985, P.L. 99-272, Section 477, was added to Title VI-E of the Social Security Act creating the first Federal independent living initiative. This law brought attention to youth who, in some cases, had grown up in foster care, were likely to remain in care until reaching the age of majority, and without significant intervention were at risk of homelessness after leaving care. For the first time, Federal funds, in the amount of \$45 million, were authorized and allocated to states to provide services to older youth in foster care.

The initial group targeted for services was comprised of youth 16 years of age and older who were Title IV-E eligible. Funding for the services was temporary, requiring

reauthorization at the end of two years. In 1988 amendments to Section 477 expanded the population to include all youth in foster care 16 and over, and in 1994 provided permanent authorization of funds for independent living services.

Not only did this ground-breaking legislation provide funding to states for independent living services, it also created the first requirement to plan for the transition from foster care. Program Instruction ACYF-PI-87-01 issued February 10, 1987, from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth, and Families directed states to assure that the case plans for youth 16 and over “include a written description of the programs and services which will help the [youth] prepare for transition from foster care to independent living.”

Funds authorized by P.L. 99-272 could only be used while youth were in care and could not be used for housing resulting in the primary focus of early transition planning on life skill acquisition. Early assessments were designed to determine what a youth knew or needed to know about living independently. Transition plans focused on the life skill instruction with an emphasis on concrete skills such as job search and money management. Although best practice called for youth to fully participate in the planning process, in actuality, this level of youth involvement rarely occurred.

During the years from 1993 and 1998, additional amendments were made to Sections 472, 474, 475, and 477 of Title IV-E of the Social Security Act. The funding for

independent living services was increased from \$45 million to \$70 million, and a state matching requirement was added. The next major change in transition planning for youth in foster care did not occur until the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (P.L. 106-169) was signed into law.

The Foster Care Independence Act created the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP) and expanded services to youth transitioning from foster care. Under CFCIP, states were, for the first time, expected to provide services to youth who had exited care at 18 but had not yet reached the age of 21. The legislation increased the funding level to \$140 million, ensured that no state had less than \$500,000, removed the age requirement allowing youth to be served before the age of 16, and permitted states to use up to 30% of their funding for room and board for former foster youth.

A significant element of the Foster Care Independence Act was the requirement that “adolescents participating in the program . . . will participate directly in designing their own program activities that prepare them for independent living, and the adolescents will be required to accept personal responsibility for living up to their part of the program” [Section 477(b)(3)(H)]. This statement changed the transition planning process from an activity that could be completed in isolation to one that must include the youth. It is now expected that youth participate in the plan to transition from foster care.

Planning for the transition from foster care for older youth was also impacted by the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997.

This legislation placed greater emphasis on permanency for all young people in care including those who were previously thought to be too old to be adopted. This increased focus on the importance of families, sibling relationships, and other lifelong connections has caused transition planning to expand beyond the basics of work, money, and housing. Planning for the transition from foster care under the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 incorporated the identification of supportive relationships, the creation of written agreements like the Permanency Pact, and the involvement of caring, supportive adults in the planning process.

In 2001, the CFCIP was amended to create the Education and Training Voucher Program. For the first time, states had access to dedicated funds to assist young adults formerly in foster care pursue postsecondary education.

Finally, the enactment of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoption Act of 2008, P.L. 110-351, has provided states with the opportunity to implement sweeping reforms in their child welfare systems. The impact of this law will be primarily predicated on a state’s ability and effectiveness in implementing the mandatory and voluntary provisions of the legislation. The inclusion of the requirement that a state must craft transition plans with young people at least 90 days prior to their emancipation from the system has renewed interest in this critical component of casework.

## Review of the Literature

### *Key Elements of Effective Transition Planning*

Perhaps the most essential principle in implementing the transition planning requirement of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoption Act of 2008, P.L. 110-351, will be an emphasis on facilitating permanent connections with youth. These relationships can support young people through every aspect of their transition to adulthood.

The urgency of achieving permanency greatly intensifies as young people approach the age of majority because of the extreme difficulties they will face if they age out of care without a permanent connection to a caring adult. Transition and permanency planning must be an integrated effort toward supporting youth in making new connections, strengthening existing relationships, and assisting youth in reconnecting with their families of origin before they leave the foster care system.

Additionally, it will be critically important to provide young people with developmentally appropriate transition planning services that account for any delays that may have occurred during childhood. It is vital that transition planning for adolescents in the foster care system be carried out within the framework of adolescent development. Spinks (2002)

reported on the work of the National Institute of Mental Health's Dr. Jay Giedd, which used imaging technology to study adolescent brain activity. The findings showed that developmentally, adolescence is as critical as the first few years of life. During adolescence, the experience-dependent prefrontal cortex (PFC) is still developing, meaning that the brain may be especially

susceptible to "experiential input"

(Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006, p. 307).

Minden (2004) notes that

***The urgency of achieving permanency greatly intensifies as young people approach the age of majority...***

because the brain may not be fully mature until the early 20s, adolescence is a time of both increased vulnerability and opportunity, when "exposure to a variety of experiences and beneficial influences [has] chances of lasting positive effects" (p. 4). In order to successfully transition to adulthood, young people most need "a circle of caring adults" that will surround them with structure and mentoring, and help them build confidence as they develop their own decision-making abilities (p. 14).

The National Juvenile Justice Network (NJJN, 2008) cautions policymakers about basing policy on what is still a relatively small amount of research, pointing out the need to learn more about the adolescent brain. The NJJN (2008) asserts that the research about adolescents must be framed in a way that is respectful and effective, focusing on the concepts of opportunity, investment, and

education. The NJJN states that adolescents must not be portrayed as incompetent or risk takers lacking the capacity to reason or make good decisions. These new findings about the adolescent brain should be utilized to support programs and services that are developmentally appropriate and that recognize adolescence as a unique period of opportunity when young people can develop abilities that will be carried throughout their lives. Investments can be made during adolescence to create environments that maximize learning opportunities and provide tools for young people to use as they enter adulthood. Finally, the NJJN (2008) maintains that education about adolescent and adult brain development is a crucial component that can improve interactions between youth and adults by heightening awareness about what is occurring during adolescence.

Schulenberg, et al. (2004) point out a “profound lack of institutional structure to facilitate the transition to young adulthood” (p. 801) noting that this can be incapacitating for youth who become dependent on a structure that will no longer be present in their lives. They assert that positive experiences can allow transitioning to be an important turning point in the lives of youth struggling with complex issues. Bessant (2008) asserts that the interpretation of adolescent brain development research can either be supportive of positive youth development or interfere with young people learning through their experiences. Bessant states that these experiences are necessary for young people to fully develop skills in: solving problems, making decisions, gaining

insight, using intuition, and sharpening perceptions. Bessant strongly argues that brain structure, experience, and social learning must all be taken into account when determining an adolescent’s ability to solve problems and make decisions.

According to Walsh (2004), knowing what teens are going through can be an essential step toward establishing healthy relationships and improving communication between adults and adolescents. Walsh said new research can show adults how to guide the teens in their lives as they develop; he also urges adults to experiment with solutions when trying to help a teen. Walsh (2006) advises physicians to educate teens and families about what is occurring throughout adolescent development: “Kids need and deserve demonstrations of love from the adults who care about them, including their doctors” (p. 4). Galinsky notes that “separation and connection go hand in hand,” and although teens may push the adults in their lives away, they still need and want them to be actively involved in their lives (Spinks, 2002, p. 3). Galinsky discusses the importance of relationships in the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) documentary, *Inside the Teenage Brain*, and states that “it is the people in kids’ lives that make a big difference” (Spinks, 2002).

Child welfare systems should see transition to adulthood as a process rather than an event. Although change and transition are common occurrences for young people in foster care, aging out of the system can still be a daunting, exciting, and emotional time. Even in normal circumstances, becoming an adult is an epic process, fraught with changes

that represent losses and gains on the way to reinventing themselves as adults. While transition planning policies emphasize many of the logistics of becoming an adult, they place little emphasis on the emotional, psychological, and developmental processes of entering adulthood.

The William Bridges transition framework is a helpful model in understanding emotional and psychological effects on the transition process. The Bridges' framework makes a distinction between change and transition, describing change as an external event or situation

that happens relatively fast and is defined by an outcome. Transition, on the other hand, is described as a slowly occurring internal process that encompasses the psychological reorientation that individuals experience when faced with change.

Bridges identifies three predictable phases in the way an individual processes change:

1. *Endings*: This phase is triggered by change and is marked by denial, loss, and grief. Individuals grieve the way things were before the change happened and have difficulty envisioning a future self that encompasses the change. This could be manifested in a number of ways: talking about how things were, refusing to engage in behaviors or attitudes that sustain or allow a change, and blaming or disrespecting another party.

2. *The Neutral Zone*: During this phase, an individual is actively trying out new behaviors and attitudes in an effort to reinvent themselves in a new and unfamiliar situation. The individual is determining how to integrate “what was” and “what is”, while grappling with whom and how they are going to become in an undefined new situation.

3. *The New Beginning*: In this phase, the individual has begun to gain some clarity about how “what was” and “what is” can coexist. As predictability and familiarity are reestablished, the individual has determined how to integrate new attitudes, behaviors, and relationships with the old ones.

This framework offers opportunity and language for child welfare practitioners and youth to explore and understand normal emotional and psychological processes, while identifying effective and healthy strategies for managing a successful transition.

***The William Bridges transition framework is a helpful model in understanding emotional and psychological effects on the transition process.***

## ***Transition Planning Across Fields***

The child welfare field is joined by other disciplines in the effort to help young people have successful transitions. The field of special education has a 25-year history with federally mandated plans for youth with disabilities who are transitioning from school to adult life. Youth with emotional and behavioral difficulties have been supported by the mental health field as they engage in the complex process of preparing for adulthood. Young people who have become involved with the juvenile justice system have needed support as they too face unique challenges in moving beyond adolescence. Child welfare systems in the United States and other countries are also attempting to determine the most effective ways to assist young people in foster care as they transition out of the system they have come to depend upon. A review of these systems efforts to help young people have successful transitions brings attention to a few specific examples that deserve attention by child welfare policy makers, administrators, and practitioners.

## ***Transition Planning in the Field of Special Education***

The field of child welfare could learn much from the transition planning practices of educators who work with youth who have disabilities. In the past, these youth were denied access to educational opportunities. Only 20% of youth with disabilities received an education, and many schools excluded children from school who had specific disabilities such as deafness and blindness. The practices within the educational system led to very poor outcomes for these

individuals as they transitioned to adulthood without the opportunity to lead satisfying lives. In 1975, the federal government responded to this issue by enacting the Education for all Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142), which was reauthorized in 1997 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This law affords all youth with disabilities a “free appropriate public education,” and the 1990 amendments require each student with a disability to also be engaged in a transition planning process (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

The IDEA Regulations on Secondary Transition (2007), published in 2006 in response to the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, required that transition planning begin between the ages of 14 to 16. Transition planning must include “appropriate, measurable, postsecondary goals based upon age appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment, and, where appropriate, independent living skills and the transition services needed to assist the child in reaching those goals” (p. 2). The IDEA Regulations (2007) also supported youth engagement in the transition planning process by requiring that the youth be invited to all meetings in which the transition plan will be discussed or decisions will be made in regard to the transition plan. Transition services are defined in the IDEA Regulations as being “coordinated... activities for a child with a disability” (p. 1), which are established to improve the academic and functional achievement of the young person. They are focused on the young person’s strengths, preferences,



interests, and needs, and include comprehensive services to develop skills related to employment, postsecondary education, and independent living skills (2007).

Morrison (2008) asserts that transition planning should begin as early as possible even earlier than the age of 14 that IDEA requirements support. This does not mean that a formal document needs to exist, only that there are many activities that can be done with children to slowly begin the transition to independence, such as having discussions about what children want to do for a career when they get older. This gradual process is reflected in the transition checklists created by Morrison (2008) for different periods of transition including 4 to 5 years before finishing school, 2 to 3 years before leaving school, and 1 year before leaving school. Morrison (2008) has also created worksheets to assist youth in transition planning that help the youth identify their strengths, needs, worries, and opportunities.

Collaboration is the key element in successful and comprehensive transition planning for youth with disabilities (deFur, 2002). Collaboration involves networking to identify resources, service coordination for youth to have services they will need after transition, and cooperation between service agencies to support the youth and each other throughout the transition process. Transition team members must be equal partners in all

aspects of the process including making decisions, taking responsibility, and maintaining trust. Creating a transition plan must include assessing strengths and needs; developing skills; matching the youth with appropriate placements in employment, education, and housing; training and preparing the youth for transition activities; and planning for following up with youth after they transition. Planning checklists in

the areas of education, employment, and independent living have been developed for transition teams to use. They are comprehensive

and include all of the elements listed above (deFur, 2002).

The National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, NCSET, (2004) highlights person-centered planning as an excellent model for transition planning for youth with disabilities. This model focuses on the young person's participation in the planning process. Youth must be adequately prepared to participate meaningfully in the process and be given opportunities by adults to lead the transition planning process. Although this may seem to be prohibitively time consuming, involving youth in this way has been shown to be more time efficient in the long run. Person-centered planning teams have been found to be most effective when they involve natural supports as an effort to combine both the formal and informal supports within a young person's

***Collaboration is the key element in successful and comprehensive transition planning for youth with disabilities...***

life. These natural supports can be a great asset to the team by offering creative problem solving that often varies from the strategies professionals may be most familiar with utilizing. Including service providers in the transition planning process can help to ensure seamless service provision through the transition process. Collaboration among youth serving agencies is critical to transition success. NCSET (2004) also identifies many useful tools and resources on their website which can be used to implement this model.

Whitney-Thomas (1998) studied the focus person's participation in person-centered planning and found various elements which impact the young person's ability to fully participate in the transition planning process. The student's personal style, the size of the meeting, and the level of abstraction of topics being discussed all affect the extent of youth participation. Therefore, identifying a young person's conversational style and tailoring meetings to create an atmosphere in which the young person will be comfortable participating are critical to person-centered planning. The young person should be the one who decides who will be at the meetings so he or she is in control of the size and makeup of the meeting. Facilitators should also make sure that the content of the meetings is driven by the youth to create a level of abstraction that the youth will understand.

Wehmeyer (2000) asserts that building self-determination should be a key element of transition planning and services for youth with disabilities, defining self-determined individuals as being "causal agents in their lives; they act to make positive things happen

and to achieve personally valued goals instead of being acted upon" (p. 42).

Wehmeyer (2000) notes that self-determined people have better outcomes after high school, which leads many professionals to advocate for promoting this ability in transition services and making self-determination an important transition goal. Although assessing self-determination is a complex process, many tools have been developed to do so, and curricula have also been developed to promote improvement in this area. Some examples include the Steps to Self-Determination, the ChoiceMaker Self-Determination Transition Assessment, the Arc's Self-Determination Scale, and the AIR Self-Determination Scale. Assessing self-determination as an ongoing collaborative group activity must include the assessment of student interests and preferences that change over time.

Geenen (2007) advocates promoting self-determination for youth with disabilities and does so within the context of youth in the foster care system, 30-40% of whom have disabilities. The National Longitudinal Transition Studies conducted in 1987 and 2003 suggest that outcomes have improved slightly for youth with disabilities, and these improvements are "related to the effective transition practice of promoting self-determination" (Geenen, p. 17). These changes in outcomes may also be in part due to the IDEA Amendments in 1990 requiring transition services to be addressed in each student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Despite the improved outcomes for many youth with disabilities, some groups have not experienced the same levels of

improvement. Foster youth with disabilities continue to be at increased risk for poor transition outcomes despite advancements in special education practices (Geenen, 2007).

Geenen (2007) suggests that the child welfare field can learn from special education practices in transition planning and services to prepare youth for successful adulthood. Four studies of foster youth with disabilities were conducted by Geenen and colleagues, which focused on their experiences with transitioning out of foster care. The four critical elements of self-determination are skills, information, opportunities, and support for others, and were used as the framework for examining their utilization in child welfare practice. All four elements were found to be frequently absent in child welfare practice. Opportunities are not made available for foster youth to adequately develop skills such as decision making or problem solving; youth are not skilled in seeking information about their rights, options, available services, or access to education; youth do not have many opportunities to make decisions, express ideas, or make mistakes; and too little emphasis is placed on creating and maintaining relationships with those outside of the child welfare system. The use of self-determination curricula and assessment tools can be valuable to those assisting foster youth with disabilities as they transition into adulthood (Geenen, 2007).

The field of special education has made significant advancements in supporting youth with disabilities in their transition to adulthood. Although there is still a long way to go for all youth with disabilities to have

successful transitions, many excellent tools and models for practice are available that can assist professionals in special education, juvenile justice, mental health, and child welfare. The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (2007) created an Age Appropriate Transition Assessment Guide to assist professionals in the assessment of youth in transition. The ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education has a web page with current research on an extensive number of important topics in youth transitions (Warger, 2003). The National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (n.d.) provides transition resources for professionals with a wide range of topics related to transition and also has a comprehensive Transition 101 information page.

### ***Transition Planning in the Field of Mental Health***

Clark (2004) developed the Transition to Independence Process (TIP) System for use with youth who are experiencing emotional and behavioral difficulties (EBD). The TIP system involves engaging young people in planning the transition to adulthood while receiving services and supports in the four transition domains of employment and career building, education, living situation, and community-life functioning.

The TIP system is based upon seven guidelines:

1. Engage young people through relationship development, person-centered planning, and a focus on their futures.

2. Tailor services and supports to be accessible, coordinated, appealing, and developmentally appropriate, and build on strengths to enable the young people to pursue their goals across all transition domains.
3. Acknowledge and develop personal choice and social responsibility with young people.
4. Ensure a safety net of support by involving a young people's parents, family members, and other informal and formal key players.
5. Enhance young people's competencies to assist them in achieving greater self-sufficiency and confidence.
6. Maintain an outcome focus in the TIP system at the young person, program, and community levels.
7. Involve young people, parents, and other community partners in the TIP system at the practice, program, and community levels (Clark, 2004).

The TIP system is led by transition facilitators who promote independence, interdependence, and self-determination (Clark, 2004). Transition process values similar to those within the system of care model are used to guide the transition staff in implementing the TIP system. Transition facilitators use “an ongoing strength-discovery approach” that produces more

youth engagement in the process than the more common approach that highlights the shortfalls of youth (Clark, 2004, p. 13). Helping youth to build relationships is a central focus of the transition work to create social support networks that will assist youth in their transition once formal relationships are no longer present. Meetings with the transition teams are person centered and designed to empower young people in their own future planning.

The transition domains of education, employment, and living situation are modeled as being linked together by the

community-life functioning domain.

Although each of these domains is addressed in each transition plan, the model is not utilized as a one-size-fits-all approach. Services and supports are driven by youth and tailored to the unique needs of each individual. The TIP system is responsible for collaborating with other youth and adult serving agencies as well as with the community to create linkages and opportunities for youth that are essential in assisting them to have a successful transition. Youth must have real-life opportunities to develop skills in each of the transition domains, including opportunities to make mistakes and face natural consequences. All aspects of a transition plan are continually monitored, evaluated, and adjusted as necessary (Clark, 2004).

***Young people are more likely to be motivated to engage in an assessment and planning process when the experience highlights their strengths...***

*The Community Adjustment Rating of Transition Success: (CARTS) Progress Tracker* is one tool to evaluate the progress of youth served by the TIP system (Clark, 2005). This tool measures progress in the four transition domains of the TIP system and the level of satisfaction youth are experiencing with their life circumstances. It also captures a description of what transition services young people have received and how effective they have been. *The CARTS Progress Tracker* should be used throughout the TIP process, including before and after receiving services, and interviews should be conducted every 90 days.

The National Network on Youth Transition for Behavioral Health (2009) has compiled resources for professionals to use in evaluating youth in transition with emotional and behavioral difficulties, which can be used as assessment instruments in systems other than the TIP system.

Epstein and Rudolph (n.d.) note the importance of strength-based assessments when working with youth with mental health needs or at risk of developing serious emotional disturbance. Young people are more likely to be motivated to engage in an assessment and planning process when the experience highlights their strengths and is focused upon building strengths instead of fixing their problems. If an assessment makes a young person feel accomplished in areas instead of making them feel inadequate, they will be more open to continuing the process. Epstein and Rudolph (n.d.) consider the use of the *Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale: A Strength-Based Approach to Assessment* in a case study to

illustrate how such assessments “enhance one’s ability to deal with adversity and stress” and “promote one’s personal, social, and academic development” (p.1).

Lehman, Clark, Bullis, Rinkin, and Castellanos (2002) also support the use of strength-based assessments when working with youth who are experiencing emotional disturbance. They point out federal legislation that “reflects the values of consumer empowerment and self-determination” in child-serving systems such as special education and juvenile justice (p. 132). However, practices do not always reflect these values at the state level. Potentially effective transition practices are found to require extensive collaboration in both planning and services that begin as early as middle school. A shift in practice must take place that views young people as functioning in larger social systems that should support youth instead of current practices that view young people in isolation with “problems that must be fixed” (Lehman et al., 2002, p. 135).

Wagner and Davis (2006) completed a review of interventions and practices in preparing youth with emotional disturbances for transition and found five principles that they assert all programs should use to guide their work of improving adult outcomes:

1. Support young people in creating meaningful relationships that engage them in their education.
2. Provide a sense of rigor and challenge for youth so that, with adequate support, they will complete a program and gain a sense of accomplishment.

3. Require youth to have opportunities for real-life learning of skills relevant to their transition.
4. Focus on the whole child for a successful transition because any neglected area can have negative spillover effects into others.
5. Ensure that transition planning be person centered, involving the youth and other people important to them in the process.

In 2002, five states were awarded grants by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SMHSA) to be demonstration sites for the Partnerships for Youth Transition (PYT) initiative (Clark, Deschenes, Sieler, Green, White, and Sondheimer, 2008). The focus of the initiative was on improving outcomes for transitioning youth who are experiencing serious emotional disturbance or serious mental illness (SED/SMI). All of the sites were given the task to “develop, implement, stabilize, and document models of comprehensive transition systems.” Most sites utilized the Transition to Independence (TIP) system (Clark et al., 2008, p. 518). Partnering with agencies and organizations was critical to each site’s being able to offer a wide array of services to the young people they served and was an important contributor to the improved outcomes seen through the initiative. The PYT sites showed promising results through the implementation of the new transition systems that improved outcomes for the young people served by them. The use of futures planning, which is based on strength rather than on deficits, was seen as the main factor that improved the outcomes of these transitioning youth (Clark et al., 2008).

### ***Transition Planning in the Field of Juvenile Justice***

The National Center on Education, Disability, and Juvenile Justice (NCEDJJ) (n.d.) discusses transition planning and services in the context of adjudicated youth with disabilities and notes how this area has been neglected by many educational programs within correctional facilities. NCEDJJ highlights three specific components that must be present for transition planning efforts to be successful: interagency collaboration, team-based planning, and tracking and monitoring. Juvenile correctional facilities have experienced challenges in transition planning such as a lack of service providers who are trained in this area and inadequate communication and data sharing between youth-serving agencies. NCEDJJ asserts that collaborating with agencies that provide transition services can expand the number of opportunities for youth exiting the system. It is critical to create wraparound services that are strength based and will promote “comprehensive and coordinated services” (p. 2). Youth must be trained in various skill areas to ensure successful transition.

Orange & Van Slyke (2006) presented some best practices in implementing the No Child Left Behind requirements for transition services in correctional facilities’ educational programs. These requirements address how youth will make successful transitions from institutions to community schools that will be responsible for planning this transition and how youth will be assisted in continuing their education after transition.

Orange & Van Slyke (2006) recommended that transition planning should begin as soon as a youth enters the system, that planning should be based on assessments and goals, and that services should be tailored to meet the individual needs of each youth. They also noted that some challenges to providing effective transition services to youth in the juvenile justice system are a lack of coordination between youth-serving agencies, a shortage of resources in transition services, and a shortage of funding to provide such services.

Wodraska (2005) presented the *Merging Two Worlds* transition and career planning curriculum for youth in the juvenile justice system and highlighted some strategies which have been successful in Arizona's secure care facilities. Interagency and intra-agency collaboration, team based planning, and tracking and monitoring are all seen as important elements in transition planning. The *Merging Two Worlds* curriculum focuses on building resiliency skills in young people that include a sense of purpose, social competence, problem solving, and autonomy. The curriculum begins with assessing youth with various tools and then brings them through four chapters that answer the questions "Who am I?", "Where am I going?", "How do I get there?", and "How do I keep it all together?" Students exit the course with a personalized resource guide and transition survival guide (Wodraska, 2005).

Keeley (2004) describes inadequacies in Pennsylvania's current transition process and proposes a model for reform that includes practice recommendations supported by organizations such as NCEDJJ.

1. Transition reform must involve partnerships between residential agencies, releasing authorities, supervising agencies, and all stakeholders working with adjudicated and transitioning youth.
2. Transition accountability plans (TAP) that begin as soon as a youth is placed in a correctional facility, should be designed by a team of the partnering agencies and should provide a "continuum in interventions, services, and information sharing over time" (p.16).
3. Data sharing barriers must be overcome to create successful transition outcomes.

The Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice Regulations, which governs mental health service transition plans for incarcerated juveniles (2005), is a promising system model. It requires a memorandum of understanding between youth-serving agencies that describes the responsibilities of each in the planning and implementation of youth transitions out of the system. A "community-based planning meeting" (p. 2) begins the process 30 days before release, with a written plan following that must be completed within 10 days of release. The plan must be reviewed every 90 days to evaluate progress and assess if changes need to be made in it. Plans include specifying who is responsible for case management, what treatment will be provided, who will deliver services, in what time frame, and how these services will be funded.

### ***Transition Planning Internationally***

The Canadian Life Skills Institute (LSI) created a transition framework after doing an extensive review of best practices in transition planning in North America. The framework has a shared management approach that creates equal partnerships between the formal and informal members involved in the young person's transition, including the young people themselves. Transition planning should begin as early as possible because learning and acquiring skills take time. Midadolescence is too late to begin teaching the many life skills a young person must have to successfully transition to adulthood. The LSI framework includes assessments to determine early where deficits are and to continually determine progress. The *Timetable for Growing Up* was created to assist care providers in guiding children and youth through the transition process. (Gall, Kingsnorth, & Healy, 2006).

In the United Kingdom, Stein (2008) explored how to promote resilience in youth transitioning from the child welfare system to adulthood. Stein combined research on resilience in youth from disadvantaged family backgrounds with that on youth leaving care and applied it to youth transitions from child welfare systems to adulthood. Factors associated with the development of resilience were (a) having a relationship that is “unconditionally supportive” with an adult, (b) having “positive school experiences, (c) feeling able to plan and be in control, (d) being given the chance of a ‘turning point,’ (e) scoring higher childhood IQ scores, (f) having lower

rates of temperamental risk, and (g) having positive peer influences” (p. 36). Stein strongly advocates for youth to have gradual transitions from care, beginning early and stretching into their early twenties, which allows for normalcy in dealing with issues over time as opposed to the often rushed experiences young people currently face when leaving care.

Stein (2008) asserts that stability is an important contributor to the ability of a young person to be resilient because it promotes better experiences in school and in relationships with peers and adults who may continue to be supports after leaving care. Stein found that the promotion of a positive sense of identity could contribute to resiliency. This included helping youth come to terms with their past so they could “psychologically ‘move on’” and work toward a healthy self-esteem and belief that they have control over their own future (p. 38). Transition planning itself can promote resilience by giving young people the opportunity to practice decision making and problem solving. Stein also advocates that young people receive “comprehensive responses across their life course” that promotes the resilience they will need to have a successful transition to adulthood (p. 42).

Reid (2007) researched transition practices internationally and found similar outcomes for youth who age out of state care. The key areas were relationships, engagement, education, housing, life skills, financial support, identity, and emotional healing. Of special importance was helping youth to establish positive identities within the context of their family and their community



to facilitate a sense of belonging when they leave state care. Many youth act out due to the trauma they have experienced. Too often, child welfare systems respond with punishment rather than with the affection that many of these youth are seeking, thus responding to the behavior rather than to the underlying issues that must be addressed. Another important element of transition practices is letting youth make mistakes. Reid asserts that youth learn as much from their successes as they do from their failures and that the child welfare system has to allow that. Helping youth learn how to make important decisions is as important as ensuring that they make the right decisions (p. 39).

Reid (2007) also found great examples of model programs that facilitate successful transition from state care to adulthood. For instance, in the United Kingdom legislation requires that transition planning begin at 16 years of age, be reviewed every six months, extend to age 21, provide a personal advisor, and require vacation accommodation when youth are on breaks from college (p. 43). Australia has a Special Youth Career (SYC) program that provides homes for one youth and one caregiver that can be best described as a type of treatment foster care. If there are irresolvable issues between the youth and the caregiver, the caregiver is the one who must leave the home. Youth know that this is their home and can assume tenancy of the home after leaving state care (Reid, 2007).

Gilligan (1999) studied ways in which the resilience of young people in care can be developed and found that mentoring their talents and interests through leisure activities

is an effective strategy. Gilligan (1999) identified the four functions of care in Ireland and Scotland: maintenance of a child's basic needs, protection from abuse, compensation to address deficits caused by past abuse and neglect, and preparation for leaving care. These functions can be served by "encouragement and support by a committed adult," which helps build a young person's self-esteem and "buffers against stress" (Gilligan, 1999, p. 188). Examples of mentoring activities are given, and tools such as Social Network Maps and Family Group Conferences are offered as means to identify potential mentors. Gilligan noted that "agency anxiety" can be a barrier to the development of mentoring relationships and to young people creating and strengthening talents and interests (p. 192).

### ***Transition Planning within the Field of Child Welfare in the United States***

Allen (2005) identified the components of a comprehensive transition plan, outlining the steps that must be taken in successful transition planning, including assessing the youth's strengths and needs and setting goals in five major life areas. Allen (2005) asserts that "a transition plan is not just a checklist of skills," (p. 38) but rather a process that should be youth guided, strength based, comprehensive, collaborative, and needs focused. The support team must also be youth driven, and all members must be culturally competent and aware, honest, and supportive of youth development and empowerment. It is essential to focus on the strengths and needs of the youth, instead of only the problems the youth faces.

Allen (2005) emphasizes that professionals must be familiar with the adolescent stage of brain development so that behaviors can be viewed through a developmentally appropriate lens. Understanding adolescence is viewed as critical to the planning process and an integral part of effective communication between the support team and the youth. In order to be effective and create trust between the young people and members of their team, communication must be intentionally nurtured. Allen (2005) provides some helpful tips for caseworkers in communicating with youth, such as asking nonaccusatory and open-ended questions, avoiding judging or making assumptions, not taking a teen's behavior personally, and meeting the youth halfway.

Frey, Greenblatt, and Brown (2005) noted the importance of ensuring that transition plans are youth guided, collaborative, comprehensive, and tailored to fit the unique needs of each individual youth, identifying key elements of the planning process:

- Allowing youth to actively participate by partnering with them in every aspect,
  - Including all important formal and informal members of the youth's life,
  - Exploring each adult's commitment to the young person,
  - Developing an integrated plan that addresses safety, permanence, and well-being, and
  - Facilitating an ongoing collaborative team planning process.
- Frey et al. (2005) advocate for an integration of permanency and transition planning for all youth. Permanency

includes physical, emotional, relational, legal, and cultural dimensions that must be addressed in a young person's plan in the most balanced manner possible. Frey et al. (2005) viewed the term "preparation for adulthood" more favorably than "transition," because it placed more focus on the process than the event of aging out of foster care.

*The Guideposts for Success for Youth in Foster Care* (2009) consists of a framework that details elements needed for youth to successfully transition from foster care to adulthood. These elements include five critical areas: school-based preparatory experiences, career preparation and work-based learning experiences, youth development and leadership, connecting activities, and family involvement and supports. Each section looks at the specific needs for all youth, then youth with disabilities, and finally youth in foster care.

The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWDY, 2007) used the *Guideposts for Success* to examine what youth transitioning to adulthood need in order to become productive adults and citizens. Similar to much of the literature in this area, this paper stresses the need for coordination among all agencies serving youth. Coordination is essential in the leveraging of multiple resources to serve this population, as well as in the support of youth looking to create networks of support that will assist them in their transition planning process and throughout their adult lives. In addition, the NCWDY stresses the importance of youth involvement in their own transition planning and the need for

these plans to include standard transition goals, as well as a goal of connectedness to adult supports, an essential element to successful transitions. *Guideposts for Success* (2007) asserts that the reunification with family “cannot be separated from the young person’s desires to go to work, pursue additional education, and live independent lives” and stresses the importance of building support systems for youth in foster care who need family, just as all other youth do (p. 13).

Samuels (2008) applied concepts of ambiguous loss to the experiences of youth in foster care and

described the feelings of grief that many foster youth are never able to resolve after such a traumatic experience. The lack of stability in placements and relationships prevalent in the foster care system further exacerbates the damage done to the critical relational skills youth need to build a support networks through connections with positive adults. Samuels (2008) found emotional support to be the most frequently cited element missing in the lives of young people who had aged out of the foster care system. Many youth attempted to cope with their past by distancing themselves from others to protect themselves from further loss. In light of these findings, child welfare systems should make every effort possible to ensure young people do not leave foster care without permanent connections to adults who will

support them through their transition to adulthood and beyond. At a minimum, a goal of transition planning should be to ensure youth have resolved and made sense of their past and to develop the relational skills needed for permanent connections (Samuels, 2008).

Eyster and Oldmixon (2007) described the comprehensive approach being taken by some states to help transitioning foster youth.

Comprehensive systems are considered the most effective strategies because they integrate other youth-serving systems into the child welfare process

of transition planning and services. These partnerships are necessary because child welfare funding streams do not always have adequate resources to provide what is necessary to all youth transitioning out of the foster care system. There are many state programs that have been successful in improving outcomes for young people in a variety of areas, such as: (a) increasing efforts in permanency planning, (b) helping youth access and manage health care, (c) assisting youth in building life skills and acquiring assets, (d) promoting educational attainment, (e) connecting youth to employment and career opportunities, (f) enhancing access to stable and safe housing, (g) and promoting youth engagement and leadership.

***...found emotional support to be the most frequently cited element missing in the lives of young people who had aged out of the foster care system.***

Casey Family Programs (2001) outlined 12 statements that serve as the guiding principles for the “It’s My Life” framework. Success is achieved when youth can “assert and believe” these statements (p. 4). This framework is strength based and focuses on a youth’s ability to be resilient during challenging situations. Successful transition planning should incorporate opportunities for youth to develop self-esteem, self-confidence, self-efficacy, and problem solving skills. The framework also stresses the use of comprehensive self-assessments, such as the Ansell Casey Life Skills Assessment, which leads to the development of a learning plan that is built and monitored in partnership with youth and supportive of youth empowerment.

The Child Welfare League of America (2005) identified standards of practice in transition services and highlighted the importance of transition work being supportive of youth development and permanent connections. Partnerships among public agencies, service providers, youth, and the community are stressed as critical to providing a continuum of services for transitioning youth. Another important concept found throughout the standards is the difference between independent living services and the goal of interdependence for transitioning youth. Interdependence emphasizes the youth’s need for permanent connections with positive and supportive adults, as well as strong connections with their communities. Goals of transition work must be built upon young people’s strengths, helping them to believe in a positive future, and teaching them the skills necessary to

succeed. The Child Welfare League of America (2005) provides detailed elements of comprehensive transition planning, services, and supports that most adequately prepare transitioning youth for adulthood.

Collins, Paris, and Ward (2008) explore the common occurrence of foster care youth returning to their families of origin after leaving foster care, and they encourage professionals to address this in transition planning. Many youth seeking support after aging out of foster care will return to these family members despite histories of abuse or neglect. Young people need assistance in dealing with their family histories; they need to be prepared to reconnect with their families and to deal with any issues that may still remain. Collins et al. (2008) identified the areas a professional may need to explore with a young person preparing to reconnect with family, including developing healthy expectations, setting boundaries, coping with loss or changes, and creating a back-up plan to use in the event that the reconnection does not go as planned.

## Emerging Themes

While reviewing the interdisciplinary literature on transition planning, a number of themes emerged about the planning process. These themes are highlighted below:

- Fostering collaboration among youth-serving agencies by overcoming barriers to sharing information, creating standard assessments, establishing agreement on desired outcomes, and preventing duplication of services and transition plans
- Involving youth in the transition planning process by preparing youth to be engaged in person-centered planning
- Creating permanent connections by building lifelong support systems for youth
- Fostering self-determination and resiliency
- Beginning transition planning early to address unique developmental needs for individual youth
- Allowing opportunities for youth to practice skills, make mistakes and learn from natural consequences, build their strengths and interests, and develop relationships with adults outside of the system
- Recognizing normal adolescent brain development and using this knowledge as the foundation to create transition plans with youth that guide them through normal developmental stages of adolescence
- Emphasizing the importance of communities, teams, and formal and informal networks
- Addressing training needs of transition facilitators and identifying lack of resources in this area
- Identifying the importance of strength-based approaches
- Providing culturally competent services to youth
- Providing early assessment with ongoing tracking and monitoring of youth progress and evaluating programs and services
- Emphasizing the need for services to be age appropriate, developmentally appropriate, and tailored to the needs of youth

## Summary of Promising Practices in the Field – State Examples

Although there are many promising practices occurring in the field of child welfare, this document highlights six specific states that have been identified as excelling in the area of transition planning. These states were identified in a variety of ways. The literature on transition planning in the child welfare field revealed some states that are engaged in promising practices in this area. Other states were identified through participation in the National Governors Association Learning Network on Youth Transitions. The remaining were respondents to a national survey sent by the National Resource Center for Youth Development. Each state of interest was contacted regarding their transition planning processes and selected based upon level of achievement in this area.

### **Hawaii**

Effective Planning and Innovative Communication (EPIC) is a nonprofit Hawaiian corporation devoted to family conferencing, facilitation, training, and program development. Beginning in January of 1998, EPIC conducted ‘Ohana Conferences throughout Hawaii. The ‘Ohana Conference model draws from Hawaiian values and the Family Group Conferencing process originating with New Zealand’s Maori people. Borrowing from the ‘Ohana Conference model, EPIC began offering E Makua Ana Youth Circles in 2004. Since then, over 300 circles have been held statewide. The E Makua Ana Youth Circle is



a youth-driven, strength-based, and solution-focused process. It draws on a youth’s support system to generate options and resources that support the youth’s goals and informed decision making. E Makua Ana means becoming an adult in Hawaiian, and circles are offered to youth between the ages of 16 and 24. The Circle’s purpose is to celebrate and plan the youth’s transition from foster care. Youth Circles are guided by five values: youth choice, positive environment, planning, informed decision making, and collaboration.

### **Iowa**

The Iowa Dream Team is another promising model addressing the transition needs of youth aging out of foster care. In the fall of 2007, several Community Partnership sites began implementing collaborative efforts to assist communities in addressing concerns surrounding youth aging out of foster care. The Dream Team is a youth-centered practice model that empowers youth to take control of their lives and dreams. Supportive adults and peers create a team to help the youth make connections to resources, education, employment, health care, housing, and supportive personal and community relationships. Through these connections and relationships, young people will be better able to access and take advantage of resources, knowledge, and skills that would enable them to support themselves and



realize their life's dreams. The following principles guide the Dream Teams: (a) Teams are voluntary; (b) teams are youth focused and youth driven; (c) youth are respected, supported, and empowered; (d) participants are there with youth permission only; (e) gatherings are honest and a place for free exchange of ideas; and (f) gatherings are confidential.

### **Oregon**

The state of Oregon engaged in multisystem collaboration in 2005 to address homelessness in youth transitioning out of foster care. The goal was to create a continuum of care system with collaboration among public and nonpublic systems and agencies. Through this collaboration, a Comprehensive Transition Plan (CTP) was developed based on numerous studies and best practices with the support of youth, families, courts, the community, and child welfare department staff. The CTPs were then incorporated into Oregon's child welfare policy, state law, and training, with the goal of having a CTP for all youth transitioning out of foster care. Kevin George (2006), Foster Care Program Manager of Oregon's child welfare agency, cited specific key factors in the collaboration's success. The requirement that certain state agencies participate created a multi-system planning process with shared accountability and a "sense of urgency to develop a plan." Utilizing practice models, such as positive youth development, that staff members were familiar with helped change practice because advocates and staff knew it



made sense and was good practice, not because it was a mandated change.

Additionally, in 2004, Oregon passed a state law requiring that by 16, each youth in foster care have a transition plan created and reviewed by the court at every permanency hearing. Oregon recognized that older youth have needs that must be addressed for successful transitions.

### **Louisiana**

Louisiana has responded to the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoption Act of 2008 by creating a policy in their Department of Social Services (DSS) that beyond federal requirements for transition plans. In March of 2009, the LA DSS introduced Youth Transition Plans (YTP) to its staff. The YTP is "a living document" which is reviewed and updated every six months as part of the Family Team Conference by completing a Youth Transition Plan Review (YTPR). The process is completed in concert with the youth and includes a permanency component, among others, which must be addressed in the youth's case plan or young adult program contract. The staff were provided training on how to use the new transition plans and were also informed about new expectations regarding transition planning with older youth in care. Once an area office completed the training, they were mandated to complete a YTP with all youth 15 and older; DSS identified the need to begin this process early to adequately serve the population.



### **Minnesota**

Hennepin County in Minnesota employs a Youth Transition Conference (YTC) modeled after the Family Group Decision-Making (FGDM) process. The YTC is meant to help youth who are age 16 and older plan their transition out of foster care. YTC topics include education and training, employment interests, finances, housing, health and fitness, documents, life skills, and Circle of Support. The youth invite people they feel will be helpful in gaining the skills needed for the transition to adulthood and may convene conferences as often as they wish. Permanency is addressed through the Circle of Support component of the YTC in which connections to a youth's family, kin, community, foster parents, and other supportive adults are discussed. Hennepin County's community collaborative program called "On Ramp to Independence" incorporates the William Bridges Transition Framework that focuses on the emotional transitions of aging out of foster care. The On Ramp program also supports a 24-7 apartment living program and a small unit of social workers who specifically look for permanency resources for older youth in long-term foster care. Hennepin County's focus on permanency for transitioning youth is an excellent model of integrated planning for independent and interdependent living after foster care.



### **New Mexico**

New Mexico's Children, Youth, and Families Department (CYFD) has an extensive case review system through the use of Adoption Resource Teams (ART). The teams are composed of a contract adoption consultant and a state agency partner, and review cases every 60 days with the goal of making specific, time-limited recommendations that will move foster children to adoption more quickly. Cases are composed largely of children who have had a recent permanency plan change to adoption, or children who have had a plan of adoption for more than a year and still have not been placed in an adoptive home. At each ART meeting, the previous recommendations are reviewed, and findings are entered into a database to show whether or not a recommendation was fully carried out. The project has been extremely successful in helping to accelerate adoptive placements for foster children. Beginning in February 2006, ART also reviews cases of all foster youth ages 16.5 through 18 (regardless of permanency plan), to ensure that necessary supports are in place to enable the youth to function successfully after leaving state care. Thus, ART is now Adoption and Adolescent Resource Teams (AART). This system creates accountability for permanency efforts being made for foster children and transition age youth.





## Observations and Conclusions

### *Observations*

1. Permanent connections are essential to youth successfully transitioning from care. Transition planning must include permanency as a goal. This goal can be achieved by the youth and facilitating professional who should jointly search the youth's family of origin and the community for potential and existing relationships and then allow opportunities for these relationships to grow. Policies and practices should support ongoing efforts to connect youth with supportive adults as early as possible and to help these relationships become lifelong and perhaps legal.
2. Transition planning must address the many experiences foster youth have had which often lead to a loss of identity and a distrust of the permanent connections they will need to achieve economic stability, health, and well-being. Youth require help to develop the skills and tools to understand and manage their unresolved feelings of grief and loss. Allowing them this opportunity will begin to create a sense of closure and may allow them to move forward in their lives. Transition plans need to address the development of a healthy sense of self, an understanding of the importance of family, and the skills needed to build and maintain healthy relationships.
3. Transition plans must be developed through a strengths and needs-based assessment of a young person's developmental abilities. This assessment should be conducted before the transition planning begins and then repeated at regular intervals to measure the effectiveness of efforts made to address any developmental delays.
4. All plans must be strengths based and directed by the young person, for instance, a person-centered planning model. This does not mean simply having youth present at decision-making meetings, but including them in conversations, and when appropriate, allowing them to lead the meetings.
5. It is imperative that adults prepare youth so they are able to be involved in their own transition planning. This may involve having preparation meetings before the actual planning process begins. As youth experience their voices having equal consideration to the adult voices and see their plans developing, their participation will then be truly meaningful. Young people will take ownership of and responsibility for plans created with them, but not one created for them.
6. Planning must be facilitated by skilled professionals who have a clear understanding of adolescent development, knowledge of the processes of major life transitions, and cultural competence and awareness. This can be achieved only through adequate and comprehensive training of the professionals who are facilitating young people's transition planning.

7. Systemic support of transition planning is a necessity. The administration of transition planning by skilled professionals should be supported by the system they are working within. A transition policy can strengthen and allow for sustainability in common practice. Policy also allows for consistency for all youth receiving services.
8. Self-determination and resiliency must be fostered in young people to ensure their success as adults by providing them with skills that will serve them throughout all their major life transitions, not just the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Young people will need real-life opportunities to build these abilities, which will require systems to give them room to make mistakes.
9. Plans and services must be the result of a collaborative effort on behalf of all agencies currently involved in young people's lives, as well as those that young people will be involved with in the future. These may include mental health systems, educational entities at both secondary and post-secondary levels, and correctional systems.
10. Barriers to cross-systems information sharing must be overcome in order for all services to work together to serve youth and adults holistically, instead of the current fragmented plans and services operating in isolation of each other.
11. Transition plans need to be accompanied by clear lines of accountability regarding who is responsible for ensuring the plan is carried out. A plan is ineffective if there

is no follow through by people willing to help youth accomplish their goals.

### **Conclusions**

In most families, preparation for adulthood is an experiential process that happens throughout childhood and adolescence. Child welfare systems need to be intentional in their efforts to prepare youth in foster care for adulthood from the moment children enter their care to the moment they leave. In part, this entails taking advantage of teachable moments instead of creating artificial learning environments. Systems must remove the barriers that prevent young people from having normal experiences.

Transition planning is a process that occurs in anticipation of young people reaching the age of majority. Although law requires a written transition plan to be developed within 90 days of youth exiting care, the actual process of creating that plan must begin much sooner. The purpose of transition planning is to ensure that all young people have economic stability, health and well-being, and permanent connections as defined by them. Child welfare systems can help youth in achieving success post-transition only by working with them, not for them.

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