

# FOSTERING THE FUTURE

AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE SIX YEARS IN REVIEW



(Front Cover)

The mural represented on the front cover was created by Fostering the Future youth participants in cooperation with the Mural, Music and Arts Project. *Nurturing Today* took over six months to design and create, stands five feet by ten feet and is in two segments so it can be easily moved from place to place. It has been on exhibit in the San Mateo County courthouse, the San Mateo County Human Services Agency, the San Mateo Garden Center as well as in its permanent home at StarVista.

The idea of the futuristic mother earth, with a strong embrace around the world, was taken directly from the class notes and student drawings. Her hands resting under her pregnant belly symbolize her care and love for children of the world. The youth drew up a list of positive words describing their ideal future. Pulling from the "top ten" on this list, the left side of the mural depicts two youth, 'confident' and 'determined', 'supporting one another' on the road to a positive future. They are taking the 'initiative' to climb the stairs before them and to avoid the negative obstacles that are figuratively represented by the concentric circles on the far left. The backpacks are rendered to represent different flags alluding to the cultural backgrounds of the Fostering the Future participants.

The following executive summary provides important highlights of the successes, challenges and lessons learned during the six years of Fostering the Future, an initiative of Silicon Valley Community Foundation. The full report is available upon request.

## Introduction

Young people who transition out of foster care face significant challenges as they attempt to take on the full mantle of adulthood. They are likely to experience more mental and physical health problems, are often unemployed or underemployed, face homelessness and housing instability and are at greater risk of becoming involved in crime or becoming victims of crime than young adults with a strong familial connection.<sup>1</sup> Their educational outcomes are also poor due to changes in placement and other stresses.<sup>2</sup>

Fostering the Future (FTF), an initiative of Silicon Valley Community Foundation, was originally launched by the Center for Venture Philanthropy<sup>3</sup> in 2005 to improve the transition to adulthood for San Mateo County foster and kinship youth. It was created in response to three factors: the death of a foster child in the county; the failure of the State of California to pass a federal audit and the resulting work to redesign the state's child welfare system; and the realization that some outcomes for children in kinship care (being raised by family members other than birth parents) are often as poor as those for children in the child welfare system.<sup>4</sup>

After hundreds of hours of interviews with a variety of stakeholders, including government agencies, judges, nonprofit leaders, foundation colleagues and youth, the community foundation led efforts to form a collaboration of key partners to focus on the unmet needs of foster and kinship youth.

The original partners in FTF were Youth and Family Enrichment Services (now StarVista), Edgewood Center for Children and Families, San Mateo County Office of Education, Legal Aid Society of San Mateo (later

replaced by the Law Foundation of Silicon Valley), the Human Services Agency of San Mateo County (HSA), San Mateo County Community College District and CASA of San Mateo County. The John Burton Foundation for Children Without Homes and Opportunity Fund joined the initiative a few years later to support public policy and financial education, respectively.

Following the community foundation's venture philanthropy framework, FTF pooled investments from foundations, individuals and government in order to reach its goals. Peninsula Community Foundation contributed \$1,000,000 from its endowment, which was matched by close to \$700,000 from individual donors and \$300,000 from San Mateo County government. The Foster Youth Housing Initiative, an effort by four foundations (The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, James Irvine Foundation, Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation and Sobrato Family Foundation) provided \$200,000 in support of FTF to help former foster youth obtain and retain permanent housing.

The three primary goals of the initiative were

1. To offer supports and opportunities to foster and kinship care youth;
2. To catalyze efforts to reform the systems serving these young people; and
3. To effect public policy change that would help foster and kinship youth prepare for the future.

Applied Survey Research, a nonprofit social research firm, was hired to assess the extent to which these goals were met. A variety of data collection methods were used including youth surveys and family/caregiver interviews, as well as service-provider observations, records and focus groups. In addition, key-informant interviews were conducted with various stakeholders who could provide a picture of the successes and lessons learned around the initiative's systems and policy work.

Given some challenges with youth-survey completion, the findings presented in this report are based on a small number of youth, but do provide meaningful insight into gains as a result of participation in various FTF-related services.

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<sup>1</sup> Courtney, M., Dworsky, A, et al, 2005. *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth*. Chicago: Chapin Hall, University of Chicago. Retrieved from <http://www.chapinhall.org>

<sup>2</sup> Trout, A. L., Hagaman, J., Casey, K., Reid, R., & Epstein, M. H. (2008). *The academic status of children and youth in out-of-home care: A review of the literature*. Children and Youth Services Review.

<sup>3</sup> The Center for Venture Philanthropy was a programmatic division of Peninsula Community Foundation, which merged with Community Foundation Silicon Valley to become Silicon Valley Community Foundation in 2007.

<sup>4</sup> In this summary, the term foster youth refers to youth being cared for within the child welfare system or having aged out of the system. The term kinship youth refers to youth who are not part of the formal child welfare system, but are in the care of relatives other than their birth parents.

## Project Successes

### Goal 1: Offer Supports and Opportunities to Youth

The first goal of FTF was to offer supports and opportunities to foster and kinship youth so that they would graduate from high school, develop a sense of belonging to community and move into adulthood on a job or education path with life skills required for independent living. In 2005, a steering committee composed of key partners identified a list of supports they believed would help youth in foster and kinship care gain the assets, skills and connections needed to become healthy, productive adults by age 25. These supports and opportunities were considered particularly important because they are often missing from these young people's lives when government, by necessity, prioritizes safety over quality-of-life issues. These supports were also aligned with recommendations in *Connected by 25: A Plan for Investing in Successful Futures for Foster Youth*, a report prepared by a group of national foundation leaders.

A total of 219 youth received direct support during the life of the project. These support services are described below, along with successes and key evaluation findings for each.

**Asset Coaching** – Asset coaching was designed to help foster and kinship youth identify and pursue goals in their lives. The theory was that by working one-on-one with the youth to create a pathway to reaching that goal, an asset coach could help them develop a sense of purpose, a positive view about their future, strong self-esteem, self-advocacy skills and personal power. Three asset coaches were hired by two partner organizations and helped 111 foster and kinship youth. Surveys of youth and asset coaches demonstrated the following outcomes with a youth comment in quotation marks:

1. Asset-coached youth increased their connection to a supportive adult with whom they could discuss important issues in their lives.

*“The asset coach helped me by being there, having someone to talk to outside of family members and friends. We talked about things I don't necessarily want to share with family or friends.”*

2. Youth had opportunities to learn about themselves and were observed to have gains in self-identity.

3. Asset coaching helped youth feel positive about their future and identify future goals.
4. The asset coach assisted youth academically by making referrals for academic supports, helping them request individualized education programs, taking youth on college tours and assisting with financial aid and college applications.

**Legal Support** – Throughout the six years of the initiative, a legal advocate worked with 93 San Mateo County youth to help them resolve a variety of legal issues, ranging from prevention of school expulsion to access to public benefits such as Medi-Cal. In addition to addressing the specific issues of each case, the advocate helped youth learn how to identify and speak up for their needs and seek appropriate help from adults and peers. The following is excerpted from a report written by the legal advocate.

*“Along with pro bono co-counsel, the legal advocate successfully represented a foster youth in a six-day state-level administrative special-education hearing. Among other remedies, they obtained over 450 hours of one-on-one instructional services for the youth to compensate for the school district's violation over many years of his rights as a student with disabilities.”*

**Youth Financial Independence (Y-FI)** – This program provided financial education and resources to 61 foster and kinship youth in an effort to promote financial literacy and economic self-sufficiency within a savings program that provided a 2:1 match for their savings up to a maximum of \$2,000.

Youth collectively saved and invested close to \$100,000 towards paying for school, car purchases and housing rental deposits. When asked what Y-FI had taught them about saving, youth said the following:

*“To put a portion aside from every check and pretend that it's not there.”*

*“Building persistence, and keeping at it until I was finally able to depend on myself rather than others.”*

**Housing Advocacy** – A housing advocate joined the team for two years (2006-2008) under a grant from the Foster Youth Housing Initiative. The goal of that work was to help youth learn how to find and retain appropriate, secure housing; provide actual housing assistance to emancipating youth; and work with landlords to help them understand the needs of foster youth and become more welcoming of these young

people. The advocate worked with 106 foster and two kinship youth.

**Other Services** – Fostering the Future also provided a number of additional programs and services, such as recreational and community service activities, drop-in groups and leadership opportunities.

## Goal 2: Catalyze Local Systems Change

A second goal of Fostering the Future was to catalyze local systems change as measured by new ways of doing business that delivered improved outcomes for youth. This goal focused primarily, but by no means exclusively, on the child-welfare system and its relationship to the youth and to other systems such as education. The systemic change was to include new ways of collecting and analyzing data about foster youth, new forms of cooperation and communication and new alignment of resources.

- FTF stimulated changes in child-welfare practice within San Mateo County by encouraging a positive youth-development approach that moved social work beyond the exclusive focus on safety to include attention on the youth's interests, quality of life and well being.
- FTF contributed to greater community awareness of the educational rights of foster and kinship youth through presentations by the legal advocate to 500 youth, educators, school-board members, social workers and other service providers. Furthermore, as a result of this heightened awareness, county judges place increasing weight upon stability of school placements when making decisions about a foster youth's placement.
- FTF commissioned the John W. Gardner Center at Stanford University to collect data from four school districts and the San Mateo County Human Services Agency and produce a report that demonstrated the disparity in outcomes between foster and non-foster youth.<sup>5</sup>
- FTF convened a group of professionals from several foster-youth-serving governmental and nonprofit agencies to participate in a statewide educational conference. The group decided to form a permanent team that created an online

educational handbook; held educational programs for school communities, particularly school board members, to highlight needs of foster youth; and launched a pilot project at South San Francisco Unified School District to improve communications between foster students, teachers and the supportive adults in the students' lives. This EdSupport Working Group is now an official advisory group to the San Mateo County Office of Education's Foster Youth Services program.

- FTF stimulated greater communication among the multiple nonprofit and government entities that operate in the ecosystem that surrounds foster youth. Partners observed that along with youth, their organizations and the larger system of care benefitted from working together towards a common goal.

## Goal 3: Effect Public Policy Change

A third goal of the initiative was to effect public policy change at both the regional and state level. The following are three of the most significant public policy successes:

- Advocating for passage of Assembly Bill 12, the California Fostering Connections to Success Act, which, among other things, extended support to foster youth until the age of 21 rather than the previous cutoff age of 18.
- Maintaining funding for THP-Plus, the transitional housing legislation that supports emancipated youth with housing subsidies and supportive services.
- Supporting passage of Assembly Bill 1512, which brought about needed changes to California's Medi-Cal program to support foster youth who are moved from one county to another.

FTF provided funding for the John Burton Foundation, which played a lead role in the first two of these legislative efforts. The community foundation was also active in the legislative process, writing letters to legislators when appropriate and participating in several of the strategy sessions regarding AB 12 and THP-Plus. The Law Foundation played a major role in passage of the Medi-Cal bill and was heavily involved in several others pieces of legislation.

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<sup>5</sup> Castrechini, S. (2009). *Education Outcomes for Court-Dependent Youth in San Mateo County*. Issue brief produced by John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities.

## Key Lessons Learned

In addition to its successes, FTF encountered significant challenges to implementation and learned a number of lessons as a result.

1. Clearly define the day-to-day work of each partner and staff position within the initiative by creating standards of practice as soon after launch as possible.

Asset coaching was a new service concept piloted by the initiative. Two of the partner organizations hired and supervised the three asset coaches and the role of this position evolved somewhat differently within these organizations in spite of significant efforts to overcome differences in institutional philosophy and practice. This created inconsistency in the work and conflict among staff which was partially responsible for staff turnover in the asset coach role.

2. Establish written eligibility criteria to identify youth who were at the appropriate risk and need level to take advantage of asset coaching and other initiative services.

Staff found that the immediate needs of many of the enrolling youth were greater and more intense than anticipated. For those youth, working toward achieving an asset goal was sometimes superseded by crisis situations and asset coaches sometimes found they were unprepared and ill qualified to deal with the issues the youth faced.

3. Fully understand the differences in supports available to the two populations (foster and kinship youth) in order to better allocate limited resources.

Differences in familial circumstances and access to opportunities impacted the distribution of resources. The kinship youth lived with relatives and tended to live in more stable situations while the foster youth had access to more programs and a broader support system of professionals (e.g., social workers, educational liaisons and court appointed special advocates). For instance, foster youth have greater access to financial aid for college and yet experience the instability brought on by ever-changing living situations.

4. Strengthen the asset-development philosophy within the existing support system for foster youth rather than add yet another paid adult to the youth's circle.

Foster youth have many paid, and some volunteer, adults touching on various parts of their lives and one more was not necessarily beneficial. Youth in kinship care, however, do not have a host of adults to serve their needs, so the work of the asset coach was very useful for those young people

5. Carefully consider when to stay the course with programmatic strategies and when to shift gears.

Many things changed between 2005 and 2011, most notably the state of the economy and secondarily, staffing at all levels within nearly all of the partner agencies, both nonprofit and government. New people brought their own interests, experiences and ideas to the work. Initiative leadership too readily reacted to these differences. Therefore, the delivery of direct services went through several evolutions and shifts in direction. While these were instituted in response to the changes occurring, the changes in themselves served as a hurdle to data collection, relationships with partners, role definition of staff and marketing of the initiative to youth and the community.

6. Create regular touch points among top management of all partner organizations to ensure adherence to the original vision.

The partnership between FTF and HSA shifted during the project. The economic downturn forced the county to reduce its in-kind and financial support and repeated changes in leadership at HSA undermined understanding and commitment to FTF. Concurrently, an incomplete understanding on the part of the initiative of some of the complexities of the child welfare system and the shifting program design mentioned above led to some communications challenges and increased tension.

7. Public policy work is time consuming and is more effectively conducted with staff specifically assigned to and experienced in the work. Build in the expectation that the initiative may not always be able to speak with one voice, but that each partner may have its own perspective.

Partnerships with county government agencies and community-based organizations were an absolute necessity to effect public policy changes. At times, however, those partners had competing or differing positions on a given policy issue,

occasionally creating a stalemate. In addition, community-based organizations whose mission does not include advocacy found it difficult to participate in a meaningful way due to lack of personnel resources.

8. Community foundations are ideally suited to play a variety of leadership roles in social change efforts and the boundaries of these roles need to be clearly defined.

In this initiative, Silicon Valley Community Foundation played a variety of roles from that of primary funder to managing partner, highly leveraging its community leadership toolkit by sharing knowledge, forming coalitions, building community capacity and leadership and advocating for policy solutions. It brought together a variety of funding streams to support the work and built a network of resources poised to continue the work. When working directly to implement and grow the initiative to meet its objectives, however, the community foundation was placed in a more tactical and politically difficult role as it was drawn into personnel and service-delivery management issues within partner organizations. This led to some confusion around the community foundation's role as managing partner of the initiative or program manager of direct services.

## Next Steps

We are pleased that a number of the services originally spearheaded by FTF will continue. Edgewood Center has adopted the asset-coaching philosophy and standards into the routines of their case managers as they support their kinship families. The community foundation is working with the Law Foundation to secure the funding needed to continue the legal advocate's work with youth in San Mateo County. Y-FI is being phased out and a new program, Start2Save, has been developed by Opportunity Fund, the San Jose-based community development financial institution that has partnered with FTF on the financial programs. Start2Save seems an ideal savings program for former foster youth and will be offered through StarVista to former foster youth enrolled in THP-Plus. Funding is coming from the state for financial education and from a specifically dedicated source at the community foundation for matching funds.

Several of the original investors in Fostering the Future have recently expressed their deep interest in continuing the work that has been started. The community foundation has agreed to embark upon a fact-finding mission to determine gaps and opportunities within the web of systems serving foster youth that could be appropriately addressed by the resources available and that would have deeper impact on significantly more youth through systemic improvements at the local and/or state levels.

## Summary

Fostering the Future was a comprehensive effort to bring about change in San Mateo County on the personal level by improving life for individual youth and on the systemic level through changes in practice, philosophy, communications and public policy. It built upon the strengths of its partners and called attention to some of the unmet or underserved needs of both foster and kinship youth. It strengthened the joint effort between government and the nonprofit sector to prepare young people in foster and kinship care for the transition to adulthood.



Fostering the Future is an initiative of **Silicon Valley Community Foundation**.

For additional information, please contact:

Margot Mailliard Rawlins  
Community Leadership Officer  
Silicon Valley Community Foundation  
2440 W. El Camino Real, Suite 300  
Mountain View, CA 94040  
mmrawlins@siliconvalleycf.org  
650.450.5493  
[www.siliconvalleycf.org](http://www.siliconvalleycf.org)



**Applied Survey Research** is a non-profit social research firm responsible for the evaluation of this social venture fund.

For additional information, please contact:

Lisa Colvig-Amir  
Director of Evaluation Services  
San Jose Office:  
991 W. Hedding St., Suite 102  
San Jose, CA 95126  
(408) 247-8319  
[www.appliedsurveyresearch.org](http://www.appliedsurveyresearch.org)