

Child Development and Successful Youth Transitions Committee of the CA Child Welfare Council

Housing and Homeless Foster Youth Work Group

Purpose

The purpose of this specific proposal is to develop a model protocol for a multi-system response to serve the needs of youth who run away from foster care.

Background

A workgroup within the Child Development and Successful Youth Transitions Committee of the California Child Welfare Council has been studying the issue of youth who run away from foster care. The initial idea for this came from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services/Administration for Children and Families Memo dated November 4, 2014, titled "Serving Youth Who Run Away From Foster Care". The memo notes the unique challenges facing foster youth ages 12-17 and that coordination is critical at the local, community, and state level. The memo noted the signing of the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act (Public Law 113-183), which authorize federal child welfare programs but is also of importance to runaway and homeless youth providers, as well. The Act had many provisions designed to increase the oversight by child welfare of youth in foster care vulnerable to sexual trafficking and exploitation. The memo notes the requirements of child welfare agencies with respect to youth who runaway and/or are at-risk of becoming a sex trafficking victim.

The memo also notes the critical issue of youth and young adult homelessness, the challenges and issues they face living on the street, and the importance of services and programs provided by runaway and homeless youth (RHY) providers. It also discusses that the majority of youth who run away from foster care are between the ages of 12-17, with many of these foster youth entering the system after age 12. These youth often face the same challenges that homeless youth do with respect to substance abuse and mental health issues. The memo ended with the recommendation, "We encourage child welfare agencies and RHY providers to meet, inventory and recognize their various strengths in serving youth who run away from foster care, and develop coordinated approaches for effective services to youth persons who have run away from foster care placements."

An initial investigation by this work group has shown that protocols for youth who run away from foster care vary by county in our state. Various county protocols have been gathered, however, a summary of each and the similarities, differences and gaps still needs to be done. In addition the CA Department of Social Services established a work group to implement SB 794, which has been working on guidance as it relates to the new federal requirements of P.L. 113-183 that are set forth in the background section of the ACF memo. This workgroup, however, has not focused on the parts of the memo that relate to the recommendations around RHY

shelters (e.g. recommendation of MOUs and contracts between child welfare and RHY programs; what to do if foster youth shows up at RHY program specifically).

Problem Description

As noted above, protocols for addressing the issue of youth who run away from foster care, why they do so, how they are brought back into care and methods for addressing why they run away vary by county. In addition, some counties work closely with runaway and homeless youth providers in this area but many others do not, or there are not direct services for RHY in their counties.

This workgroup provides a unique opportunity to address the broad issue of youth who run away from foster care and look at all the various inter-related issues such as why they run away, how are their needs being met, and what can be done to prevent other youth from running away. In addition, runaway and homeless youth providers often end up serving these youth and a more coordinated response between them and the child welfare system can benefit all. Finally, while the SB 794 work group has done some of the work in this area, their work has remained within the department. The California Child Welfare Council, with its mission as a collaborative, interagency approach, provides a unique opportunity to bring all the various relevant agencies, departments and others across the board to develop a broad based strategy to address this issue. The development of a model protocol on an collaborative, inter-agency/department approach is key to the success of this workgroup (such as was done with the Partial Credits workgroup).

Additional information needs to be added to this section including:

- A more detailed description of the problem.
- A literature survey of the issue.
- Current data on youth who runaway from foster care in California.

Current Practices

A review of what other states are doing on this issue along with a review of the current protocols by county needs to be added in, along with a strengths and gaps analysis.

Recommendations

The suggestions below are the initial recommendations for the initial phase of the work of this sub-committee overall.

1. Develop a broad based collaborative group of participants to reflect an inter-agency approach to this issue. In addition to hopeful participation by a few youth who have had experience in this area and are willing to share their story and offer suggestions to improve outcomes.

Possible Participants

Government:

Child Welfare – CDSS, CWDA
Probation
Law Enforcement
Behavioral Health – CBHDA, DHCS
Health Care
Education – CDE
Ombudsman’s Office

NGO’s

RHY Providers
Mental Health Providers
Foster Family Agencies
STRTP’s
Legal Advocacy – CLC, YLC, NCYL, CYC, etc

2. Develop protocols for gathering data on youth who run away from foster care. The data should include: Age, gender, placement prior to running away, number of previous placements, reasons why the youth ran away (if known), length of time as a runaway (if known), and county-specific data.
3. Mental health services for runaway youth should be included as part of any service array contained in the model protocol to be developed.
4. Using the Partial Credits Model Policy as an example of the type of protocol we want to develop, it was suggested that a case study be added – a real life example of why it matters to have the protocol.
5. Build incentives into the protocol. For example, Fresno County child welfare workers have found it is less work to find a runaway youth than it is to constantly report to the court that the youth is missing and measures being taken to find him or her. Another benefit is the message to foster youth that the child welfare agency cares, offering opportunities to collaborate with the community to find the youth and offer a safe placement.
6. The protocol should be connected to the permanency work that is under development as part of the CDSS/Sara Roger’s Continuum of Care Reform, CDSS/Mary Shepard’s Engagement-Oriented Practice, Gail Johnson Vaughn’s FamiliesNOW and Seneca’s Family Finding Institute.
7. Arrange a time at the September meeting to get together with the Permanency Committee to share the proposal, discuss the overall issue and how it ties into their work and areas of focus, and get their thoughts and ideas on this proposal and a possible model protocol.