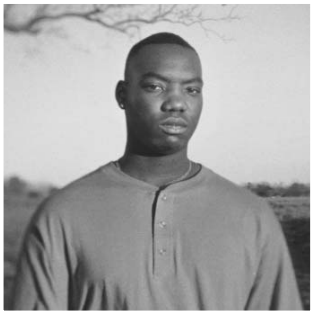

# it's my life

**summary of a framework for youth transitioning from foster care to successful adulthood**

casey family programs
fostering families. fostering change.

## About Casey Family Programs

Casey Family Programs mission is to provide and improve and ultimately to prevent the need for foster care.

Established by United Parcel Service founder Jim Casey, the Seattle-based national operating foundation has served children, youth, and families in the child welfare system since 1966.

The foundation operates in two ways. It provides direct services, and it promotes advances in child-welfare practice and policy.

Casey collaborates with foster, kinship, and adoptive parents to provide safe, loving homes for youth in its direct care. The foundation also collaborates with counties, states, and American Indian and Alaska Native tribes to improve services and outcomes for the more than 500,000 young people in out-of-home care across the U.S.

Drawing on four decades of front-line work with families and alumni of foster care, Casey Family Programs develops tools, practices, and policies to nurture all youth in care and to help parents strengthen families at risk of needing foster care.

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For more information about this framework, contact Casey Family Programs at info@casey.org or 1300 Dexter Avenue North, Floor 3, Seattle, WA 98109.

Visit our Web site at www.casey.org.

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Casey's Board of Trustees, President and CEO Ruth Massinga, and Executive Vice Presidents Jim Marquart and Jean McIntosh laid the foundation for this work. Casey's Regional Vice Presidents—Carolyne Rodriguez, Southern Region; Darwin Cox, Great Plains Region; Katherine Gabel, Western Region; and James Edmondson, Northwest Region—worked with staff members from 28 locations across 14 states to make the dream a reality.

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it's my life

**a framework for youth transitioning from foster care to successful adulthood**

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**The Development of It's My Life**

This document is the result of many people's work. A complete list of individual acknowledgements appears in the full version of It's My Life. This work builds upon the successful activities of the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement at the University of Southern Maine and the National Resource Center for Youth Services (NRCYS) at the University of Oklahoma. Funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and sponsored by the National Foster Care Awareness Project (NFCAP), the work of NRCYS identified promising practices that assist youth transitioning from foster care into successful adulthood.

In early 2000, shortly after the Foster Care Independence Act was passed, Casey Family Programs convened a steering committee of staff, foster parents, and young adults formerly in foster care to discuss what youth leaving care need to successfully live on their own. Over three months, a smaller task force gathered for a series of meetings to develop content for this document. This task force included former foster youth, foster parents, child welfare staff, educators, economic development practitioners, health care professionals, a juvenile justice judge, researchers, and professionals who work in urban, rural, and Native American reservation settings across the United States. The task force was facilitated by Barbara Kelley Duncan, Vice President of Enterprise Development, and Darwin Cox, Vice President of Casey Family Programs' Great Plains Region.

To complete their work, the Task Force analyzed information on exemplary transition practices gathered by Dorothy Ansell, Casey Family Programs and other organizations over a three-year period. In addition to the Task Force, several workgroups and teams internal to Casey Family Programs were seminal to this work. They include the Youth Competencies Workgroup; the Transition Guidelines Workgroup; the 1999-2000 Casey Day planners and participants; and the Cross-Regional Practice Team.

**This document is based on:**

- *Contributions from members of the task force*, who reviewed and discussed promising practices culled from a literature review and a program review of transition services. The task force included former foster youth, foster parents, child welfare staff, educators, economic development practitioners, health care professionals and a juvenile justice judge, researchers, and professionals.

- *A literature review*, which resulted in a compilation of materials from the fields of child welfare, independent living, youth development, economic development, and housing for people with special needs.
- *A program review*, which provided further insight into new and innovative practices for youth leaving care.

* A fully referenced and more detailed version of It's My Life is available from Casey Family Programs, Practice and Policy Development Department, 206-282-7300.

## acknowledgements

## FOREWORD

It's My Life is the culmination of years of effort, love, passion and commitment to the well being and success of children and young adults who are in foster care. It is also the start of a more focused commitment to youth who are transitioning out of foster care. I hope that each person who reads this is empowered by it, excited by it, and that it strengthens everyone's commitment to transitioning foster youth. Together as foster care alumni, youth, foster parents, child welfare professionals, and as regular people, I believe we can and will make a huge difference in the lives of youth leaving care, but only if we do it together.

I was in Casey Family Programs' long-term foster care for fifteen years, and during this time the most important person in my life was my mother. She is and continues to be a source of stability for me. She is my biggest cheerleader and fan, my best friend, my teacher and my guide. I admire her and love her enormously for sticking with me—that has made a huge impact in my life.

We could not have made it alone. It was family and Casey support that helped us through the tough times and allowed us to stay together. My mother had the support of my Casey social worker, family and friends, and access to services that helped us both. But to me the most important thing she ever did was to just be there. It was her continuous presence, the presence of an adult who I knew loved me, supported me, and believed in me that really made the difference and helped me to become a self-sufficient and happy adult.

I believe that every person has the capacity to make a positive contribution to a child's life. One of the best contributions is to be that stability in a child's life, to be their advocate, to listen, to comfort, to play, to remember birthdays, to congratulate them on a job well done, and to encourage them when times get rough. Just being there will make all the difference.

Samatra C. Doyle
Seattle, Washington
June 2001

## INTRODUCTION

*"It is important to honor our beginnings,*
*to remember that we matter,*
*and that we have a place in this world*
*that no one else has."*
—INSPIRED BY A NATIVE AMERICAN LEGEND

it's my life

Finding one's "place in the world" can be challenging in the best of circumstances. For the thousands of young people who "age out" of foster care[a] each year, the transition to self-sufficiency may require a strong safety net of support services. Youth who have experienced abuse, neglect, and other circumstances resulting in out-of-home placement may need additional resources to reach their full potential. Further, these young people may lack access to family members who might typically provide assistance and support.

Each year, more than 20,000 of the 500,000 youth in substitute care reach an age at which they must make their transition out of the child welfare system, whether or not they possess the skills and support necessary to live successfully on their own. Like all young people making the difficult transition to adulthood, these youth need extensive support and opportunities to build and practice skills, as well as to develop and strengthen the interdependent relationships needed for healthy, productive community life.

While these youth experience physical and emotional challenges more frequently than their peers, a basic premise of transition work is that *despite significant challenges, youth in out-of-home care possess the strengths and power to succeed, so long as they receive resources and support from caring adults.*

"It is difficult," says one foster youth. "But we need to be optimistic. We need to keep hope alive."

Regardless of family circumstances, we can help these youth learn to honor their uniqueness and find their own special place in the world. We want to ensure that every young person who leaves the child welfare system is connected with a competent, caring adult. Whether this adult is a teacher, coach, aunt, social worker, or former foster parent, what matters is that someone steady will be there to lend an ear, answer questions and help that young person to find his or her place in the world. There is perhaps no more important work we can do.

The following pages explain the principles and practices that form the basis of successful transition work.

I envision my success.

[a]Foster care is 24-hour substitute care for children placed away from their birth parents. An agency (state, local, tribal, non-profit, or child welfare) is involved in placement and care responsibility for the child. Foster care includes foster family homes (kin and non-relative), group homes, residential facilities, or child care institutions.

## BACKGROUND AND INTENT

Casey Family Programs is a Seattle-based private operating foundation that has provided long-term foster care for children and youth since 1966. Operating out of 28 offices in 14 states and Washington, D.C., Casey's services include long-term foster care, adoption, kinship care, family reunification, and transition services[b] for foster youth leaving care. Casey also collaborates with public and private entities, and works with local, state, and federal policy makers to improve services for children, youth, and families.

### The Casey Legacy

Our founder, Jim Casey, realized early in his life that a caring family and a permanent home were the elements that separated youth who succeeded in life from those who did not. He committed himself to helping youth who were denied opportunities because of circumstances they did not choose and could not control.

Jim Casey believed that every child deserved a safe, stable home and a permanent relationship with a caring adult. His legacy has been the creation of strong, lasting connections for abused and neglected youth. With the security and resources that caring adults can provide, he believed that every youth could begin to achieve the self-sufficiency necessary to live in an increasingly complex world.

### Our Plan for the Future

*"...we will use every resource we have to see that children put at risk by family circumstances have the means to grow into hopeful citizens with worthy futures."*

—First is the Dream: Casey Family Programs Strategic Plan 2000

Casey Family Program's strategic plan for the new century outlines a clear plan to reach more young people in transition: "Each year, more than 20,000 American foster youth turn 18 and step out into the world alone, most of them without resources. Our goal is to make the transition for every one of them much more secure and productive."

The strategic plan further states that we will help foster teens enter adulthood with confidence and purpose: "Casey will partner with communities and families to make sure that youth transitioning from foster care have a lasting connection with a significant adult and a stable living environment."

While some of the objectives necessary to accomplish these goals are complicated, their purpose is simple. We have created a national plan to develop more services for youth exiting the foster care system. Through



[b]Transition services can be described as a compendium of assessments, services and supports available to youth and young adults leaving out-of-home care.

effective collaboration with other public and private agencies, we will help ensure that foster care transition services are available in every state, drawing from all available resources at the local, state, and national levels.

Through this work, we intend to make Jim Casey's belief a reality for youth leaving out-of-home care. We want to help youth discover their own power. We want to help them identify their strengths so that they can envision a future filled with promise. We want to make it possible for them to proclaim, "It's my life.  And I can make choices that will help me to be healthy and productive. I can dream of a brighter future."

**I am a strong person with unique talents, gifts and skills.**

## A FRAMEWORK FOR YOUTH IN TRANSITION

It's My Life is a youth-centered framework to guide transition services for young people who "age out" of foster care and other substitute care. The principles and practices described in this document serve as the foundation of Casey Family Programs' national transition strategy, which aims to provide youth with the skills, knowledge and supports they need to become self-supporting by age 25.

It is our hope that all organizations providing transition services to youth leaving care will incorporate these principles and practices into their work. By working together to employ these principles and practices in ways that are most appropriate in each community, service providers and organizations can help young people acquire the skills, experience, and attitudes they need to be successful, contributing citizens.

## RECOMMENDED PROGRAM STRATEGIES

To support youth in achieving their self-identified goals and dreams for a good life, service providers can implement the following program strategies:

- Help youth and young adults in transition channel their energy, strengths, and power into developing and achieving a personal vision of successful adulthood.
- Identify areas in which their program, community and/or state can develop new services and strengthen existing services to provide a comprehensive system to support youth transitioning from care.
- Develop strategies to facilitate effective and timely implementation of improved services and a comprehensive system of support at the local and state levels.
- Identify and implement agency, system and public policies that promote collaboration among agencies, encourage youth involvement in planning and programming, and prepare caregivers to help youth gain independent living skills.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR SUCCESS

The practices described in It's My Life are designed to help youth discover their own power "by drawing on their strengths to identify and pursue healthy and productive futures."

As partners with youth in achieving this goal, we have defined "success" as the point at which youth transitioning from care can assert and believe the following declarations. These statements, spoken in the voices of youth in transition, serve as the fundamental guiding principles for our work.

it's my life

### TWELVE STATEMENTS OF SUCCESS FOR YOUTH IN TRANSITION

- *I envision my **success**.*
- *I am a strong person with unique **talents, gifts and skills**.*
- *I am proud of the **cultural and personal values** that make me who I am.*
- *I am responsible for my own life and know how to **make good decisions**.*
- *I determine the **relationships that are significant** in my life.*
- *I pursue **relationships that help me** succeed and **seek opportunities to make contributions** to others.*
- *I am **committed to learning the skills** to succeed.*
- *I need to begin the process of **learning to live on my own** early and continue it throughout my life.*
- *I understand that **every community is different** and that I need to create **my own sense of place** in each without losing my identity.*
- *I am a **leader**, and I make **important contributions** to my community.*
- *I benefit most by having **services and supports that work together** to help me achieve my goals.*
- *In order to help other youth, I will **bring my experiences**, good and bad, **to create positive change** in programs and services.*

**I am proud of the cultural and personal values that make me who I am.**

### CHALLENGES AND RESILIENCY

The principles above are essential in transition work, because youth leaving foster care face a wide range of physical and emotional challenges. These challenges are often complicated by problems inherent in the child welfare system, such as disrupted placements and frequent moves.[1] Compared with youth who have not been in the child welfare system, foster youth are more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system, are at higher risk of teen pregnancy and parenting, have lower academic skills and high school graduation rates, and have disproportionately high rates of physical, developmental, and mental health problems. These issues are exacerbated by the fact that youth in out-of-home care tend to have less support—both emotional and financial—than youth in the general population.[2]

Several circumstances drive these problems. One is that more than half the children and youth in care have experienced neglect and one-fourth have experienced physical abuse.[3] Abuse and neglect affect a youth's ability to learn and to form healthy relationships.[4] Another factor is that youth encounter additional challenges once they are placed in the child welfare system. Common problems within the system include less than optimal initial placements, limited resources, poor service integration, school instability and lack of youth involvement in transition planning and programming.[5] The Foster Care Independence Act specifically recognizes the need for permanency planning for older adolescents while preparing these same youth for independent living.

There are significant societal issues that contribute to the family and systemic problems that precede the placement of children into out-of-home care. For example, the inability to adequately address poverty reduction and substance abuse has led to substandard living conditions for many families in the United States.[6]

Further, foster youth have historically had minimal control over their personal circumstances. This is the unintended result of the past 70 years of state and federal child welfare policy, which focused broadly on protection of abused children, and left little room for youth to make decisions about placements, service planning and other factors that impact their daily lives.

While many youth in out-of-home care share similar experiences, a recent multi-state analysis completed by the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago speaks to the need to be thoughtful about the assumptions programs make about those experiences and the implications for service delivery. The researchers studied adolescents in foster care at age 16 and found two main groups of youth:

1) *Teens who return home to birth family relatively quickly*, some of whom (28%) return to out-of-home care two or more times. These youth generally receive transition services via community-based settings, as well as family-based services with their birth families whenever appropriate.

2) *Youth who have spent long periods of time in out-of-home care*, who often have less connection to birth families. Services are more likely to be provided as an adjunct to foster or group care, or through community-based settings. The involvement of birth or extended family varies. For those youth who are homeless, in detention facilities, or living on their own (often after running away or spending time in residential treatment facilities), services are offered primarily through community-based settings.[7]

This analysis raises the question of how to focus future research and points to one way to define subpopulations of transitioning youth. Future research could help identify whether there are specific service delivery methods that are more effective based on the age at entry, length of time in care, differential need, and number of placements.

Given these challenges, transitioning foster youth nonetheless possess the power and strengths necessary to succeed in life. Effective transition work focuses on resiliency, or identifying the factors that can enhance young people's ability to overcome life situations that place them at risk. Resilient youth possess:

- self-esteem and confidence;
- a belief in their ability to affect their own lives; and
- problem-solving abilities.

Two critical factors that are known to help youth overcome the challenges they face are *positive, trusting relationships with adults* and connections to *external support systems*, such as schools, religious organizations, cultural communities and youth groups.[8]

Studies have demonstrated that attachment to a supportive adult, related or unrelated, can be one of the key variables correlated with resilience. Research has also shown that even when young people grow up in high-risk environments, they are likely to have positive outcomes when they experience caring relationships with adults. Further, resilient children are more likely to avoid such high-risk behavior patterns as alcohol and drug use, depression, sexual activity, and violence. They are also more likely to succeed in school, exhibit leadership, and overcome adversity.

Resilient youth also share the ability to see themselves as part of a larger community.

For example, in a longitudinal study of children from Kauai, Werner found that youth who developed resilient traits over time also had emotional support from institutions or individuals within the community.[9] One of the external supports identified was religious institutions or faith. As adults, some participants reported that faith—either religious or otherwise—provided them with needed support. Anecdotally, the significance of faith or spirituality during and after care has been reaffirmed by foster youth since the Werner study.[10]

**I understand that every community is different and that I need to create my own sense of place in each without losing my identity.**

## HOW CAN PRACTITIONERS BEST HELP TO MEET THE NEEDS OF YOUTH IN TRANSITION?

### GENERAL PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 1. BE ABLE TO FULFILL MULTIPLE ROLES.

It is helpful for each youth and young adult to work one-on-one with a designated staff person when they are in need of transition services. The ideal worker fills many roles, serving as an advocate, service coordinator, coach, facilitator, mediator, counselor, and information resource. When these relationships are based on mutual respect and trust, young people can come to rely on the staff member for support. Having the same person serve as an advocate can prevent the frustration that results when youth are required to tell the same story again and again to determine eligibility for distinct services.

#### 2. DEVELOP A COMPREHENSIVE SERVICE PLAN.

Youth and young adults also benefit from a single, coherent planning process that "brings it all together" for them in a clear and meaningful way. By effectively engaging with young people and becoming partners in the planning process, practitioners can enable youth to identify their own talents and needs based on a comprehensive self-assessment. Staff can instruct youth in goal setting and provide methods to help youth meet those goals. As part of a team characterized by mutual respect, the staff member can help the young adult to develop and monitor an individualized service plan. Professionals, caregivers, and other important people in the youth's life (as identified by the youth) can also serve on the team. ***This process is most beneficial when the assessment is strength-based, the service plan is outcome-oriented, and all services are culturally appropriate***.

#### 3. USE OUTCOME-ORIENTED PRACTICE TO HELP YOUTH CREATE THEIR OWN VISION FOR THE FUTURE.

Outcome-oriented practice focuses on a young person's strengths and potential. By creating a vision, youth can learn to identify their capabilities, and develop goals to help accomplish their dreams. Practitioners can help youth recognize their strengths and talents, and then translate those talents into goals and action steps.

#### 4. CONTRIBUTE TO A COORDINATED SYSTEM OF TRANSITION SERVICES.

Youth receive better quality services when providers are working in a collaborative manner. Further, collaboration among organizations can help improve the knowledge base of practitioners and maximize available resources. Essential ingredients for effective organizational collaboration include a shared vision across organizations, clearly identified mechanisms

**I am a leader,**
**and I make important**
**contributions to my community.**

for communication, and regular opportunities to learn from one another. All stakeholders must be willing to work toward a shared, coordinated system. Other mechanisms for facilitating system coordination include interagency staffing and comprehensive community development initiatives.

The methods briefly described above are individual tasks that practitioners can use to facilitate smoother transition planning for youth. Public policy is also essential for reaching the goal of helping transitioning young people become self-supporting. At the public policy level, assistance to young adults transitioning from care has been mandated by recent federal legislation. The following section presents a brief overview of how child welfare legislation has grown to include such concepts as youth development, permanency planning for older adolescents, and improved access to services for foster youth and families.

## POLICY BACKGROUND

Youth empowerment and participation are essential components of successful transition work. Historically, foster youth have had minimal control over their personal circumstances. In the past, state and federal child welfare policy focused broadly on protection of abused children and did not allow youth an active voice in placement decisions. Until Congress passed the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, federal policy encouraged removing children from homes and placing them in foster care; there was no funding to support preservation of families. The 1980 law requires public agencies to make "reasonable efforts" to prevent removal of children from their homes and to rehabilitate parents if removal is necessary. It was followed by a series of laws promoting more rigorous child abuse reporting, community-based services to support families with children, quicker adoptions, and placement of Native American children with kin and tribes.

Congress responded to concerns about the poor outcomes of youth emancipating out of foster care with the IV-E Independent Living Skills Initiative of 1986. This law and subsequent amendments provide for emancipation skills training for youth in foster care and post-foster care up to age 21. But despite the promise of the new legislation, states implemented the policies unevenly, and they served only a fraction of the young people eligible. The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 considerably increases funding for independent living activities, offers more assistance for youth ages 18-21 who are leaving foster care, provides states with options to offer more housing and health care services (Medicaid), requires states to provide training to foster parents so they can support the development of independent living skills, and increases state accountability for outcomes of transitioning foster youth.

**I benefit most from having services and supports that work together to help me achieve my goals.**

The new federal law has also opened many doors for youth emancipating from care, but there are still obstacles to helping foster youth achieve a smoother transition to adulthood. Many challenges to effective transition policies may be addressed at the state and local level and can be overturned with strong mobilization of child welfare professionals, youth and families, educators, employers, and other community participants. Some of the questions practitioners may ask in their individual states include:

- Does the state plan include strategies for engaging young people in planning and decisions regarding their own case planning?
- Does it include strategies for engaging tribes in planning for Chafee and for delivering transition/independent living services to Indian youth?

- Does the plan include ways to fill service gaps unique to individual communities within the state, such as high housing costs or large rural areas?
- Is there a plan for spending up to 30% of Chafee funds to provide room and board services to 18–20 year olds?
- Is there a plan for exercising the Medicaid option made possible through the new legislation?

For further questions to consider or additional information about the Foster Care Independence Act and the Chafee Program, see the fully annotated version of *It's My Life* and *Frequently Asked Questions About the FCIA* at www.casey.org.

It is our hope that the new federal policies will support an integrated approach to transition work across the seven practice domains. Following is a summary of the importance of each domain in the lives of transitioning foster youth, along with recommendations for practice.

Through interdependent[c] relationships with family, friends, and community, and particularly through connections with competent and caring adults, transitioning youth will have the resources and supports to succeed in all of the important areas—or domains—of their lives:

1. Cultural and Personal Identity Formation

2. Supportive Relationships and Community Connections

3. Physical and Mental Health

4. Life Skills

5. Education

6. Employment

7. Housing

Because life is not lived in neat little compartments, this transition framework uses a holistic approach based on the belief that the domains of our lives are interconnected. For example, the state of our emotions affects our ability to think and work. Our physical health determines the tasks we can and cannot perform at any given time. The work we do, the places we live, the friends we make...all are woven together to create a life that is uniquely ours.

What follows is a summary of the importance of each domain in the lives of transitioning foster youth, along with recommendations for practice.

**1. Cultural and Personal Identity Formation**

The primary psychological task of adolescence is individuation—the process of separating from family and finding a place in society as a complete person. Identity development involves the integration of cognitive, emotional, and social factors to create a person's sense of self. Elements of identity include race and ethnicity, religion, nationality, immigration status, gender, sexual orientation, disability, regional differences, geographical focus (urban or rural), and economic class. Practitioners should seek out activities to assist youth in the development of their identity.[d]

For youth who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT), developing a healthy sexual identity may be compromised by families who are not accepting of them. Many of these youth enter care when they must leave home due to family intolerance. If GLBT youth are also youth of color, they

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**In order to help youth, I will bring my experiences, good, and bad, to create positive change in programs and services.**

[c]Interdependency represents the ability to meet one's physical, cultural, social, emotional, economic, and spiritual needs within the context of relationships with families, friends, employers, and the community. We use this term rather than independent because the relationships cultivated throughout life are not independent of one another.

[d]For work with gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered youth, see Ryan and Futterman's *Lesbian and Gay Youth, Care and Counseling*. Columbia University Press: NY 1998. For additional parent and practitioner resources on identity formation, see the annotated bibliography in Casey Family Programs' *The Conceptual Framework of Identity Formation in a Society of Multiple Cultures*. Seattle, WA. 2000.

may face the additional stress of racial discrimination and possible scorn from communities of color about their sexual identity.[11]

Another aspect of identity development involves issues of spirituality and faith. Werner discusses spirituality as a component of youth identity in her research of foster care youth on Kauai.[12] Spirituality and religion are critical elements of many foster youth's identities and should not be overlooked. Further research is needed to explore the role of spirituality in youth identity development.

All adolescents strive to answer four questions in their quest for identity: "Who am I? Where do I belong? What can I do or be? What do I believe in?" Adolescents in foster care need information about their past to answer these questions. This process can be very difficult and having a stable relationship with a significant adult can provide an anchor as the youth seeks understanding.

For youth who are removed from their families before they are emotionally prepared for separation, individuation can be particularly complicated. Issues to be addressed include: separation from birth family; insecure attachments due to abuse and neglect; struggles with self-esteem; possible cognitive and learning disabilities; and the challenges of living apart from family, culture, and community. Youth in care who identify with multiple communities face significant challenges to the development of a healthy identity.

**Practice recommendations to promote healthy identity formation**

- Train staff and caregivers to assess their own biases with regard to youth's cultural and personal identities.
- Train staff and caregivers in the stages of identity formation, and in how to respond to "teachable moments" to assist youth in healthy identity formation.
- Connect youth with opportunities to select well-screened mentors who can act as role models and teach youth specific skills.
- Value and promote birth family work. Invest in providing a continuum of information, opportunities and supports that enable youth to connect with birth families as they choose.
- Provide activities which address cultural needs in recruitment and retention of families, staff, and mentors.
- Provide assessments and service planning that address cultural needs.
- Provide activities which support youth in developing a positive sense of self, with a specific focus on dealing with racism and discrimination.

**2. Supportive Relationships and Community Connections**

None of us can live independently without a support system in our community. A connection to one's community builds and strengthens relationships and can create lasting ties. As we depend on others, so others must have opportunities to depend on us. Youth need people in their lives who fill the roles that a healthy birth family would typically provide. Whether it is a biological or adoptive family member, a guardian, counselor or mentor, young people need someone to contact for support and guidance. While creating healthy relationships with birth families can be extremely difficult, it has been demonstrated that foster youth who have contact with their birth parents while in care have better outcomes than youth who do not maintain these contacts.[13]

In addition to personal connections, young people need opportunities to provide assistance to others through volunteerism and community service.[14] They should also have opportunities to contribute to community life through leadership and participation in community decision-making. Additional efforts may be necessary to support such connections for youth in out-of-home care, who may have lived in multiple homes or experienced less consistency in relationships with others than their mainstream peers.

**Practice recommendations to support community connections and relationship-building**

- Provide opportunities for youth to create, maintain, or strengthen supportive and sustaining relationships with birth families, foster families, and significant others.
- Connect youth with peer and adult mentors; provide opportunities for youth in out-of-home care to mentor others.
- Create opportunities for youth to play an active role in community life through volunteerism, leadership, and community service.
- Facilitate young people's knowledge of and access to community resources; ensure opportunities for young people to be valued as community resources.
- Connect youth with culturally specific events and services in their communities.

**3. Physical and Mental Health**

Maintaining good health is an essential first step for transitioning youth as they move toward fulfilling their personal vision for adult life. They need sustained support to ensure that their long-term health needs are met during the transition to adulthood. In addition to physical health, developmental, behavioral, and emotional issues must also be addressed, along with personal and environmental safety.

**I am responsible for my own life and know how to make good decisions.**

It is necessary for youth leaving care to have access to highly intensive and specialized health services. There are specific physical and mental health issues which they are more likely to develop.[15] Such health concerns should be assessed and explored within the context of each youth's individual health care needs. When leaving the child welfare system, young people often lose routine preventive care, specialized services to treat chronic medical conditions, and access to counseling services.[16]

Many youth enter jobs that do not provide health insurance or pay sufficient wages to allow them to purchase it independently.[17] In addition, there is a national shortage of qualified providers who can help young people with the unique constellation of developmental, mental health, and substance abuse issues they may face when transitioning from care.

It is important for youth transitioning out of care to see their health care needs in a holistic way and to understand the connection between maintaining good health and achieving their personal vision for adult life. To develop a sense of well being, youth must feel that they have control over their own health and be able to identify needed health services. Physical and emotional health also include attributes such as self-esteem and self-confidence, which are common areas of continuous development for all youth.[18]

Many young adults leaving care also need to learn personal and environmental safety skills. Typically, caregivers and educators have provided youth with the knowledge and skills to prevent physical violence, theft or fire, and health threats such as Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) and HIV. Youth who have not acquired this knowledge may benefit from life skills classes.

## Practice recommendations to support sound physical and mental health

### PERSONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY ISSUES

- Arrange comprehensive screenings to assess physical health, mental health and substance abuse before youth leave care.
- Arrange safety training for youth that addresses social relationships, home safety, preventing accidents and violence, reporting unsafe events, and safety response plans.
- Provide information to youth on pregnancy and STIs, including HIV infection.
- Provide assistance in identifying birth family information that may affect youth's ability to maintain good physical and mental health.
- Educate and support youth in addressing critical health and mental health issues.

**COMMUNITY RESOURCES**

- Provide youth with information to access health care services of their choice.
- Provide youth with information about available health care resources, including Medicaid or other insurance options.
- Assist youth in learning how to manage their own health care needs.
- Identify individuals who can help youth stay healthy.
- Assist youth in consolidating and updating health records.

**4. Life Skills**

A growing body of knowledge indicates that providing training in selected skill areas such as money management, consumer skills, education, and employment preparation improves outcomes for older foster youth. Sources of training include foster parents, specialized independent living training programs, group homes, and other institutions. Youth are more likely to acquire necessary life skills if they have a vision of their future, a positive relationship with a foster parent, and improved self-esteem. Volunteer and/or paid work experience has also been related to the development of effective life skills, as has involvement in group activities.[19]

Another life skills area that needs to be addressed for young people leaving substitute care is that of responsible parenting. Early experiences of abuse and neglect have been related to higher incidences of teen pregnancy and parenting. Further, youth with disrupted parent-child relationships may have difficulty attaching to their own children, particularly if they have not seen healthy parenting behaviors modeled. Teen parents may find themselves working across purposes developmentally, as parenting involves regularly deferring one's own needs for the child, a task for which no adolescent is well equipped. The following recommendations support development of life skills instruction, including parenting skills, for youth in out-of-home care.

**Practice recommendations to support life skills acquisition**

- Provide instruction for youth in goal setting and attainment; problem solving and decision-making; and self-advocacy.
- Assess youth's level of self-determination and sense of hope for the future.
- Use outcome-oriented practice to help youth create their own vision for the future.
- Provide instruction and experiences to enable youth to exert control over their own lives.

**I determine the relationships that are significant in my life.**

- Ensure that youth, staff and caregivers understand that acquiring life skills is a life-long proposition.
- Provide opportunities for youth to practice life skills in a "real world" environment.
- Ensure that staff and caregivers are trained to teach a core set of life skills to youth.
- Provide youth with information on the responsibilities of parenting and effective parenting skills, including prevention of abuse and neglect.
- Use the Ansell Casey Life Skills Assessment, Casey's standardized assessment tool to track progress.
- Assess youth's attachment to others and promote relationships with significant adults.
- Provide services to help youth face the challenges of forming healthy attachments with others.

**5. Education**

Success in school is a critical contributor to a high quality of life for children and adults and is central to the transition process. School success also contributes to the positive self-esteem and hope for the future associated with resilience in youth.[20] The performance of various adult roles, the achievement of physical and material well-being, and the realization of a sense of personal fulfillment are all to a large extent grounded in successful school experiences.

Many factors contribute to educational challenges for youth in out-of-home care. The effects of prolonged abuse and neglect may include cognitive impairment, speech and language delays, attention disorders, emotional disturbance and attachment disorders, all of which may affect educational attainment. In addition, multiple foster home placements and school changes may cause students in out-of-home care to experience school instability and/or academic failure.[21] They may also lack a strong, consistent advocate for their educational needs. Further, a disproportionate number of foster children have special education needs that arise from problems preceding their placement into care or from the foster care experience itself.[22]

Caregivers, social workers, teachers, counselors, judges and youth can work together to become effective educational advocates and planners. Educational excellence and transition success can become a reality when individuals and systems commit themselves to a coordinated approach that addresses the practice recommendations below.

**Practice recommendations to support educational attainment**

- Structure and coordinate educational advocacy.
- Provide educational case management.
- Involve parents and caregivers along with youth.
- Make basic skills acquisition a priority; encourage the continuation of math and science education.
- Recognize the impact of trauma on a child's ability to develop and learn.
- Coordinate special education services.
- Provide career development, vocational and job training.
- Arrange for post-secondary planning and supports.
- Promote goal-setting and educational self-determination.
- Encourage co-curricular or extracurricular engagement.
- Ensure collection and retrieval of all educational records for youth.

**6. Employment**

Youth involved in employment or volunteer activities are in a position to acquire important skills, identify and exercise their talents, gain confidence and experience a sense of achievement. When young people leave care, employment is necessary to replace the financial assistance, health care, and personal connections previously provided by the child welfare system.

In order to become employable, foster youth leaving care need a combination of basic skills—such as reading, writing and math—and more advanced skills related to work habits and knowledge of a particular field or trade. Some of these skills can be obtained during adolescence through internships, part-time jobs and volunteer work, in addition to formal training programs.

Successful employment programs focus on teaching specific skills that are needed in the workplace.[23] The more preparation and training young people receive through education and pre-employment skills development, the better equipped they will be to achieve self-sufficiency.

New strategies supporting employment of transitioning youth combine traditional employment and training programs with necessary support services, such as counseling or peer support, child care, and transportation assistance.[24] Youth in care with minimal or no job experience may benefit from such collaborative ventures that blend social services with workforce development.

**I pursue relationships that help me succeed and seek opportunities to make contributions to others.**

**Practice recommendations to support gainful employment**

- Assist youth in identification of natural skills and abilities.
- Encourage career exploration through experience.
- Support development of job readiness training and employment skills.
- Work with job placement agencies and assist youth with job coaching.
- Provide preparation and training in non-traditional careers for young women.
- Teach youth how to save money and accumulate assets.
- Develop employment-based collaborations between business, social service, education and employment agencies (i.e. internships, volunteer opportunities and paid employment).

**7. Housing**

One of the biggest challenges for youth leaving care is finding and maintaining safe and stable homes.[25] It is essential that organizations have some capacity to meet housing needs, either through direct provision of housing or connections to local housing providers. The National Coalition for the Homeless found that between 20% and 50% of homeless clients had been in foster care sometime in their lives.[26] During the past 15 years, child welfare agencies have explored many different types of independent living and transitional living arrangements.[27]

In addition to securing a safe place to live, youth must also possess the skills necessary to live independently and generate sufficient income to cover their basic living expenses.

The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 lifted many programmatic and fiscal barriers to providing supervised independent living opportunities for youth. This legislation allows states to use up to 30% of their program funds for room and board for youth 18-21 years old, thereby providing enhanced practice to prepare for adulthood. The longer version of It's My Life includes a continuum of housing options that many child welfare professionals are providing to young adults leaving care.

**Practice recommendations to support stable housing**

- Provide life skills classes that teach youth how to live independently.
- Provide opportunities for youth to practice living on their own.
- Increase staff knowledge of housing issues, including knowledge of available resources to accommodate housing needs.
- Create alliances with housing providers.
- Ensure that youth have a safe, affordable place to live when leaving care.

## HOW CAN WE ASSESS THE EFFECTIVENESS OF OUR EFFORTS?

In order to assess the effectiveness of transition services, researchers and others need appropriate outcome indicators and measures. An outcome measure or indicator can be thought of as a result of a provided service. For example, a youth's grade point average can be seen as a measure of his or her academic progress. A measure is an objective way to collect information using a questionnaire, records check, survey, interview, or other instrument.

Child welfare agencies and research institutions have engaged in complex discussions about outcome indicators and measures of transition services. The Transition Framework Task Force developed a table of outcome indicators and measures to evaluate the effectiveness of transition services. It is not intended to be a comprehensive set of indicators but rather a compilation of those recommended by practitioners, researchers, alumni, foster parents, and other professionals. This table is included in the longer version of It's My Life. The next section includes a summary of the intended results of the practices described in this document. A summary of these outcomes, together with the principles and practices highlighted in this document, are shown in Figure 1.

it's my life

**I am committed to learning the skills to succeed.**

## OUTCOME INDICATORS FOR YOUTH IN TRANSITION

**Healthy sense of cultural and personal identity**

Youth or young adult demonstrates a strong sense of ethnic or cultural identity, personal identity (including sexual orientation and gender), and spiritual identity.

**Close, positive relationship with an adult and connection to a community**

Youth or young adult has a close positive relationship with a caring adult, one or more close friends with whom he/she engages in positive social activities, and has done volunteer or community service work.

**Access to critical physical and mental health services**

Youth or young adult knows where to access physical and mental health services, has health insurance, and has not been a victim of abuse or violence, been incarcerated, parented a child or used illegal substances during the reporting period. Youth or young adult demonstrates hope for her/his future, shows self-determination and motivation to succeed.

**Improved life skills**

Youth or young adult has shown mastery of basic study skills, work skills, money management, social development skills, self-care skills and practical daily living skills. He or she can manage their sexual health through pregnancy and STI prevention skills. The youth shows respect for other ethnic groups and cultures, understands racism and is able to confront racism.

**Educational achievement**

Youth or young adult attends school, does not have unplanned school changes, has progressed in grade point average and test scores, and has or is working toward a high school diploma or GED, and has engaged in post-secondary planning.

**Income sufficient to meet basic living needs**

Youth or young adult has successful work experience, engaged in a career exploration or vocational training program, including an internship or volunteer experience, and has a mentor or career coach to help them develop a career plan. Youth has sufficient income through employment and other income to meet basic living needs after case closure.

**Safe and stable living condition**

Youth or young adult is living in a safe and stable residence of their choice based on their understanding of the housing options available to them. If youth or young adult is a parent, their children are living with him/her. This living situation is affordable and the young adult will be able to continue living at the residence when they exit the program. If emergencies arise, the youth would be able to identify an alternative living situation.

## CONCLUSION

*"The greatest good you can do for another*

*is not just to share your riches,*

*but to reveal to him his own."*

- Benjamin Disraeli

it's my life

One of the major premises of Casey's work with youth in transition is that, despite the serious challenges posed by abuse, neglect and life in substitute care, young people leaving the child welfare system possess the inner strength to find their place in the world. Through interdependent relationships with family, friends, and community, and particularly through connections with competent and caring adults, transitioning youth have the resources and supports necessary to succeed in all of the important areas of their lives.

The information compiled for this framework revealed some encouraging truths that can inform and inspire every parent and professional who works with youth in out-of-home care. At the heart of these precepts is the empowering knowledge that *youth possess the inherent strengths to succeed, so long as they receive resources and support from caring adults.* In all of its transition work, Casey Family Programs focuses on the remarkable resiliency of youth who have experienced abuse and neglect, yet are nonetheless able to triumph over the physical and mental challenges they may face as a result.

In closing, we repeat the guiding principles for success stated earlier. In order for young people to identify and pursue healthy and productive futures, they must have opportunities to:

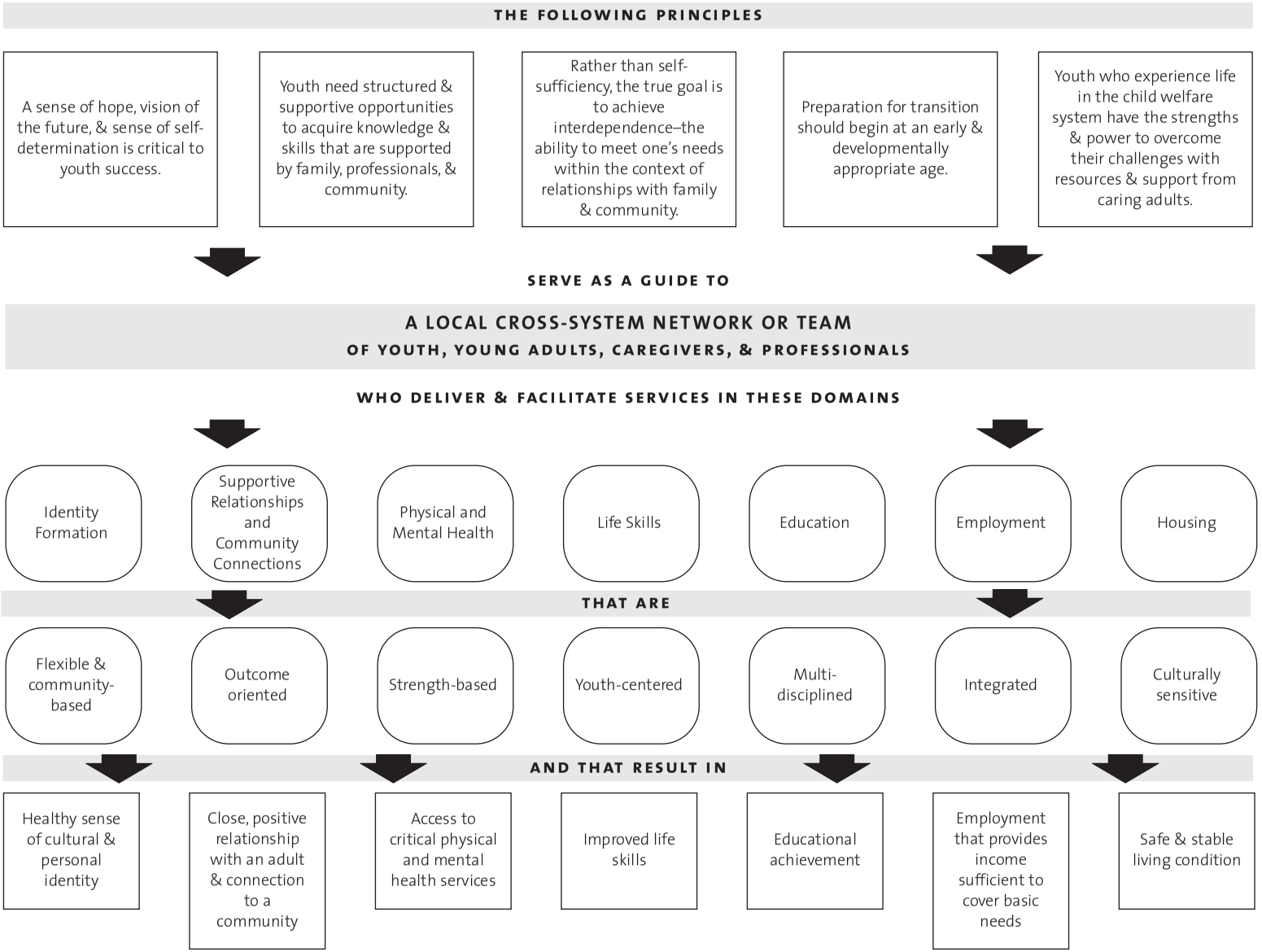
- create a vision of their own success;
- become self-determined instead of being passively acted upon;
- begin their preparation for transition as early as possible;
- continue to learn life skills over time;
- acknowledge their own individual needs and those of their community;
- focus on their own resiliency and strengths;
- recognize that living on one's own requires a support network;
- explore and acknowledge their own values to develop a healthy identity;
- acknowledge birth families and other significant relationships to assist with identity formation and personal history; and
- develop the skills and competencies necessary to achieve their personal goals.

**I need to begin the process of learning to live on my own early and continue it throughout my life.**

Practitioners and parents often note that there is nothing so gratifying as seeing the confidence and enthusiasm of a young person who has mastered a skill or task, be it cooking an omelette or having a successful friendship. All of our work in transition is aimed at seeing young people demonstrate the confidence of knowing that they *can*. The confidence to proclaim: **"It's my life and my life matters."**

**FIGURE 1**

**IT'S MY LIFE: A FRAMEWORK FOR YOUTH TRANSITIONING FROM FOSTER CARE TO SUCCESSFUL ADULTHOOD**



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