

Supporting Our Teens:

Building Successful Transitions to Adulthood



Adoption Rhode Island Teen Focus Program Report 2017 - 2018



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State of Rhode Island
Department of Children, Youth & Families

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Executive Summary

Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA) is intended for youth in the care of the Department of Children Youth and Families (DCYF) for whom reunification or adoption is not a viable option and all other efforts to create an alternative permanency goal have not been achieved. *Teen Focus*, a program of Adoption Rhode Island funded by DCYF, is a program specifically for teens with the goal of APPLA to help them build meaningful connections and improve their readiness to transition into adulthood through educational advocacy and academic/vocational support.

Designed to serve up to 54 youth at a time, the program has consistently been at or near capacity since its inception in January 2017. The program goals are to keep older youth stable in supportive living arrangements while striving towards legal and relational permanency through adoption, guardianship, and/or the development of a network of peer and adult supports. Additionally, youth are supported in achieving educational and/or vocational and career goals as they prepare for adulthood. Fewer youth will exit foster care without a family or network of supportive adults. More youth will exit care with a high school diploma or equivalent and support toward preparing for higher education attainment. The program closely collaborates with public child welfare, family court, and the youth's placement to develop and deliver services.

Almost immediately, it became apparent that youth had many unmet, complex needs that would need to be addressed in order to make strides towards finding and maintaining positive adult connections, achieving relational and/or legal permanency, earning a high school diploma or equivalent, learning and practicing life skills within the context of their living environments and obtaining employment. The purpose of this report is to describe the *Teen Focus* program's first two years of services, the outcomes achieved by the program's participants, and recommendations for continued success for youth and young adults exiting Rhode Island's foster care system.

Program Statistics

Between March 2017 and December 2018, the *Teen Focus* program served a total of 77 youth, ages 16-21. The average age of youth served was 18, with 48% identifying as male and 52% identifying as female. The youth were racially and ethnically diverse: approximately 20% Black/African American, 19% Hispanic, 36% White, and 31% other/multiracial. Several youth identified as a member of the LGBT community. A total of 35 youth closed their cases to *Teen Focus* on or before December 31, 2018. Outcome measures were tracked for youth enrolled in the program for six months or more; 26 of the 35 closed cases were youth served for more than six months.

Selected Program Outcomes 2017 & 2018

Despite research demonstrating the negative outcomes for youth aging out of the foster care system and the challenges faced by the youth served by *Teen Focus*, this program is documenting progress for many of the referred youth in several key domains.

- **Seventy-three percent (73%) of the participating youth that exited the program, left foster care with meaningful legal or relational permanency at case closure. This included youth who were able to achieve reunification with their birth parents, placement with relatives and /or other network of family supports.**

- **Of the 77 youth served in 2017 and 2018, 54 were engaged in some type of education (high school, GED program, college, college exploration.)**
- **A total of 26 Teen Focus participants achieved a high school diploma or GED; 8 came to the program with their diploma and another 18 earned their diploma/GED while enrolled in Teen Focus.**
- **Last year we hosted a graduation celebration for 9 youth and their families at Save the Bay and we are currently preparing for our second high school graduation celebration for another 12 youth.**
- **Sixteen of the 26 high school graduates (62%) had some involvement in higher education, a rate far exceeding the national average.**

Other Outcomes and Achievements

The program is also identifying key strengths and challenges with the teen population and documenting the barriers these young people face. *Teen Focus* has been instrumental in assisting and advocating for and with youth in issues related to mental health, teen pregnancy/parenting, housing, immigration, incarceration, and employment. The program has been successful in building and supporting community connections for youth through partnerships with Job Corps, the Gateway to College Program, local police, RI Family Court, several other service providers, and several businesses and caring individuals across Rhode Island.

Program Recommendations

As we plan for the future of this successful program, we identify several recommendations that will further improve outcomes for youth in our community. Youth would benefit from being referred to *Teen Focus* immediately upon receiving the APPLA designation. The earlier the program is able to begin permanency and education work with this population, the greater the impact. Additionally, these youth are some of the highest need population in the child welfare system. They clearly benefit from comprehensive permanency-focused community based programs as well as additional investment in resources dedicated to meeting the unique needs of transition-age youth involved in the child welfare system.

Introduction

One of the primary goals of public child welfare is achieving timely permanency for children in foster care. All foster children should exit care to a safe, permanent family. As youth age, they are less likely to achieve permanency. This is a significant issue for youth in foster care. More than 20,000 youth age out of foster care annually.

When youth exit care without permanency, they are at risk for a number of negative health, legal, and employment outcomes. While children and youth reside in foster care, their educational outcomes are significantly poorer than their non-foster peers. Although the majority of students in foster care express interest in attending college or post high school education, far too many do not graduate high school. In fact, nationally only 65% of foster youth graduate high school by age 21, compared to 86% of all youth ages 18-24 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

In 2016, the Rhode Island Department of Children Youth and Families (DCYF) re-procured their community-based and residential services. At that time, the state had recently completed an analysis of outcome needs in Rhode Island and requested bids for programs to address the identified needs. The *Teen Focus* program was designed to meet the outcome category *Preparing Youth for Independence* by addressing foster youth's legal and relational permanency as well as their educational needs. Adoption Rhode Island proposed serving 36 youth with the permanency goal Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA). APPLA is a term created by the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 to replace the goal of long term foster care. Youth with the goal of APPLA are in the care and custody of DCYF and options such as reunification, adoption, or legal guardianship have been ruled out.

Across the country, states have developed programs and models to improve outcomes for this population and act as prevention models, preventing young adults from entering the adult homeless, mental health, and other services. At the time the *Teen Focus* program was developed, there were more than 175 youth with the APPLA goal in Rhode Island. DCYF requested that Adoption Rhode Island increase the proposed capacity of the program to serve 54 youth. The desire for increased capacity was to serve more youth who were preparing to exit care without permanency and without completing their education. A contract was signed and the program was established in January 2017.

Staff recruitment began immediately. Team members were hired in February and started in March 2017. Within the first two weeks of the program, DCYF referred more than 60 youth. The *Teen Focus* team worked diligently to reach every youth's DCYF worker and assess each youth's individual needs. In the first several weeks of the program, dozens of intakes were completed and work with youth began.

Almost immediately, it became apparent that youth had many unmet, complex needs that would need to be addressed in order to make strides towards finding and maintaining positive adult connections, achieving relational and/or legal permanency, earning a high school diploma or equivalent, learning and practicing life skills within the context of their living environments and obtaining employment. The purpose of this report is to describe the *Teen Focus* program's first two years of services, the outcomes achieved by the program's participants, and recommendations for continued success for youth and young adults exiting Rhode Island's foster care system.

Program Model

The *Teen Focus* program leverages evidence-based and research-informed best practices as well as Adoption Rhode Island's experience in achieving permanency and well-being for teens in foster care. The model seeks to improve outcomes for teens in care who are more likely to be in congregate care settings and least likely to exit care to a permanency outcome. Specifically, the program utilizes (1) child-focused recruitment, (2) family search and engagement (3) clarification, (4) building opportunities for relational permanency, and (5) educational advocacy.

The program goals are to keep older youth stable in supportive living arrangements while striving towards legal and relational permanency through adoption, guardianship, and/or the development of a network of peer and adult supports. Additionally, youth are supported in achieving educational and/or vocational and career goals as they prepare for adulthood. Fewer youth will exit foster care without a family or network of supportive adults. More youth will exit care with a high school diploma or equivalent and support toward preparing for higher education attainment. The program closely collaborates with public child welfare, family court, and the youth's placement to develop and deliver services.

Child-Focused Recruitment The Permanency Specialists were trained in the child-focused recruitment model to include: a) a complete initial case intake and referral, b) build a positive relationship with the youth, c) complete the public case record review, d) craft a comprehensive, trauma-informed assessment, e) provide permanency preparation, f) network building, g) ensure development of a recruitment plan and h) complete diligent search.

Family Search and Engagement Family search and engagement includes search for, outreach to, and engagement of family and other natural supports in order to explore placement, permanency, and support options for youth in care. Permanency Specialists work closely and in tandem with youth, DCYF workers, and others to "map out" the youth's family of origin as well as other family and community connections (such as previous foster care providers, teachers, coaches, religious community members, etc).

Clarification Clarification is the process of assisting a youth in understanding what has happened in his/her life and is a key element in preparing a youth for permanency. It is instrumental in providing services to assist youth in clarifying their story in order to acknowledge and resolve grief; promote life-long emotional well-being and inter-personal functioning; and improve the actualization of healthy attachments. Using evidence-informed practice, such as Darla Henry's 3-5-7 Model ©, youth have the opportunity to engage in the three tasks necessary for permanency and well-being: clarification, integration, and actualization.

Relational Permanency Research and best practice has found that permanency for older youth may be conceptualized as two separate but related dimensions: legal and relational. It is ideal, but not always possible, for youth to attain both. Narrowly defining permanency by its legal definition may be inadequate in explaining the experiences of permanency for older youth in foster care. In response to this limitation, the notion of relational permanency has emerged as an additional way to conceptualize meaningful permanency for older youth. Relational permanency is defined as establishing and maintaining positive adult and peer relationships in order to develop a network of lifelong natural supports outside of paid providers as well as a

sense of identity and belonging. Despite the goal of APPLA meaning that other legal permanency options have been ruled out, the need for family and belonging drives this practice.

Educational & Vocational Advocacy Older youth, and particularly those with an APPLA goal, often do not have the option of turning to their families for emotional, financial, education, or housing supports. The *Teen Focus* Education Specialist assists youth in overcoming barriers to academic success and improve continuity and consistency of education across systems serving these youth. The Education Specialist provides resources for educational achievement such as reviewing transcripts, maintaining contact with high school counselors to ensure students are enrolled in appropriate courses, goal-setting, career exploration, and any other educational/vocational needs the youth may have. The Education Specialists assist youth in preparing for and navigating college and post-secondary options. Youth have opportunities to explore careers of interest and have a plan to achieve those goals. Finally, the Education Specialist connects youth with opportunities to learn important life skills such as stress management, healthy relationships, self-advocacy, time management, study skills, budgeting and financial literacy skills and more.

Program Statistics

Between March 2017 and December 2018, the *Teen Focus* program served a total of 77 youth, ages 16-21. The average age of youth served was 18, with 48% identifying as male and 52% identifying as female. The youth were racially and ethnically diverse: approximately 20% Black/African American, 19% Hispanic, 36% White, and 31% other/multiracial. Several youth identified as a member of the LGBT community. A total of 35 youth closed their cases to *Teen Focus* on or before December 31, 2018. Outcome measures were tracked for youth enrolled in the program for six months or more; 26 of the 35 closed cases were youth served for more than six months.

Program Highlights and Lessons Learned

Permanency

Nationally, more than 23,000 children will age out of the US foster care system every year without permanency. Tens of thousands of children in the foster care system were removed from their parents after experiencing abuse or neglect. Others enter foster care due to significant mental health needs or juvenile justice involvement. Exiting foster care without permanency can have lifelong detrimental consequences. The *Teen Focus* program is designed to support these youth and partner with the state to provide specialized community-based services that reduce the risks of negative outcomes for youth exiting foster care. The program seeks to give these youth a chance for life long success.

Of the 77 youth served by the *Teen Focus* program, 35 have been discharged from the program. To determine our impact, we reviewed cases of participating youth that received 6 months or more of services from the program. This allows *Teen Focus* staff to create permanency plans with the youth and allows the child-focused recruitment strategies to be employed. A total of 26 youth were discharged from the program after receiving at least 6 months of services from the program. Nineteen out of the 26 youth (73%) of these youth exited state care with legal or relational permanency. This includes several youth who reunified with birth family or exited to live with family members. Many youth built and/or strengthened relationships with peers and

other natural/community supports and exited care with a network of support that will remain involved in the youth's life long after paid providers are gone.

The *Teen Focus* program strives to help youth and young adults identify and maintain positive connections with adults. *Teen Focus* is committed to honoring youth voice and decision-making in their own permanency choices and work. For some youth, this means searching for, locating, and engaging with supportive adults as well as creating new connections with mentors in the youth's community. For many of the youth in the program, permanency work is primarily relationship repair and support. Very often, relationships can be difficult, as youth have experienced many disrupted connections with others. Using a strengths-based and trauma-informed lens, the team helps youth and their "people" navigate their relationships in order to clarify and heal from past disruptions in the relationship, help define and maintain healthy boundaries, and navigate the complex terrain of improving the quality of healthy relationships and discerning healthy vs. unhealthy relationships.

Below are some examples of connections and relationship development and repair achieved during the two year reporting period:

Teen Focus started clarification work with a 19-year-old male who hadn't known where he lived at certain points in his life. While clarifying his geographic timeline with him, he left the table many times to get picture albums and reviewed where he was placed during some of his favorite childhood memories. This clarification work is critical to a youth's development of identity and ability to achieve permanency in the future.

Teen Focus makes diligent efforts to connect and establish relationships with birth parents whenever safely possible. Permanency Specialists and Education Specialists on the team worked collaboratively with two DCYF social workers to case mine, define relationships with siblings and help support a visit with a birth mother after many years with no contact.

After being in state care for 4 years, a 17-year-old male reunified with his biological father and brother out of state. The biological father drove to and from RI multiple times and worked closely with Teen Focus to ensure all of the youth's providers (doctors, school, other resources) were established upon the youth's arrival in his new community. At the Permanency Hearing where the family was reunified, the youth's biological father expressed being extremely grateful that he had the assistance from Teen Focus.

Teen Focus advocated for and facilitated a visit between two siblings who hadn't seen each other for nearly 4 years. This was particularly challenging as one youth is placed out of state. Teen Focus was also able to hold a 16th birthday party for the youth placed out of state, his first ever birthday party.

Seven youth exited the program after six or more months of services without achieving legal or relational permanency, for a variety of reasons. The reasons included AWOL from their placement programs, unmet mental health needs that required adult behavioral health intervention and incarceration. Although they did not achieve legal or relational permanency, Teen Focus had connected them to family members and community supports prior to exiting care.

Education

Several research reports estimate that approximately 70% of foster youth across the country regularly state they would like to attend college. Unfortunately, research also has found that fewer than 3% of children who have aged out of foster care actually earn a college degree at any point in their life. In fact, approximately one in four youth who age out of the foster care system will not graduate from high school or be able to pass their GED. According to the most recent National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) survey, Rhode Island's transition-age foster youth fare worse than foster youth nationally when it comes to education completion. By age 19, only 46% of foster youth have completed their high school diploma or GED, compared to 56% of foster youth nationally. Only 51% of RI foster youth at age 19 were actually attending school or a GED program to work toward their educational goal.

It is critical that jurisdictions across the country invest in these youth with the services, supports, and technical assistance they need to achieve their educational goals. This is exactly what *Teen Focus* seeks to address and that DCYF has identified as a necessary investment to give these youth the best chance at a promising future. It is clear that youth in foster care experience disruptions in their education and barriers to academic success. Frequent moves, delays in arranging transportation, a disagreement between school districts as to who is required to pay for the costs of a child's education, and unaddressed trauma and mental illness significantly impact a foster youth's success in their educational attainment.

Of the 77 youth served in 2017 and 2018, 54 were engaged in some type of education (high school, GED program, college, college exploration) or became re-engaged while in the *Teen Focus* program. Data was not available for another 10 youth due to lack of engagement in the program and/or AWOL. Of the 13 youth who did not participate in any educational/vocational program while enrolled with *Teen Focus*, the majority were due to AWOL, incarceration, or significant mental illness. One youth had his high school diploma but was not interested in pursuing additional educational opportunities. Another two youth were focused on maintaining employment and/or parenting. Only three youth were not participating in completing their high school/GED due to the youth's own lack of motivation to continue.

A total of 26 *Teen Focus* participants have a high school diploma or GED; 8 came to the program with their diploma and another 18 earned their diploma/GED while enrolled in *Teen Focus*. Last year we hosted a graduation celebration for 9 youth and their families at Save the Bay and we are currently preparing for our second high school graduation celebration for another 12 youth. Sixteen of the 26 high school graduates (62%) had some involvement in higher education, a rate far exceeding the national average.

Several youth required moderate to significant intervention from *Teen Focus* in order to continue, complete, or re-engage in their education. Several barriers emerged for these youth, particularly:

- Multiple placement changes resulting in gaps in education and/or instability in school placement/attendance
- Frequent hospitalizations and significant mental illness
- Special education needs not adequately addressed
- Placement providers' lack of engagement in helping youth achieve educational goals

Despite these challenges, *Teen Focus* staff were successful in assisting several youth in achieving academic goals. Staff assisted youth with FAFSA applications, obtaining transcripts, developing individualized plans to complete credit recovery, enroll in online classes, and completing college applications. *Teen Focus* team members were active participants in important educational meetings, advocating for students who needed additional accommodations in order to be successful in their education, and connected several youth with the Gateway to College program and Nowell Academy. In June 2018, we celebrated our high school graduates with a celebration at Save the Bay, including an inspiration keynote from an aged out youth who is a national advocate and motivational speaker. This party gave the youth the opportunity to celebrate their accomplishments with family and friends and recognize their own success.

Below are some examples of academic/educational advocacy and successes accomplished during the two year reporting period:

Teen Focus assisted a young man who needed to complete several months' worth of work in the final weeks of school in order to graduate. Because the program provides flexible, individualized educational assistance, the youth received intensive support and advocacy. The youth graduated and has plans for college.

Teen Focus assisted a young woman who had missed several months of school due to hospitalization. Teen Focus obtained a tutor and assisted the youth with completing an online educational program.

Several youth were not attending school upon enrollment in the Teen Focus program because they were in inappropriate school placements that were not meeting their educational needs. Teen Focus worked closely with the Gateway to College at Roger Williams University to inspire students to complete their diploma and earn college credits.

One youth attended residential school with the hopes of one day being able to enter public school. With advocacy and support from the Teen Focus program, she was able to enter public high school, where she is doing well.

Teen Focus assisted a young man who had a history of expulsions and school changes to become "student of the month" in a school that best met his needs.

Early Parenthood

According to the National Youth Foster Care Institute, 7 out of 10 girls who age out of the foster care system will become pregnant before the age of 21 and the Guttmacher Institute estimates that young women in foster care are more than twice as likely as their non-foster peers to become pregnant by age 19. Teen pregnancy can be difficult under the best of circumstances, but it can be especially hard for young women in the foster care system. Child welfare agencies are challenged to address the special needs of foster youth who are pregnant or parenting, and little has been done to help foster youth avoid pregnancy. Because a significant number of young adults who age out of foster care become pregnant or get someone pregnant, it is critical for reproductive and sexual health, family planning, and healthy dating and relationships to be a part of preparing youth for the transition to independence.

Twelve young women in the *Teen Focus* program were pregnant or parenting during the reporting period. Three young women were pregnant and have given birth and are parenting their

children. One young woman came to the program pregnant and gave birth while participating in the program and her baby was removed from her custody upon birth. Another young woman was still pregnant when she closed to *Teen Focus*. Seven young women were already parents when they started the *Teen Focus* program. Four of these women are still parenting (one of them is pregnant with her second child). One young woman had her children removed from her care just prior to closing to *Teen Focus*. Two young women had children in care while they were enrolled in *Teen Focus*. One young woman signed a direct consent adoption and terminated her parental rights and another young woman was successfully reunified with her children after closing to *Teen Focus*.

The program has been able to identify the very specific needs that young parents face, including the lack of a support system, difficulty finding high quality child care, employment and continuing their education. The *Teen Focus* staff has sought out community resources and partners to assist with donations of cribs, bedding, diapers, baby wipes, and more. Open communication among team members has been essential to making certain that despite these barriers, our young mothers can achieve success and see their potential. Making certain these young people graduate from high school, continue to explore post-secondary options and learn basic life skills including budgeting, will increase their likelihood in achieving a positive outcome. A young parent completing their education, obtaining employment, and maintaining housing will ultimately lead to a better opportunity for their child.

The *Teen Focus* program works with young men and women on safe and healthy pregnancy prevention on an individual basis as well as in small groups. A “Gentleman’s Group” was coordinated to educate our young men in areas such as gaining and showing confidence, the basics of professionalism in the classroom and workplace, as well as how to foster healthy relationships. The young men in attendance were able to hear from and dialogue with a guest speaker who was versed in the topics being discussed. This group was well attended and another has been scheduled to take place in the near future. Each group will highlight topics that our *Teen Focus* staff has identified as areas of need for our young people. Efforts to creatively address real life issues and provide opportunities for connection to individual and community supports are things that *Teen Focus* strives for.

The *Teen Focus* program was also able to refer *Teen Focus* youth to a privately funded group program at Adoption Rhode Island to address pregnancy prevention, safe dating and other risky behaviors due to a generous grant from the Rhode Island Coalition for Domestic Violence. *Teen Focus* staff utilized the Safe Dates curriculum, a popular evidence-based curriculum among high schools across the country, in order to educate young people in the dangers of Intimate Partner Violence. More than 15 youth participated in this group, some involved in the *Teen Focus* program, some their peers in DCYF care, completing the 4-6 week sessions in the program. Youth completed a pre and post-test that identified an increase in their knowledge of topics related to healthy dating relationships, how and where to find resources when assistance is needed and how to effectively deal with feelings of anger and jealousy in dating relationships.

Mental Health

The American Academy of Pediatrics, Healthy Foster Care America Initiative, identifies mental and behavioral health as the “greatest unmet health need for children and teens in foster care.” Factors contributing to the mental and behavioral health of children and youth in foster care includes the history of complex trauma, frequently changing situations and transitions, broken

family relationships, inconsistent and inadequate access to mental health services and the over-prescription of psychotropic medications. Former foster youth are nearly twice as likely to suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as US war veterans returning from tours in Iraq, according to a study conducted by the Harvard Crimson, et al. One in four alumni of foster care experience PTSD and more than half experience at least one mental health issue such as depression, social phobia, or panic syndrome.

Teen Focus staff has encountered several circumstances where youth with a complex trauma history had unmet mental health needs and as a result place themselves in unsafe situations, including sex trafficking and self-injurious behavior. These youth often go AWOL from their placements for days, weeks and months, often finding themselves in dangerous situations.

While not initially identified as area in our scope of work, *Teen Focus* staff regularly find themselves advocating for youth to have appropriate, specialized clinical services in place, including medication management. One youth that *Teen Focus* worked with had a stay at a local hospital for more than a year because of the complex background she had, which made placement in the community very difficult. It took a very collaborative, creative effort to coordinate a placement opportunity that would not only ensure her safety, but allow her to experience some semblance of independence and normalcy. One of the youth in our program had been psychiatrically hospitalized several times in the 6 months prior to working with the *Teen Focus* program. Although he did require hospitalization while working with the program to meet his unmet mental health needs, the need for hospitalization was reduced significantly: he had 50% fewer hospitalizations in the first year of participation and will soon reach 1 full year since his last hospitalization.

Because *Teen Focus* is a community based program and follows the youth regardless of placement and works with DCYF investigative trackers to locate AWOL youth, the staff are able to inform child placement and other providers when changes in behavior are observed that could require specific interventions. Many of the youth that the *Teen Focus* program serves reside in group homes that have clinical staff on site or on-call. These clinicians provide crisis intervention when the youth is placed in their programs. If a youth is stable in a program, this clinician may be able to address their complex behavioral health needs. These clinicians are also responsible for imparting consequences when a young person does not follow program rules, which can often hinder the forming of a therapeutic relationship. This paired with a high turnover rate for clinical staff in the group homes, has resulted in a disruption of services for many youth we served.

It has been evident that once a young person has a negative clinical experience, they are very reluctant to access necessary services outside their residence, making recovery from trauma and mental health issues extremely difficult. The *Teen Focus* program staff have advocated on many occasions for youth to be referred for additional clinical services with permanency-competent, trauma-informed clinicians in the community. This connection to a community provider is crucial, so that when and if a placement is disrupted, they are able to maintain the connection to their clinical support. Being connected to a community-based, trauma informed clinician creates an opportunity for a young person to begin to heal from the circumstances of their past and move toward growth and recovery.

Although *Teen Focus* staff work tirelessly to connect youth with competent providers, some youth do not receive the behavioral health services they need. There have been numerous

reasons that have included waitlists for psychiatrists, transportation barriers, disconnection from primary physical care providers and an overall lack of continuity in care. In some instances the youth report that they are tired of telling their story over and over to new providers. In other instances the youth have been discharged from mental health providers for inconsistent attendance. Their placement providers try to instill life skills by requiring the youth to get to their own appointments. Unfortunately for some youth, they are not successful with these developmentally appropriate expectations. Additionally, for several youth that received mental health evaluations, updated diagnosis and recommendations for specific evidenced-based or research-informed treatments, the youth did not receive the services due to accessibility and availability issues.

Preventing Homelessness

According to numerous national reports, more than 20% of former foster children become homeless within two to four years of leaving the system. According to the NYTD data, approximately 25% of former RI foster youth report that they had experienced homelessness by age 21. According to the RI HMIS workgroup that is addressing youth and young adult homelessness, a significant portion of this population are young people with a history of foster care involvement. In a recent analysis by the Rhode Island Coalition for the Homeless, over a 6-month period, approximately one-third of the young adults who were in need of homeless assistance had a history of foster care involvement.

The staff of the *Teen Focus* program works to ensure that youth who exit the program are prepared and are connected to resources that will help prevent homelessness. The *Teen Focus* program hosted two Housing Navigation sessions at the Adoption Rhode Island office, while also conducting individual sessions to aid young adults in applying for housing within their communities. This experience has allowed young people the opportunity to be placed on several public housing lists, to check on their application status and prepare to exit from DCYF care. Additionally, *Teen Focus* has assisted individual youth in their search for affordable apartments, educated youth on how to speak with potential landlords and maintain housing once they have been placed. *Teen Focus* also works very closely with the Independent Living placement agencies to find placement for youth in a community that would be beneficial to them, having natural and community supports easily accessible.

Incarceration

According to the latest data, there are 437,500 children in America's foster care system, who face a disproportionate risk of being incarcerated. The problem is so severe that one quarter of foster care alumni will become involved with the criminal justice system within two years of leaving care. The foster care-to-prison pipeline particularly affects youth of color, LGBTQ-identified youth, and young people with mental illnesses – all of whom are already more likely to be in foster care and thus even more likely to be pushed into the justice systems. Being in foster care too often means being institutionalized over and over again. According to a University of Minnesota study, youth in group homes are 2.5 times more likely to become involved in the justice system than youth placed with foster families. Moreover, frequent placement changes increase the likelihood of incarceration. One study showed that more than 90% of youth in foster care with five or more moves will become involved in the juvenile justice system.

According to NYTD data, Rhode Island foster youth reported that by age 21, 24% of them had been incarcerated and more had had some legal involvement. Several of the youth who have been referred to the *Teen Focus* program have experienced involvement with the juvenile justice

system. Two are currently incarcerated. Several others have been incarcerated and released back into the community. Some of the obstacles that these specific youth faced include lack of positive role models, lack of involvement in positive community experiences and complex mental health and substance use. *Teen Focus* links youth to positive community supports, including athletic programs, fitness centers, music lessons, mentors, theater programs and community health centers. The connection to these experiences can offer positive opportunities for youth, a way to increase self-esteem, create meaningful connections and provide a constructive use of their free time.

Employment

Only half of foster youth who age out of the system will have some form of gainful employment by the age of 24. Nationally, approximately 10 % of youth ages 16-24 are unemployed, but the rate for youth aging out of foster care is 47-69% depending on race and gender according to the Annie E Casey Foundation. This is an extremely troubling finding. The experience of working, whether it is a summer job, internship or employment after school, creates essential skills for future youth employment success. According to NYTD data, only 47% of RI foster youth reported that they had full or part time employment by age 21 compared to 59% of the general population.

In the *Teen Focus* program, 37 youth have obtained employment. The *Teen Focus* staff works one on one with many youth to assist them with filling out job applications, have candid conversations about how to maintain employment and tackle barriers such as transportation and communication. Staff engage youth who are employed in coordinating a back-up plan for transportation to work when public transportation and/or their placement is unable to support them when needed. In several instances, *Teen Focus* staff has utilized personal community connections with local businesses to secure employment and training opportunities for youth. These youth had an opportunity to not only earn a paycheck, but also have the support of *Teen Focus* staff in eliminating barriers to success such as, purchasing a uniform needed for a job, necessary footwear, bus passes and Uber cards to overcome transportation barriers.

Teen Focus also assists youth with the purchase of a cell phone when needed and they are unable to obtain one from their placement provider. The program realizes the value of each youth being able to respond to employers, make follow up phone calls after applications have been submitted and checking in after they have begun employment. Many youth that are in jeopardy of having their phone shut off will reach out to *Teen Focus* for assistance with keeping their phone turned on. Staff will work with each youth to plan and budget for their phone service to remain on, and highlight the utilization of the phone as a networking tool. *Teen Focus* has also worked with numerous youth to help them navigate obtaining citizenship or legal permanent residency in the United States. These youth and young adults needed necessary documentation such as birth certificates, passport, social security cards to reduce barriers to securing employment and achieving all of their life goals.

For some youth, seeking and obtaining employment has been difficult. Several of the youth have received assistance with obtaining social security disability benefits. Others have been referred to programs such as the Office of Rehabilitation Services. Some youth have obtained employment but have difficulty keeping employment. *Teen Focus* staff work with these youth to assess their work challenges and help improve their ability to maintain employment.

Building Community Connections

Relational difficulties are often perpetuated in foster care due to the lack of family and supportive connections as well as an inability to know where and to whom foster youth reach out to following foster care. There is a steep drop off in services for youth once they exit care. Accessing community services outside of public child welfare services is necessary to assist positive outcomes for transitioning youth. Partnerships with agencies, business and organizations that serve youth and young adults is a key part of supporting this population.

The *Teen Focus* program focuses on building partnerships and community connections for foster youth. Teen Focus has aimed to establish opportunities for both youth and staff to grow and learn so that they can identify how to access supports and achieve success. Some of the community connections include:

- Job Corp
- Gateway to College
- Rhode Island Family Court
- Local police
- Military recruiters
- Chefs Feeding Kids
- Association of Building and Contractors
- Several small business employers
- Project Undercover
- Providence Driving School
- Judith McSoley Fund for Children
- Rhode Island child placement facilities
- Out- of -state child placement facilities
- Dorcas International

Summary

In the first two years of the *Teen Focus* program, we have learned a great deal and have had some initial success in addressing permanency, education and successful transitions to adulthood for youth who do not have reunification or adoption as their primary case goals. Many of the youth served by the program were disconnected from their educational goals, disconnected from siblings and other relatives, experiencing significant unresolved trauma and had complex mental and behavioral health needs. Some of the youth experienced first episode psychosis, many had been hospitalized prior to referral and many continued to struggle with mental health needs that were not adequately met without additional specialized community-based clinical services. Several youth and young adults were criminally involved and many were victims of crime. Most youth were not connected to comprehensive healthcare nor were they receiving pregnancy prevention services prior to enrolling in *Teen Focus*.

The program made great progress in helping youth get focused or remain focused on their education. It helped to ensure youth were taking the right classes and receiving credits toward graduation. The program also identified, created and supported many, many connections for youth. Building and supporting relationships was a key focus. Some resulting in permanency while others helping with community connectedness. The program helped mitigate significant

risk of harm in situations where vulnerable youth were at high risk of victimization. *Teen Focus* was able to help secure housing, furniture, basic needs for several youth. The program referred many youth to appropriate trauma- informed behavioral health services. The program helped youth achieve driving lessons, and assisted with job interviews and career exploration. Teen Focus worked in close partnership with DCYF and RI Family Court to ensure that youth voice and choice was actualized for youth in APPLA court.

Going forward, the program would benefit by receiving referrals for youth immediately upon receiving the APPLA designation. The earlier the program is able to apply focused permanency and educational assistance with the population of youth, the greater likelihood that it will have an impact. Additionally, the program will seek additional mental health advocacy support to ensure that the youth are linked with the correct specialized mental and behavioral health services they need. These youth are some of the highest need youth in the child welfare system. They clearly benefit from comprehensive permanency focused community based services to help improve their opportunities to achieve permanency and improved well-being prior to discharge from the public child welfare system. Investing in these services has benefitted many youth that would otherwise age out without permanency and increased wellness. Investing earlier would increase the benefit for youth.



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