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# Transitional Living Services Plan

As Required By  
House Bill 1912, 81<sup>st</sup> Legislature,  
Regular Session, 2009

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A Report from  
The Texas Department of Family and Protective Services

Submitted to the Governor and the Texas Legislature  
September 2010

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## *Executive Summary*

The Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) Transitional Living Services Program has been described by many other states as a "national model" for transitional living services for older youth in foster care. As with any program, improvements and enhancements can always be made. By collaborating with internal and external stakeholders, DFPS embraces every opportunity to critically review and make changes and enhancements needed to increase the positive outcomes for all children, youth, and families involved with DFPS.

Section 3 of House Bill 1912, 81<sup>st</sup> Legislature, Regular Session, 2009 requires DFPS to develop a comprehensive transitional living services plan to improve the Transitional Living Services Program. The plan must incorporate best practices and recommendations from a stakeholder workgroup made up of youth, foster parents and individuals with expertise in transitional living services. The workgroup addressed the required elements of the plan laid out in HB 1912:

- efforts to further individualize independent living skills assessment and transition planning;
- the potential for an online life skills training option; and
- improvement of services to youth with disabilities.

The stakeholder workgroup formed subcommittees in September 2009 which addressed the required elements of the plan outlined in HB 1912 in addition to addressing other issues important to the stakeholders such as;

- identifying caring adults who can form lasting relationships with youth; and
- experiential learning.

DFPS staff participated on subcommittees as subject matter experts to provide information about current practices as stakeholders explored concerns and solutions. As a result of this participation, DFPS and stakeholders were able to work together to identify many changes that could be implemented immediately. These efforts included:

- Residential contract changes related to the Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment (ACLSA) and experiential learning,
- Posting of experiential learning resources to the DFPS website and linking to the contract,
- Updates to the Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) Independent Study Guide, and
- Resources to support creation of a new protocol for Child Protective Services (CPS) staff to use to locate family members.

As subcommittees progressed in developing recommendations, common themes related to the transition planning process emerged from their findings. The recommendations of the group included removing inconsistencies in the transition planning process and improving the actual transition plan document used to drive the process. DFPS is initiating a long term effort to make changes to the format and use of the transition plan document referred to as "Transition Plan Reform". This reform will review and revise current policy and practices and initiate changes to the current transition planning process so that transition planning is more individualized for each youth; less burdensome for staff to develop, maintain, and coordinate; and promotes accountability by all parties committed to supporting the youth. The following goals have been identified for Transition Plan Reform:

- Create one individualized child service plan for all youth in foster care that incorporates transition planning into a single document;

- Make the plan concise and youth-friendly and design it with elements that can easily individualize the plan for each youth's specific age and needs (so that learning life skills / transition planning can begin early and build over time);
- Design the plan as a living document, where progress can be tracked and updated when goals, accomplishments, need for supports, and milestones are identified and achieved;
- Begin to utilize a new function where documents such as the youth's Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment results or important records for a youth with disabilities can be merged, scanned, and posted electronically directly into the youth's record in IMPACT;
- Make the plan accessible to all individuals involved with the youth; and
- Ensure accountability and coordination through the child's plan by identifying a Plan Monitor (not the primary caseworker) who will take on the role of assisting the caseworker in monitoring participant commitments of the plan.

This report further describes DFPS plans to reform the transition plan and how this effort addresses many of the concerns presented by the stakeholder workgroups. The report also presents planned and potential actions to respond to other recommendations such as improved staff training on serving youth with disabilities and mental health issues. DFPS will work to immediately implement improvements in policy and practice that require no additional resources. Some recommendations may require additional legislative direction or funding.

### ***Introduction***

House Bill 1912, 81<sup>st</sup> Legislature, Regular Session, 2009 amended the Texas Family Code to further define the Transitional Living Services Program for youth in foster care and to ensure that transition planning is individualized and made available to youth beginning at age 14 through experiential life skills training provided by foster care placements and Circles of Support transition planning meetings offered by DFPS. The legislation also set forth requirements for making sure youth have access to important personal documents, among other provisions. Further, the legislation required DFPS to develop a comprehensive transitional living services plan to describe efforts DFPS will make to continue to help youth in foster care transition successfully to adulthood. The comprehensive transition plan must:

- Ensure that each foster youth over age 16 receive individual assessments of their developmental needs and future goals to be used to develop an individualized transitional living services plan tailored to the youth,
- Modify the Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) Program training curriculum to include online training options with a selection of training modules to meet the needs of individual youth, and
- Ensure that transitional living services are appropriate and meet the needs of youth in foster care with disabilities.

To assist DFPS in this effort, HB 1912 called for the creation of a stakeholder workgroup comprised of youth formerly in foster care, child welfare professionals, advocates, and others with knowledge of the needs of transition-age youth to research best practices and offer recommendations. The stakeholder workgroup met regularly from September 2009 to April 2010 to discuss implementation of HB 1912 and presented a report to DFPS entitled "*Recommendations to Improve DFPS' Transitional Living Services Program*" on June 25, 2010. The report includes the recommendations of the four subcommittees that were created to address the requirements of the

plan bulleted above and other issues identified as important to improving transitional living services by the workgroup. The stakeholders report, with appendices, is included as an attachment to this report.

This report presents DFPS current, planned, and potential implementation activities that address the stakeholder subcommittee recommendations to the best of DFPS resources and abilities, and incorporate identified best practices as required by HB 1912, in these areas:

1. Individualizing Life Skills Assessments
2. Experiential Learning Activities to Develop Life Skills
3. Transition Planning (including Circles of Support)
4. Online Life Skills Training Options
5. Improving Services to Youth with Disabilities
6. Identifying Caring Adults to Form Lasting Relationships with Youth

### ***Overview***

According to data from the 2009 DFPS Annual Report and Data Book, there were about 4,225 youth ages 14-17 in foster care in FY 2009. The total number of youth ages 16-20 served in the Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) Program for federal FY 2009 included 7,735 youth. The Transitional Living Services Program is a systemic and integrated approach in transition planning and the services and benefits that affect youth in foster care and as they age out of foster care (ages 14-23). Transitional Living Services are provided by DFPS staff, including CPS caseworkers and specialized staff, and by contracted providers, such as PAL services contractors, staff located at the Youth Transition Centers, and foster care providers. The Transitional Living Services Program includes, but is not limited to:

- Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) services
- Circles of Support/Formal Transition Planning Meetings
- Education and Training Voucher Program
- College Tuition and Fee Waivers
- Youth Involvement
  - Youth Leadership Council
  - Youth Specialists
  - Annual Youth Survey (2009)
- Youth Transition Centers
- Medicaid for Transitioning Foster Care Youth
- STAR Health
- Health Care Benefits for Former Foster Care Youth in Higher Education
- Texas Youth Connection Website
- Texas Youth Hotline
- Extended Care Program
- Return to Care Program
- National Youth in Transition Database

Through a service mapping exercise conducted during an HB 1912 subcommittee workgroup, a chart was created that DFPS has modified as a tool for use during case planning reviews. The "*Transitional Living Services for Youth by Age-Checklist*" will help regional CPS program directors,

supervisors and caseworkers make sure that youth are receiving identified services at the appropriate age intervals. The chart provides a brief overview of the types of services and benefits youth receive by age beginning at age 14-15 and ending up to age 23. The tool includes both the services and benefits available to youth once they enter the Transitional Living Services Program. The chart is included as an appendix to this report for further review.

### *The Preparation for Adult Living Program (PAL)*

The purpose of the PAL Program is to prepare youth for adult life when they leave foster care by offering services, benefits, resources, and supports. The program makes every effort to connect youth to the community resources they will need in adulthood. PAL services are provided to youth beginning at age 16 and up to the age of 21. However, with funding availability, regions may serve youth ages 14 and 15. PAL Services include:

- Independent Living Skills Assessment
- Life Skills Training Classes
- Life Skills Independent Study Guide
- Transitional Living Allowance
- Optional services when funds are available
- Aftercare Room and Board assistance
- Case Management Services

DFPS has been providing PAL services since 1986. The PAL program is most commonly associated with life skills training provided in most regions by a contracted provider in the form of training classes. A PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide is available for youth and their caregivers when individual circumstances or transportation do not allow on-site participation in a PAL training class. In either case, PAL life skills training must cover the following areas: personal/social relationships, job readiness, housing and transportation, health and safety, life decisions/responsibility, and financial management.

Regional DFPS PAL staff support DFPS caseworkers by overseeing the workload of youth eligible for PAL services, determining additional service needs and making appropriate referrals. PAL staff are the point of contact and general subject matter expert about all Transitional Living Services including the state tuition and fee waiver, the Education and Training Voucher program, college partnerships, and the Texas Youth Hotline. PAL staff refer youth to PAL contracted providers for support services based on need and funding availability. Examples of support services include aftercare case management, vocational assessment and training, preparation for college entrance exams, driver education, mentoring, and counseling.

Additional benefits and resources for youth available through the PAL program include a transitional living allowance, aftercare room and board assistance. DFPS also supports a variety of statewide activities for youth such as PEAKS (Physical and Environmental Activities for Knowledge and Skills) Camps, the Statewide Teen Conference, College Weekend, the Statewide Leadership Committee and regional activities, all aimed at teaching life skills, promoting youth leadership and having fun.

### *Circles of Support/Formal Transition Plan Meetings*

DFPS uses Circles of Support and formal Transition Plan Meetings (TPM) with all youth age 16 years and older in DFPS conservatorship in order to involve youth in the development of their transition plans from foster care to adulthood and connect youth to caring/supportive adults. Circles of Support, a model of Family Group Decision Making (FGDM), are the preferred method of developing or reviewing a youth's transition plan. The model is based on the FGDM philosophy, which, at its core, recognizes and embraces family and youth collaboration when making decisions about a youth's safety, well being, and permanency. Circles of Support are youth-focused and youth-driven meetings, and include broad participation of the youth's support network, including foster parents or kinship caregivers, teachers, siblings, biological parents and family members, community resources, as well as DFPS caseworkers and other professionals involved with the youth. Circles of Support are coordinated and facilitated by an unbiased independent CPS staff that does not carry case loads or have any decision making authority over the case.

When a youth declines a Circle of Support or a Circle of Support can not be held, a formal Transition Plan Meeting is held with youth. Like Circles of Support, the primary purposes of the formal Transition Plan Meeting is to develop a transition plan with a youth who is moving from foster care to adulthood and to help the youth connect with supportive and caring adults. A Transition Plan Meeting tends to be a shorter and more DFPS-driven conference, with fewer participants than a Circle of Support. Transition Plan Meetings are primarily facilitated by Family Conference Specialists; however they may be facilitated by a CPS supervisor or their designee.

*Circles of Support - Case Example*

A 16 year-old youth talking with a Circle of Support Coordinator about a Circle of Support asked if her sisters and her mother could be invited. The youth had been adopted when she was young. The adoption had not worked out and somewhere during that time she had lost contact with her birth family. The Circle of Support Coordinator worked with the youth's caseworker to find the names and addresses of her sisters and her mother and sought to contact them. Within a few days, she received a phone call from one of the sisters, who indicated she had been trying to locate her sister [the youth] for a long time. The sister helped the Coordinator contact the mother and other sisters who were also eager to initiate contact. The Coordinator talked with the youth's caseworker, foster mother, case manager and therapist about the best way to re-introduce these individuals into the youth's life. The therapist began working with the youth on this process in therapy before the Circle of Support.

Three of four sisters attended the Circle of Support, seeing their youngest sister for the first time in many years. The Circle helped the youth discuss her hopes and dreams, her strengths, and her needs and concerns related to transitioning to adulthood. One of the youth's sisters had aged out of foster care and was able to share her experiences about the importance of PAL benefits and the importance of staying in care and using the PAL benefits. The youth had a career goal of becoming a registered nurse and discussed programs at her school that would help her prepare for this career path. She made plans with her foster mother to enroll in a nursing program at her high school.

The Circle also discussed and developed a plan for the youth to maintain contact with her sisters and to participate in therapy together. The youth's therapist, case manager, and foster mother were also present and they helped create a plan for therapeutically re-introducing the youth's mother into her life. One of the youth's best friends from a previous placement also came to the Circle of Support and the two were able to make plans to continue their friendship.

This Circle of Support re-connected the youth with family that she had lost. She was feeling alone and separated, and through this meeting, a plan was put in place to help her form a lasting support system. The Circle also helped her create a plan to get the best education she could while in high school to prepare her for college courses in nursing. Through the Circle, this youth experienced that the adults in her life, including her caseworker and other professionals in the child welfare system, recognized her strengths, validated her hopes and dreams, and wanted to work with her to achieve these things.

#### *Education and Training Voucher Program (ETV)*

The Education and Training Voucher Program is a federally-funded (Chafee) and state-administered program. Based on need, current and former youth in foster care ages 16 to 23 may be eligible to receive up to \$5,000 in financial assistance per year to help them reach their postsecondary educational goals if they meet one of the following criteria:

- Meet college enrollment criteria and enrolled at least 6 semester hours in an institute of higher education that includes an accredited or pre-accredited public or non-profit institution:
  - that provides a bachelor's degree or not less than a 2 year program that provides credit towards a degree or certification;
  - that provides not less than one year program of training to prepare students for gainful employment; or
  - a private institution, that has been in existence for at least two years and provides a program of training to prepare students for gainful employment in a recognized occupation.
- Youth participating in the Education and Training Voucher Program on their 21st birthday can remain eligible until 23 years of age as long as they are enrolled and making satisfactory progress toward completing their postsecondary education or training program; or
- Youth interested in online correspondence and/or distance learning courses must contact Education and Training Voucher Program staff for prior approval.

#### *College Tuition and Fee Waiver (Texas Law-Section 54.211 and 54.2111 of the Texas Education Code)*

The College Tuition and Fee waiver provides exemptions to certain youth from payment of tuition and fees at Texas' state supported institutions of higher education. To be exempt from the payment of tuition and fees youth must have been in DFPS conservatorship. To be eligible for the tuition and fee waiver, the youth:

- is in DFPS conservatorship the day before the student's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday;
- is in DFPS conservatorship the day of the student's 14<sup>th</sup> birthday, if the youth was eligible for adoption (parental rights being terminated) on or after that day;
- is in DFPS conservatorship the day the student graduated from high school or received the equivalent of a high school diploma;
- was adopted and the adoption occurred on or after September 1, 2009;
- was in DFPS conservatorship and permanent managing conservatorship of the youth was granted to a non-parent on or after September 1, 2009; or
- was in DFPS conservatorship and entered the Permanency Care Assistance Program.



The tuition and fee waiver is available to youth meeting one of the eligibility criteria and is a student enrolled in a dual credit course or other course in which the student may earn joint high school and college credit.

Youth must be enrolled in an institution of higher education as an undergraduate, or in a dual credit course or other course for which a high school student may earn joint high school and college credit, no later than the youth's 25<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Adopted youth subject to an adoption assistance agreement and youth with a permanency care assistance agreement that provides monthly payments and Medicaid benefits are also eligible for the tuition and fee waiver. There is no age limit for a student with an adoption assistance agreement to enroll in college in order to take advantage of the tuition and fee waiver

### *Youth Involvement*

Young people have been actively engaged in all aspects of Transitional Living Services through their participation in leadership trainings with CPS managers, their participation on advisory committees, workgroups, focus groups and their presentations with CPS staff. "Nothing about us, without us" and "Making a difference" have been themes of youth leadership activities. The dedicated involvement of youth clearly speaks to their strong desire to be involved in directing their own futures.

### *Youth Leadership Councils*

Youth Leadership Councils operate in each of the eleven DFPS regions. They meet on a regular basis and at times most convenient to the youth. The statewide Youth Leadership Council is represented by two members of each regional Youth Leadership Council. This group meets on a quarterly basis and conducts meetings on Saturdays in order to accommodate the educational, employment, and leisure schedules of the members. Major achievements of the statewide Youth Leadership Council from October 2005 to the present include the following deliverables:

- improvements to the statewide newsletter for youth, providers, and other stakeholders
- improvements to the DFPS youth friendly website (Texas Youth Connection)
- improvements to the transition plan and policy
- improvements to the Education Training Voucher program
- development of the roles and responsibilities of youth and adult sponsors attending youth activities and events
- development of youth/alumni annual award concept
- development of roles/responsibilities of Youth Leadership Councils (regional and statewide)
- recommendations for revisions to the Texas Foster Care Handbook for Youth
- input to Extended Care and Return to Care programs
- development of CPS Rights of Children and Youth in Foster Care
- input into Foster Care Re-design initiative
- input into Fostering Connections initiative
- input into the National Youth in Transition Data base (NYTD) in Texas
- input on the HB 1912 subcommittee workgroups
- input and improvements on the Circles of Support process

### *Youth Specialists*

Youth Specialists (alumni of foster care) have been hired as full time employees in each region. Youth Specialists and their supervisors play a key role in the development and support of local Youth Leadership Councils. Youth Specialists also serve to help strengthen the casework provided by CPS with their contributions to policy and practice.

### *2009 Annual Youth Survey*

The Annual Random Youth Survey is required by legislation (Senate Bill 6, 79<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislature, 2005). Youth at least 14 - 17 years old receiving substitute care services are randomly selected from the foster care population. In FY 2009, 356 youth throughout the state were asked about the quality of substitute care services and programs, recommended improvements to support youth in care, and other factors DFPS considers relevant to program enhancement. Substitute care services were grouped into four categories: 1) employment, financial and educational information; 2) resources, family and health information; 3) the adoption process; and 4) services and training.

### *Youth Transition Centers*

There are currently 11 Youth Transition Centers located in the majority of CPS regions. These centers provide an array of comprehensive services through a one-stop approach that includes access and referrals to community partners and resources. Services may include employment assistance, training, educational support and transitional living services geared specifically to meet the individual needs of current and former foster youth ages 15 to 25. Additional services such as PAL Life Skills Training classes, job search and job readiness classes, food and housing assistance, and substance abuse / mental health counseling may be incorporated into Transition Center services. Transition Centers may also serve as a central clearinghouse where local partners such as Workforce Solutions, local community colleges and universities, or the Texas Youth Commission can meet on a regular basis to jointly serve the diverse needs of the youth. Transition Centers are independently operated and supported by partnerships between DFPS and their providers, the Texas Workforce Commission, and Casey Family Programs. These Centers are located in Houston, Dallas, Austin, San Antonio, Kerrville, Central Texas, Corpus Christi, San Angelo, El Paso, and Beaumont. Links to these Transition Center websites are accessible at:

[www.texasyouthconnection.org](http://www.texasyouthconnection.org)

During the 81<sup>st</sup> Legislative Session, \$200,000 in one-time funds were appropriated to use as seed money to expand transition centers in eight communities in Texas that did not operate a Center. The sites for the new Centers were identified to provide a consistent baseline of services to youth aging out of care or for older youth in areas of the state where transition centers were not available. New Transition Centers are expected to become operational in the Fall of 2010 and will be located in:

- Fort Worth (Region 3)
- Tyler (Region 4)
- McAllen (Region 11)
- Lubbock (Region 1)
- Abilene (Region 2)

Transition Centers in Region 1 and Cameron County are expected to open in FY 2011.

Each identified area received a one time \$25,000 developmental grant. Effective and successful transition centers involve multiple partners (local, state, and federal), each of whom brings different strengths and resources in addition to serving a particular role to ensure success of the center. Grantees are expected to list and describe how partners and other collaborations will be involved in providing services to youth and in sustaining these Centers once DFPS funds end.

#### *Medicaid for Transitioning Youth in Foster Care (MTFCY)*

Medicaid for Transitioning Youth in Foster Care (MTFCY) provides continuous medical coverage to individuals age 18 to 21 that have aged out of foster care and meet the following eligibility criteria:

- Current Texas resident between 18 and 21 years of age,
- U.S. citizen or qualified alien,
- Aged out of Texas foster care / DFPS custody at age 18,
- Have no other medical coverage (private insurance or other category of Medicaid),
- Do not have resources valued at more than \$10,000, and
- Meet the HHSC income guidelines for this category of Medicaid.

#### *STAR Health*

STAR Health is a statewide, comprehensive health care model designed to better coordinate and improve healthcare for:

- Children in DFPS conservatorship,
- Young adults under 22 years of age who under voluntary foster care placement agreements, and
- Young adults under 21 years of age who were previously in DFPS conservatorship and are currently receiving MTFCY.

#### *Health Care Benefits for Former Youth in Foster Care in Higher Education*

Effective October 1, 2009, the Health and Human Services Commission is required to provide health care benefits to certain youth formerly in foster care who are at least 21 years of age but younger than 23 years of age, eligible to receive assistance and enrolled in an institution of higher learning.

#### *Texas Youth Hotline*

The Texas Youth Hotline (1-800-210-2278) is a resource for youth who are under 21 years of age, including those who have aged out of the foster care system. Youth may contact the statewide hotline for telephone counseling, information, and referrals to housing, transportation, child care or other services. The hotline can help young adults locate services available in their communities.

#### *Texas Youth Connection Website*

The Texas Youth Connection website ([www.texasyouthconnection.org](http://www.texasyouthconnection.org)) was designed with input from youth as a resource for youth in the Texas Foster Care system, youth formerly in foster care, and any youth seeking general tips and information. The website offers information and resources in education, finances, legal, diversity, health, contacts, job links, food, housing, books, stories, hotlines and other information of interest to youth. This website will be the location of the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) Youth Survey.

*Extended Foster Care (Federally Funded Program)*

Some youth may not be ready to leave foster care at age 18. These youth may extend their stay in foster care beyond their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and up to their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday (in some cases up to age 22) by signing a voluntary agreement to extend foster care and by:

- Attending full time high school regularly up to the end of the month of their 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday;
- Attending a full time certified vocational or technical program regularly that allows for a young adult to be hired into the workforce up to the end of the month of their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday (The number of hours enrolled must be acceptable to the department and consistent with the transition plan.);
- Attending full time GED (Graduate Equivalence Diploma) classes regularly up to the end of the month of their 19<sup>th</sup> birthday. (The number of hours enrolled must be acceptable to the department and consistent with the transition plan); or
- Pursuing admission to a college, or to a vocational program, to begin within 3 ½ months following the end of the month in which they graduate from high school or complete the GED.

With the implementation of federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (PL 110-351)(Fostering Connections) on October 1, 2010, a youth who ages out of foster care at age 18 will continue to be eligible for extended foster care provided the youth signs a voluntary extended foster care agreement before age 18. The youth must be:

18 or up to 22 years old, and:

- regularly attending high school or enrolled in a program leading toward a high school diploma or school equivalence certificate (GED); or be

18 to 21 years old and:

- regularly attending an institution of higher education or a post secondary vocational or technical program;
- actively participating in a program or activity that promotes, or removes barriers to, employment;
- employed for at least 80 hours per month; or
- incapable of doing any of the above due to a documented medical condition.

Youth who have graduated from high school/GED and are accepted into a higher education or other post-secondary program remain eligible for extended foster care before the start of regular semester term unless the term is more than 3 ½ months following the youth graduating or receiving a GED.

In addition, DFPS is reviewing federal guidance received in July 2010 regarding options that will allow older youth to live in supervised independent living settings that offer supports while helping youth move towards independence. If implemented, a supervised independent living program would be an extension of the extended foster care program. For more information on Fostering Connections see section below, "Other Initiatives Impacting Transitional Living Services."

*Return to Care Program (State-Paid Foster Care)*

If a youth was in DFPS conservatorship the day before he/she turned 18 and left care for a certain period of time, he/she may return to care to:

- Attend full time high school regularly up to the end of the month of their 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday;
- Attend a full time certified vocational or technical program regularly that allows for a young adult to be hired into the workforce up to the end of the month of their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday (The number of hours enrolled must be acceptable to the department and consistent with the transition plan);
- Attend full time GED (Graduate Equivalence Diploma) classes regularly up to the end of the month of their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday (The number of hours enrolled must be acceptable to the department and consistent with the transition plan); or
- Return on a break from college or technical or vocational program for at least one month, but no more than 4 months up to their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.

Youth must meet the Return to Foster Care requirements as noted above and sign a Voluntary Return to Foster Care Agreement.

#### *National Youth In Transition Database (NYTD)*

The National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) is a data collection system created to track independent living services and states successes in preparing youth for the move from foster care into adulthood. Texas will survey youth who are in foster care when they are age 17 and then conduct follow-up surveys of some youth at age 19 and again at age 21. Data collection begins October 1, 2010.

## ***Implementation of Recommendations***

### **1. Life Skills Assessment**

House Bill 1912 requires DFPS to ensure that each youth in foster care who is age 16 or older receives an individual assessment of developmental needs and future goals to be used to develop an individualized transitional living service plan. Since 2002, DFPS has used the Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment (ACLSA) to identify youth needs prior to services being offered. Since September 2008, the assessment has been administered through Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) contracted providers when youth are 16 and about to begin PAL Life Skills Training classes. PAL contract providers administer the assessment to the youth and make efforts to ask the caregiver/a caring adult to complete an accompanying assessment on the individual youth. The youth and the caregiver results are combined into a Matching Score Report. The assessment is intended to identify the youth's current skill level and readiness to live independently. The report also creates an opportunity for the youth and caregiver to discuss the youth's life skills and needs. The results are made available to the youth, caregiver, CPS PAL staff and the CPS caseworker. The CPS caseworker, together with the youth, uses the assessment to develop the youth's plan of service and transition plan. A post-assessment using the ACLSA is conducted by the PAL staff or PAL aftercare case manager between the youth's 17<sup>th</sup> birthday and two months after discharge from substitute care. The post-assessment is intended to assess knowledge gain in the time since the initial assessment was given.

#### **Stakeholder Recommendations:**

- Continue to use the ACLSA as the primary assessment tool.
- Strengthen policies requiring caregivers and Child Placement Agencies (CPAs) to administer and utilize the ACLSA as a tool to help caregivers develop life skills training plans to practice in the home beginning at age 14.
- Train case-managers, caregivers, and providers on how to use the ACLSA as a tool to help caregivers develop life skills training plans to practice in the home beginning at age 14.
- Provide for the youth's primary caseworker to administer the assessment to the youth at age 14.
- Administer the ACLSA to the youth a second time at age 15 ½ and make it part of the Circles of Support process.
- Make sure caregivers receive copies of ACLSA results consistently.

#### *Agency Response:*

DFPS will continue to use the ACLSA as the primary assessment tool for youth. PAL contractors will continue to administer the ACLSA to the youth starting at age 16. PAL contractors offer a centralized entity to develop expertise in the tool. They also lend their knowledge and experience working with youth on adult living skills to help the youth and their caregivers interpret the results, which is also a requirement of their contract. The providers must have a conversation with the youth and invite the caregiver or caring adult and CPS caseworker to discuss the youth's strengths and areas for improvement.

To encourage participation by the youth's caregiver, DFPS has strengthened the FY 2012 residential contract requirements regarding the ACLSA. As part of service planning and coordination, the

contract requires foster care or other residential care providers to coordinate with the PAL provider to ensure the youth's caregiver completes the ACLSA. The contract also requires residential care providers to incorporate components of the CPS transition plan, including the ACLSA results (which is specifically referenced), into their service plans.

DFPS does not prohibit providers from administering the ACLSA earlier than age 16 and recognizes the “Ready, Set, Fly” plan created through the assessment on the ACLSA website as a useful tool for planning experiential activities. DFPS will consider adding this as a requirement to the FY 2012 contract. To eliminate duplication, DFPS will encourage anyone administering the ACLSA to include the assessment results as part of a youth’s Education Portfolio in a new section to be added for transition planning. DFPS will add the assessment completed by the PAL provider at age 16 to the youth’s Education Portfolio. In addition, the ACLSA post-assessment will no longer be used. Instead, DFPS will rely on individual knowledge-based assessments currently used during the PAL Life Skills Training classes.

Casey Family Programs recently notified DFPS that they have started planning a renovation of the Casey Life Skills (currently known as the ACLSA) website, which is now ten years old. Part of the renovation will be to make improvements to the content, usability, and functionality of the site. Casey Family Programs will be integrating components related to permanency so that the tool can help deepen dialogue and case practice about permanency, as well as transition planning, for older youth. DFPS has assigned a regional PAL staff and a PAL contractor to work with Casey Family Programs during this renovation process.

DFPS will also support the assessment of youth skills necessary to plan for experiential learning through an initiative to reform the transition plan document and process. Changes will be made to incorporate ongoing assessments of a youth’s skills beginning at a young age. For example, a "readiness scale" will be added to the transition plan that will be used by the youth, their caregivers and other caring adults to determine whether a youth is on track in learning the types of life skills appropriate at every age leading up to the youth’s preparation for the transition to adulthood. Improvements to the transition plan document will also include development of a resource / guidance component for caseworkers that will refer to the ACLSA and how to incorporate results into transition planning when the assessment is available at age 16. Guidance in this area will build upon training provided to all caseworkers on transitional living services, including use of the ACLSA, during Basic Skills Development training that all new CPS caseworkers receive.

## **2. Experiential Learning Activities**

House Bill 1912 requires foster care providers to offer experiential life-skills training to youth ages 14 and older to help them transition to independent living.

### **Stakeholder Recommendations:**

- Convene a stakeholder work group to help develop the requirements for experiential life skills activities to be provided by caregivers. The minimum activities and skills caregivers must address should be sufficiently specific to ensure that all youth receive the same basic level of training.
- Link requirements for experiential life skills activities to the existing PAL program to complement and enhance classroom PAL Life Skills training.

- CPS caseworkers should be active in monitoring whether youth are provided experiential activities and progress in developing adult living skills.

*Agency Response:*

DFPS residential contract staff worked with the House Bill 1912 subcommittee to revise the contract language on basic living and social skills that address experiential learning. The contract now more clearly requires contractors to maximize opportunities for learning through experiential life skills activities and to provide access to learning both in the home (or other residential setting) and in the community. DFPS contract managers began monitoring this requirement more closely in FY 2010 through records review and conversations with youth. This initial monitoring found some trends that providers were unsure of expectations and offering limited opportunities, particularly for older youth. CPS Residential Contract Division staff therefore welcomed the participation of the HB 1912 subcommittee in refining the definition of experiential life skills activities and drafting resource documents as tools. The HB 1912 subcommittee developed tips for Residential Treatment Centers on providing experiential learning opportunities and a document listing resources and internet sites where all types of residential care providers can go for more information. The residential contracts website was updated in May 2010 to include links to these documents and other resource material. The link to the contract website containing these tools was also referenced in the residential contract within the definition of experiential life skills activities as a way of providing examples.

DFPS also revised residential childcare licensing standards in July 2010 related to service planning to include the requirement that plans for youth age 14 or older include training in independent living skills through practical activities such as meal preparation, use of public transportation, money management, and basic household tasks. These rules were approved in July 2010. In addition, Residential Child Care Licensing staff are developing a guidance tool on serving older youth in foster care that addresses appropriate leeway for youth who need some measure of independence and autonomy in order to learn and practice life skills.

At this time, rather than forming a new workgroup to develop minimum requirements for experiential life skills activities for all youth, DFPS proposes an approach focused on better identifying and meeting the needs of individual youth. DFPS has convened a workgroup to redesign the transition plan. This effort, referred to as "Transition Plan Reform" will seek to strengthen the transition planning process to better understand and meet the unique needs of youth in foster care. As addressed in the prior section, DFPS will incorporate a "readiness scale" in the transition plan, which will be used by the youth and the youth's caring adults to determine a youth's level of preparation for transitioning successfully to adulthood and to identify the tasks and services needed for the youth to make progress. The youth's experiential learning and PAL activities, and how they compliment one another, will be discussed and addressed in each "life domain" within the plan. As a means of oversight, DFPS will provide the residential providers and foster parents a tool to document and log any experiential learning activities and accomplishments achieved. This log will include any records of achievements and can be added to the youth's Education Portfolio which belongs to the youth and follows them should they experience a placement change or when they exit from care.

To better serve younger youth, CPS was recently approached by Texas State University to develop a pilot program in Region 7 (the central Texas region including Austin) to expose youth in foster care



ages 12 to 15 to education opportunities and choices. This program would coincide with "Planting a Seed for Education" that is being developed internally within CPS to increase more positive education outcomes for foster youth. General discussion on the plan will involve the Youth Specialist coordinating and planning college/university tours; requiring CPS caseworkers to discuss college as an option during their monthly face to face visits; utilizing the Education Specialist to start career and education exploration activities while these youth are in middle school and adding this information into the contracts for residential providers as an additional experiential life skills component to be taught.

### **3. Transition Planning and Circles of Support**

Effective transition planning is important to help the youth and those who support them identify and complete tasks that need to be accomplished for youth to successfully live on their own. DFPS uses a youth-driven transition plan developed when the youth turns 16. The plan is based on each youth's individual strengths, talents, skills, and personal goals. It addresses special needs and issues that are important to youth as they prepare to leave care and enter the adult world. Transition plan topics include education, health and personal needs, family and community, developmental disabilities, employment, and living arrangements.

The current plan is a paper document developed in a Transition Plan Meeting or in a Circle of Support (preferred method) by the youth, their caseworker and participants the youth identifies as "caring adults" such as relatives, foster or kinship caregivers, teachers, and Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA). The Transition Plan is not currently automated in the DFPS case information database, referred to as the IMPACT system. Because the Transition Plan is a paper document, it has no room for notes to track the youth's progress. However, the plan in its current form does have the capacity to be modified with internal and external stakeholder input. Automating the plan in IMPACT will pose a fiscal impact to DFPS.

The plan is designed to be a 'living document' where each element is developed and enhanced over time, starting when a youth is age 16. By the time the youth is ready to transition to adulthood, the youth should have a complete Transition Plan, which can serve as a beginning "road map" to adult living. During a youth's Transition Plan Meeting or Circle of Support, each caring adult participant identifies a personal way that they can help support the youth's plan and attain his/her goals toward self-sufficiency. The Transition Plan is reviewed every six months by the caseworker as part of case planning and the development of the child service plan. At least once a year a Transition Plan Meeting or Circle of Support is held with a youth to review and update the youth's Transition Plan.

When implemented as designed, Circles of Support are highly effective in developing individualized Transition Plans with youth moving to adulthood. Currently, DFPS employs independent coordinators/facilitators, or Family Conference Specialists, to conduct all models of Family Group Decision Making, including Family Team Meetings, Family Group Conferences, and Circles of Support. Because the majority of DFPS Family Conference Specialist resources have been linked to specific mandates around the provision of Family Group Conferences and Family Team Meetings, staff resources and capacity to conduct Circles of Support to the extent recommended by best practice is reduced. A reduced workforce of independent coordinators/facilitators to conduct Circle of Support has resulted in ineffectiveness, inadequate follow through, and a Circle of Support often beginning after age 17, a timeline usually too short to implement identified areas of the plan.

HB 1912 calls for Circles of Support to begin at age 14, which is a more effective age to begin a youth's transition to adulthood. One Circle of Support takes an average of 16 hours to coordinate and facilitate. To provide the best quality Circles of Support, a Family Conference Specialist can coordinate/facilitate 10 – 12 Circles of Support per month. The 81st Texas Legislature appropriated 15 new Family Conference Specialists to conduct Circles of Support. Additional Family Conference Specialists would be needed to conduct Circles of Support for youth beginning at age 14 and conduct semi-annual re-conferences until the youth leaves foster care will pose a significant fiscal impact to DFPS.

### **Stakeholder Recommendations:**

- Adequately staff the program (could require 30 new facilitators) or modify the process to be more effective with existing resources.
- Modify the Circles of Support process to better connect all transition services and to improve communication and collaboration between DFPS, existing providers (CPAs, foster parents, transition centers, etc.) and volunteers helping the youth
- Simplify the Transition Plan, merge it with the youth's service plan, and make it live online - accessible to the youth and appropriate caregivers and providers and Circles of Support participants, with an automated calendar extending 2 years out.
- At each Circles of Support, designate, by agreement, a "Plan Monitor," who is a consistent person in the youth's life, and NOT the youth's caseworker, whose assignment is to hold all parties accountable.
- Make sure caregivers receive copies of Transition Plans and are included in Circles of Support when their presence is not contraindicated.
- If all Circles of Support for all youths cannot begin by age 14, priority should be given to youth with disabilities.

### *Agency Response:*

#### Circles of Support

Currently, Circles of Support are available to youth at age 14 on a case by case basis depending on staff availability and referrals. Youth served at age 14 are more likely to be those referred as a result of specific complex needs, such as a developmental disability or immigration issue. Current resources do not meet the needs for all youth age 16 and over to receive Circles of Support and semi-annual re-conferences to the extent recommended by best practice. In current practice, DFPS supervisors or their designee are an alternate vehicle for reviewing the Transition Plan when a youth declines a Circle of Support meeting or a meeting cannot be held. To offer Circles of Support to all youth at age 14 through age 21 would require 30 additional Circles of Support staff and 3 Supervisors. This estimate of additional staff is based on 4,225 Circles of Support for 14-17 year olds and 530 Circles of Support for 18-21 year olds for a total of 4,755 Circles of Support annually. This does not include any re-conferences.

In the absence of additional funding, DFPS is working toward continual process improvements. DFPS has developed a new tracking report for Circles of Support and Transition Plan meetings for youth age 16 and over to better ensure that youth are receiving timely attention to transition needs through regular meetings. Developed with input from PAL coordinators, Family Conference Specialists, and Conservatorship field staff across the state, the report also identifies key

characteristics and data elements on each youth age 16 and older, to assist in the coordination of Circles of Support and Transition Plan Meetings, as well PAL services

Since the implementation of Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) in 2003, DFPS has partnered with Casey Family Programs and American Humane Association (AHA), who employs nationally recognized experts in FGDM, to enhance and continually improve its FGDM process. Sponsored by Casey Family Programs, AHA has provided DFPS: 1) FGDM curriculum development and training, 2) on-site regional technical assistance, and 3) specialized trainings focused on unique issues faced within the FGDM context, including child and youth involvement in FGDM conferences, and domestic violence and substance abuse issues in FGDM conferences. In FY 2011, AHA will provide on-site technical assistance to all eleven CPS regions, as well as provide consultation regarding the Texas Circles of Support process. AHA will also conduct a review of the Circles of Support process that will focus on one urban and one rural region to identify strengths and areas for improvement in practice. DFPS will use AHA's recommendations to improve Circles of Support practice across the state as part of the Transition Plan Reform.

#### *Circles of Support Pilot*

Region 6 (Houston area) is currently conducting a special pilot project with CASA in Fort Bend County in conjunction with Circles of Support. This project works with youth at age 14 and their CASA worker to empower youth to take charge of their own case planning process. A Circles of Support worker still coordinates, facilitates and documents the meeting, however the youth's CASA volunteer conducts intense preparation with the youth several months prior to the youth's Circle of Support. It is anticipated that as youth have a greater role in the process, they will experience better quality outcomes. The intensive Circles of Support and CASA collaboration begins six months prior to the Circles of Support.

Regarding the recommendation for youth with disabilities, Circles of Support are currently available to youth at age 14, including youth with disabilities, or complex mental health or other needs, on a case by case basis. These youth are referred by the CPS caseworker or Developmental Disability Specialist for a Circle of Support through normal regional protocols. DFPS will identify two Circles of Support facilitators per region who will be trained and committed to addressing the individual needs of youth with disabilities. Serving youth with disabilities will be further addressed in the section covering recommendations from the disability subcommittee (See Section 5).

#### Transition Plan Reform

Since DFPS began using the current Transition Plan with youth age 16 and older in 2005, lessons have been learned from the practical application of the Transition Plan. In particular, the complexity, length, and accessibility of the plan have been identified as areas needing improvement. The existence of two plans, the Transition Plan and child service plan, for a youth and their caring adults to navigate has also been identified as problematic. Because of these staff concerns and the recommendations of the HB 1912 committee, DFPS has commenced an internal workgroup focused on Transition Plan Reform. A workgroup has started preliminary discussions on moving forward with creating an *individualized* service plan for ALL children/youth (0 up to 22 years old) in DFPS conservatorship, including those in extended care and return to care programs. This undertaking will entail designing a new plan consisting of required elements from the current child plan and transition plan, as well as additional elements the workgroup deems necessary to address in

the child's service plan. The group will focus on three age milestones that youth reach (0-14, 14-18, and 18-22), since each milestone brings forth new accomplishments, needs for support, and areas of growth.

The Transition Plan Reform workgroup has developed the following plan of action as a starting point:

- *Interim plan* - Create a shortened transition plan for all youth age 16 and up, including youth in extended care and return to care. The plan will be more concise (5-6 pages) with a separate working guide rather than prompts built into the document. The goal is to very clearly present the major goals and tasks, including those assigned to members of a youth's support system, and the status of these tasks. The plan will accommodate updates and tracking. It will also be more individualized so that domains may be included or excluded according to a youth's special needs or age. For example, a section on housing may not be included initially, but can be brought forth when the issue becomes salient. The plan would continue to be a paper document, but would be shorter. New technology of scanning and posting documents directly to IMPACT will be utilized so that the plan is more easily accessible. For example, scanning the document into IMPACT will now make the plan available to staff for youth who return to care, rather than waiting for delivery of archived paper documents. A shorter, more easily scanned document will also ease ability to send electronically to other parties. It is anticipated that some of these changes will also be incorporated into transition plan changes currently being developed for youth over the age of 18 in extended foster care.
- *Long term plan* - Merge the child service plan and the Transition Plan and automate the plan in IMPACT. This is a longer term effort that may require several years to develop with the ultimate goal of making the plan accessible to youth through the authenticated NYTD website. DFPS will explore enabling additional members of the approved support network to gain accesses through the portal.

The following four goals have been identified for a new, individualized child service plan:

1. The child service plan will be more concise and youth-friendly:
  - Only one plan will exist for all youth and will contain elements individualized for that child/youth.
  - Elements in the plan that are not applicable to a specific youth can be marked as not appropriate (i.e. transition plan elements for a 3 year old child) and will not show up or print out on the finalized plan.
  - For youth age 14 and older, a link to the Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment (ACLSA) website will be available on the child service plan.
  - The results of the youth's ACLSA matched scored report will be up loaded into IMPACT and available as a report to generate with the child service plan
  - Questions/prompts in the child service plan will be related to the plan itself, not to items that need to be addressed in the coordination of FGDM meetings or by the caseworker during regular visits with the child/youth.

2. The child service plan will be a living document, where progress can be tracked as needed by the caseworker in IMPACT.
3. The child service plan will be more accessible:
  - Automated in IMPACT
  - PDF version easily emailed from IMPACT to an outside participant
  - Accessible to the youth through the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD).
4. Accountability and coordination will be assured:
  - A plan monitor (who is not the caseworker but is an individual designated by the youth as a caring adult) will be identified in the Circle of Support or Transition Plan Meeting, designated as such on the plan, and will take on the role of assisting the caseworker with the monitoring of participant commitments on the plan.
  - The child's service plan will contain questions and prompts related to citizenship.
  - The child's service plan will contain questions and prompts related to planning for youth with disabilities, behavioral health, or other needs.
  - A caseworker "to-do list" (an existing IMPACT feature) will be generated when the child service plan needs to be updated, as determined in policy and federal guidelines.

Continued efforts to include and collaborate with foster parents and other residential care providers, as well as other significant community and contract providers involved with the youth will be a priority. Creating a balanced process when a youth does not desire the presence of a professional, foster parent, or other community provider at his/her Circle of Support or Transition Plan Meeting will be the focus. The level of involvement and actual presence of all individuals at Circles of Support and Transition Plan Meetings will be taken into consideration when creating and communicating a plan with the youth.

As the workgroup moves forward with both short and long term changes to the child service plan / transition plan, DFPS will seek stakeholder input from providers, foster parents, youth and others on the potential changes.

#### **4. Online Training**

HB 1912 called for a review of best practices and stakeholder recommendations for consideration of adding online training options and other training modules while reviewing the modification to the PAL Training curriculum. The workgroup evaluated the current PAL Independent Study Guide and numerous online products, using stakeholder group member input and youth focus groups. More detail about the review is in the Stakeholder report attached as an appendix.

#### **Stakeholder Recommendations:**

- Continue to use the PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide as an alternative means of training for youth who are unable to attend PAL Life Skills classes in person.
- Dedicate a person (contract or portion of an FTE) to maintain the PAL Independent Study Guide to ensure that websites and links included in activities are active and that material is

- Post the PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide on an existing PAL-related website in a PDF format.
- Allow use of the ISG as an alternative to physical attendance at PAL classes only for the bona fide reasons listed in the guidelines, and as a complement to the formal PAL classes.

*Agency Response:*

CPS will continue to use the PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide as an alternative means of training for youth who are unable to attend PAL Life Skills classes in person. DFPS will post the Study Guide on the DFPS Transitional Living Section of the DFPS website and the Texas Youth Connection website. Youth utilizing the on-line study guide will continue to require approval from the PAL staff to count the on-line study course towards completion of PAL classes. The stakeholder workgroup made recommendations for permissible and non-permissible reasons for substituting the independent study course. DFPS has adopted these into the guidelines for PAL staff to consider when a youth is not able to attend classes in person.

As a result of the subcommittee work, the PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide was updated to ensure the most current information is still available and all of the web links were active. Inactive links were replaced or removed. At this time funding does not allow for a dedicated staff to monitor and maintain websites and resource links tied to the PAL study guide. Current staff will review the study guide periodically and update as needed.

CPS will review how evaluations and youth focus groups can be utilized and incorporated into updating the PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide.

## **5. Youth with Disabilities**

HB 1912 directed the stakeholder workgroup to ensure transitional living services are appropriate and meet the individual needs and specialized needs of foster care with disabilities. The workgroup noted transitioning to adulthood is exceptionally problematic for children within vulnerable populations, including youth with disabilities and youth with significant mental health issues. Adequate resources, quality standards and meaningful accountability must be infused in the system if outcomes for youth are to improve.

### **Stakeholder Recommendations:**

- Use “Person Centered Planning” as discussed in the full report, reviewing and updating it annually beginning at age 12. Utilize the Person Centered Planning as the basis of the youth’s Circles of Support and begin the planning at age 14 with all youth having a transition plan.
- All youth with disabilities transitioning from the foster care system should have a caring adult who is going to continue with the youth when he/she leaves the system. All youth with a disability should be assigned a CASA worker.
- Youth with disabilities should begin PAL activities by age 14. In addition to the general PAL curriculum, we have specified specific areas of learning they should have to enable them to navigate adult life and obtain the services they need. (Self determination and self advocacy)

- Develop specialized Disability Units for children and youth in DFPS conservatorship, as described in the full report. These units would provide service coordination and case management, and network and collaborate with other state agencies, community organizations and services. Members of these units should be trained, experienced, and certified in disabilities and behavioral health. Training to include history, values, and rights of individuals with disabilities; mental/behavioral health
- Ensure that each child or youth in care has an electronic case record with contents as detailed in the full report
- Improve Cross system collaboration. Require all state agencies responsible for serving disabled persons to participate in their transition planning, and work together to ensure that these youth transition to adulthood receiving the services they need within their communities, avoiding institutionalization.
- Provide after-care services for these young adults up to age 25 that include specialized intensive case management and other needed supports and services.

*Agency Response:*

Currently, transitional living services are required to begin for youth in DFPS conservatorship at age 16, but may begin as early as age 14, based on the youth's needs and circumstances. DFPS is working with staff and residential contract providers to offer experiential transitional living activities to youth beginning at age 14. DFPS will also be requiring CVS Supervisors to conduct a case review and staffing to determine if a youth need a Circles of Support prior to the youth turning 16. Youth with complex needs and circumstances, such as youth with intellectual disabilities/developmental disabilities, primary medical needs or youth with citizenship issues shall be referred for Circles of Support or Transition Plan Meetings prior to the youth turning age 16 if deemed appropriate by the supervisor. DFPS will also utilize the services offered through the Medicaid program, STAR Health, to ensure the needs of youth with intellectual disabilities/developmental disabilities are met. STAR. The contracted provider of STAR Health services provides case management to children and youth with complex medical or mental/behavioral health service needs.

DFPS supports beginning experiential living skills as part of regular case practice. Experiential living skills such as in-home experiential life skills training between youth and caregivers (i.e., a caregiver training a youth to cook, cleans, wash clothes, etc.), identification and research of caring adults, introduction to higher education and Transition Centers, and day-to-day discussions between a caseworker and youth around transition planning, should begin prior to the youth turning age 16 particularly for youth with special needs.

The current Transition Plan was developed based on the Person Centered Planning model. This model keeps the focus on the person and not the service delivery system. Circles of Support is a model that is person focused and client driven, thus ensuring that the plans are individualized and unique for each youth and his/her needs. DFPS supports the recommendation to begin experiential living skills at age 12 years. A Transition Plan Reform workgroup has been meeting regularly to improve transition planning for youth in foster care to determine what experiential living skills transition planning services can occur for youth beginning at age 12, given current resources. The workgroup is developing one planning document for youth by combining the current planning documents and researching other planning tools that could be adapted to the DFPS system, such as

the Foster Club Transition Toolkit (Toolkit). The Toolkit was developed by young adults recently transitioned from foster care for youth beginning their journey to adulthood. This project was completed in collaboration with [FosteringConnections.org](http://FosteringConnections.org). Identifying individualized services and activities that meet the specific needs of youth with disabilities will be part of the Transition Plan Reform. DFPS will seek stakeholder input (including input from members of the HB 1912 workgroup) on recommended changes to the Transition Plan including changes to support youth with disabilities. As part of the Transition Plan Reform, DFPS will also revise and modify current policies regarding changing the priority population for long term care needs for youth with disabilities to start at an age earlier than 16.

As noted in Section 3, DFPS will identify two Circles of Support facilitators per region to receive enhanced training about developmental disabilities, mental health and other disabilities in order to address the individual needs of these youth during a youth's Circles of Support. In addition, caring adults will be identified during Circles of Support and Transition Planning meetings. DFPS supports the recommendation that youth with a disability be a priority to be assigned a CASA worker. As a legally appointed advocate for children and youth, the CASA worker's involvement and support would assist in the overall transition of the youth with intellectual disabilities/developmental disabilities as well as monitoring to insure that all identified tasks on the plan are being completed. However, DFPS recognizes that CASA has a shortage of volunteers to serve children in DFPS conservatorship. DFPS will work with CASA at the state and local level by providing CASA with information about the unique needs and services for youth with intellectual disabilities/developmental disabilities so both agencies can work in concert with one another to meet the youth's identified needs, including locating a caring adult who will continue with the youth when he/she leaves the system. DFPS will meet with Texas CASA to discuss strategies to offer training for CASA workers who serve children and youth with intellectual disabilities/developmental disabilities. DFPS will also assist CASA during joint recruitment efforts to recruit both additional foster-adopt parents and CASA volunteers willing to serve children and youth with intellectual disabilities/developmental disabilities. Additionally, DFPS will work with the Texas Supreme Court Permanent Judicial Commission for Children, Youth, and Families to train guardians and/or attorney ad litem regarding the needs of youth with intellectual disabilities/developmental disabilities.

Federal Title IV-E Chafee funds utilized by DFPS to support PAL activities are not currently sufficient for DFPS to expand PAL activities to include all youth ages 14-15. However, the feasibility of expanding these services to include some youth ages 14-15 will be assessed during the PAL contract renewal for FY 2012. As noted in Section 1, DFPS has revised the residential contract language and requirements addressing basic living and social skills trainings. The contract requires residential contractors (foster parents and other caregivers) to maximize opportunities for learning through experiential life skills activities and provide access to learning both in the home (or other residential setting) and in the community beginning at age 14. Guidance and resources, such as the experiential living guides, will continue to be offered to providers to address learning opportunities recommended by the HB 1912 stakeholder workgroup. As DFPS becomes aware of other resources to provide experiential life skills or transition activities to support youth, DFPS will share these resources with residential providers and may require these activities to become a part of their contract. During the monthly face-to-face contacts with the youth, the caseworkers will follow-up with the youth on the kinds of learning opportunities made available to them, progress made, and areas where training can be expanded or improved upon. This will be essential before the referral to the PAL program to ensure that efforts are not being duplicated or to provide more enhanced PAL



skills training where identified. As addressed in previous sections, DFPS will encourage tracking of experiential activities learned and achievements accomplished through the youth's Education Portfolio.

When applicable, PAL staff may use alternative methods to assess life skills taught in school or at home using the Individualized Education Plan Progress Notes or information from the school Transition Plan, substituting these trainings for a PAL training credit. PAL staff utilize these sources as additional supports or resources for PAL training credits in addition to ensuring youth have the opportunities available as provided in PAL classes.

The Texas Supreme Court Permanent Judicial Commission for Children, Youth, and Families has established an education sub-committee to address educational needs of children and youth in foster care. The first meeting will take place in Fall 2010.

Previous experience in establishing specialty units within CPS has not always led to improved outcomes for children. However, DFPS is compiling data to determine the feasibility of creating units and/or caseworkers that specialize in working with children/youth with intellectual disabilities/developmental disabilities, their siblings, and families. Once the data is analyzed, DFPS will consider options to most efficiently and effectively meet the needs of youth with ID/DD within current resources.

Recognizing the importance of staff development around intellectual disabilities/developmental disabilities, DFPS will explore training opportunities to increase the knowledge and skills of all staff who work with this population. Currently, DFPS is exploring the value of Computer Based trainings on developmental disabilities and behavioral/mental health for children and youth in foster care. DFPS is also pursuing in coordination with TEA the use of training materials developed by the regional Education Service Centers to support teachers and other staff in serving children and youth with developmental disabilities. DFPS will also explore the possibility of offering workshops on developmental disabilities and behavioral/mental health issues at future staff trainings and agency conferences. Finally, DFPS will continue to partner with the Department of Aging and Disability Services (DADS) to share knowledge about developmental disability issues including accessing and incorporating information on self determination and self advocacy that can be inserted into the PAL and other life skills curriculum.

DFPS welcomes opportunities to collaborate with other state agencies to ensure that youth who transition out of foster care to adulthood receive the services they need within their communities. Regional CPS management build relationships and collaborations within the community to meet the diverse and various needs of youth. Caseworkers include local and/or state staff from DADS, the Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services (DARS), the Department of State Health Services (DSHS), and the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC), in addition to staff from local housing authorities and Mental Health Authorities, for individualized staffings during the youth's case planning.

Federal Title IV-E funding limits the age DFPS can serve youth to age 21 or in some cases up to 22 and the youth must voluntarily agree to remain in care and participate in a specific educational or employment activity unless their medical condition prevents their participation. In addition, Medicaid services for youth formerly in foster care ends at age 21.

## 6. Caring Adults

The Caring Adults subcommittee workgroup focused on what changes should be made to the foster care system to maximize the likelihood that a youth who leaves care as an adult will leave connected to at least one healthy, caring adult who wants him/her to be successful.

### Stakeholder Recommendations:

- Monitor the new DFPS “Building Permanent Connections” family finding and permanency connection project. 18 month evaluation. Within the next year, DFPS should develop a plan and a schedule to conduct relative searches and connection finding for all youth in foster care over age 12, beginning with the oldest.
- Reinstate voluntary mentoring through the PAL program to all youth in care over age 14, beginning with a pilot project in Region 8 (San Antonio area).
- Develop a Resources and Tools page on the DFPS website that is a living document containing research and resources for DFPS and providers.
- Reevaluate all training to assure that it is designed to train all persons in the system to understand that foster care is temporary, and that every child should be targeted for legal and emotional permanency.
- Request the Texas Supreme Court Children’s Commission to address the question: “How can the courts better support all children and youth in care, especially those ages 14 and over, having long-term, healthy, and caring adults in their lives?”
- Ensure that foster youths receive experiential learning in basic social skills, such as building healthy relationships, primarily through modeling by caregivers (usually foster parents).
- Review the system to identify and correct any artificial barriers to permanent, healthy, relationships.
- The CPS system should have a process in place to ensure that record redactions needed to facilitate adoptions of CPS children do not become backlogged.

### *Agency Response:*

Building Permanent Connections is a new project that will continue to be refined. The project standardizes what is commonly referred to as "case mining." A DFPS protocol for case mining has been developed that not only includes direction to DFPS staff but also includes providers and volunteers who may be conducting information searches. The goal of Building Permanent Connections is to identify and locate persons who may serve as a potential placement or caring adult for the youth. The long term goal for Building Permanent Connections is that the process will become part of casework practice in all cases in an effort to locate potential kinship placements. Building Permanent Connections is an example of how DFPS uses current research and other data to build practice models that best meet the needs of the child.

DFPS updated policy to clarify and outline the expectation that search efforts for potential kinship placements and caring adults will continue until a child achieves permanency and exits DFPS care.

DFPS will fully implement the extended services options provided by Fostering Connections. This initiative will greatly expand services to the youth and young adult population by expanding supports and other services into their early adulthood.

DFPS is currently working with the Texas Supreme Court Permanent Judicial Commission for Children, Youth and Families to address all permanency and well-being issues of all children in DFPS conservatorship with a focus on children in DFPS permanent managing conservatorship.

Over the last year, changes have been made to the records redaction division at DFPS, following a comprehensive evaluation by an independent business analyst. During the transition, redaction software was introduced, processes streamlined, and additional resources (both temporary staff and reassignment of permanent staff) provided. This system overhaul will reduce the amount of time needed to meet record redaction requirements for adoption records.

Mentoring is currently available to youth in many regions of the state. PAL contract (Case Management and Aftercare) staff must refer youth to mentoring services through partnerships, volunteers or other community resources when these services are available. This contract term has been in effect for the last two years. DFPS does not require contractors to provide or administer a mentoring program because of fund limitations.

#### *DFPS Mentoring Projects*

The 80<sup>th</sup> Legislature passed House Bill 3008, mandating the establishment of a youth (14 and older) mentoring pilot project in 4 counties in Region 3: Tarrant, Denton, Dallas and Collin. Big Brothers Big Sisters of North Texas is contracted to provide these mentoring services and the University of Texas at Arlington is contracted to conduct an evaluation of the effectiveness of the pilot program. DFPS will report findings to the Legislature no later than January 1, 2011.

Region 6 (Houston area) currently has 14 volunteer mentors that are part of the services offered through the transition center in this region. The program has been very successful for the past five years. The face-to-face mentor program is a one year commitment. The challenges this program has faced are the shortage of volunteers willing or able to commit to a year of service and the commitment of the youth who are assigned to mentors.

Region 7 (Central Texas area including Austin) is in the process of initiating a mentoring program in collaboration with Partnership for Children - Youth Empowerment and Success Program, Casey Family Programs, Central Texas CASA (Caldwell and Hays County), Judge Karin Bonicoro and GoodGuides, a youth mentoring program of Goodwill Industries in Austin.

DFPS ensures that the Texas Youth Connections website is updated with current program changes and areas of interest. This website offers numerous tools and resources to youth and other interested individuals.

Recommendations related to ensuring youth receive experiential life skills around building healthy relationships through modeling by the caregivers and a review of the system to reevaluate training and identify and correct any artificial barriers to permanent, healthy relationships are included in other sections of this report and will be addressed during the Transition Plan Reform.

#### ***Other Initiatives Impacting Transitional Living Services***

##### *House Bill 1912 and Other Legislative Requirements*

House Bill 1912, Section 2(d) also requires DFPS to allow youth who are at least 18 years of age to receive transitional living services, other than foster care benefits, while residing with a person who was previously designated as a perpetrator of abuse or neglect if DFPS determines that, despite the person's prior history, this person does not pose a threat to the health and safety of the youth. The transitional living services that youth would qualify for are benefits received from the PAL program, such as a transitional living allowance or aftercare room and board assistance. To comply with this requirement, DFPS has issued policy guidance to PAL staff who will review each youth's case on an individual basis. If the PAL staff determines there is a threat to the health and safety of the youth, the DFPS Transitional Living Services Lead Staff person will be contacted for a final determination.

Section 2(e) of House Bill 1912 requires DFPS to ensure that each youth receives a certified copy of their birth certificate, a social security card or replacement social security card, as appropriate, and a personal identification certificate (Texas ID) on or before the youth turns 16 years of age. A PAL staff will assist youth in obtaining these documents if the youth's caseworker is not able to. In addition, DFPS must designate staff to assist youth in obtaining replacement documents or provide information on how to obtain duplicate copies and youth must be provided with contact information for the designated staff. To comply with this section of the bill, DFPS issued policy guidance to CPS caseworkers and PAL staff related to the issuance of these documents and designated the regional lead PAL staff as the main point of contact for youth when lost documents need to be obtained again.

Other policy changes include adding the requirements from Senate Bill 983, 81<sup>st</sup> Legislature, Regular Session, 2009. Senate Bill 983 amended the Texas Family Code requiring DFPS to ensure youth who turn 18 years of age or have had their disabilities of minority removed receive copies of their:

- Birth certificate;
- Social security card or a replacement social security card;
- A personal identification issued by the Texas Department of Public Safety;
- Immunization records;
- Information contained in the youth's health passport; and
- Proof of enrollment in Medicaid, if appropriate.

In addition, new instructions issued under the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act requires Texas to provide information to youth related to designating a Medical Power of Attorney once a youth turns age 18 and leaves care or extends their stay in care.

DFPS is also addressing Section 2 of Senate Bill 983 by convening a workgroup that included representatives from the Texas Education Agency, Texas Department of Public Safety, and the Texas Department of Insurance to develop a plan ensuring each child in DFPS permanent managing conservatorship is provided an opportunity to complete a driver's education course and obtain a driver's license before leaving conservatorship. The plan will be included in a report to the legislature to be submitted by December 1, 2010 and will also include the cost estimates for providing driver's education and methods to obtain affordable liability insurance for youth in foster care. Results from the workgroup efforts have identified some legislative recommendations to be presented during the 82<sup>nd</sup> Legislative Session.

### *Fostering Connections*

The complete federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (PL 110-351) includes components that:

- provide a state option for a subsidized kinship guardianship program (known in Texas as Permanency Care Assistance);
- contain the re-authorization of the adoption incentive program for an additional five years through 2013;
- begin a graduated implementation of the elimination of all income and other tests for Title IV-E eligibility for adoption assistance; and
- provide a state option to provide Title IV-E foster care maintenance payments for youth that want to stay in extended foster care up to their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday if meeting certain educational or employment related requirements or have a medical condition that prevents participating in such activities.

During the 81<sup>st</sup> Legislative Session, the Texas Legislature passed legislation and funding to allow Texas to implement the optional subsidized guardianship program, and provide Title IV-E foster payments of youth up to their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.

### *Foster Care Redesign*

DFPS is currently engaged in a project known as "Improving Child/Youth Placement Outcomes: A System Redesign" to redesign the Texas foster care system. Through this project, and in collaboration with other child welfare stakeholders, DFPS seeks to improve the manner in which it procures and contracts for services. Through contract performance measures and incentives, DFPS hopes to better ensure that children are placed close to home with their siblings, placements are minimized, and children are provided quality services in appropriate settings that are least restrictive.

This initiative is a major focus for DFPS. The effort has significant implications for improving services for youth transitioning from foster care. Insofar as keeping youth close to home impacts permanency, the initiative supports the goal of fewer children aging out of foster care. As addressed in the House Bill 1912 stakeholder workgroup recommendations, placement stability and quality are key to meaningful transition services. Disruption of a youth's social, education, and work connections due to a placement move creates significant barriers to youth's ability to meet his/her goals. This initiative also recognizes the importance of working toward normalcy for youth in foster care. Two quality indicators include preparing youth for successful adulthood by providing opportunities, experiences and activities similar to those experienced by their non-foster care peers and providing opportunities to participate in decisions that impact their lives. More information is available at [http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Child\\_Protection/Foster\\_Care/redesign.asp](http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Child_Protection/Foster_Care/redesign.asp)

### ***Statutory Changes***

No statutory changes will be necessary to implement this Transitional Living Services plan.

### ***Fiscal Impact***

This plan has outlined two items with significant fiscal impact to DFPS:

1. Preliminary costs associated with adding an additional 30 Circles of Support staff and 3 Supervisors for the next biennium are estimated to be \$4,606,718. This figure is based on 4225 Circles of Support for 14-17 year olds and 530 Circles of Support for 18-21 year olds for an annual total of 4755 Circles of Support.
2. A preliminary cost estimate for the Transition Plan Reform and automation changes totals \$459,701. This estimate is based on analysis, development and testing for twelve components required to meet the goals outlined in this plan.

Appendix A  
Transitional Living Services for Youth by Age- Checklist

Appendix B  
HB 1912 Transitional Living Services Workgroup Recommendations to Improve DFPS Transitional Living Services Program

## Transitional Living Services for Youth 14-21 (Checklist)

Annual review to be completed the month of the youth's birth date

Ages	14-15	16	17	18	19-21
<b>Permanency Planning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>If youth has a disability or is medical fragile and requires long term care or support into adulthood, the CVS Supervisor will conduct a case review and staffing to determine if a Circles of Support (COS) is needed prior to the youth turning 16.</b></li> <li>● Citizenship Status: verification of status. If necessary, consult with SIJS for assistance</li> <li>● Identify caring adult for on-going support after the youth turns 18</li> <li>● Conduct/Review case mining activities to support permanency planning goals and activities</li> <li>● Verify receipt of or issue ACCESS GRANTED-Foster Care Handbook</li> <li>● Provide contact information for the regional youth specialist and Youth Leadership Council (YLC)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Conduct/Review case mining activities to support permanency planning goals and activities</li> <li>● Review educational needs and identify necessary support for HS graduation</li> <li>● Circles of Support (COS) or Transition Planning Meeting (TPM) replace permanency conference (additions to child service plan).</li> <li>● CPS service plan and other service provider staffings are incorporated in the transition plan, including citizenship issues.</li> <li>● Court report must identify the services needed to assist the youth in transitioning to adult life</li> <li>● Identify caring adult for on-going support after the youth turns 18.</li> <li>● Verify receipt of or issue ACCESS GRANTED-Foster Care Handbook</li> <li>● Provide contact information for the regional youth specialist and Youth Leadership Council (YLC)</li> <li>● <b>If youth has a disability or is medical fragile and requires long term care or support into adulthood, consult with Developmental Disability Specialist to ensure:</b></li> <li>● Youth is placed on appropriate Medicaid Waiver lists</li> <li>● Youth with substantial incapacitation are referred to DADS Guardianship</li> <li>● Appropriate long-term care resources through other state agencies are considered and arranged</li> <li>● Citizenship Status: verification of status. If necessary, consult with SIJS for assistance as this may impact DADS Guardianship and other adult services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Conduct/Review case mining activities to support permanency planning goals and activities</li> <li>● Review educational needs and identify necessary report for HS graduation (including credit recovery)</li> <li>● COS or Transition Planning Meeting held annually</li> <li>● CPS service plan and other service provider staffings are incorporated in the transition plan, including citizenship issues.</li> <li>● Transition planning services progress reported in placement review hearings</li> <li>● Identify caring adult for on-going support after the youth turns 18.</li> <li>● Verify receipt of or issue ACCESS GRANTED-Foster Care Handbook</li> <li>● Provide contact information for the regional youth specialist and Youth Leadership Council (YLC)</li> <li>● <b>If youth has a disability or is medical fragile and requires long term care or support into adulthood consult with Developmental Disability Specialist to ensure:</b></li> <li>● See comments under Age 16</li> <li>● Youth with substantial incapacitation are referred to DADS Guardianship</li> <li>● <b>SSI Coordinator to ensure;</b> that the youth's SSI application will be submitted at least six months before the youth turns 18: and</li> <li>● <b>STAR Health Service Manager-</b> to coordinate the youth's transition to medical services that are covered by SSI if the youth will no longer be covered by STAR Health</li> <li>● <b>Youth at 17 yrs, 8 Months:</b></li> <li>● Extended court jurisdiction in some cases if youth requests (must occur before youth turns 18)</li> <li>● Transition Plan review or update must occur and be documented within 90 days before turning 18.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Conduct/Review case mining activities to support permanency planning goals and activities</li> <li>● Review educational needs and identify necessary report for HS graduation (including credit recovery)</li> <li>● Conservatorship ends: Voluntary Extended foster care begins</li> <li>● COS or Transition Planning meeting held annually</li> <li>● Verify receipt of or issue ACCESS GRANTED-Foster Care Handbook</li> <li>● Provide contact information for the regional youth specialist and Youth Leadership Council (YLC)</li> <li>● CPS service plan and other service provider staffings are incorporated in the transition plan, including citizenship issues.</li> <li>● Six month periodic review and annual permanency hearing review by court or administrative methods</li> <li>● Transition Plan review or update must occur and be documented within 90 days before leaving care</li> <li>● <b>If youth has a disability or is medical fragile and requires long term care or support into adulthood at least six months prior to transition unless the youth has a DADS guardian consult with Developmental Disability Specialist to ensure:</b></li> <li>● See comments under Age 17</li> <li>● <b>SSI Coordinator to ensure;</b> that the youth's SSI application will be submitted at least six months before the youth turns 18: and</li> <li>● <b>STAR Health Service Manager-</b> to coordinate the youth's transition to medical services that is covered by SSI if the youth will no longer be covered by STAR Health.</li> <li>● If the youth does have a DADS</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● COS or Transition Planning meeting held annually if in the extended care or return to care program.</li> <li>● CPS service plan and other service provider staffings are incorporated in the transition plan, including citizenship issues.</li> <li>● Verify receipt of or issue ACCESS GRANTED-Foster Care Handbook</li> <li>● Provide contact information for the regional youth specialist and Youth Leadership Council (YLC)</li> <li>● Court continuance and review for special circumstances</li> <li>● Six month periodic review and annual permanency hearing review by court or administrative methods</li> <li>● Transition Plan review or update must occur and be documented 90 days before leaving care</li> <li>● <b>If youth has a disability or is medical fragile and requires long term care or support into adulthood at least six months prior to transition unless the youth has a DADS guardian consult with Developmental Disability Specialist to ensure:</b></li> <li>● See comments under Age 18</li> <li>● <b>SSI Coordinator to ensure</b> that the youth's SSI application will be submitted at least six months before the youth turns 18: and</li> <li>● <b>STAR Health Service Manager-</b> to coordinate the youth's transition to medical services that are covered by SSI if the youth will no longer be covered by STAR Health</li> <li>● If the youth does have a DADS guardian determine DADS plan for long term care for the youth.</li> </ul>

				guardian determine DADS plan for long term care for the youth.	
<b>Ages</b>	<b>14-15</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>18-21</b>	<b>22-25</b>
<b>Transitional Living Services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experiential life skills training in placement</li> <li>• Introduction to Transition Centers</li> <li>• Other identified activities to support PAL readiness such as the Teen Conference.</li> <li>• Introduction to Higher Education opportunities through campus tours and other campus activities (Coordinate with Youth Specialist or Education Specialist)</li> <li>• Provide contact Information for regional Youth Specialists and Youth Leadership Council (YLC)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PAL Services -Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment and PAL Life Skills Training</li> <li>• Continue experiential life skills training in placement</li> <li>• Education and Training Voucher (ETV) eligible (age 16-23)-Dual credit courses.</li> <li>• Tuition and Fee Waiver Exemption (high school dual credit course)</li> <li>• Transition Center services</li> <li>• Determine eligibility for WIA youth employment programs-local workforce center referral.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PAL Services-Life Skills Training and Case Management (until age 18)</li> <li>• Assess for Extended Care Program eligibility- Voluntary Agreement must be signed prior to the youth's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday if eligible</li> <li>• Transition Center Services</li> <li>• Continue experiential life skills training in placement</li> <li>• National Youth in Transition</li> <li>• Database Survey-baseline</li> <li>• population</li> <li>• Education and Training Voucher (ETV) eligible (age 16-23)-Dual Credit course or Higher Education</li> <li>• Tuition and Fee Waiver Exemption</li> <li>• Letter</li> <li>• Transitional Medicaid / STAR Health - age 18-21</li> <li>• Receives Information on Medical Power of Attorney (90 days before age 18)</li> <li>• Receives Youth Transition Portfolio that includes all required personal documents (90 days before age 18)</li> <li>• Provide Contact Information for regional Lead PAL Staff</li> <li>• Receives Education Portfolio (Green Binder) 90 days before age 18.</li> <li>• Receives Health Passport and other medical records</li> <li>• Eligible for WIA youth employment and training programs-local workforce center referral. Register in WorkInTexas.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PAL-Transitional Living Allowance, Aftercare Room &amp; Board, and Case Management services</li> <li>• Transition Center Services</li> <li>• Extended Care Program</li> <li>• Return to Care Program</li> <li>• Education and Training Voucher (ETV) eligible (age 16-23)-Higher Education</li> <li>• Tuition and Fee Waiver</li> <li>• Exemption Letter</li> <li>• Transitional Medicaid / STAR Health - age 18-21</li> <li>• Former Foster Youth in Higher Education-medical services (FFCHE) (21 up to 23)</li> <li>• Eligible for WIA youth or adult employment and training programs-local workforce center referral. Register in WorkInTexas.</li> <li>• Information on the National Youth in Transition Database Follow-up Survey (age 19 &amp; 21, if applicable)</li> <li>• Information about State Employment Preference to Former Foster Youth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transition Center Services</li> <li>• Education and Voucher (ETV) eligible (age 16-23)-Higher Education</li> <li>• Tuition and Fee Waiver (must be used before age 25)</li> <li>• Former Foster Youth in Higher Education-medical services (FFCHE) (21 up to 23)</li> <li>• Refer to Local workforce centers for employment and training programs. Register in WorkInTexas.</li> <li>• Information about State Employment Preference to Former Foster Youth</li> </ul>

Education and Training Voucher website: [www.bcfs.net/ETV](http://www.bcfs.net/ETV) or 1-877-268-4063

Texas Youth Connection Website: [www.texasyouthconnection.org](http://www.texasyouthconnection.org)



**Report to Texas Department of  
Family and Protective Services**

**HB 1912**

**Transitional Living Services  
Workgroup**

**Recommendations to Improve  
DFPS' Transitional Living Services  
Program**

**June, 2010**

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June 2010

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**Report  
HB 1912 Transitional Living Services Work Group  
June, 2010**

**OVERVIEW AND INTRODUCTION**

HB 1912 (Rodriguez) enacted by the 81<sup>st</sup> Texas Legislature (2009), assigned the Department of Family and Protective Services numerous tasks to improve transition services for older youth in foster care. One of those assignments was establishing a stakeholder work group to develop a comprehensive plan for services for these youth. In cooperation with organizations representing various stakeholders, the work group was established. The task force created four subcommittees which were chaired by members of the full group and included subject matter experts and representatives of DFPS invited to participate in each work group. Each group developed one or more reports which are summarized in the full report. Several of the full subcommittee reports are reproduced in full in the appendices.

The attached report contains numerous specific recommendations, together with a description of the research work behind those recommendations. Underlying these recommendations is the theme that, primarily because they so move frequently, youth who grow up in foster care often do not have the opportunity to develop certain skills they need to become healthy, productive adults. These skills include being able to:

- develop and sustain healthy relationships;
- learn proper problem-solving and other necessary life skills most people learn in their families, and
- develop and attain realistic educational and vocational goals.

HB 1912 establishes the goal of assuring that every child receives individualized planning and education to enable him or her to become a healthy, interdependent adult. In general, the HB 1912 work group has concluded that Texas' current policies and tools are good but need better implementation. The following 4 principles must be in place to improve the implementation:

- Caseworkers and other providers of services such as Child Placing Agencies (CPAs) and foster parents must have the resources, skills, time, authority, and encouragement to take ownership of the child's case, the transition planning, and delivery of services. Each must also be held accountable for outcomes for those things for which they are responsible.
- Placement stability and quality are keys to meaningful transitional living services. Those are being addressed in the foster care redesign project.
- Transition services must begin early, 14 at the latest.
- Youth who leave care must have a meaningful connection to at least one caring adult.

When services begin, a meaningful assessment of the youth's strengths and needs must be made. The tools the state currently uses appear to be the best available, but they need to be administered by adults who know the youth well and know how to administer and interpret these tests, preferably the child's caseworker. Those assessments must then be a key tool used for service planning and for developing each youth's individual goals. The services must evolve and adapt to the youth's learning, changes in goals and circumstances. Youth with disabilities have added special needs which are discussed in our report.

Technology should be used more effectively. Transition plans should be interactive and accessible to the youth and important people in his/her life, especially caregivers, CPAs, CASA and CPS staff. The plan should include an interactive calendar with alerts and should be able to be updated electronically. Transition plans also need to be simplified as they are developed for web use. Experiential learning should be given in foster homes and tracked online.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

HB 1912, 81<sup>st</sup> Texas Legislature (2009) Section 3, requires DFPS to (1) research best practices for transitional services, and (2) establish a work group to help DFPS develop a comprehensive plan to:

- assure that foster youth over age 16 receive individual assessments of their developmental needs and transitional living services tailored to each youth's needs;
- modify the Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) Program training curriculum to include online training options; and
- ensure that transitional living services meet the needs of youth with disabilities.

Work group members are listed in Appendix 5.

Section 2 of HB 1912 directs DFPS to require providers to give youth age 14 or older experiential life skills training. This work group has developed recommendations for implementing that requirement. Our task force has also included recommendations to increase the likelihood that a youth leaving foster care has a meaningful connection to at least one healthy caring adult.

Our full report contains summaries of the reports of each subcommittee. The Appendix contains the full reports of the subcommittees, including some tools to aid in developing services.

This task force also recommends numerous uses of technology, including the internet, to make information more accessible to youths and all parties in the system. Wherever possible, paper documents such as the youth's Transition Plan should be converted to electronic documents accessible to persons who need them, such as the youth, caregivers, and caseworkers. We also recommend monthly maintenance of online materials to assure that the information and web links are up to date.

We recommend that some new projects stimulated by our efforts be evaluated in 18 months to determine their effectiveness, adjusting and/or expanding these projects as appropriate in light of those evaluations.

### ***Specific recommendations are summarized below.***

**Assessment of youth's life skills:** HB 1912 requires DFPS to ensure that youth over age 16 receive individualized assessments of their development needs and future goals to be used to develop individualized transitional living services plans. The task force evaluated numerous assessment tools and concluded that Texas should continue to use the Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment (ACLSA) when developing a life skills learning plan for each youth. To maximize its effectiveness, DFPS should do the following.

- Train caseworkers and caregivers in its administration and utilization.
- Provide for the youth's primary caseworker to administer the assessment to the youth at age 14.
- Administer the ACLSA to the youth a second time at age 15 ½ and make it part of the Circles of Support (COS) process to help develop a plan of action for the youth's continuing life skills development.

**Experiential activities to develop life skills:** HB 1912 requires that youth 14 and older are to be provided experiential life-skills training, tailored to their individual skills and abilities. If resources are not sufficient to begin this training for all youth immediately at age 14, we recommend that priority be given to youth with disabilities. We recommend that DFPS:

- convene a stakeholder work group to help it develop the requirements for experiential life skills activities to be provided by caregivers. The minimum activities and skills caregivers must address should be sufficiently specific to ensure that all youth receive the same basic level of training.
- Link requirements for experiential life skills activities to the existing PAL program to complement and enhance formal/classroom PAL Life Skills training.

Because youth living in Residential Treatment Centers (RTCs) and other structured settings also need experiential learning, we recommend that RTC providers network with one another to share and develop good experiential activities for these settings. For youth with disabilities, in addition to the general PAL curriculum, we have recommended specific areas of learning they should receive to enable them to navigate adult life and obtain the services they need.

**Transition planning & Circles of Support (COS):** COS can be highly effective in assisting youth who are transitioning from foster care to adulthood, if adequate staffing resources are available. We therefore recommend that adequate staff are made available to conduct COS. If adequate staff are not made available, we recommend that DFPS find a transition planning and support process which can be more effective using existing resources. We make the following recommendations to make COS more effective:

- Modify the COS process to better connect all transition services, and to improve communication and collaboration between DFPS, existing providers (CPAs, foster parents, transition centers, etc.) and volunteers helping the youth.
- Simplify the Transition Plan, merge it with the youth's service plan, and make it live online to the youth and appropriate caregivers and providers and COS participants.
- If all COS for all youth cannot begin by age 14, priority should be given to youth with disabilities.
- At each COS, designate, by agreement, a "Plan Monitor," who is a consistent person in the youth's life, and NOT the youth's caseworker, whose assignment is to hold all parties accountable for the commitments made on the youth's transition plan.

**Online training:** HB 1912 requires that the PAL curriculum include online training options. After evaluating several online study guides, we recommend that DFPS:

- Update the current Texas PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide (ISG), and post the ISG on an existing PAL-related website in a PDF format.
- Allow use of the ISG as an alternative to physical attendance at PAL classes only for the bona fide reasons listed in our guidelines, and as a complement to the formal PAL classes.
- Provide for evaluations by the youth.

**Youth with disabilities:** In addition to the needs of all youth in care, youth with disabilities require specialized individual transitional living services plans. We recommend that DFPS:

- Use "Person Centered Planning" (PCP) as discussed in the full report, reviewing and updating it annually beginning at age 12. Also use PCP as the basis and in preparation of the youth's COS at 14 years old.
- Develop specialized Disability Units for children & youth in DFPS conservatorship, as described in our full report. These units would provide service coordination and case management, and network and collaborate with other state agencies, community organizations and services.
- Provide after-care services for these young adults up to age 25 that include specialized intensive case management and other needed supports and services.

**Caring adults:** We have made eight recommendations to increase the likelihood that every youth will leave care connected to healthy, caring adults. These include the following:

- Monitor the new DFPS "Building Permanent Connections" family finding and permanency connection project.
- Within the next year, DFPS should develop a plan and a schedule to conduct relative searches and connection finding for all youth in foster care over age 12, beginning with the oldest.
- Reinstate voluntary mentoring through the PAL program to all youth in care over age 14, beginning with a pilot project in Region 8 (San Antonio area).
- Request the Texas Supreme Court Children's Commission to address the question: "How can the courts better support all children and youth in care, especially those age 14 and over, having long-term, healthy, caring, adults in their lives?"

## Skills Assessment

### Summary of Report HB 1912 Transitional Living Services (TLS) Subcommittee Recommendations on Assessment Tools

#### Issue:

This subcommittee was tasked with evaluating the utility and use of this and alternative assessment tools in helping foster youth prepare for adult living. The group evaluated several tools and determined that the State of Texas should continue to use the tool it currently uses, the Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment (ACLSA), also referred to as Casey Life Skills. However, the State should improve the process it uses in order to gain more information that is useful to assist the youth. ACLSA is a suite of comprehensive online assessments, learning plans, and learning resources that can be utilized for free to help engage young people in foster care to help them gain the life skills they need to exit care. The tools are strengths-based and were built and refined with user input and research. The assessments consist of statements about life skills domains deemed critical by youth and caregivers for successful adult living.

#### Concerns:

1. The ACLSA is not being utilized as intended to help case-managers, youth and caregivers identify areas of focus for life skills development.
2. ACLSA is not used as part of the Circle of Support process to identify areas to focus for life skills development.
3. PAL Providers are required to administer the ACLSA to both the youth and a caregiver but, providers throughout the state can not get caregiver involvement in the process nor do they know how this tool can benefit their work with the youth in their homes and facilities.

#### Recommendations:

The Assessment Tools subcommittee makes the following recommendations regarding the use, process and utilization of the ACLSA.

*Recommendation 1:* Continue to use the ACLSA as the primary assessment tool for the following reasons:

- No cost to the State to use the ACLSA assessment
- It is currently used nation wide
- Ease of use--it can be administered on-line or by hard copy, & is easy to administer, interpret results and analyze
- Can be modified for young adults with disabilities
- If utilized properly, it can be used to develop learning plans to help young adults develop needed life skills.

*Recommendation 2, Training:* Train case-managers, caregivers, and providers on how to use the ACLSA as a tool to help develop plans for increasing a youth's mastery of life skills.

*Recommendation 3, Planning:* Strengthen policies requiring caregivers and Child Placement Agencies (CPA)s to administer and utilize the ACLSA as a tool to help caregivers develop life skills training plans to practice in the home beginning at age 14.

*Recommendation 4, Use for Circles of Support (COS):* Administer the ACLSA to the youth at age 15 ½ and make it part of the COS process to help develop a plan of action for life skills development.

## Experiential Learning

### Summary of Report HB1912 TLS Preparation for Adult Living Services Subcommittee Recommendations Regarding Experiential Life Skills Activities

#### Issue

The Transitional Living Services committee Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) Services subcommittee has developed recommendations addressing life skills training for youth living in residential treatment centers (RTCs) and experiential life skill activities for all youth in CPS care, whether in RTCs or foster homes. This subcommittee also developed (a) a resource guide for caregivers, and (b) tips for RTCs. DFPS will be providing these documents to its contractors and posting them on its provider website. We recommend DFPS also make specific provision to maintain these guides, so that the information and links remain current.

#### Recommendations

The following is a brief summary of this subcommittee's recommendations, fully discussed in our report, for experiential life skills activities to be provided by caregivers to the foster youth in their care.

##### *Experiential Activity Requirements*

Write requirements for minimum activities and skills to be addressed by caregivers through experiential activities with enough specificity to ensure that youth receive generally the same level of training regardless of where they live. Link requirements for experiential life skills activities to the existing PAL program to complement and enhance PAL Life Skills training. Examples are meal preparation, hygiene and housekeeping. Include experiential activities in the Contractor's Service Plan. Ensure that experiential services include basic social skills, such as building healthy relationships, primarily through modeling by caregivers (usually foster parents). Convene a stakeholder workgroup to develop the requirements for experiential life skills activities to be provided by caregivers.

##### *ACLSA Administration & Utilization, Caseworker Involvement*

A youth's primary CPS caseworker should administer the Ansell- Casey Life Skills Assessment to a youth at age 14. These results are then to be used to develop each youth's experiential activities, basing activities on the youth's skill levels. These results and transition plans need to be provided to the youth's primary caregiver as a tool. CPS caseworkers should be active in monitoring youths' progress. For example, during monthly visits, CPS Caseworkers should ask youth and caregivers about experiential activities and progress in developing adult living skills, such as a part-time job, driver's education, PAL classes, and ascertain barriers that they can help the youth and foster parents address.

##### *Transition Plans and Circles of Support*

Caregivers also need to receive copies of Transition Plans and be included in Circle of Support conferences unless their presence is contraindicated. If necessary, system changes need to be made to ensure that this happens.

##### *Residential Treatment Centers*

Youth living in Residential Treatment Centers and other structured settings also need experiential activities, such as housekeeping, laundry, & food preparation. RTC providers should network with other RTCs to share and develop good experiential activities for these structured settings.

##### *Training/ Documentation:*

Residential Contractors should train their staff & caregivers on contract requirements, including any specific curriculum requirements or expectations. Caregivers should document provision of experiential activities and other adult living skills-building opportunities in their care logs.

## **Circles of Support & Transition Planning**

### **HB 1912 Implementation Task Force Subcommittee Recommendations, Circles of Support (COS)**

#### **Issue:**

Circles of Support (COS) and Transition Planning Meetings (TPM) for youth age 16 or older are used to help youth successfully transition to adulthood. COS use a youth driven process based on the Family Group Decision Making model (FGDM). COS are offered to youth beginning at age 16. COS help to ensure that personal and community connections are incorporated into the transition planning process. CPS FGDM Specialists oversee and monitor youth TPM activities and COS. CPS Conservatorship staff oversee the implementation of transition plans, the product of a TPM or COS, and transitional living activities. A uniform template is used statewide to help ensure all youth are receiving consistent services. COS and TPM operate in all 11 regions in the state.

Participants in these facilitated meetings are persons a youth has identified as “caring adults” who make up his/her support system. Participants may include a youth’s foster parents, teachers, relatives, church members, etc. Participants come together to review the youth’s transition plan. The plan addresses the youth’s strengths, hopes, dreams, goals and needs in the areas of education, employment, health/mental health, housing, and all PAL life skills training components. Sections are also included to address special needs for youth with disabilities and to ensure all youth leave care with important personal documents they need, as well as services they need such as educational and health benefits. Each adult participant identifies a personal way he/she can help support the youth to attain his/her short- and long-term goals toward self-sufficiency.

#### **Concern:**

When implemented as designed, COS are highly effective. However, inadequate staffing of COS independent coordinators/facilitators, has resulted in ineffectiveness, inadequate follow through, and in COS often beginning after age 17, a timeline usually too short to implement the plan. HB 1912 calls for COS to begin at age 14, which is a better age to begin a youth’s transition to adulthood. One COS takes an average of 12 to 20 hours to coordinate. To provide the best quality COS, a facilitator should coordinate/facilitate 10 – 12 COS per month. Since FGDM implementation in 2003, DFPS has used existing FGDM staff to coordinate and facilitate the majority of COS. The 81<sup>st</sup> Texas Legislature appropriated 15 new FGDM staff to conduct COS, which is the first time legislative funding for COS, specifically, has occurred. While the majority of FGDM staff are primarily focused on other models of FGDM, inadequate staff and contractors to provide timely initial COS and the semi-annual re-conferencing needed to track progress and assure follow through remains a concern. The transition plan forms are paper, and have no room for notes on implementation, modification, follow through, etc.

#### **Recommendations:**

*Recommendation 1, Staffing:* For the COS process to empower and benefit the youth, COS must be adequately staffed. This could require as many as 58 new COS coordinators/facilitators to create manageable workloads, so that timely initial conferences and semiannual re-conferences occur to assure implementation and follow through. This staffing is also critical to comply with HB 1912’s requirement to begin COS at age 14. If adequate staffing is not available, we recommend that DFPS find a transition planning and support process which can be more effective using existing resources.

*Recommendation 2, Coordination:* Modify the COS process to better connect all transition services & to improve communication & collaboration between DFPS, existing providers (CPAs, foster parents, transition centers, etc.) & volunteers helping the youth.

*Recommendation 3, Planning:* Simplify the transition plan, merge it with the youth’s service plan, & make it live online to the youth & appropriate providers & COS participants, with an automated calendar extending 2 years out.



*Recommendation 4, Plan Monitor:* At each COS, designate, by agreement, a “Plan Monitor,” who is a consistent person in the youth’s life, and NOT the youth’s caseworker. The person’s assignment is to hold all parties accountable for the commitments made on the youth’s transition plan. He or she might be the youth’s PAL provider, a family member, teacher or foster parent, etc. Plan Monitors are currently being successfully used in Family Team Meetings.

## **Online Training**

### **Summary of Report HB1912 TLS Preparation for Adult Living Services Subcommittee Recommendations Regarding Online Training**

#### **Issue**

The Transitional Living Services committee Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) Services subcommittee has developed recommendations regarding an online training option for PAL Life Skills training, as directed by HB 1912. In doing so, we evaluated the current PAL Independent Study Guide and numerous online products, using our group members and focus groups of foster youth. We also obtained data from DFPS on youth served. Following this research, and evaluation, we developed the following recommendations, more fully discussed in our report.

#### **Recommendations:**

##### *Online Training Recommendations*

DFPS should take the following actions with regard to online training:

- a. Continue to use the PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide as an alternative means of training for youth who are unable to attend PAL Life Skills classes in person.
- b. Dedicate a person (contract or portion of an FTE) to maintain the PAL Independent Study Guide to ensure that websites and links included in activities are active and that material is current.
- c. Post the PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide on an existing PAL-related website in a PDF format.

##### *Guidelines Regarding Use of Independent Study*

Use the following criteria to authorize a youth to complete PAL Life Skills training through independent study (whether via online training or another source):

Permissible reasons for independent study:

- Medical reason prevents attending classes (example, compromised immune system);
- Danger to self or others;
- Not enough time to attend classes before 18<sup>th</sup> birthday; or
- Other exceptional reasons determined on a case-by-case basis.

Non-permissible reasons for independent study:

- Difficulties arranging travel to classes (Caregivers are to make arrangements for youth to attend classes);
- Punishment or restriction (PAL classes are not a privilege, but PAL is an educational entitlement that youth are expected to complete); and
- Scheduling conflicts, particularly when there is sufficient time to take classes at a later date.

##### *Recommendations for maintaining the study guide:*

- Check website links monthly;
- Keep current, relevant and appealing to users (ensuring that it meets requirements of PAL curriculum);
- Have youth who complete the Independent Study Guide fill out evaluations, & use feedback to improve when updating the guide; and

- Conduct tests and/or focus groups on the Independent Study Guide with youth periodically, and incorporate feedback in updates of the guide.

## Youth with Disabilities

### Summary of Report HB 1912 Transitional Living Skills Stakeholder Workgroup Subcommittee on Youth with Disabilities and Mental Health Issues

#### **Problem Statement & Issue:**

The National Council on Disability's February 26, 2008 report titled "*Youth with Disabilities in the Foster Care System: Barriers to Success and Proposed Policy Solutions*", finds that transition to adulthood is exceptionally problematic for children within vulnerable populations, including youth with disabilities and youth with significant mental health issues. "*Youth with disabilities in foster care must still navigate too many challenges and barriers to truly become self-determined or self-sufficient. These young people in particular require a comprehensive, multi-system transition support network. It is unrealistic to imagine that the child welfare system alone can provide the resources necessary to address the employment, education, health care, housing and family challenges of this population.*"

Adequate resources, quality standards, and meaningful accountability must be infused in the system if outcomes for children are to improve. If sufficient funds are not invested in comprehensive planning and appropriate community supports, many of these children will eventually be institutionalized, hospitalized, homeless, or incarcerated, at great cost to their quality of life, and at major expense to the State.

#### **Recommendations:**

##### **Person Centered Planning**

Children with disabilities, age 12 and over, in the Texas foster care system should have a Person Centered Plan, updated annually. There are several models used for person centered planning; this distinct type of planning should not be confused with a general philosophy of child/family centered care.

This plan should incorporate all the federally-required elements & become the plan that guides all supports and services for the child or youth. Our full report contains detailed discussion of the need for and use of these plans. They should be the basis of the Circle of Support (COS). For these youth, the COS should begin at age **14**. All youth with disabilities transitioning from the foster care system should have a caring adult who will continue with them when they leave the system.

##### **Preparation for Adult Living Training for Youth**

Youth with disabilities should begin PAL activities by age 14. In addition to the general PAL curriculum, we have specified specific areas of learning they should have to enable them to navigate adult life and obtain the services they need. **A transition plan from a school district should never be substituted for transition planning required by the department, as education plans are NOT comprehensive.**

##### **Specialization within Units, Special Training, Additional Case Management**

Develop specialized Disability Units for children & youth in DFPS conservatorship, as described in our full report. Members of these units should be trained, experienced, and certified in disabilities and behavioral health as outlined in that report. These units provide service coordination & case management, and network and collaborate with other state agencies, community organizations and services. The State should also provide after care services for these young adults up to age 25, using specialized intensive case management and other needed supports and services.

##### **Improve cross system collaboration for youth with disabilities**

Ensure that each child or youth in care has an electronic case record with contents as detailed in the full report, require all state agencies responsible for serving disabled persons to participate in their transition planning, and work together to ensure that these youth transition to adulthood receiving the services they need within their communities, avoiding institutionalization.

For more information, please contact Colleen Horton at 512/471-2988, or [colleen.horton@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:colleen.horton@austin.utexas.edu).

## Caring Adults

### Summary of Report HB 1912 Transitional Living Services Recommendations of Caring Adults Subcommittee

#### **Problem Statement and Issue:**

A former foster youth stated well why she, like all of us, needed a caring adult in her life: ***“We all need someone to look up to. We all need some kind of advice, we all need some kind of direction because we’re still young and trying to find ourselves and who we are and having that mentor relationship with an adult could make a big difference.”*** Even more than people with intact families, foster children who have been removed from their parents to protect the child’s safety need those human connections with safe and appropriate family members and healthy adults who care about them.

The Caring Adults Work Group focused on the question: ***“What changes should be made to the foster care system to maximize the likelihood that a youth who leaves care as an adult will leave connected to at least one healthy, caring adult who wants him/her to be successful?”*** Our recommendations have implications for all parts of the foster care system: DFPS, providers and the courts, as well as volunteers. We conducted substantial research in developing our recommendations. It is discussed in our full report. One study found that whereas a 16-year old African American male foster youth has a 5% chance of adoption, he has a 90% chance of having a lifelong network of caring adults. Historically, the foster care system has succeeded at safety, but is only now truly beginning to focus on “well-being”, which includes unconditional love and connectedness. 1400 to 1500 youth each year leave Texas foster care because they have reached emancipation. These young adults critically need healthy adult role models in their lives.

#### **Summary of our Recommendations:**

The Caring Adults Work Group is making 7 recommendations specific to our charge. We also have made recommendations relating to electronic records and paperwork reduction which are a common thread with other work groups and will be in the full report. Additionally, since adoption is perhaps the most important way to have a caring adult in a youth’s life we have added a related 8<sup>th</sup> recommendation to help speed adoptions.

#### ***The specific recommendations discussed in our full report are:***

- (1) a. Monitor the new DFPS “Building Permanent Connections” family finding and permanency connection project. In 18 months, produce a formal written evaluation of this project to determine successes and failures and expand or modify as appropriate.  
b. Request DFPS to develop, within the next year, a plan and schedule to conduct relative searches and connection finding for all youth in foster care over age 12, beginning with the oldest.
- (2) Reinstate voluntary mentoring through the PAL program to all youth in care over age 14, beginning with a Pilot project in Region 8 (San Antonio area). In 18 months, produce a written evaluation of this project to determine successes and failures, then expand or modify as appropriate.
- (3) Develop a Resources and Tools page on the DFPS website that is a living document containing research and resources for DFPS and providers.
- (4) Reevaluate all training to assure that it is designed to train all persons in the system to understand that foster care is TEMPORARY, and that every child should be targeted for legal and emotional permanency.
- (5) Request the Texas Supreme Court Children’s Commission to address the question: “How can the courts better support all children and youth in care, especially those age 14 and over, having long-term, healthy, caring adults in their lives?”
- (6) Insure that foster youths receive experiential learning in basic social skills, such as building healthy relationships, primarily through modeling by caregivers (usually foster parents).
- (7) Review the system to identify and correct any artificial barriers to permanent, healthy, relationships.
- (8) The CPS system should have a process in place to ensure that record redactions needed to facilitate adoptions of CPS children do not become backlogged.

# **APPENDICES**

## Appendix 1: Experiential Learning, Full Report

### Preparation for Adult Living Services Subcommittee Recommendations

#### Experiential Life Skills Activities

##### Issue

The Transitional Living Services committee Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) Services subcommittee has developed recommendations addressing the following:

- an online training option for PAL Life Skills training;
- experiential life skills activities provided by caregivers to youth in their homes; and
- life skills training and experiential activities for youth living in residential treatment centers.

This document outlines the recommendations for the experiential life skills activities provided by caregivers to foster youth in their care.

##### Recommendations

The HB1912 Transitional Living Services Preparation for Adulthood subcommittee recommends that DFPS take the following actions with regard to experiential life skills activities provided by caregivers to foster youth in their care.

##### *Experiential Activity Requirements*

General recommendations:

- Write the requirements of minimum activities and skills to be addressed by caregivers through experiential activities with enough specificity to ensure that youth receive generally the same level of training regardless of where they are placed.
- Link requirements for experiential life skills activities to the existing PAL curriculum and/or core elements/domain areas to complement and enhance PAL Life Skills training, such as the domain and topic areas addressed in the Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment (ACLSA).
- Provide training that complements, rather than duplicates, the formal PAL Life Skills training & lends itself better to a home environment than formal classes. Examples are meal preparation, hygiene and housekeeping.
- Ensure that experiential services include basic social skills, such as building healthy relationships, primarily through modeling by caregivers (usually foster parents)
- Convene a stakeholder workgroup to develop the requirements for experiential life skills activities to be provided by caregivers, basing the requirements on the PAL curriculum. Take care to ensure purposeful, thought-out representation of parties on the workgroup.
- If there is not sufficient time or staff resources to develop requirements based on of the PAL curriculum, then a set of required activities could be selected from a pre-existing resource, particularly "Ready, Set, Fly", a guidebook for caregivers created by Casey Family Programs that follows the same life skills domains as assessed by the ACLSA.

##### *ACLSA Utilization*

Consider results from the ACLSA when determining each youth's experiential activities, basing activities on the youth's skill levels. To this end, it is imperative that caregivers receive copies of ACLSA results. Currently, some caregivers receive ACLSA results inconsistently. After completion of PAL Life Skills classes, it may be helpful to re-administer the ACLSA or use another method to evaluate progress on independent living skills and knowledge acquisition in order to clarify what topics still need to be taught by caregivers.

##### *Transition Plans and Circles of Support*

Caregivers also need to receive copies of Transition Plans and be included in Circle of Support conferences unless their presence is contraindicated. If necessary, system changes need to be made to ensure that this happens.

### *Service Planning*

Include experiential activities in the Contractor's Service Plan. Activities must be completed on a routine, on-going basis at a frequency where youth make progress in increasing their independent living skills. The focus of in-home training on life skills should be on individualizing the training to meet the needs of the youth and build his/her skills over time.

### *Residential Treatment Centers*

Youth living in Residential Treatment Centers and other structured settings must also receive experiential activities to prepare for adult living. These youth need the same nature and frequency of activities in order to make progress as youth in family home environments. Care and creativity should be taken to tailor experiences to the specific setting and needs of the youth. For example, youth living in RTCs may still learn skills in housekeeping, laundry, food handling, and cooking, although they may need more supervision during activities, and special provisions may need to be taken to prevent direct access to potentially harmful chemicals and tools. RTC providers are encouraged to meet with other RTC providers who are known to provide good experiential activities to their youth in order to learn best practices for structured settings.

### *Training*

Residential Contractors should train their staff, foster parents and other care givers on contract requirements, including any specific curriculum requirements or expectations. The DFPS Residential Contract Division staff will attend Regional Provider Meetings and, when requested, provide guidance regarding contract requirements. The DFPS Residential Contract Division website contains helpful guides to Residential Contractors and procurement applicants at the following link: [http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/PCS/Residential\\_Contracts/default.asp](http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/PCS/Residential_Contracts/default.asp).

### *Documentation*

Caregivers should document provision of experiential activities and other adult living skills-building opportunities in their care logs (frequency will vary based on the documentation requirements of the Child Placing Agency or facility). Where appropriate, prompts regarding experiential activities could be added to the documentation logs in order to help remind caregivers what sort of events to document.

### *Caseworker Involvement*

CPS Conservatorship or ISeeYou Caseworkers should take an active role in monitoring participation in experiential activities and the youth's progress acquiring adult living skills acquisition. During monthly visits, CPS caseworkers should ask youth and caregivers what experiential activities and other adult living preparation, such as part-time job, driver's education, PAL classes, are occurring, and ascertain any barriers that they can help the youth and foster parents address. Caseworkers should document this information in the youth's case records.

### *ACLSA Administration*

The youth's primary CPS caseworker should administer the ACLSA. We recommend this because:

- the ACLSA is web-based and easy to administer, and
- the caseworker meets routinely with the youths on their caseloads, and the caseworker plays an integral part in ensuring that youths receive preparation for their transition to adulthood.

After administering the ACLSA, the CPS caseworker would then document completion in DFPS' IMPACT system in order to meet tracking requirements for the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD), share the results with caregivers and other service providers, and utilize the results in service planning to individualize services based on the needs, skills, and interests of the youth. In keeping with using results from the ACLSA to help guide service planning on experiential life skills training and the requirement that caregivers begin providing experiential activities when youth are 14 years old, caseworkers should administer the first ACLSA when the youth is 14.

## **Actions Taken**

In addition to creating recommendations regarding experiential life skills activities, the subcommittee has tied two documents to assist caregivers in providing experiential activities. The subcommittee also provided recommendations to representatives from DFPS Child Care Licensing and Residential Contracts, which were incorporated into the contracts and standards.

### *1. Resource Guide, Attachment 1*

To assist caregivers in providing experiential life skills activities to youth in their care, this subcommittee created a document entitled “Resources to Aid Caregivers in Providing Experiential Life Skills Training to Foster Youth.” This resource guide contains the following information:

- Life skills training resources
- Retailers of life skills training resources
- Resources for training for caregivers on life skills topics

The resource guide should be provided to all providers of residential services for foster youth, including residential treatment centers, group homes, child placing agencies, and foster homes. The resource guide is to be posted on the residential contracts website so that providers can have continuous access to it. Caregivers will be encouraged to contact DFPS with additional resources to be added to the list. DFPS should maintain the list by adding the suggested resources and checking monthly to see if website links are in working order. The party responsible for maintaining the list should provide any revisions to DFPS Residential Contracts in order that they may update information on their website.

### *2. Tips for Residential Treatment Centers (RTCs), Attachment 2*

To assist caregivers in RTCs and other structured residential facilities to provide experiential life skills activities to youth in their care, this subcommittee created a document entitled “Tips for Providing Experiential Life Skills Training in Residential Treatment Settings.” This list of tips for RTCs provides sample experiential activities that can be done in RTCs. It includes experiential activities that address topics of food and meals, financial management, employment, and housekeeping, as well as additional ideas to help prepare youth for their transition to adult living.

DFPS should provide the list of tips for RTCs to all residential treatment centers and other structured residential facilities serving foster youth, and post this list of tips on the residential contracts website so that providers can have continuous access to it. Caregivers will be encouraged to contact DFPS with additional suggested activities to be added to the list. DFPS should maintain the list by adding the suggested activities and providing any revisions to DFPS Residential Contracts so that it can update the information on its website.

## **Changes to Child Care Licensing and Residential Contracts**

Based on feedback and recommendations from the Transitional Living Services Preparation for Adult Living subcommittee, the following changes were implemented to the Child Care Licensing standards and Residential Contracts.

- Links to helpful resources for caregivers, including Casey Life Skills, “50 Things You Can Do to Help Someone Get Ready for Independent Living”, and Washington State Department of Social and Health Services Life Skills Inventory Independent Living Skills Assessment Tool were added to the contract.
- Wording in the contracts was changed to clarify that caregivers are responsible for providing the experiential activities.
- To aid in monitoring compliance with the requirement listed in the Residential Child Care Contracts that caregivers provide experiential life skills activities, questions addressing the progress youth have made with experiential life skills training are to be added to the CPS caseworkers’ and the youths’ interview portion of monitoring visits.
- The “Resources to Aid Caregivers in Providing Experiential Life Skills Training to Foster Youth” document is to be posted on the Residential Contracts website.
- The “Tips for Providing Experiential Life Skills Training in Residential Treatment Settings” document is to be posted on the Residential Contracts website.



**Subcommittee Members**

The following stakeholders participated in the HB1912 Transitional Living Services Preparation for Adulthood subcommittee:

Leslie Gaines, LifeWorks, Chair  
Alma Alfaro, DFPS, PAL Reg. 11  
Miriam Attra, BCFS  
Irene Clements, LSS/TFAA  
Lane Coco, DePelchin  
Ashley G., Youth  
Claire Hall, DFPS  
Judge John Hathaway, Travis County Juvenile Court  
Crimson Holland, Settlement Home  
Albert Moreno, BCFS  
Veronica Ramirez, DFPS – Residential Contracts  
Leslie Reid, DFPS - Residential Child Care Licensing  
Kim Schenck, TNOYS  
Jodie Smith, Texans Care for Children  
Gloria Stevenson, DFPS – Residential Contracts  
Laura Tibbitt, DFPS  
Naomi V., Youth  
Gaby Valladares, DFPS, Region 6 Youth Specialist  
Gaye Vopat, DFPS – PAL  
Carol Wilkinson, DFPS – Residential Contracts

## Attachment 1

### Resources to Aid Caregivers in Providing Experiential Life Skills Training to Foster Youth

**Note:** The resources listed below are just some suggestions to get you started on your journey of providing experiential life skills activities to youth in your care. This list is a product of the House Bill 1912 (81<sup>st</sup> Legislative Session) workgroup and was developed to help caregivers fulfill the requirement of providing or assisting foster youth age 14 or older to receive experiential life-skills training to improve their transition to independent living.

This list is not comprehensive, and caregivers are not required by DFPS to use any of these resources. The materials referenced below contain information created and maintained by other government, public and private organizations and are provided for the user's convenience.<sup>1</sup>

If you have ideas for other materials to include on this list, please contact DFPS at [gaye.vopat@dfps.state.tx.us](mailto:gaye.vopat@dfps.state.tx.us).

#### **Life Skills Training Resources**

Texas Youth Connection web site: <http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/txyouth/default.asp>

DFPS Transitional Living Services Information  
[http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Child\\_Protection/Transitional\\_Living/default.asp](http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Child_Protection/Transitional_Living/default.asp)

Ready, Set, Fly! A Parent's Guide to Teaching Life Skills by Casey Family Programs - Available in print and also online at <http://www.caseylifeskills.org/pages/res/rsf%5CRSF.pdf>

Casey Family Programs list of free web resources:  
[http://www.caseylifeskills.org/pages/res/res\\_ACLSAGuidebook.htm#5](http://www.caseylifeskills.org/pages/res/res_ACLSAGuidebook.htm#5)

Casey Family Programs comprehensive list of resources, including those available for purchase:  
[http://www.caseylifeskills.org/pages/res/res\\_ACLSAGuidebook.htm](http://www.caseylifeskills.org/pages/res/res_ACLSAGuidebook.htm)

"50 Things You Can Do to Help Someone Get Ready for Independent Living"  
<http://www.hss.alaska.gov/ocs/IndependentLiving/Docs/RS%2050%20Things.pdf>

"Life Skills Inventory: Independent Living Skills Assessment Tool"  
[http://www.dshs.wa.gov/pdf/ms/forms/10\\_267.pdf](http://www.dshs.wa.gov/pdf/ms/forms/10_267.pdf)

Independent Living Books and DVDs by SocialLearning  
<http://www.sociallearning.com/catalog/topics/lifeskills/independent-living.html;jsessionid=a8boZGg48se5>

"Truth About Drugs" DVD <http://store.discoveryeducation.com/product/show/51960>

"Truth About Drinking" DVD <http://store.discoveryeducation.com/product/show/53563>

"Truth About Sex" DVD <http://store.discoveryeducation.com/product/show/48582>  
FosterClub <http://www.fosterclub.com/>

### ***Retailers of Life Skills Training Resources***

National Resource Center of Youth Services <http://www.nrcys.ou.edu/catalog/>

National Independent Living Association  
<http://www.nilausa.org/membersonly/memresourcesn.htm>

Daniel Memorial <http://www.danielkids.org/sites/web/store/product.cfm>

Youth Communication <http://www.youthcomm.org/>

Social Learning <http://www.sociallearning.com/>

Discovery Education <http://www.discoveryeducation.com/>

### ***Training for Caregivers***

“Teaching Moments: How Foster Parents Can Teach Independent Living Skills To Teens”  
DVD <http://www.sociallearning.com/catalog/items/DVD7316.html;jsessionid=adIWbottlDV9>

Foster Care and Adoptive Community Training:

“Teaching Essential Life Skills to Children of All Ages”

“Teaching Independence & Keeping Fragile Kids Safe”

“Preparing for Post High School Education”

“Enhancing Independence Through Recognizing and Improving Job Skills”

“Money Skills”

“Sexually Transmitted Diseases: What You Need To Know”

“Health Issues”

<http://www.fosterparentstest.com/store/index.htm><sup>1</sup>

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i DFPS does not control or guarantee the accuracy, relevance, timeliness or completeness of this outside information. Further, the inclusion of references to particular materials and/or of links to particular organizations or sites is not intended to reflect their importance, nor is it intended to endorse any views expressed, or products or services offered on these outside sites, or the organizations sponsoring the sites.

## Attachment 2:

### Tips for Providing Experiential Life Skills Training in Residential Treatment Settings

All youth growing up in foster care need to receive hands-on training in life skills to help prepare them for their transition to adulthood. However, when youth are living in RTCs or other structured settings, it can take some creativity to provide experiential activities that meet the needs of youth within the setting, particularly youth who require a more restricted environment. Activities should be individually tailored to a youth's skills and abilities and can include practical skills. Here are some tips for activities to help you start thinking of ways to provide experiential activities. These tips are a product of the House Bill 1912 (81<sup>st</sup> Legislative Session) workgroup and were developed to help caregivers fulfill the requirement of providing or assisting foster youth age 14 or older in obtaining experiential life-skills training to improve their transition to independent living.

#### FOOD AND MEALS

- **Preparing Food:** In some residential settings, only people who have received Food Handler's Certification are allowed to prepare food in the facility kitchen. Even if this is not the case, it may not be in the best interest of the youth to expose them to kitchen utensils and appliances that may be used in a harmful manner. However, youths need to learn how to prepare their own food. One way to provide an experiential activity in food preparation is to take the lesson outside of the kitchen to a classroom or other appropriate setting and prepare something simple that does not require cooking, such as trail mix or smoothies. A simple recipe can be utilized to teach how to use recipes and follow written directions, such as on packages of ready-to-prepare foods. Youth can receive experience in using measuring cups and spoons and mixing bowls. This is also a great time to discuss nutrition.
- **Meal Planning:** Youth can find a recipe they like in a cookbook, online, or in a magazine. They can make a list of ingredients to plan a meal for an individual and then another for making a meal for a group. If youth are able to go grocery shopping to purchase items, have them take a calculator and budget along with the list. Challenge: give each youth a few dollars to utilize for a meal and go to the grocery store with a group of youth. They can choose to buy items and make their own meal or put their money together to make a nicer meal for the group. Make a weekly meal menu for the home and list all the ingredients needed to prepare meal. Go to the store and look at prices and combinations of food items to see if there are ways to lower expenses or utilize ingredients in several meals. If youth are unable to go to a public grocery store, have them create the menu and list ingredients needed. They can then look in newspaper ads or on-line to get ideas about how much the meals may cost to prepare.
- **Taking Training on Meals to the Next Level:** An ideal way to teach about food preparation, meals and etiquette is to do so in a simulated (or real) kitchen and dining room. Some RTCs have life skills buildings that contain kitchen and dining areas that include all of the standard cooking appliances and supplies needed to prepare a meal as well as all of the serving ware needed to appropriately set the dining table for a nice meal. In addition to learning about cooking, nutrition, and meal planning, youth also can be taught dining etiquette. If your RTC is unable to provide these facilities, think about other ways that etiquette and other lessons could be taught.

#### HOUSEKEEPING

- **Laundry:** If laundry facilities are available onsite that youth may use, teach the youth how to do laundry and give them the responsibility of taking care of their own laundry. One way to do this is for each youth to have an assigned laundry day. On that day, staff assists the youth with doing their laundry to the extent that each youth needs assistance. With youth who are just beginning to do laundry, who have never received formal instruction, or who need more supervision, staff should guide youth completely through the laundry process,

- **Cleaning:** In most RTCs, youth are given responsibility for making their own beds and helping to clean their living environment, such as sweeping and cleaning the bathroom. However, if this is not happening, it may be a good idea to incorporate such chores into the routine so that youth develop skills in housekeeping and learn to take responsibility for the cleanliness of their home.
- **Organization:** Youth often need to be taught how to keep their possessions in a neat and organized manner. This skill can best be taught one-on-one with the youth and a staff person, intern or volunteer. This person can help the youth sort through their possessions and organize them in their closet and other storage spaces. It is important to ensure that this experience is a learning opportunity for the youth, teaching them how to think through how to organize, rather than the assistant just doing the organizing for the youth. During this process, the assistant can aid the youth in determining that some items are no longer of use and should be gotten rid of, thus developing an important skill in managing one's possessions. However, considering the particular situation of youth in foster care, it is not uncommon for youth to have a strong attachment to their possessions and have great difficulty in parting with them. Youth can be taught how to appropriately care for items of sentimental value by giving them the opportunity to put such items in an album or treasure chest. This can also make for a good therapeutic activity.

## FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

- **Allowances:** If youth receive an allowance, create a log for keeping track of their money and have them write down any they spend. This will help prepare them for using a checkbook register and help them learn to manage their money.
- **Responsible Spending:** Create posters or pictures of household items, hygiene items, luxury items, and other necessities with prices attached. Have youth "go shopping" with a limited amount of money. You can even use Monopoly money for fun. Someone can play "cashier" to learn about making change. Youth can learn about the differences between "wants" and "needs" and how to prioritize certain items. Discuss fine tuning shopping experiences, such as making lists before you go and/or how to utilize coupons.
- **Budgeting:** Utilize mock check books and mock monthly budgets to help youth understand how to keep track of income and expenditures. Youth can prepare a budget for when they live on their own by giving them information about average wages for starting out jobs and the average costs of typical budget items, such as rent, utilities, cell phone bills, food, car insurance, child care, etc. Youth can even help find information about wages and costs by looking at advertisements and other publications and by asking adults who are willing to share the information.
- **Banking:** Teach about different types of bank accounts and the difference between debit and credit. Teach youth how to choose a bank and how to open checking and savings accounts. If appropriate and allowable, have youth open an account.
- **Credit Cards:** Bring in examples of credit card applications, and go over the "fine print." Help youth calculate interest charges and other fees.

**Taxes:** Bring in mock W-2 forms and 1040EZ forms, and show youth how to complete and file simple federal income taxes using the paper forms or online. Inform youth of community agencies where they can receive free assistance in completing their taxes.

## **EMPLOYMENT**

- **Job Applications:** Provide youth with the opportunity to practice filling out job applications. You can create a mock application or pick up some real applications from businesses for them to practice filling out.
- **Interviews:** Create role-plays of mock interviews. Allow youth to dress up for the “interview” and make mock follow up contacts to potential employers.
- **On-the-Job Skills:** Role-play difficult situations with customers or managers and how to maintain appropriate interactions. Teach basic job maintenance skills such as being on time, calling if you are going to be late, and giving notice if you intend to terminate.
- **Resumes:** Assist youth in making a resume. Word processing software, such as Microsoft Word, includes resume templates that make formatting a resume easy. There are also many resources available online to help in creating a resume.

## **PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT**

- **Time Management:** Youth can be taught how to prioritize the activities that they need to do and how to make a schedule for their day. They can also be taught how to utilize a calendar or planner to help them plan ahead. These skills can be taught as a group activity or one-on-one.
- **Leadership Skills:** A great way for youth to develop their leadership skills and to feel that they are able to have a voice in the RTC is to have a Residents’ Council. Criteria should be established to determine eligibility for participation in the council, and there should be policies outlining lengths of council terms, participation expectations, how council members input will be utilized and other important information.
- **Peer Mentoring:** A peer mentoring program can be implemented at the RTC in order to help youth build their leadership skills and feel that they are being of help to others while also providing an opportunity for residents to receive additional attention and support. Guidelines should be established to determine eligibility to be a peer mentor and to outline the peer mentor’s roles and responsibilities, such as ensuring that peer mentors report to staff if their mentee has informed them of any safety-related issues.

## **SOME MORE TIPS**

- Have youth apply for a library card and learn how to borrow books from the library.
- Have youth complete training in First Aid and CPR.
- Have youth take a driver’s education class.
- If appropriate, allow and encourage youth to get part-time jobs. If they are unable to leave the RTC campus, perhaps jobs could be made available on campus.

Please note that these activities are just some suggestions to get you started on your journey of providing experiential life skills activities to youth in your care. The list is not comprehensive, and caregivers are not required by DFPS to provide these specific experiential activities. If you have ideas for other experiential activities or tips to include on this list, please contact DFPS at [gaye.vopat@dfps.state.tx.us](mailto:gaye.vopat@dfps.state.tx.us).

## Appendix 2: Full Report on ONLINE TRAINING

### HB1912 TLS Preparation for Adult Living Services Subcommittee Recommendations Regarding Online Training

#### Issue

The Transitional Living Services committee Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) Services subcommittee was asked to develop recommendations addressing the following:

- an online training option for PAL Life Skills training;
- experiential life skills activities provided by caregivers to youth in their homes; and
- life skills training and experiential activities youth living in residential treatment centers .

This document contains recommendations relating to optional online training for PAL Life Skills classes.

#### Recommendations:

##### *Online Training Recommendations*

DFPS should take the following actions with regard to online training:

- d. Continue to use the PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide as an alternative means of training for youth who are unable to attend PAL Life Skills classes in person.
- e. Dedicate a person (contract or portion of an FTE) to maintain the PAL Independent Study Guide to ensure that websites included in activities are active and that material is current.
- f. Post the PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide on an existing PAL-related website in a PDF format.

##### *Guidelines Regarding Use of Independent Study*

Use the following criteria to authorize a youth to complete PAL Life Skills training through independent study (whether via online training or another source).

Permissible reasons for independent study:

- Medical reason prevents attending classes (example, compromised immune system);
- Danger to self or others;
- Not enough time to attend classes before 18<sup>th</sup> birthday; or
- Other exceptional reasons determined on a case-by-case basis.

Non-permissible reasons for independent study:

- Difficulties arranging travel to classes (Caregivers are to make arrangements for youth to attend classes);
- Punishment or restriction (PAL classes are not a privilege, but PAL is an educational entitlement that youth are expected to complete); and
- Schedule conflicts, particularly when there is sufficient time to take classes at a later date.

*Recommendations for maintaining the study guide:*

- Check website links monthly;
- Keep current, relevant and appealing to users (ensuring that it meets requirements of PAL curriculum);
- Have youth who complete the Independent Study Guide fill out evaluations, & use feedback to improve when updating the guide; and
- Conduct tests and/or focus groups on the Independent Study Guide with youth periodically, and incorporate feedback in updates of the guide.

#### History

From 2007 to 2008, the Transitional Living Services Initiative (TLSI) workgroup, brought together to implement Senate Bill (SB) 6 (79<sup>th</sup> Legislature) requirements on transitional living services for older youth in foster care, created a uniform PAL Life Skills Training curriculum outline and a PAL Life Skills

Independent Study Guide. These changes were incorporated into PAL Life Skills Training contracts that began in September 2008.

A main purpose of the TLSI workgroup was to establish uniformity in PAL Life Skills training across the state by creating minimum requirements, a standard curriculum outline, & an Independent Study Guide to be used in all regions of the state. Because no funds were appropriated for this mandate, the options available to the TLSI workgroup in creating these tools were limited. For example, funds were not available to purchase commercially-available Life Skills training workbooks or to contract with a curriculum developer to create an Independent Study Guide workbook specifically for DFPS use.

Given these limitations, the workgroup created a PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide covering all PAL Life Skills Training curriculum outline topics in which youth complete activities utilizing free resources available on the internet and in the community. This Independent Study Guide is still actively in use for youth who meet the DFPS eligibility criteria for independent study. Unfortunately, since the workgroup that created the study guide disbanded at the conclusion of the TLSI work, no one has updated the study guide to ensure that resources, particularly internet websites, are still valid.

The intent of the HB 1912 section that calls for the PAL training curriculum to include an online training option is to give youth alternative options to the PAL Life Skills classroom training. The existing Independent Study Guide is an existing alternative to the classroom training, but while it requires the youth to complete online activities, it is not a completely online curriculum

#### **Actions Taken by Subcommittee:**

To develop this report, the HB1912 TLS PAL subcommittee took the following actions:

1. Reviewed the current PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide.
2. Searched for online Life Skills training curriculum available for purchase.
3. Summarized the available online Life Skills training courses & compared the options.
4. Determined that V Street was the best online Life Skills training option available.
5. Contacted Northwest Media, provider of V Street, to obtain additional information about the product, including volume pricing.
6. Compared the V Street curriculum to the PAL Life Skills Training curriculum outline requirements, and determined where V Street met and did not meet the PAL curriculum outline requirements.
7. Presented subcommittee members and two guest youth with an overview of V Street, and gathered their feedback.
8. Provided subcommittee members with a trial logon for V Street, asked them to view the site on their own, and obtained their feedback.
9. Conducted focus groups of youth to obtain feedback on V Street and the PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide. During the focus groups, youth completed sections of the V Street and the PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide. Youth also explored other sections of the V Street website, including soap operas, poetry, and the discussion board. Youth then completed a follow-up questionnaire and participated in a facilitated discussion about their experience. (3 focus groups with a total of approximately 20 youth were conducted, 2 in DFPS region 7 and 1 in Region 11.)
10. Synthesized feedback from the three focus groups.
11. Obtained data on the number of youth in DPFS foster care, the number of youth completing PAL training, and the number of youth completing training through the PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide.
12. Reviewed current reasons for which PAL staff authorize youth to complete PAL Life Skills training using the Independent Study Guide instead of in-person classes. These reasons were further refined to be included in the subcommittee's recommendations.

#### **Statistics**

In order to make informed recommendations regarding online PAL Life Skills training, the following data was obtained (actual numbers are not authorized for distribution outside of the subcommittee):

- The number of youth in care ages 14-15 and age 16 and older;



- The number of PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guides that were provided and completed in FY09;
- The number of youth who aged out of DFPS care having completed PAL training;
- The number of youth ages 16 and older in PAL stage.

Each year, approximately 200 youth need to complete the PAL Life Skills Independent Study guide in lieu of going to the PAL Life Skills classroom training.

### **Focus Group Results**

The three focus groups conducted to gather feedback regarding V Street and the current PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide garnered useful feedback regarding the youths' opinions of V Street. However, we could gather only minimal feedback on the PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide because a link to one of the websites did not work and because many youth thought that questions on the survey that were about the Independent Study Guide were about V Street.

*The following themes emerged from the focus group feedback:*

- The reviews of V Street were mixed, with some participants liking V Street and some participants being less enthused about V Street.
- Many participants thought that the style of V Street was immature and that it appeared to be geared towards a younger audience.
- Participants liked the ability to decorate their V Street room and the different features on the website, such as the soap operas, poetry and discussion board.
- Most participants thought that it would be best for youth to go to PAL Life Skills classes and also have access to V Street.
- For youth who are unable to attend PAL Life Skills classes, most participants thought that V Street alone was insufficient to make up for PAL Life Skills classes and that those youth should do V Street along with the PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide or that there should be another option for them, such as video recordings of the PAL Life Skills classes or web chat.
- A few of the youth preferred V Street over the PAL Life Skills classes and thought that all youth should be able to do the classes through V Street rather than go the PAL Life Skills classes.

### **Comparison of V Street and the PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide**

The PAL Services subcommittee noted advantages and drawbacks of both V Street and the PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide.

#### *Advantages of V Street*

- Six elements from the PAL Life Skills Training required content are included in the V Street curriculum. They are:
  - All topics required for the Financial Management core element;
  - All topics for the Housing and Transportation core element, except for real world local examples;
  - For the Life Decisions/Responsibilities core element, organizational skills are covered;
  - For the Health and Safety core element, sexual responsibility, coping and stress management;
  - For the Personal/Social Relationships core element, interpersonal relationships, communication, and anger management;
  - For the Job Readiness core element, some of the job readiness content is covered, including an assessment of what job is best and how to keep a job.
- Youth like the various features of the site, including being able to personalize their "room", the discussion board, soap operas, and poetry.
- Some youth liked the interactive style of V Street and found it funny and engaging.
- Users must complete work to move ahead in the modules.

### *Drawbacks of V Street*

- Subscriptions to V Street cost \$19 to \$24 per user, depending on quantity.
- V Street lessons take less time to complete than is required for completion of PAL Life Skills classes: one to two hours versus five hours of time.
- V Street is missing a great deal of the required content of the PAL Life Skills Training curriculum outline. The following content is not covered in the V Street curriculum outline:
  - For the Life Decisions/ Responsibilities core element, legal rights and responsibilities, legal documents, records, roots, life decisions, and the transition plan;
  - For the Health and Safety core element, personal health care or substance abuse;
  - For the Personal/Social Relationships core element, culture, self-esteem, or paperwork.
  - For the Job Readiness core element, there is not enough focus on how to get a job, such as finding a job, resumes, and interviewing.
  - For education, the following topics are not addressed: the link between education and employment, finishing high school, and higher education.
- General perception by youth is that V Street is geared towards a younger audience than those who would be at the age for PAL Life Skills classes. Youth repeatedly described V Street as “childish,” which did not support the idea that the content was to help prepare them for adulthood.
- Users are unable to skip around in the modules.
- In order to use V Street, DFPS would need to assign a staff administrator.

### *Advantages of PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide*

- There is no cost for users to complete the lessons.
- The PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide covers all required PAL Life Skills curriculum in the required amount of time.
- Activities utilize a variety of resources, including online websites and community agencies. Lessons specifically address local resources and information.
- Curriculum is presented in a mature manner.
- Completion of the PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide requires caregiver involvement, including obtaining information from and discussing information with the caregiver and requiring caregiver sign-off.
- The curriculum encourages youth to be actively involved in their learning and, in some cases the work is personalized to the youths’ interests, such as when they choose which careers to research and when they create a collage, picture or poem to represent them.
- The curriculum allows youth the flexibility to skip around and complete lessons in the order in which they are comfortable.

### *Drawbacks of PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide*

- Content is not all included in a comprehensive online course, which makes it less user-friendly and potentially confusing.
- Users must be able to follow multiple instructions.
- The PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide is not being maintained, so content includes website links that are invalid.
- The required caregiver involvement may pose a challenge in some situations.

## **Discussion**

### *Training Options*

Out of the available options for purchase of online Life Skills training, V Street is the best option currently available. However, V Street has some profound shortcomings, as discussed above, so the subcommittee cannot recommend that V Street be a substitute for PAL Life Skills classes, even for youth needing an option for independent study.

Given that V Street was appealing to many of the youth surveyed and because it does cover some of the content, if additional funds are available without compromising other PAL services, it is recommended that V Street be used as follows:

- As Pre-PAL training for youth ages 14-15;
- As an adjunct along with in-person PAL Life Skills classes;
- As an adjunct along with the PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide for youth authorized to complete PAL Life Skills classes independently;
- As a supplement for youth to utilize after having completed the PAL Life Skills classes if they scored poorly on the Knowledge Skills Assessment; and/or
- As a tool for use by caregivers to help them provide Life Skills training to youth in their care.

There is also the possibility that the developers of V Street would be willing to create additional content to meet the DFPS PAL Life Skills requirements. However, because additions would need to be extensive in order to bring V Street up to the PAL requirements, this option seems to be unlikely or costly, and it would not change youths' perception that V Street is for younger users. Another option would be to commission the creation "from scratch" of a PAL Life Skills online training that covered all of the required content in an age-appropriate and appealing manner. However, this option is likely to be prohibitively expensive.

Therefore, since there is currently in use a PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide that covers the entire PAL Life Skills training curriculum in the required amount of time and includes a large amount of online content, the subcommittee recommends that this PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide continue to be used.

To allow for greater accessibility, DFPS may wish to put the PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide on an existing PAL-related website in a PDF format. In addition to the PAL Independent Study Guide being used as a replacement for in-person PAL classes, with a PDF version available online, youth and caregivers could also utilize it as a supplement to the PAL classes to increase independent living skills. Those youth needing to complete the PAL Life Skills Independent Study guide for credit would need to obtain prior written approval from their PAL Coordinator.

The PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide created in 2007-08 has not been revised or updated. This subcommittee's focus groups found that some of the websites listed in the Independent Study guide no longer work. Therefore, this subcommittee recommends that DFPS have someone maintain the guide. This person could be a DFPS employee or a contracted responsibility (possibly could be included with the PEAKS contract).

#### *Financial Considerations*

In exploring the various options available for online training, the subcommittee took costs to DFPS into consideration when developing recommendations. The recommendation to retain use of the PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide is the least costly, while providing an alternative to PAL classes that contains online training components, as mandated by HB1912.

The only costs involved with this recommendation are the amounts needed to put a PDF version of the PAL Independent Study Guide on a website and to hire or contract for an employee to maintain the guide. The maintenance duties should only involve a few hours of work per month. The subcommittee estimates that the cost to add the PAL Independent Study Guide to an existing website and to add the maintenance duties would be approximately \$3000 per year.

However, if DFPS is able to allocate additional funding to enhance PAL Life Skills training without compromising other PAL or DFPS services, the "nice to have" recommendations regarding V Street or the creation of a PAL Life Skills Online training curriculum from scratch would be helpful. These costs were not estimated since they are not primary recommendations.

#### *Legislative Intent*

The online training option for PAL Life Skills classes was included in HB1912 to provide additional

means by which youth in foster care can take the PAL Life Skills classes to ensure that all youth have the ability to complete training and obtain eligibility for the Transitional Living Allowance. However, this subcommittee approached a representative from the bill author's office asking if they had been aware of the existence of the PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide when the bill was created, and we were informed that they were not. The PAL Life Skills Independent Study Guide serves an alternative means for youth unable to attend PAL Life Skills classes in person to take the classes, and it also includes online content. As such, it appears that DFPS meets the intent of HB 1912, which was to add an alternative method for youth to receive PAL Life Skills training.

### **Subcommittee Members**

The following stakeholders participated in the HB1912 Transitional Living Services Preparation for Adulthood subcommittee:

Leslie Gaines, LifeWorks, Chair  
Alma Alfaro, DFPS, PAL Reg. 11  
Miriam Attra, BCFS  
Irene Clements, LSS/TFAA  
Lane Coco, DePelchin  
Ashley G., Youth  
Claire Hall, DFPS  
Judge John Hathaway, Travis County Juvenile Court  
Crimson Holland, Settlement Home  
Albert Moreno, BCFS  
Veronica Ramirez, DFPS – Residential Contracts  
Leslie Reid, DFPS - Residential Child Care Licensing  
Kim Schenck, TNOYS  
Jodie Smith, Texans Care for Children  
Gloria Stevenson, DFPS – Residential Contracts  
Laura Tibbitt, DFPS  
Naomi V., Youth  
Gaby Valladares, DFPS, Region 6 Youth Specialist  
Gaye Vopat, DFPS – PAL  
Carol Wilkinson, DFPS – Residential Contracts

## Appendix 3: Full Report on Youth with Disabilities

### HB 1912 Transitional Living Skills Stakeholder Workgroup Subcommittee on Youth with Disabilities and Mental Health Issues

#### **Problem Statement & Issue:**

The National Council on Disability's February 26, 2008 report titled *Youth with Disabilities in the Foster Care System: Barriers to Success and Proposed Policy Solutions*, finds that transition to adulthood is exceptionally problematic for children within vulnerable populations, including youth with disabilities and youth with significant mental health issues. *"Youth with disabilities in foster care must still navigate too many challenges and barriers to truly become self-determined or self-sufficient. These young people in particular require a comprehensive, multi-system transition support network. It is unrealistic to imagine that the child welfare system alone can provide the resources necessary to address the employment, education, health care, housing and family challenges of this population."*

#### **Current Texas System**

The following information relating to youth with disabilities in CPS care was derived from information found in the CPS Handbook, 6551 & 6564.

The priority population is age 16 to 21. CVS staff begins planning for long term care needs when a child enters foster care, but gives the planning special attention once they turn 16. Efforts are coordinated with other agencies and community resources. PAL services are provided concurrently regardless of the permanency goal. Types of services needed are addressed in the youth's plan of service.

In regards to PAL life skills training, the extent of the youth's disabilities is taken into consideration. If possible youth are trained in formal classes; some classes are modified to meet their needs. In some cases the youth and caregiver are provided an Independent Study Guide to accomplish at home. The workbook is completed with the caregiver's assistance. Another alternative is for PAL staff to assess life skills taught in school or at home via the IEP Progress Notes, treatment plans, Plans of Service, Individual transition Plans, and/or ARD meetings and substitute this for PAL training credit.

For youth who are moved to supervised or semi-supervised placements after leaving foster care PAL participates in coordinated services. Youth can receive \$500 of the Transitional Living Allowance if they meet the requirements. Case management is coordinated through a multi-agency collaboration as required by the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999. Efforts are coordinated so that plans and services do not conflict and the needs of the youth are met.

It was obvious from discussion in the workgroup that, regardless of what is in the manual, there is much deviation in what is actually happening around the state. Some areas do more than what is required and some do much less. Additionally, it was clear that what is offered is rarely enough for children with disabilities and children with serious emotional disturbance. As is often the case, lack of adequate resources is frequently cited as the primary reason for sub-standard transition planning and after-care services. If sufficient funds are not invested in comprehensive planning and appropriate community supports, many of these children will eventually be institutionalized, hospitalized, homeless, or incarcerated.

Adequate resources, quality standards, and meaningful accountability must be infused in the system if outcomes for children are to improve.

#### **Recommendations**

##### **Person Centered Planning**

1. Children with disabilities, age 12 and over, in the Texas foster care system should have a Person Centered Plan. For youth entering the system after their 12<sup>th</sup> birthday, a Person Centered Plan should be developed within six months from the date they enter care. Plans should be updated annually. The plan must incorporate those things that are

2. The Person Centered Plan should incorporate the federally required elements of the Child's Plan of Service and should become the plan that guides all supports and services for the child or youth.
3. The Person Centered Plan should be the basis of the Circle of Support that is convened expressly to develop a transition plan for a youth with a disability. The Circles should **begin** for this population at age **14** and all children with disabilities should have a transition plan.
4. All youth with disabilities transitioning from the foster care system should have a caring adult who is going to continue with the youth when he/she leaves the system. Children with disabilities should be assigned a court appointed special advocate (CASA) while they are in care. At least one caring adult should be identified to follow the child as they transition from care. While in care, children need someone who is "with them" (paying attention to them) even if their placement changes. This is more fully discussed in the "Caring Adults" subcommittee report.
5. The responsibility for person centered planning may rest with the case manager, members of the specialized disability unit, disability specialist, the PAL coordinator, or the CASA. Deciding who is accountable will need further review. However, for children in facilities, the facility provider should not have responsibility for person-centered planning.

#### **Preparation Training for Youth**

1. Children with disabilities should be included in PAL activities. Children & youth with disabilities should begin PAL activities no later than age 14 (this may require a change in minimum standards). Modify the PAL curriculum to include hands-on experiential life activities for youth with disabilities, including but not be limited to the following:
  - Learning to navigate their own community
  - Visiting various post-care living options
  - Exploring employment/vocational options
  - Exploring leisure/recreational opportunities
  - Leading meetings such as IEP meetings, planning meetings, etc.
  - Learning money management skills
  - Learning about healthy relationships
  - Learning to protect themselves from abuse, neglect, and exploitation
2. Ensure that all children with disabilities receive training in self-determination and self-advocacy.
3. **A transition plan from a school district should never be used to meet the DFPS transition planning requirements, as education transition plans are NOT comprehensive.**

#### **Specialization within Units and Additional Case Management**

1. Develop specialized Disability Units for children & youth in the temporary managing conservatorship (TMC) and permanent managing conservatorship (PMC) of DFPS to provide specialized case management, transition support, and after-care support. Members of the Disability Units would be certified (see below), have experience with children & youth with disabilities, and have a strong understanding of self-determination, self-advocacy, and the rights of individuals with disabilities.

Each unit should include case managers with knowledge & experience in developmental disabilities, as well as mental & behavioral health. Members of the specialized unit will:

- provide service coordination & case management,
  - network with community organizations & services,
  - collaborate with staff from other state agencies offering services to children & youth with disabilities, and
  - support & be a resource to other members of the specialized unit.
2. Fund additional specialized case managers for After Care services for youth with significant disabilities including youth with mental health and behavioral health issues.
  3. Disability specialists would not be part of these specialized units and would not carry a caseload, and therefore, would be available to support all case managers in their respective regions. (See below for 'disability specialist' requirements).
  4. After-care for children with disabilities, including mental/behavioral health disabilities should be provided until age 25. This should include specialized intensive case management and other needed supports and services.

#### **Training for DFPS workers**

1. Develop certification for DFPS "disability specialist" to include education, experience, and training requirements. Both the regional disability specialists and the staff of the disability specialized units (see above) should be required to hold this certification. Continuing education requirements should be included. This is needed to correct the existing wide difference in the skills, knowledge, and training of current disability specialists. Certification could be modeled after the current certification for supervisors and case workers.
2. Disability specialists and staff of specialized disability units must be trained in the history, values, and rights of individuals with disabilities. Competencies in these areas should be evidenced.
3. Currently, few disability specialists have experience or expertise in mental/behavioral health. In addition to the expected state staff mental health expert, disability specialists and members of the specialized units should have knowledge and skill in this area.
4. Person Centered Planning expertise must be available in all regions.
5. All caseworkers will receive training in Person Centered Planning as part of the Basic Skills Development as well as training in self-determination, supported employment, the independent living movement, family-based care for youth and young adults with significant disabilities, positive behavior supports and inclusion.

#### **Improve cross system collaboration for youth with disabilities**

1. Ensure that each child or youth in care has an electronic case record that contains his or her Person Centered Plan, Transition Plan, Psychiatric/Psychological Evaluations, Medical Records, School Records, etc.
2. Require that state agencies responsible for the delivery of services to transitioning youth with disabilities participate in the transition plan including DARS, DADS, DSHS, TWC, local housing authorities, local Mental Health Authorities and schools.
3. As children with disabilities transition to the adult services system, agency staffs should work together to ensure that the needed supports and services are in place so that those

For more information, please contact Colleen Horton at 512/471-2988, or [colleen.horton@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:colleen.horton@austin.utexas.edu).

**SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS:**

Colleen Horton, Hogg Foundation, Chair

Dawn Choate, the ARC of Texas

Bob Alexander, DFPS Disability Specialist

Tiffany Denson, PMC staff, Child Advocates of San Antonio (CASA)

Annette Keller, Avalon Family Services

Nancy Zatarain, Avalon

Marie Garcia, DFPS Youth Specialist

Elizabeth Tucker, Every Child

Irene Clements, Lutheran Social Services

John McCann, Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services

Becky Brooks, Texas Region 8 PAL staff

Quyona Gregg, DFPS Legal



## Appendix 4: Full Report, Connection to Caring Adults

### Caring Adults Sub workgroup March 30, 2010

A former foster youth stated well why she, like all of us, needed a caring adult in her life: ***“We all need someone to look up to. We all need some kind of advice, we all need some kind of direction because we’re still young and trying to find ourselves and who we are and having that mentor relationship with an adult could make a big difference.”***<sup>1</sup>

The **Red Cross** responds to thousands of **disasters** around the globe each year. When it responds it **provides** food, shelter, medical and mental health care and **family connections**. It operates on the principle that governments have a limited ability to help, and where government cannot help, people need family and friends or they are dead.<sup>2</sup> *Even more than people with intact families, foster children who have been removed from their parents to protect the child’s safety need those human connections with safe and appropriate family members and healthy adults who care about them.*

#### **Our charge:**

The Caring Adults Work Group focused on the question: ***“What changes should be made to the foster care system to maximize the likelihood that a youth who leaves care as an adult will leave connected to at least one healthy, caring adult who wants him/her to be successful?”***

Our recommendations have implications for all parts of the foster care system: DFPS, providers and the courts, as well as volunteers.

#### **Summary of our Recommendations:**

The Caring Adults Work Group is making 7 recommendations specific to our charge. We also have made recommendations relating to electronic records and paperwork reduction which are a common thread with other work groups and will be in the full report. Additionally, since adoption is perhaps the most important way to have a caring adult in a youth’s life we have a related recommendation to help speed adoptions.

Our specific recommendations:

- (1) a. Monitor the new DFPS “Building Permanent Connections” family finding and permanency connection project.** In 18 months, produce a formal written evaluation of this project to determine successes and failures and expand or modify as appropriate.
  - b. Request DFPS to develop, within the next year, a plan and schedule to conduct relative searches and connection finding for all youth in foster care over age 12,** beginning with the oldest.
- (2) Reinstate voluntary mentoring through the PAL program** to all youth in care over age 14, beginning with a Pilot project in Region 8 (San Antonio area). In 18 months, produce a written evaluation of this project to determine successes and failures, then expand or modify as appropriate.
- (3) Develop a Resources and Tools page on the DFPS website** that is a living document containing research and resources for DFPS and providers.
- (4) Reevaluate all training** to assure that it is designed to train all persons in the system to understand that foster care is TEMPORARY, and that every child should be targeted for legal and emotional **permanency**.
- (5) Request the Texas Supreme Court Children’s Commission to address the question: “How can the courts better support all children and youth in care, especially those age 14 and over, having long-term, healthy, caring adults in their lives?”**
- (6) Insure that foster youths receive experiential learning in basic social skills,** such as building healthy relationships, primarily through modeling by caregivers (usually foster parents).

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<sup>1</sup> Lenz-Rashid, Sonja Developing Permanent, Supportive Connections While in Care: Foster Youth’s Perspectives, 2009, <http://www.cfpic.org/pdfs/PermanencyStudyReportLenz-RashidOct2009.pdf>, and sources cited therein. Quote from former foster youth.

<sup>2</sup> Continuing education by Kevin Campbell, April 13, 2010, Austin Texas, sponsored by National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.

**(7) Review the system to identify and correct any artificial barriers to permanent, healthy, relationships.**

**The Research:**

Intuition and experience, now documented by research, show that young adults who have the support and guidance of mature, caring adults are more likely to succeed in life. “The literature establishes that, absent a strong attachment to at least one caring adult, a young person is at risk for lifelong difficulty interacting with others and [faces major challenges in] becoming and remaining independent, handling emotions, functioning intellectually, and coping with stress.”<sup>3</sup> In many cases, these caring adults are relatives, but they can be other significant persons in the youth’s life such as coaches, teachers, church connections or foster parents.

Over the last several decades, permanency for children who cannot be reunified with their families has focused on adoption and, more recently, on relative guardianship. While adoption or relative guardianship certainly should remain the primary goals for all children who cannot be reunified, such options will not be feasible for every child. Older children, children who are part of a large sibling group, and children with special needs are difficult to place for adoption<sup>4</sup> and not every child has a relative who is willing and able to become a permanent caregiver<sup>5</sup>. But under federal and state law, these children are still entitled to permanency. It just takes a different form.

For example, St. Louis, MO., officials determined that although there is a 5% chance that a 16-year old African American boy will be adopted, there is a 90% chance that he can have a lifelong network, typically of 8 relationships, 1/3 of whom are non-relatives.<sup>6</sup>

The foster care system has been successful at keeping children safe, but only in recent years has it begun to truly focus on “well being.” That well being includes not only safety and meeting such basic needs as food, clothing, shelter and education, but the things families should provide: unconditional love, connectedness, stability, hope, sobriety in the family, and neighborhood.<sup>7</sup>

If a child cannot be reunified and there is no one to adopt or take legal guardianship, the legal default permanent plan is “another planned, permanent living arrangement” (APPLA).<sup>8</sup> This plan, however, does not mean that the state can simply park the child in foster care until he/she turns 18. Instead, the state must identify and help the child develop a relationship with a family or other caring adult who has made a permanent commitment to the child.<sup>9</sup> The family or adult will not be legally responsible for the child as with adoption or guardianship, but emotionally there should be no difference. Just like a child in an adoptive home or in the home of a relative legal guardian, a child with in an APPLA should have a place to go home to for holidays and someone to call upon for advice and support even after they turn 18 and leave state care.

Over the last many years, between 9% and 10% of Texas foster youth have left care each year because they reached the age of emancipation (usually 18). In 2008 and 2009, this meant 1400 to 1500 youth each year<sup>10</sup>. For these young adults, establishing a permanent connection is not just a legal requirement. It is a practical necessity if they are to have a chance to become a healthy, productive adult member of society.

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<sup>3</sup> Lenz-Rashid, page 9

<sup>4</sup> In Texas in 2009, children 13 years or older represented less than 8 percent of all completed adoptions even though they were over 25% of the children in foster care. Children with physical disabilities represented less than 1 percent of all children placed in an adoptive home. DFPS 2009 Data Book, pages 51 and 59.

<sup>5</sup> In Texas in 2009, less than 30 percent of children in state care lived with a relative. DFPS 2009 Data Book.

<sup>6</sup> Campbell, April 13, see footnote 2. For success stories, see “A Determined Quest to Bring Adoptive Ties to Foster Teenagers”, New York Times, January 31, 2010, Foster and Adoptive Care Coalition, Coalition in Action, <http://www.foster-adopt.org/Default.aspx?TabID=251>

<sup>7</sup> Campbell, April 13, see footnote 2.

<sup>8</sup> 42 U.S.C. §675(5)(C); Texas Family Code (TFC) §263.3026(a).

<sup>9</sup> TFC §263.503(a)(7)(B).

<sup>10</sup> For 2009, 1453, 10% of youth leaving care, see 2009 DFPS Data Book page 62; for 2008, 1468, 9% of youth leaving care, see Data Book 2008 page 60; for 2007, 1411, 8.7%, see DFPS Data Book 2007, page 58.

A major peer-reviewed study published online January 8, 2008 in the American Academy of Pediatrics' Journal "*Pediatrics*" found that foster youth who were mentored for at least 2 years between ages 14 and 18:

- had higher educational achievement,
- had better overall health,
- were less likely to report suicidal ideation,
- had better overall psychological well-being and social adjustment,
- were less likely to participate in unhealthy behaviors such as substance abuse, gang affiliation, fighting, or smoking, and
- were less likely to have been arrested.

The study recommended that youths be asked to identify potential adult mentors, and that those persons be recruited and trained to mentor the youths.<sup>11</sup>

Today, internet tools have also been developed which can be of great assistance. One of these is U S Search, but there are many others which can be of great aid in finding relatives.

The foster youth organization Foster Club, Inc., has developed a guide, *Permanency Pact*, to guide youth, facilitators, and caring adults to define the supports the adult will provide. The pact is developed using a formal, facilitated process to define and reduce to writing the kinds of supports the adult will be expected to provide. There are 45 identified supports ranging from a place to do laundry or make a telephone call to spending holidays, loaning money, or adopting the youth. It is located at [http://www.fosterclub.com/files/PermPact\\_0.pdf](http://www.fosterclub.com/files/PermPact_0.pdf)

In light of this background, to help the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) fulfill its obligation to find all children and youth a true permanent connection, we recommend the following:

**Recommendations:**

**RECOMMENDATION 1: a. Monitor the upcoming DFPS "Building Permanent Connections" family finding and permanency connection project.** In 18 months, review this project to determine successes and failures. At that time, recommend the project's statewide implementation and/or modification. A formal report should be developed, studying youth who have been randomly assigned to this program and to services as usual. Also review modifications to the program which would use technological and practice advances, especially technological search tools and family/connection finding. **b. Request DFPS to develop, within the next year, a plan and schedule to conduct relative searches and connection finding for all youth in foster care over age 12, beginning with the oldest.**

**Discussion:** "80% of foster children, even those removed at birth, go search for family [when they leave care]," Justice Max Baer, Pennsylvania Supreme Court. 81% of former foster youth report they have at least weekly contact with a biological family member: 45% with their mothers; 17.8% with fathers; 29.4% with grandparents, and 63.1% with siblings. When asked if they are "very" or "somewhat" close to a specific biological family member, 53.4% report they are close or very close to their mothers, 30.2% to their fathers, 49.4% to their grandparents, and 81.5% to their siblings.<sup>12</sup>

In early 2010, the HB 1912 implementation task force approved a preliminary recommendation that DFPS and cooperating providers **replicate the Kin Can project** developed by DFPS Region 6 (Houston area) and DePelchin Children's Center, conducted during 2000-2003, and funded by a federal research grant. The purpose of Kin Can was to find relative placements and/or connections

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<sup>11</sup> Ahrens, Kym R., MD, MPH; DuBois, David Lane, PhD, et. al., *Pediatrics*, January, 2008, Youth in Foster Care with Adult Mentors During Adolescence Have Improved Adult Outcomes

<sup>12</sup> Courtney, M., Dworsky, A., Lee, J., & Raap, M, *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Ages 23 and 24*, 2009, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, pages 12 & 13, <http://www.chapinhall.org/research/report/midwest-evaluation-adult-functioning-former-foster-youth>.

for youth who were in the permanent managing conservatorship (PMC) of Texas DFPS, with or without termination of parental rights (TPR). It was based on the principle that people who lack connections tend to establish only transient, shallow relationships, and lack the desire or ability to form attachments. A fuller discussion of this project and recommendation are contained in Attachment No. 1.

DFPS will soon be putting a similar approach into practice. DFPS staff used the Kin Can report as a reference in helping to develop case mining tools and procedures, as part of their efforts to help youths build permanent connections to caring adults and hopefully permanent placements. DFPS will begin by rolling out this project in a couple regions. There are some contract providers and staff, including disproportionality staff, working on this. They are focusing on youth in PMC **without** TPR who are in placements that DFPS does not consider permanent. They will review the situations of children and youth of all ages in this situation. However, since the new DFPS project is similar to, but not an exact replication of, the Kin Can research project, we do not want to abandon our recommendation to replicate the Kin Can project until we see the results of this similar project. Additionally, since the Kin Can project, various internet search tools have been developed, as well as connections analysis tools such as the tonal mapping discussed in Recommendation #5. The project might be modified to make use of those advances.

### **RECOMMENDATION 2: Reinstate mentoring to the Preparation for Adult Living (PAL)**

**Program**, offering it to all youth in care over age 14, and providing it to those youth who desire it. Make the mentoring available through the transition centers, beginning with a pilot project in Region 8 at no cost to the State. Offer mentoring to all youths over age 14, regardless of the youth's identified permanency plan. Request DFPS to help develop cooperation from caseworkers to collaborate with the centers to make mentoring available to youths who want it. If necessary, amend/clarify or interpret PAL contracts with DFPS to allow providers to make the mentoring available to all youth age 14 and over, whether or not the youth has been "PAL progressed," and whether or not the court has determined that the youth is likely to age out of care. Work with Baptist Child and Family Services (BCFS) to enable this to happen and remove barriers to its happening. Also institute a special, voluntary, mentoring program for youth leaving care. In 18 months, produce a formal written evaluation of this project to determine successes and failures and expand or modify as appropriate.

**Discussion:** As discussed above, research shows that mentoring is an essential element to ensure a youth's successful transition to adulthood. They need to have a "lasting and irrevocable connection to at least one committed and caring adult who will provide...lifelong support."<sup>13</sup> The research findings echo the sentiments of the youth. *"It's really important to make sure before emancipating a youth that they have one person. If I have somebody that I know I can depend on, that loves me and cares that I wake up tomorrow and am still breathing, I can get through it. I can walk through it"*<sup>14</sup>

Mentoring was at one time a part of the PAL program. It no longer is, and task force members do not know why. BCFS, the PAL provider in Region 8 (San Antonio area), has volunteered to reinstitute mentoring as a Region 8 pilot, at no cost to the state. Attachment #2 contains a detailed outline of the BCFS proposal.

To ensure the youth's participation in the mentoring program, they should be included in identifying and choosing potential adult mentors.<sup>15</sup> Carrie Lopez of DFPS noted that every child 16 or over is entitled to PAL services regardless of the permanency plan, so making the mentoring available to all

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<sup>13</sup> Barth, R., Greeson, J., Zlotnik, S., & Chintapalli, L. (2009). Evidence-Based Practice for Youth in Supervised Out-of-Home Care: A Framework for Development, Definition, and Evaluation. *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work*, 6(2), 147-175. doi:10.1080/15433710802683796, Frey, L. L., Greenblatt, S. B., & Brown, J. (2005). An integrated approach to youth permanency and preparation for adulthood. New Haven, CT: Casey Family Services. Retrieved <http://www.aecf.org/KnowledgeCenter/Publications.aspx?pubguid=%7BC95F352A-9A07-4B88-96F0-055ADD853BA1%7D>

<sup>14</sup> Lenz-Rashid, fully cited in footnote 1, quote from former foster youth at page 16.

<sup>15</sup> Ahrens, Kym R., MD, MPH; DuBois, David Lane, PhD, et. al., *Pediatrics*, January, 2008, Youth in Foster Care with Adult Mentors During Adolescence Have Improved Adult Outcomes

youth over 14, even if they have an identified plan of adoption or relative legal guardianship, should not be a problem.

Wherever possible, youths' mentors should come from natural connections the youth has made. For those natural connections to occur, wherever possible, the youth should be given opportunities to learn and serve outside the traditional classroom. As with other children, foster youth should be encouraged to engage in growth and development activities that interest him or her such as Scouts, 4-H, church youth groups and short term missions, sports, music or art enrichment activities, learning activities he or she chooses such as cooking classes. These activities not only contribute to the youth's personal development and sense of self worth but also increase his/her opportunities to make healthy connections with caring adults.<sup>16</sup>

**RECOMMENDATION #3: Develop a resources and tools page on the DFPS website that is a living document** for DFPS staff and providers, giving electronic access to tools that will help all in the system to assist youths to reach and maintain permanency. Use volunteers and interns to review the literature, with appropriate DFPS staff posting a monthly e-mail notice to DFPS contractors/list serve subscribers, notifying them of the posting of abstracts and links. Users could also refer articles to be abstracted and posted. In addition to evidence-based fully developed models, include promising practices, so that DFPS, providers and other stakeholders can watch for outcomes to help with continuous improvement.

**Discussion:** Youths' needs for permanency and relationships are areas in which research is expanding. To enable practice and training improvements, such a site could serve as a valuable resource for busy child welfare professionals and care providers. The California Permanency for Youth Project (CPYP) should be listed in an exemplary model directory included in this resources and tools page. For example, the CPYP website has a "pdf" format that contains 9 model programs from across the U.S. CPYP also has family finding search tools, and a number of safety protection tools. Consider using the CPYP website as a starting point, adding Texas-specific references and tools.

**RECOMMENDATION #4: Reevaluate all training** to make sure it is designed to train all persons in the system to understand that every child in state care is entitled to and needs permanency, striving for foster care to be truly temporary. For those for whom the legal permanency options of reunification, adoption or relative guardianship are not an option, emotional permanency is critical. This includes both original and continuing education for CPS (especially caseworkers); child placement agencies (CPAs); foster parents; therapists; judges and court personnel to constantly focus on permanent connections, and not give up. Evaluate all training to make sure there is a constant focus on permanency/developing healthy relationships with healthy, caring adults. This includes foster families understanding that they are entering into their role as being potentially permanent for the child if he/she is not reunified with family, and will not give up on him/her when he needs treatment, acts out, etc., i.e., that they are truly parents and professionals with a long-term commitment to the child, as per the research literature reviewed by work group members.

**Discussion:** "There are many barriers for social workers to seek permanent emotional connections for foster care youth...Current federal legislation mandates that social workers work on finding youth permanent placements while in care, but does not address permanent emotional connections. In fact, most social workers are not necessarily specifically trained in linking youth with permanent emotional connections....Given the results from this study it is apparent that older youth in foster care want and need such relationships, but may not be ready to admit it."<sup>17</sup>

This subcommittee agreed that this recommendation should be forwarded to the Foster Care Redesign Project. However, during follow up we ascertained that this may or may not be appropriate for that group, whose primary focus is on improving the system to promote positive outcomes through better placements. Accordingly, we recommend that DFPS leadership work with CPAs and the courts to modify training to cause all participants in the system to focus on foster care as temporary,

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Megan Mooney, Ph.D., Staff Psychologist, DePelchin Children's Center, April 16, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Lenz-Rashid,, pages 86 & 87.

continually seeking legal permanency for foster children, and in the absence of that, emotional/relational permanency.

Training, both original and CE, should be modified to develop the mindset in foster parents, clinicians, case managers, and judges that the system must view foster care as truly temporary, and (1) increase awareness that youth NEED permanency, legal if possible, but emotional in all cases; (2) assist agencies (DFPS and providers) to develop practices that result in permanency, and (3) get all to understand that each child or youth needs a permanent caring adult in his/her life no matter what happens in legal status or the youth's life--to understand that permanency is not necessarily a place, but can be connections. The website, [cpyp.org](http://cpyp.org), uses numerous models to fit various populations. For example, the Family Bound program works with each teen on what permanency means for him/her. They also use the mentoring model discussed in Recommendation #2 and more fully described in Attachment 2, at a younger age. CPYP also has family finding search tools.

**Recommendation #5: Request the Texas Supreme Court Children's Commission to address the question: "How can the courts better support all children and youth in care, especially those age 14 and over, having long-term, healthy, caring adults in their lives?"** For example, should the Commission develop recommended questions for judges to ask and put them in the Bench book? Have a Roundtable? Use another approach? Consider how the courts can help youths connect with healthy caring adults even if not adopted, and with maintenance/restoration of sibling connections. For example, should attorneys, CASAs, judges, and others have more training and should process changes be made so that at every court hearing, whether during TMC or PMC, the question is always addressed: *"What has been done and by whom to find the long-term supportive caring adult(s) for this child/youth?"*

**Discussion:** Texas Family Code Section 263.503 was amended in 2009 to require the court to determine at a placement review hearing whether.... "(7) for a child whose permanency goal is another planned, permanent living arrangement, the department [of Family & Protective Services] has:

- (A) documented a compelling reason why adoption, permanent managing conservatorship with a relative or other suitable individual, or returning the child to a parent is not in the child's best interest; and
- (B) identified a family or other caring adult who has made a permanent commitment to the child;<sup>18</sup>

Key Richardson described the use of genograms and "tonal mapping" as developed by Dr. David Arredondo. His web site, [www.childrensprogram.wordpress.com](http://www.childrensprogram.wordpress.com), contains helpful vignettes. He uses:

- blue lines for genetic connections,
- red for heart connections,
- green for people the child learns from or teaches, and
- yellow lines for connections of the soul.

The purpose of the process is not only to connect a youth to appropriate people, but to help increase the youth's resilience. Interviewers ask specific questions to get this information. For example: "Who do you love? Who loves you? Who do you miss and who misses you?" The CASA volunteers find it helpful. The questions alone help them uncover people who are possible connections. For example, can an aunt who is a single mom care for a 15-year old? They check support systems to try to ascertain this. The information gained from the interviews is also helpful to launch family searches using some well-developed approaches and internet tools for family finding, such as U.S. Search.

April 13, at a seminar sponsored by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, Kevin Campbell outlined the Six Steps to Family Finding.<sup>19</sup> In summary, they are:

1. *Discovery:* finding at least 40 family members and other important supportive adults who may be willing to help support the youth;

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<sup>18</sup> SB 939, Acts, 2009, 81<sup>st</sup> Texas Legislature, Chapter 1372, Sec 10, effective June 19, 2009

<sup>19</sup> See footnote 2. The summary is from a handout distributed at that seminar.

2. *Engagement*: enlisting willing ones to help support the youth;
3. *Planning*: meetings with the child and adults to help plan the youth's future success;
4. *Decision Making*: team decides the young person's future for safety, well-being, and life-time affection, family and belonging;
5. *Evaluation*: time line for permanency, plans A, B, etc, and commitment for quick reconvening as changes occur requiring reevaluation and adjustments;
6. *Follow-up supports*: the team actively supports the youth and caregivers, with formal and informal supports, to sustain the relationships.

The Travis County Model Court has a subcommittee on Family Search and Engagement. Attorneys, CASAs, and case workers give input into a document that lives with the legal records and contains family information. This information is used throughout the life of the case for placement options and eventual permanency. Their pilot will have six TMC youth at the very beginning, so that all parties to the case will contribute to the document from the start. The pilot will also select 5 or 6 PMC youth whose parental rights have been terminated, and who are facing aging out. Their group will be meeting periodically to focus on those youth. Reports from the Travis model court will be available in approximately one year. However, the value of the documents will be ongoing for the life of each case.

To the extent expanded training is necessary, there are new federal subsidies available under the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act.<sup>20</sup>

**RECOMMENDATION #6: Ensure that foster youths receive experiential learning in basic social skills**, primarily through modeling by caregivers (usually foster parents). Review foster parent training to assure that caregivers receive training in experiential teaching of these skills, and make necessary revisions. For example, this learning should include establishing and maintaining healthy relationships, and problem solving skills, in addition to the current items in the PAL curriculum such as hygiene, telephone skills, and proper eating.

**Discussion:** As a result of the adversity and instability most foster youths have encountered in their lives, they often lack the foundation which they need to develop positive, healthy relationships, attachments and resiliency. Developing healthy relationships is a life-long process for everyone, which for most people begins in the home. However, because of their histories of complex trauma and of insecure, non-trusting relationships, foster youth often lack the ability to develop healthy relationships. Accordingly, education on developing and sustaining healthy relationships should be a core component of PAL services.

Because PAL programs do not necessarily address such things as development of the social and interpersonal skills that are necessary to developing and sustaining healthy relationships, the system needs to make sure that foster parent training includes:

- helping youth develop the skills they need to develop and sustain healthy relationships,
- information and understanding of the PAL services available, and
- what PAL does NOT teach.

The PAL curriculum should also be evaluated to determine how some of these subjects can be added to PAL training, both classroom and experiential. We recommend the following questions be addressed in that evaluation:

- Should there be a basic training curriculum on how to identify, develop and maintain healthy relationships?
- Which parts of this should be in the formal PAL curriculum, and which should be taught by foster parents through modeling and discussion?

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<sup>20</sup> Federal funds available for administrative costs now include training for relatives obtaining PMC; state-licensed or state-approved child welfare agencies; court staff; attorneys for the child welfare agency, children or parents; and court-appointed special advocates. The federal government pays the state for 55 percent of the training costs in federal fiscal 2009 with the rate increasing every year until it reaches 70 percent in federal FY 2012. The training must be short-term and increase the ability of the participants to provide support and assistance to foster and adopted children. 42 U.S.C. §674(a)(3)(B).

- What kind of original and continuing education do the foster parents need for this?

Our research has not located healthy relationship curricula for foster youth. We did locate one tool developed by the Children's Home Society of Florida and the Change Companies as a part of *Helping Children Thrive: an Integrated System*. This tool is a workbook focusing on honesty, respecting differences, etc.,. However it does not address some important skills such as communication skills, compromise and conflict resolution, or identifying and dealing with relationship "red flags", such as manipulative or predatory behavior.

**RECOMMENDATION #7: Review the foster care system to identify and correct any artificial barriers to permanent relationships.** Analyze all parts of the system to identify artificial barriers to youth having long-term, healthy relationships with caring adults. For example, can a former CASA or caseworker mentor an older youth? If so, when and when not, and with what boundaries and training requirements? As one young adult stated "*My social worker was pretty much my mentor and still is.*"<sup>21</sup>

**RECOMMENDATIONS CONSIDERED BY CARING ADULTS SUBCOMMITTEE THAT ARE BEING ADDRESSED IN A LARGER CONTEXT BY THE FULL HB 1912 IMPLEMENTATION WORK GROUP:**

**RECOMMENDATION 1: Electronic records accessible to the youth** would be a major asset to assist in finding relatives and caring adults. Electronic records have been recommended by all groups for reasons directly related to each of our charges. Those will be discussed as a whole in the full report.

**RECOMMENDATION #2: Paperwork reduction:** Undertake a project for CPS and DFPS to evaluate the paperwork required of CPS, CPAs, and foster parents to eliminate unnecessary or duplicative paperwork, and to better utilize technology, so that all persons in the system can spend more time with the children. This will not only serve the children better, but may reduce stress and burnout. For example, the current Transition Plan form is 27 pages, and not formatted for updating. How can unnecessary things be eliminated, and the form be made more user friendly?

**Related Recommendation regarding adoption barrier:** Make sure that the CPS system is equipped to assure that redactions of the records of adoption-eligible children occur on a timely basis so that the children can be placed for adoption as quickly as feasible. We recommend that DFPS develop an "early warning" or "alert" system that triggers a notification to management in each region when redactions reach a certain backlog, such as a 2-week wait, and that DFPS have a process in place, such as a strike force, to immediately reduce those backlogs.

**Discussion:** Clearly, for most people, the most important caring adults in their lives are parents, whether biological or adoptive. An issue that has arisen is the periodically-reoccurring backlog on redaction of files to facilitate adoptions. Redaction must be performed to remove certain private information such as social security numbers. Until a child's CPS file is redacted, prospective adoptive parents cannot read the child's file and the adoption placement cannot occur, nor can a foster care placement be converted to an adoptive placement, allowing the adoption by the foster parents to proceed.

Each day a child remains in foster care makes that child less adoptable. Region 6 (Houston area) is behind 6 to 8 weeks. Region 8 (San Antonio area) is several months behind. These are the 2 regions with the greatest numbers of adoptions in most years.<sup>22</sup> A priority must be placed on making sure that CPS files get timely redaction so that timely adoptions can occur.

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<sup>21</sup> Lenz-Rashid, page 75.

<sup>22</sup> In FY 2009 40% of the adoptions of CPS children in Texas were in those 2 regions, see page 57 of DFPS 2009 Data Book, and in 2008 it was 44%, see 2008 Data Book page 55.



DFPS is moving redaction from its legal department to operations and is moving to an electronic process. However, Region 6 was the first to begin this, and the first week the servers and scanners crashed. As this is implemented, redaction will hopefully be expedited. The files of children who are planned for a direct adoption, rather than adoption by their foster parents, are being prioritized, since the foster-to-adopt children should be in stable placements. Although this prioritization is appropriate, we recommend that the system be modified to avoid the need for such prioritization. Since the foster care system saves significant money when an adoption occurs, such a process is likely to pay for itself very quickly. Having such a system in place will hopefully, over the long term, reduce the number of youths aging out of foster care each year.

**Respectfully submitted April, 2010**

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Many thanks to Laura Tibbitt and Katharine Ligon, graduate student interns, for their research contributions.

## **Attachment 1:**

## **Kin Can Project Summary**

**Purpose:** To find relative placements and/or connections for youth in PMC, with or without termination of parental rights. Based on the principle that people who lack connections tend to establish only transient, shallow relationships, and lack the desire or ability to form attachments. Project ran 2000 to 2003, a project of DFPS Region 6 and DePelchin Children's Center.

**Population served:** ONLY served families where there was at least one sibling age 12 or older. 58% were in sibling groups.

**Funding/replication:** Funded by a federal grant. Report & replication manual electronically available from Pat Sims at DePelchin Children's Center, [psims@depelchin.org](mailto:psims@depelchin.org). Project costs were offset if 2 ½ years of foster care avoided (these were youth destined to remain in foster care to 18 or longer). Note: this cost includes the cost of research team, so future costs should be less.

**Personnel Structure:** The youth MUST be a key member of the team, involved in the decision making. In addition, there are 6 other kinds of people: (1) child's CPS caseworker; (2) person who mines the case file and identifies possible connections; (3) follow up social worker(s) who works with the first 2 to find the kin and make the connection, hopefully a permanent placement, but if not, a long-term connection; (4) search specialist who conducts more intensive searches when needed; (5) internal, tenured CPS liaison person who can navigate the CPS system and coordinate with other divisions of CPS, monitor intakes, and bridge system policy or practice barriers; (6) administrative assistant to make sure paperwork & monitoring are done

### **Lessons learned about structure and implementation:**

- **Clinician independence:** Some of the clinicians should be former CPS employees who know the people and the system, but they *must be independent of the day to day operation, especially because relatives are often suspicious of CPS.*
- **Workloads:** Kin Can work was IN ADDITION to day to day CPS casework. Caseloads project clinicians must be kept reasonable. Average was 30.
- **Assessments:** Kin were assessed, strength based, for appropriateness for & interest in the youth.
- **Connections:** Full range of possible connections to kin explored, from writing letters & phone conversations to visits & permanent placement. All connections valuable.
- **Needs:** When placement made, funds available to cover basic needs, such as beds.
- **Training:** (a) *Kin taking custody* need the same training and support as foster and adoptive parents. However, they usually have to have individual PRIDE training because of timing and transportation problems. (b) *CPS staff* must be trained to be open to family connections (including to the parent(s)) after termination of parental rights, across the entire range of contacts. Kin Can project workers provided this 3-hour training quarterly to CPS staff.
- **Eligibility/Teamwork:** CPS liaison had a printout of EVERY youth who met the criteria. She worked hard with their individual caseworkers to make sure the team was an enhancement to help the youth.

**Information from other later research studies:** The best source to begin searches is the youth, who will identify the relatives he/she might wish to find.

Some youth reunified with birth mothers. However, many had therapy with the mother, & it REALLY helped the youth even when they could not reunify, because they understood why they could not live with the mother and why CPS had had to remove them, but they were able to establish a relationship. It helped the youth (a) get rid of myths and fantasies about the birth parent(s), & (b) realize that CPS, courts, foster parents, etc., are not "the bad guys."

## **CASE EXAMPLES**

**Case example, parent contact:** “Janie” hopped from foster home to foster home because she wanted to decrease her meds and her foster parents would not allow this. Finally, she went to a facility where they helped her lower her meds and she worked with the project staff to help her get into a paramilitary academy. She presented her academy plans at her permanency planning meeting, & met resistance. Project staff pushed for her, & backed her up in her self advocacy, getting the permanency team to focus on “how” she could do this, rather than “why she could not.” She eventually earned her GED & went to college. During the project she went through counseling with her mother and concluded “my mom will never be able to take care of me, but I am glad I had the chance to get to know her.”

**Case example, relative adoption:** “David” was removed at 18 months when his married parents, while using cocaine, had let a pot boil over and burn him. The father had been an NFL player. The grandmother had a home study when David came into custody, but was denied placement because she “would not be able to protect him from his father.” The family lost contact, despite their best efforts, because of all his moves. 13 relatives had tried to contact him. The extended family was highly functional & highly educated. He could not be placed with the father because of a criminal history problem. At age 13, David was on 5 psych meds and in an RTC. The RTC therapists said “he has always been in special education, and he is not a special education child.” Psychological testing revealed that he has a high I.Q. He was weaned off the meds, & adopted by a paternal aunt. He attended a public school, & the aunt pushed him and the school so that after a year he was out of special education and in A.P. classes.

**Case example, sibling reconnection:** 4 siblings were in care under 2 different case numbers. The girls were together in a foster home. The boys were separated, one in a foster home and one in an RTC. While trying to reunite the brothers, the sisters were discovered. The boys got placed together in the home of one’s foster-adoptive parents. The foster mothers arranged regular connections between the siblings.

**Appendices** include training materials, evaluations, and the form used for the search review.

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**UPDATE: Some federal and state legislative changes have been made since the study that address some of the barriers (primarily financial) identified in the Kin Can report:**

- **Adoption assistance** now available up to 21 if adopted at age 16 or older;
- **Subsidized guardianship** now available, See HB 1151 (2009) p. 9;
- **Legal cost assistance:** HB 1151 (2009) allows reimbursement to relatives for up to \$2000 to get PMC;
- **Court reviews:** At placement review hearings for DFPS PMC kids, DFPS must identify a family member or other caring adult who has made a commitment to the child (SB 939, 2009, Sec. 10).
- **College tuition waivers broader as of 9-1-09, so** that many youth who are adopted or enter relative guardianship are now eligible (see SB 939).

**NOTE:** The barrier of the past criminal record may remain. If the criminal history is not related to child safety, it can be waived case by case in the same manner as for foster parents. See 40 Texas Admin Code Sec. 745.693.

**Question: Have the following important training changes (generally better understanding of the youth’s point of view) been made? (1) Training of new and existing staff of CPS and CPAs on the importance of the birth family to the child; (2) importance of family relationships to children in care and how to build those relationships, through effective visitation; (3) reunification/reconnection opportunities along the continuum and how to see and cultivate them.**

**Other barriers found that are likely to remain:** (1) relative cannot deal with the child’s continuing behavioral problems; (2) relative has own emotional problems; (3) a sudden change in life circumstance such as illness or job loss.

**Attachment #2:****Mentoring**

Baptist Child and Family Services BCFS Health & Human Services (BCFS HHS) Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) Center provides a central clearinghouse for many partners to serve the diverse needs of youth ages 14-21, who are in the process of aging out or have aged out of foster care, or help them become healthy, independent young adults., and to connect to community resources.

The center is funded and supported by a partnership between the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) and BCFS. The center is designed to serve as locations for services such as PAL, case management, life skills, mentoring, employment readiness, and job search classes and assistance. BCFS HHS also has Memorandums of Understandings with Texas Worksource Commission, Good Samaritan, ACCD, and UTSA who provide education and employment opportunities. Other partners, including Avalon, Our Lady of the Lake University, Texas State University, Division for Rehabilitation Services (DARS), George Gervin, and The San Antonio Food Bank provide other services including substance abuse, mental health counseling, housing assistance, food assistance, and leadership training.

The region 8 PAL center is the first transition center in Texas and served more than 1200 youth last year. We are currently the experts in providing transition services for foster care youth and in the best position to successfully house a pilot mentoring program for this population.

Youth emancipating from the foster care system should be connected to a caring adult prior to leaving care. Statics show that 46% of youth connected with a caring adult are less likely to use illegal drugs, 27% are less likely to begin using alcohol, 52% are less likely to skip school, 37% are less likely to skip a class, 33% are less likely to resort to violence, and 59% are more likely to get better grades.

While in care youth have a support system such as, foster families, case workers, or Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA). Once the youth emancipates they are lacking the needed support to make the proper transition to independent living.

**Recommendation:** Reinstate mentoring as a part of PAL services. Mentoring was at one time apart of PAL services with positive results. Begin with a pilot mentoring program at the region 8 (San Antonio area) transition center, which will provide the environment necessary for this process, and expand to all 10 transition centers in the state. The center will be a hub for existing programs such as CASA and Big Brother/Big Sister, universities, local churches, and businesses. The center will have a program that connects youth to a caring adult through mentorship.

**Purpose:** Use the existing region 8 transition center as the pilot mentoring program to connect youth emancipating from foster care to a caring adult.

**Population served:** Youth emancipating from foster care ages 14-21.

**Funding:** Existing transition centers will house the mentor program. Local universities will provide interns. PAL case management supervisor will supervise interns and PAL case manager will assist with managing cases. Using existing PAL staff, interns, Big Brothers Big Sisters, and local universities co-located at the PAL transition centers, will minimize costs.

**Project staff:** Existing PAL staff, interns, partners.

**Structure:** Interns from local public and private universities will recruit, match, and monitor the program. MOUs with universities will provide for master level students in relevant fields to complete their internship with the center and provide needed interns through-out the pilot program. Training will begin prior to the internship. The mentor will help youths connect to the PAL youth center; closing the existing gap in services. The mentor will ensure the youth know where the center is, how to get to the center, and ensure they are scheduled for an intake, learn about their benefits, and begin to receive services.

**Appendix 5:**

***Members of HB 1912 Transitional Living Services Workgroup***

Conni Barker-DePelchin Children's Center, representing Texas Alliance of Child and Family Services  
Caroline Bagues- Casey Family Services, foster care alumni  
Jane Burstain-Center for Public Policy Priorities  
Dawn Choate-The Arc of Texas  
Leslie Gaines-Lifeworks  
Terri Hipps-Baptist Child and Family Services  
Colleen Horton-Hogg Foundation  
Jody Smith- Texans Care For Children  
Andrea Sparks-Texas CASA  
Mary Christine Reed-Texas Foster Youth Justice Project  
Kim Schenck-Texas Network of Youth Services  
Diana Martinez, Texas Association for the Protection of Children

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**Members of Subcommittee on Transitional Living Practices (assessments, transition planning, Circles of Support)**

Terri Hipps, Baptist Child and Family Services, Chair  
Shannon Ramsey, DFPS  
Jeremy Taylor, Kerrville Transition Services  
Mary Christine Reed, Texas Foster Youth Justice Project  
Metoyer Ellis, Child Advocates of Fort Bend (CASA)  
Norma Blackwell, CASA of Central Texas  
Julie Baker, LifeWorks  
Joel Levine, Harris County Protective Services  
Evi Kay Ritzen, PAL Provider, Region 3  
Lisa Curtis, Workforce Commission  
Jodie Smith, Texans Care for Children  
Robert Villegas, DFPS  
Carrie Lopez, DFPS  
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Kristine Mohajer, DFPS  
Erica Brewington, DFPS

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