

# Connecting Youth and Adult Mental Health Services to Reduce Homelessness Among Emancipated Youth

Youth are falling through the cracks of the disconnected mental health system – many need adult mental health services after emancipation

## Background

Honoring Emancipated Youth (HEY) conducted a two-year study examining the process of the transition from foster care to independence in San Francisco County. The Emancipation Research Project (ERP) consisted of 30 in-depth interviews held in 2008-2009 with professionals and youth involved in the county's dependency system. Many topics were discussed, including personal emancipation experiences, official transition planning, and perceptions of stakeholders' roles. As responses were analyzed, a number of themes emerged.

## Mental Health and Homelessness

One of the first themes that surfaced was mental health needs; one of the most influential factors contributing to homelessness. A high number of youth (35 to 85%) have significant mental health problems when they enter foster care, and for many this need continues long after emancipation.<sup>1</sup> After leaving care, youth also experience disproportionate rates of trauma; in fact, former foster youth are diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) at a rate eight times higher than the general population.<sup>2</sup> Interviewees identified the problem of the lack of continuity of care for emancipated youth not directly linked to adult services through SSI or other programs, who continue to need mental health services.

## Lack of Continuity of Care

Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP) case managers explained that, while in care, foster youth are referred to youth mental health services through their social worker. After emancipation, however, foster youth do not necessarily have one assigned person to provide resources and referrals to mental health services. While this need is recognized by aftercare workers, they lack information about available services and processes. They often don't have the scheduling capacity to provide referrals due to high caseloads. ILSP workers expressed a desire to have a better system of communication between adult and youth mental health services *before* a youth emancipates. They also wanted more education on the services to which they could refer emancipated foster youth. ILSP workers worry about youth's ability to keep the housing that they have connected the youth to, if the youth lacks the mental health supports they need.

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<sup>1</sup> Marsenich, L. (2002). *Evidence-based practices in mental health services for foster youth*. Sacramento, CA: California Institute for Mental Health.

<sup>2</sup> Center for Social Law and Policy. 2007. *Financing Reform: How Can We Help Youth Aging Out of Care?*. National Association of Counties Task Force on Youth Aging Out of Foster Care.

## Information Sharing

One ILSP worker described the impact that lack of mental health treatment has on a youth leaving his in-care placement to live in aftercare transitional housing:

**"In this case the youth ... stopped going to therapy, stopped taking medication. Those things directly impact their ability**

While ILSP has housing specialists, and direct lines of communication to Transitional Housing Placement Program (THP-Plus) providers and Child Welfare Workers, emancipated youth with mental health needs require other resources and services to obtain and maintain their housing. ILSP workers expressed a desire to communicate with mental health providers more often, and a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) agreed that ILSP workers should be trained on how to respond when youth have mental health needs. Because aftercare workers are not expected to be specialists in mental health diagnosis and treatment, it is important they be linked in direct ways to the adult mental health community.

Information and training for aftercare workers are key, but the focus should be on connecting the youth *before* emancipation to ensure continuity of care. Youth who require new or different assistance *after* emancipation need mental health aftercare specialists they can access through ILSP, as are currently available in the areas of housing, education, and employment.

To reduce the risk of homelessness among emancipated youth, HEY advocates for better information sharing across systems, direct lines of communication between adult and youth mental health and aftercare workers, and better resources for ILSP workers, to ensure a successful transition for emancipating youth with mental health needs.

For more information on how mental health issues can affect homelessness and some mental health services available in San Francisco, see [HEY Statistics: Health, Homelessness and Services](#), and other HEY Statistics Sheets at <http://www.heysf.org/publications.html>.