

# **A REPORT ON TRANSITIONAL HOUSING FOR EMANCIPATED FOSTER YOUTH IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY**

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

## I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- A. Background
- B. Methodology
- C. Findings
- D. Recommendations

## II. INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

- A. Study Background And Goals
- B. Emancipation Planning And Independent Living Programs
- C. Recent Changes In Policy And Funding
  - 1. Community Development Commission of the County of Los Angeles - City of Industry Funding
  - 2. At-Risk Adolescent Youth Agreement
  - 3. Weingart Foundation Funding
  - 4. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Supportive Housing Program

## III. DATA SOURCES AND SURVEY METHODOLOGY

- A. Shelter Partnership, Inc.: Agency Survey Data
- B. County Of Los Angeles Department Of Children And Family Services - Youth Data
- C. Children's Hospital Of Los Angeles, Division Of Adolescent Medicine: Street And Agency-Based Surveying
- D. Review Of Studies And Current Literature

## IV. DEFINING THE TERMS

- A. Youth Definitions
  - 1. Foster Youth
  - 2. Emancipating and Emancipated Youth
- B. Housing Definitions
  - 1. Transitional Housing

## V. EMANCIPATION PREPARATION

- A. Federal Legislation: Independent Living Initiatives
- B. County of Los Angeles Department Of Children And Family Services
  - 1. Emancipation Planning for Youths in Out-of-Home Care
  - 2. Independent Living Program (ILP)
  - 3. Transitional Housing Placement Program (AB 1198)

## VI. DESCRIBING THE POPULATION

### A. Demographics And Foster Care History

## VII. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DEVELOPING SYSTEM OF HOUSING AND SERVICES

### A. Housing Availability And Description

1. Inventory
2. Program Parameters

### B. Siting Models/Formats

1. Los Angeles-Based Housing for Emancipated Foster Youth
2. Three Supportive Housing Models

## III. SUPPORTIVE SERVICES AVAILABLE TO EMANCIPATED FOSTER YOUTH

### A. Supportive Services Provided To Youth By Local Programs

### B. Supportive Services Viewed As Most Important By Local Providers

### C. Supportive Services Viewed By Clients As Most Helpful

### D. Youth Service Needs Based Upon Expert Studies In The Field

### E. Differences In Youth And Provider Perceptions Of Need

## IX. RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO PROVIDERS OF HOUSING FOR EMANCIPATED FOSTER YOUTH

### A. Primary Funding Sources

1. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Special Needs Assistance Programs - Supportive Housing Program
2. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families - Runaway and Homeless Youth Program - Transitional Living Program
3. City of Industry Funds
4. Local Public Funding Sources
5. Private Foundations
6. Transitional Housing Placement Program

### B. Other Resources: Coordination Efforts

1. Shelter Partnership, Inc.: Coordination Meetings for Emancipated Foster Youth
2. Children's Hospital Division of Adolescent Medicine: Coordinating Council for Runaway and Homeless Youth

## X. CONCLUSIONS

### A. Evaluating The Needs Of Sub-Groups

### B. Need For Additional Services And Beds In Los Angeles County

1. Emancipated Foster Youth Target Sub-populations
2. Geographic Distribution
- C. Policy Implications

## XI. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## XII. APPENDIX

- A. Survey Of Providers Of Housing And Services For Emancipated Foster Youth
- B. List Of Agencies And Individuals Surveyed And Interviewed
- C. Service Planning Areas Of Los Angeles County Map
- D. Map Of Beds Available For Emancipated Foster Youth In Los Angeles County
- E. City Of Industry Housing Radius Map

## XIII. REFERENCE LIST

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### A. BACKGROUND

According to the County of Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), there were nearly 45,000 youth in out-of-home foster care placements in Los Angeles County in December 1996. Approximately 1,000 of the youth under the care of DCFS emancipate from the foster care system annually. Further, according to DCFS, 45% of the youth emancipated each year tragically become part of the homeless population of Los Angeles. As a result, policy changes at all levels of government have recently been implemented to better meet the unique needs of youth being emancipated from foster care. Locally, the County has begun to address the epidemic of homelessness among emancipating youth with independent living skills training and even further, with more comprehensive emancipation planning and post-emancipation support.

The Community Development Commission of the County of Los Angeles (CDC) has been instrumental in bringing about initial coordination among those entities developing transitional housing for emancipated foster youth in Los Angeles County. The CDC requested that Shelter Partnership, Inc. facilitate a coordination effort among developer/providers, which has led to quarterly meetings of these providers as well as other specific efforts. This report resulted from the need for detailed and reliable data regarding the services and housing available to emancipated foster youth. It examines the context in which current services and housing are being provided and offers some guidance for further action in addressing the needs of this population.

Emancipated foster youth have now become a priority among public funding sources. During the 1996 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Supportive Housing Program (SHP), "homeless youth, including unaccompanied youth and emancipated foster youth" were locally established as one of the top four areas for project selection. Additionally, the Board of Supervisors of the County of Los Angeles adopted program guidelines for use of funds from the City of Industry, which when available are expected to be used for the development of low-income housing for "special needs" populations, which include emancipated foster youth.

Private-public collaborations further emphasize the need for housing for this population. The Homeless Foster Youth Program (HFYP), the largest effort to develop post-emancipation housing options in Los Angeles County, was initiated by United Friends of the Children (UFC), a non-profit agency, and DCFS, in conjunction with the CDC and several other non-profit providers. UFC and DCFS remain formidable advocates for this population. UFC, as the lead agency, was recently awarded a major multi-year grant from the Weingart Foundation to implement a collaborative effort to serve emancipated foster youth. Working with DCFS and other Los Angeles City and County Departments, UFC proposed a comprehensive program that is expected to have a significant impact on the delivery of housing and services to emancipated foster youth. In addition, several other non-profit agencies have been developing similar types of housing and service programs developed exclusively for this population.

## B. METHODOLOGY

The fifteen provider agencies who regularly attended Shelter Partnership, Inc.'s quarterly meetings were surveyed for this report. Of the surveyed providers, nine had existing housing and services that served emancipated foster youth, exclusively for that population or for those of a similar age range, generally 18 and older. Three agencies surveyed were developing housing and services for this population as well. This group of agencies was selected because at the time of surveying, they represented the universe of providers serving emancipated foster youth in Los Angeles County as known to Shelter Partnership, Inc. Several other providers who were working with foster youth still in care were also included in the survey to provide additional information and another perspective on housing and service needs.

The survey focused on three areas of agency operation: 1) aspects of the entire agency (range of services, size); 2) aspects of the specific program being operated to serve emancipated foster youth (number of beds, age range of clients, source of referrals); and 3) expert opinion from the providers. Other sources of information included in this report are various studies and surveys of emancipated foster youth and homeless and runaway youth conducted in Los Angeles County. The balance of the data is from current literature documenting the correlation between homelessness and foster care as well as from studies examining the issues faced by foster youth.

## C. FINDINGS

According to the data collected by Shelter Partnership, Inc., 11 programs currently operate 272 transitional housing beds in Los Angeles County for homeless youth, either exclusively for emancipated foster youth or for those who are of a similar age range. At present, 76 (or 28%) of the existing beds are available strictly to emancipated foster youth. Of these 76 beds, 60 (or 79%) are located in projects of UFC/DCFS.

There are 275 beds in development in Los Angeles County to serve youth of the emancipation age range. Of these beds, 191 (or 69%) are targeted strictly to emancipated foster youth. Among the beds in development strictly for emancipated foster youth, 155 (or 81%) are being created by UFC/DCFS, either alone or in collaboration with a non-profit agency. It is especially meaningful that although only 28% of existing beds are targeted for emancipated foster youth, 69% of the pool of beds in development for youth of the same age range are being targeted specifically to emancipated foster youth.

For the purposes of data tabulation, only information from the 12 agencies that were or would be dealing imminently with emancipated foster youth has been considered. This includes data from nine existing providers and three programs in development. A total of 11 of 12 (92%) agencies get client referrals to their programs from DCFS, with six (50%) ranking it as their first source. Nine of 12 (75%) agencies get referrals from each social service agencies and client self-referrals. The Probation Department was ranked as a referral source by only five agencies (42%).

On average, of the 11 agencies who could provide information regarding their funding sources, approximately 68% came from public sources and 32% came from private sources.

Fifty percent (6 of 12) of all programs do not charge clients fees, although three (25%) collect a percentage of the client's income (10%, 30%, and 80%) and return it to the youth upon exiting the program. Among the others, two (17%) charge 30% of the youth's income; two (17%) have a flat fee; one (8%) has a sliding scale; and one (8%) collects 33% of the youth's income if the resident works or a flat fee is s/he is on public assistance, which can be reduced with the contribution of volunteer hours.

Occupancy rates hovered near 90% for most existing programs (n=9) due to good waiting list systems. Programs with higher rates of vacancy indicated that the application process for transitional housing is long and that often program participants leave suddenly, creating a gap.

Among all programs (n=12), four programs (33%) permit maximum stays up to 18 months; four programs (33%) permit maximum stays up to 24 months; and one program each (8%), permits up to six months, up to 12 months, over 24 months, or has no maximum.

A majority (78%) of existing programs (n=9) accept clients at 18 years of age or those who are legal adults. Among these programs, four (44%) serve clients to age 21; two (22%) programs serve to age 23; and one each (11%) serves to ages 22, 24, and 28.

Among existing programs (n=9), there was a predominance of programs available to the general youth population (5), pregnant women (5) and gay, lesbian and bisexual youth (4), with other sub-populations represented, as well. Two existing programs serve females only, and two serve single parents with more than one child. One existing program serves youth with mental illness; one program serves minority immigrant youth; and another serves males only.

To examine the services offered by providers to clients, information only from existing programs (n=9) was considered. Case management, individual counseling, group counseling and housing placement assistance are offered on-site by each of the nine existing surveyed programs. Follow-up services are provided on-site by eight of nine programs. Seven programs provide transportation assistance on-site, and clothing is made available on-site at six programs.

All programs (9 of 9) offer assistance in obtaining a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) or a high school diploma, with seven providing the help on-site. All nine provide assistance applying for higher education, as well, with two programs by referral only. Eight providers offer assistance paying for books and supplies, and seven offer assistance paying for tuition for higher education.

All providers (9 of 9) offer job interview skills training on-site. Job search assistance is also offered by each of the providers, though one only by referral. Every agency provides on-site money budgeting skills as well as information on how to open a bank account.

All programs (9 of 9) offer guidance on-site regarding how to get health care and how to access an alcohol or drug treatment program. Assistance accessing counseling services and community mental health programs are also provided by every program.

In order to rank the supportive services viewed as most important by local providers, the responses of 14 interviewees were considered, as one agency was unable to assign priority among the services. From a list of over 35 services, the providers ranked the following six as the most important services for emancipated foster youth: case management; how to budget money; individual counseling; housing placement; job search assistance; and how to access health care. Case management was ranked the most important service by fifty percent of the agencies.

#### D. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There is a need throughout Los Angeles County for additional public and private resources for both capital and operating costs aimed toward serving the housing needs of the emancipated foster youth population. These resources should be encouraged to complement projects currently in development for this population.
2. Transitional housing programs serving emancipated foster youth need to offer comprehensive services to ensure that the youth successfully transition to independence.
3. Additional housing for emancipated single parents with two or more children should be developed.
4. Better case management and maintenance of services coupled with sufficient and separate housing, where necessary, should be encouraged for emancipated foster youth with mental illness.
5. Although it is preferable that youth being emancipated from the foster care system have the option to remain in the community in which they have been placed and grown accustomed to, it is also important to consider the needs of youth and whether or not these needs are being met. The location of housing for emancipated foster youth must take into consideration the proximity of services that are readily available.
6. Additional housing and services are needed for youth who emancipate through the Probation Department. Further research on the specific needs of this population should be encouraged as it is likely that there is a large unmet demand for post-emancipated housing and services for these youth.

7. The development of both congregate living facilities and scattered site apartments as housing options for emancipated foster youth should be encouraged.
8. Housing for emancipated foster youth should be further studied as more programs come on line to serve this population. The information contained in this report should be updated as the housing system for emancipated foster youth changes.
9. More overall evaluation and follow-up measurement should be undertaken to determine how successful transitional living programs are in meeting the needs of emancipating and emancipated foster youth and transitioning them to independence. As more programs come on line to serve youth while still in care, the effect on post-emancipated youth and the programs designed to serve them must be examined.