

EMPLOYMENT AND HUMAN SERVICES

CONTRA COSTA COUNTY

TO: Family and Human Services Committee Members
Monica Nino, Contra Costa County Administrator

DATE: June 28, 2022

FR: Marla Stuart, Director, Employment and Human Services Department

SUBJECT: Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP)

RECOMMENDATION: Accept this report from the Employment and Human Services Department, and continue to support the Children and Family Services Bureau's efforts to serve transitional age foster youth through the Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP).

BACKGROUND OF ILSP SERVICES AND SERVICES FOR TRANSITION AGE YOUTH:

In 1999, the Federal government passed the Foster Care Independence Act. This legislation, sponsored by the late Senator John Chafee, doubled funding for statewide Independent Living Skills Programs (ILSP). There was overwhelming evidence emerging that youth who aged out of foster care were in need of greater support to establish permanent connections and make a successful transition into adulthood. Foster youth nationwide were found to have increased likelihood of early parenting, instability in relationships, not graduating from high school, lower school performance, increased health and mental health problems, homelessness, substance abuse, and a higher rate of unemployment.

For the past thirty-four years, the Children and Family Services Bureau has provided services through the Contra Costa ILSP Program. Contra Costa ILSP serves eligible youth and nonminors between the ages of 15.5 and 21. Contra Costa ILSP has received recognition throughout the state of California and the nation for its service and service delivery model.

The Contra Costa ILSP Unit consists of an ILSP Coordinator, Assistant Coordinator, and two ILSP Specialists. ILSP is funded by the federal Title IV-E dollars with a 20% state match towards administrative costs and realignment funds.

PROGRESS TO DATE:

The uncertainties of the pandemic continue to affect ILSP service delivery, in terms of limiting large group gatherings. Despite these challenges, Contra Costa ILSP continues to provide quality services to eligible youth. ILSP Specialists, in collaboration with the youth's Child and Family Team (CFT), which

includes other staff members from CFS, develop plans to help prepare foster youth for a successful transition into adulthood. Contra Costa ILSP offers support to youth through one-on-one mentoring, workshops, support groups, recreational activities, needs-based supportive services (e.g., housing resources, on-site emergency food pantry, housing resources, employment resources, help with applying for financial assistance for college and vocational programs), and partnering with youth and CFS staff members to develop a Transitional Independent Living Plan (TILP) for each youth.

This fiscal year, most of the group work has continued virtually via weekly Zoom workshops. ILSP offered skill-building and youth engagement activities, all of which cover the mandated four core areas, referred to as the Four Pillars. The Four Pillars consist of: Education, Employment/Vocational, Housing, and Well Being.

This year, four hundred and sixty-nine (469) youth in Contra Costa have been served both individually and in group settings (e.g. Zoom workshops, classes, activities). Five hundred and eighty (580) youth were deemed eligible for ILSP services. Contra Costa's focus this fiscal year was to provide targeted outreach and support to Contra Costa dependent youth, in an attempt to identify those denoted as not having any ILSP services rendered, and to notify the case carrying social workers about the mandate to send TILPs and referrals to the ILSP Unit. By engaging district social workers in a collaborative way, Contra Costa ILSP hopes to improve outcomes and alleviate some of their workload, as it relates to preparing youth for life after foster care.

Contra Costa ILSP continues to receive financial and tangible support from community donors. These funds are managed by Volunteer & Emergency Services Team in Action (VESTIA, Inc.) through an account known as the ILSP Fund. The purpose of the ILSP Fund is to support the well-being and enrichment of older youth (starting at age 15.5) and Nonminor Dependents (NMDs) by providing timely and flexible access to gift cards and tangible items. These funds can provide assistance when there are emergency, time-sensitive situations, and no other financial resources have been identified. These funds also provide an opportunity for foster youth to participate and explore interests in music, dance, and other self-enrichment extracurricular activities.

VESTIA, Inc. continues to receive donations to fund scholarships for Contra Costa ILSP youth who are continuing their education post high school, as does the Assistance League of Diablo Valley, and the Orinda Women's Club.

This fiscal year, Contra Costa ILSP was selected by Jack and Jill of America, Inc. as a recipient to receive funds raised during Foster Care Awareness Month. Additionally, the Methodist Church of Walnut Creek increased their giving this year and has stocked the ILSP food pantry on a regular basis. Methodist Church donated emergency backpacks filled with first aid kits that served as carrying bags for non-perishable foods donated for youth experiencing food insecurity. Methodist Church has also regularly assisted in keeping the ILSP Clothes Closet stocked and organized.

ILSP PILLAR – HOUSING:

Contra Costa ILSP's commitment to providing housing for eligible youth led Contra Costa ILSP to solidify communication amongst local housing partners. Monthly meetings occur with the Health, Housing and Homeless (H3) Program to shore up case management, resources, and selection processes in regards to

the Transitional Housing Plus dollars allocated from the state, which is then contracted to H3 to provide housing for former foster youth.

Transitional housing for foster youth and emancipated foster youth continues to be delivered in Contra Costa through three transitional housing programs:

- Transitional Housing Placement Program (THPP). THPP is designed for foster youth ages 16 and 17. There are two providers in Contra Costa County, who served two (2) foster youth in this fiscal year. Historically, the number of youth in this type of placement setting is low.
- Transitional Housing Placement-Plus-Foster Care (THP+FC – also known as THP-NMD). THP+FC is for Nonminor Dependents (NMDs) from age 18 up to age 21. There are five in-county providers. This fiscal year, sixty-two (62) NMDs on average were in a THP+FC placement.
- Transitional Housing Program-Plus (THP-Plus). THP-Plus is a transitional housing program for young adults who exited foster care on or after turning 18, and up to 24 years of age. In this current fiscal year, fourteen (14) nonminors on average were in THP-Plus housing.

Housing continues to be a significant challenge for foster youth as they transition into adulthood. Locating affordable housing and possessing the necessary skill sets to command employment to afford housing are paramount in reducing homelessness post-emancipation.

Efforts continue to be developed to create permanency options for youth in the community (e.g., rooms for rent, locating family members, extended family, friends, etc.) through collaborations with case-carrying social workers, community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, and individual citizens with resources to offer. The need to develop permanent housing options for youth remains urgent, as CFS has identified forty-two (42) youth who will turn twenty-one (21) by December 31, 2022. Strengthening ILSP collaboration with THP+ providers and H3 to identify mutual youth in need will streamline entry points so that youth and NMDs will be able to access the supports they need to stabilize their housing. Additional subsidized housing slots are needed to reduce homelessness amongst foster youth facing challenges securing housing.

ILSP PILLAR – EMPLOYMENT:

Contra Costa ILSP collaborates with the Contra Costa County Office of Education to refer youth to the Workforce Innovative Opportunities Act (WIOA). WIOA case managers help provide employment services to ILSP participants enrolled in their program. Contra Costa ILSP created a referral partnership with Civic Corps so interested youth can take advantage of their job-training program and high school diploma track. Contra Costa ILSP also continues to work with Job Corps to refer youth to the Treasure Island Job Corps site. This year, the following two employment workshops were offered to youth:

- First Job – Discover the power of a resume, job search techniques, interview best practices, and how to have a good attitude in the workplace.
- Finding a Job in a Pandemic – Job options and opportunities during the era of COVID-19.

These workshops were offered through ILSP's partnership with Travis Credit Union and the Youth Finance Institute of America. Family Harvest Farm (FHF), an employment training program in regenerative farming for transition age foster youth, is flourishing in its location in Pittsburg/Bay Point,

and is entering its third year of operation. FHF employed nine (9) Contra Costa dependent youth in paid internship positions and was featured on Channel 2 KTVU news.

ILSP PILLAR – EDUCATION:

This current fiscal year, Contra Costa ILSP collaborated with the Office of Education to identify fifty-eight (58) Contra Costa County dependent youth who were eligible to graduate from high school this school year. All dependent Contra Costa graduates will be honored with the ILSP High School Graduation Stipend to celebrate their achievement.

Contra Costa ILSP's collaboration with the Assistance League of Diablo Valley (ALDV) continues. The ALDV administered fifteen (15) Senior Sponsorships this year. As there are few funding streams to support extracurricular activities and expenses for foster youth, the Senior Sponsorship program was created to assist graduating seniors so they can partake in events that are difficult for caregivers to afford. The Senior Sponsorship program can fund senior pictures, yearbooks, and graduation caps and gowns. The ALDV also funded 12 scholarships totaling \$17,200 for youth pursuing higher education, and the Orinda Women's Club funded two scholarships of \$1,000 each. Each year, thousands of dollars are donated via VESTIA, Inc. to provide scholarship opportunities for Contra Costa youth, as well as several private families who are funding scholarships for Contra Costa youth. This year the Methodist Church of Walnut Creek committed \$2,000 to create new scholarships that they will award to youth pursuing their higher educational goals.

In collaboration with the local community colleges, ILSP hosted workshops to inform CCC youth of supportive services on each community college campus to create a successful college transition. One of Contra Costa ILSP's active participants who graduated from San Diego State University in 3 years created and delivered a presentation encouraging ILSP youth to consider attending a 4-year college after high school and identified support services at colleges and universities throughout the state. Supporting foster youth by connecting them to on-campus resources can support youth in obtaining their degree. iFoster has also continued to offer free phones to foster youth and laptops to college students.

Contra Costa ILSP's partnerships with vocational training providers also gives Contra Costa youth an opportunity to learn valuable skills via a trade. Job Corps, Civic Corps, and Apprenticeship presentations were offered to Contra Costa youth in the past year. ILSP has also continued their connection with YearUp, which offers higher education classes and job placement services to youth interested in pursuing a career in the field of technology. ILSP also established a collaboration with Bridge-Tech. Bridge-Tech philanthropy refurbishes Think Pad laptops and provides them to Contra Costa youth free of charge. Bridge-Tech filled all fifteen (15) laptop requests from CFS Social Workers and youth who expressed a need for a laptop. iFoster has continued to offer free phones to foster youth and laptops to college students.

ILSP PILLAR – WELL-BEING:

Youth in foster care often do not experience childhood in the way most children who live with their families of origin do. Youth involved in the child welfare system have suffered abuse and neglect. Not all parents successfully complete Family Reunification services, which leaves their children in foster care

until a relative, extended family member, or resource parent is willing and able to provide permanency. Many older youth experience placement instability while a permanent connection is being looked for.

Contra Costa ILSP has provided financial support to Contra Costa youth to help encourage positive social development and exposure to activities. This year, through fund raising efforts, more youth were funded to attend prom, camps, and driver's education classes. The California Department of Social Services (CDSS) has emphasized the importance of supporting the well-being of youth in foster care, and Contra Costa ILSP is an available mechanism to provide this intervention. Contra Costa ILSP has collaborated with several former foster youth who have successful careers in coaching and motivational speaking to present on their challenges and successes, and offer tools for Contra Costa youth to develop their skills and visions for creating a positive future. Contra Costa ILSP also connected with Shores of Hope, which offered a 14-session Healthy Relationship curriculum that helps youth identify and choose healthy relationships. The ILSP staff are trained in an approach called Positive Youth Development. This approach enables them to engage youth and motivate them to strive to improve their lives, and build on their existing strengths to tackle life's challenges.

SUMMARY/CONCLUSION:

Youth who emancipate from foster care are expected to become self-sufficient by twenty-one (21) years of age, which includes the ability to maintain stable housing, employment, and quality physical and mental health. Research on the outcomes of emancipated foster youth indicates that these tasks are difficult for this population to achieve. Rates of homelessness for emancipated foster youth have been found to be as high as 42%, and housing moves are generally related to poverty and lack of stable family relationships.

Child Welfare programs have implemented ILSP programs to help prevent these negative outcomes. Contra Costa ILSP serves upwards of 500 youth each year, and continues to strive to improve the lives of at-risk foster youth. Much of the work the ILSP staff does is to cultivate collaborative partnerships with community-based organizations and other foster youth serving groups. ILSP staff have expertise in engaging youth and motivating them to stay in school, graduate, and obtain life-sustaining employment. These services are critical right now. With the Board's continuing support and commitment to Contra Costa's ILSP, foster youth will continue to be provided supportive services, skill-building workshops, social skill development, financial support, and improved transitions into adulthood.