

Improving the Quality of Services to Youth in Substitute Care

A Report on Surveyed Youth in Foster Care

Texas Department of Family and Protective Services

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Improving the Quality of Services to Youth in Substitute Care

Executive Summary

The Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) has undertaken several activities designed to improve the overall preparation of youth in foster care for the experience of adult living. This report discusses the results of two surveys of youth in foster care and describes the ongoing efforts toward program improvement undertaken by Child Protective Services (CPS). These results are being shared with community partners, CPS management and staff, and the adolescents themselves in the interests of further improving the foster care experience for all children.

In response to Senate Bill 6 in the 79th Legislative Session, DFPS conducted a survey of youth randomly selected from the foster care population who were at least 14 years of age. These youth from all areas of the state were asked to rate the quality of the services received while in foster care with regard to a broad array of support services, access to financial benefits, and preparation for adult living as well as provide any suggestions for improvement of these same services.

Seventy-eight to 80 percent of the youth rated the quality of a support service they had received as good to outstanding. However, one widely received service, that of counseling/therapy, was more frequently rated unfavorably (29 percent). Youth indicating that services had not yet been received tended to be younger and are expected to encounter more services as they age.

Youth were asked about their awareness of several financial benefit programs. Forty-nine percent were aware of the Educational Training and Voucher program. Geared toward college entrance, this program was better known by 17 – 18 year olds. Fifty-one percent of the responding youth indicated that they were aware of the Texas Youth Hotline, one resource for accessing a broad array of services. Sixty-one percent of the youth indicated that they were aware of the Transitional Medicaid and Transitional Living Allowance programs. Fifty-seven percent indicated that they were aware of the After Care Room and Board allowance.

Only 73 youth indicated that they had participated in the adoption process. Forty-two percent rated the experience as being poor to very poor, 18 percent rated it as adequate, and 39 percent rated the adoption process as good to very good. Since this was a survey of youth currently in foster care, the participants were more likely to have either not yet participated in the adoption process or, having participated, found it lacking.

At discharge from foster care, youth are asked to voluntarily complete an exit survey. One hundred and fifty-seven responses dating from late 2005 and 2006 have been received and are also included in this report.

Seventy-five percent of the responses indicated that youth were either satisfied or extremely satisfied with their last placement. Eighty-three percent preferred a foster home placement rather than a group home placement. Eighty-four percent indicated that, in general, staff in their last placement had been helpful. Seventy-six percent rated their last placement as being helpful in dealing with problems while 75 percent indicated that the last placement was helpful in preparing them for adult living.

Taken as a whole, both the annual randomized survey and the exit survey indicate that youth are generally satisfied with the quality of all services and benefits made available to them – they simply need more. Looking at the qualitative results, particularly high on their list of preferences are those services offered one-on-one, such as counseling, therapy and mentoring. They want more of their caseworker's time and attention and requested that caseloads be lowered so as to accommodate more access to their caseworker. They would like more training to prepare them for adult living and would like the process of securing financial benefits to be more understandable.

The current Transitional Living Services Program Initiative aims to ensure that more youth receive necessary services that will help them as they transition to adulthood. The Department of Family and Protective Services will continue to elicit the voice of youth through the use of surveys, forums and conferences. This first annual survey of youth, combined with the existing exit survey, has provided valuable quantitative and qualitative information that will improve the services made available for youth transitioning to adult living.

Improving the Quality of Services to Youth in Substitute Care

Overview

Since the passage of Senate Bill 6 in the 79th Legislative session, the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) has undertaken several activities designed to improve the overall preparation of youth in foster care for the experience of adult living. To determine the needs of youth in foster care, DFPS has utilized a variety of avenues for gathering feedback from youth who have experienced the foster care system. In fiscal year 2006, DFPS conducted two surveys of youth in Texas foster care. The first survey, mandated by Senate Bill 6, was the first of an annual survey of randomly selected youth. The focus of the survey was to measure the views of youth in foster care on the services provided to them in preparation for adult living. The second survey is an optional youth exit survey that has been an ongoing effort to obtain feedback from youth upon discharge from care. This report discusses the methodology and results of each study, summarizes the overall results, and describes the ongoing efforts toward program improvement undertaken by Child Protective Services in response. These results are being shared with community partners, CPS management and staff, and the adolescents themselves in the interests of further improving the foster care experience for all children.

Senate Bill 6

Senate Bill 6 requires the Department of Family and Protective Services to conduct an annual survey of youth ages 14 to 17. Specifically, Section 1.50 of the bill states:

The department shall conduct an annual random survey of a sample of children from each region of the state who are at least 14 years of age and who receive substitute care services. The survey must include questions regarding:

- (1) the quality of the substitute care services provided to the child,
- (2) any improvements that could be made to better support the child, and
- (3) any other factor that the department considers relevant to enable the department to identify potential program enhancements.

In response to Senate Bill 6, DFPS also developed what is termed the "Transitional Living Services Program Initiative." The purpose of this initiative is to implement a systemic approach in transition/discharge planning and services affecting youth aging out of DFPS foster care. The goal is to ensure greater consistency and quality in services. The ongoing efforts of the Transitional Living Services Program will be informed by the annual youth survey results. Therefore, this report will summarize not only the results of the two surveys

conducted in 2006, but also, the program improvement efforts undertaken in response to the identified needs. These efforts are expected to enhance the foster care experience for all youth and to better prepare them for adult living.

Surveys

Annual Random Sample / Telephone Surveys

The first annual survey in response to Senate Bill 6 was developed with input from alumni of the Texas foster care system as well as CPS staff. State Office staff (including the Transitioning Youth Services Team) and Regional Preparation for Adult Living (PAL)¹ staff conducted the interviews by phone and directly entered the responses into a web-based instrument. Attempts to contact 1,000 randomly selected youth ages 14 to 17 resulted in 474 completed interviews. The youth were asked to rate the quality of the services received while in foster care with regard to a broad array of support services, access to financial benefits, and preparation for adult living. They were also asked to provide any suggestions for improvement of these same services. Multiple choice and several open-ended questions were included. Respondents' ages ranged from 14 to 18 with an average age of 16.37². Fifty-two percent were female and 48 percent male. Twenty percent were African American, 40 percent were Hispanic and 36 percent were Anglo. The remaining youth were mixed race/ethnicities or unknown. Youth in all regions of the state participated.

The survey questions were arranged in three broad categories: 1) questions regarding the support services offered, 2) questions regarding knowledge of and access to financial benefits, and 3) questions regarding the experience of the adoption process. Both qualitative and quantitative questions were posed.

Support Services: Quantitative Results

Thirteen general categories of support services were rated by the youth on a scale of 1 to 5, with options being "Poor" (1), "Fair" (2), "Good Quality" (3), "Outstanding Quality" (4) and "Did Not Receive" (5). Detailed data on the specific categories of support are listed below by topical heading. Overall, when youth rated the quality of a support service they had received, the rating was "Good Quality." When a particular support had not been received, the majority of the respondents tended to be younger – suggesting that as they matured, the service would become available. This conclusion is further supported by the fact that the

¹ The Transitioning Youth Services Team is comprised of program, policy, and administrative specialists who oversee all aspects of the Transitional Living Services Program statewide, including the federally funded PAL and ETV programs. PAL staff are located in every region of the state. They work specifically with youth aged 16 and older by offering classes and activities designed to enable youth to gain the skills necessary to live independently as an adult.

² Children older than 17 can remain in care up to the age of 22 to complete high school, and up to the age of 21 to complete vocational training. DFPS interviewed 69 of these individuals.

highest percentages indicating they had not received a service were for those typically experienced in the later years of high school: vocational assessment or training, Graduate Equivalency Degree (GED) classes, preparation for college entrance exams, driver's education, and high school graduation expenses. The chart below (Table 1) reflects that when roughly one-third or more of the total respondents rated a service they had received, 78 to 80 percent rated the quality as good to outstanding while 20 to 22 percent rated the quality as poor to fair. The one exception to this pattern is in the area of counseling/therapy in which only 12 percent of the respondents indicated they had not received that service. Of the remaining 88 percent who had experienced counseling/therapy services, 71 percent responded favorably and 29 percent appeared to be unsatisfied with the quality received. Since this is a service not specifically tied to the later years of high school, it suggests that improvements in this regard would have broad benefit to youth in foster care.

Table 1³

Support Type	Of those who said they had received the service:		Percent of all responses
	Favorable Response	Unfavorable Response	Did Not Receive
Personal and Interpersonal Skills (e.g., <i>Building Self-Esteem, Interpersonal Skills, Self-Management, Leisure Activities, and Sexual Responsibility</i>)	79 percent (264)	21 percent (71)	30 percent (139)
Job Skills (e.g., <i>Searching for Work, Getting the Job, Keeping the Job, and Leaving a Job</i>)	80 percent (260)	20 percent (79)	22 percent (135)
Housing and Transportation (e.g., <i>Locating, Securing, Maintaining, and Moving</i>)	79 percent (250)	21 percent (66)	33 percent (158)
Health (e.g., <i>First Aid, Personal Hygiene, Health and Nutrition, Substance Abuse, Health Insurance, Getting Health Care, and Safe Sex</i>)	80 percent (298)	20 percent (72)	22 percent (104)
Planning for the Future (e.g., <i>Completing Forms, Roots and Records, Legal Issues, Educational Planning, and Community Resources</i>)	78 percent (256)	22 percent (73)	31 percent (145)
Money Management (e.g., <i>Currency, Budgeting, Banking, Consumer Credit, and Education</i>)	80 percent (274)	20 percent (70)	20 percent (130)
Vocational Assessment or Training	66 percent (118)	34 percent (62)	62 percent (294)
GED Classes	70 percent (38)	30 percent (16)	89 percent (420)
Preparation for College Entrance Exams	70 percent (87)	30 percent (38)	72 percent (340)
Driver's Education	74 percent (91)	26 percent (32)	74 percent (351)
High School Graduation Expenses	68 percent (84)	32 percent (39)	74 percent (351)
Counseling/Therapy	71 percent (296)	29 percent (123)	12 percent (55)
Volunteer Mentoring to Provide Guidance and Support	63 percent (115)	37 percent (66)	62 percent (293)

³ Numbers in the table contained in parentheses are the actual number of responses represented by the percentage.

Support Services: Qualitative Results

As part of the survey, youth made comments regarding their suggestions for improvements in support services available to them. They cited a need to learn more about job-interviewing skills and more hands-on experience related to job preparation. In the area of money management, they wanted more information on how to open a bank account, how to use debit and credit cards, budgeting, and how to purchase a car. Several comments also indicated that youth want more information to be provided to them on how to obtain housing after care. They would also like transportation provided to PAL classes, education on how to use local bus routes, and more funding for driver's education classes. Other comments indicated that the PAL classes could be improved through more emphasis on sexual education and personal hygiene. To allow time for these additional instructions, the youth suggested increasing the allotted PAL class time, and providing more in-depth information on curriculum. An overwhelming majority suggested that each child be provided with a packet including the curriculum in PAL classes, as well as services available to foster care children. They would also like to see more one-on-one training and prefer teachers that were formerly in foster care.

Comments regarding counseling, therapy, and mentoring indicated that these services were viewed as being very helpful when available. Many of the negative comments reflected that individual therapy would have been preferred over the group therapy that had been offered. Some respondents mentioned that these services were a better resource for adulthood preparation than the PAL program. Finally, the youth suggested that mentors be foster care alumni.

Financial Benefits: Quantitative Results

The second part of the survey evaluated the respondents' views on the benefits and financial assistance available to them. Primarily, these questions were aimed at ascertaining whether the youth were aware of the existence of the service available to them. When asked about the Educational and Training Voucher program, 49 percent were aware of the program while 51 percent were not. Since the Educational and Training Voucher program is primarily geared toward college entrance, it is not surprising that more 17- and 18-year-old youth responded that they are aware of the program. Sixty-six percent of the "Yes" responses came from 17- 18-year-olds while 71 percent of all "No" responses came from youth aged 16 or younger. Overall, only seven percent of all responding youth indicated that they had received training on how to get Educational and Training Voucher services. Even restricting the responses to those who are 17 – 18, only 26 percent indicated that they had received the training. On the other hand, 51 percent of all youth responded that they were aware of the Texas Youth Hotline, a readily available source for a broad array of services.

The next set of questions asked about three other transitional financial support services that appear to be better known. Sixty-one percent of the youth indicated that they were aware of the Transitional Medicaid and Transitional Living Allowance programs. Fifty-seven percent indicated that they were aware of the After Care Room and Board allowance.

Financial Benefits: Qualitative Results

There were a considerable number of suggestions to increase awareness of these services as well as how to access and improve them. Under the Educational and Training Voucher Program, youth would like to see more assistance given in applying to colleges, universities, and institutions. They also suggested that changes be made in the funding allotted for their education. For example, many complaints were made that the time frame allowable for funding does not match the time frame required for coursework completion. In the area of Transitional Medicaid, respondents felt that caseworkers should be more helpful in providing them with information about medical services available to them. They would also like a document or pamphlet of all Medicaid services, rules, and procedures that is understandable by a high school graduate or lower. The youth also suggested minimizing the delay in time before the Medicaid services actually take effect. In the area of Transitional Living Allowance and After Care Room and Board, the responding youth suggested an increase in allowances to match inflation, and minimizing the time delay in receiving money transfers.

The Adoption Process: Quantitative Results

Finally, youth were asked if they had ever participated in the adoption process. Only 73 youth indicated that they had. Of those 73 participants, 42 percent rated the experience as being poor to very poor, 18 percent rated it as adequate, and 39 percent rated the adoption process as good to very good.

The Adoption Process: Qualitative Results

The comments made regarding the adoption process conveyed the overall sense felt by many youth in foster care that others are in control of their lives. The most frequent comment was not so much a suggestion for improvement as an indication that they had tried adoption and no placement resulted or, if it had, it failed. A few commented that it all happened too fast – they didn't have time to get to know the adoptive parents and then there was little follow-up after the placement to see how they were doing. Almost three times as many comments were made about how long the process took. Several mentioned that they didn't want to be adopted but had been "put on the list," pressured into it, or put in the situation of having to part from siblings on the chance of being adopted. Several refused adoption because of the desire to remain with siblings. A few children were hoping to be adopted but only by a specific friend or relative. As a whole,

the comments reinforced the need for caseworkers to listen carefully to the child, keep them informed of the process, and help the child understand and verbalize the complexity of emotions surrounding the adoption process. Obtaining feedback on these adoption experiences is valuable for the Transitional Living Services Program because part of preparing youth for adult living all too often involves helping them deal with the emotions tied to failed adoptive placements.

Exit Survey

The exit survey is a paper form that individuals leaving care are asked to fill out as part of the discharge process. The survey is voluntary and has been offered for approximately five years. Results of earlier exit surveys have been reported previously; however, more recent responses are included as part of this report.

This survey provides an opportunity for youth to comment on the quality of their most recent placement and how it helped prepare them for adult living. The focus of this survey is on the placement and the people who assisted youth in foster care rather than the services received while in care. Alumni of the Texas foster care system and CPS staff developed these questions. This report includes a total of 157 responses from youth who exited care in the latter half of 2005 and FY 2006. Eighty-five percent of the respondents were 18 years of age or older.⁴ This survey recorded the respondents' views on their last placement, their preferences on the choice between a foster home or group home living situation, and the quality of assistance offered to them by the following individuals: CPS caseworker, CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate), Therapist, Big Brother/Big Sister/Mentor, and Attorney Ad Litem.

Exit Survey: Quantitative Results

Overall, youth responding to the exit survey expressed positive feedback regarding their last placement and those with whom they interacted. When asked, "How satisfied were you with your last placement?" 75 percent were either satisfied or extremely satisfied. Sixteen percent were somewhat or extremely unsatisfied and eight percent reported being neither satisfied nor unsatisfied. Eighty-three percent preferred a foster home placement rather than a group home placement (17 percent), although, due to the anonymity of the survey, it is not known what type of placement they had actually experienced.

Youth were then asked, "Generally, do you think the staff (including foster parents and/or child care workers) at your last placement was helpful?" These questions were followed with questions about the helpfulness of specific persons involved in foster care cases. Table 2 below indicates the percentages based on those responding. Thirty-nine percent, 10 percent and 52 percent, did not respond to the helpfulness questions regarding CASA, Therapist, and a Big

⁴ One hundred forty-three individuals provided their age.

Brother/Sister or Mentor, respectively. Presumably these “Not Applicable” answers were given because no such relationship existed.

Table 2

	<i>Extremely or Somewhat Helpful</i>	<i>Neither Helpful Nor Unhelpful</i>	<i>Extremely or Somewhat Unhelpful</i>
Generally, do you think the staff at your last placement was helpful?	84 percent (131)	5 percent (8)	12 percent (18)
How helpful were the following:			
CPS caseworker?	71 percent (111)	10 percent (16)	19 percent (29)
CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate)?	53 percent (62)	15 percent (14)	16 percent (15)
Therapist?	68 percent (81)	12 percent (14)	21 percent (25)
Big Brother or Big Sister or Mentor?	73 percent (34)	16 percent (8)	12 percent (6)

Finally, with regard to the helpfulness of involved persons, youth were asked about the helpfulness of their attorney ad litem. Youth were also able to respond that they had not had contact with the attorney ad litem or that they did not know they had an attorney ad litem. Twenty-five percent indicated they had not had contact and 15 percent did not know they had an attorney ad litem. Of those who did rate the helpfulness of the attorney ad litem, 70 percent found them somewhat to extremely helpful. Sixteen percent rated the attorney ad litem as neither helpful nor unhelpful and 15 percent indicated the attorney ad litem as somewhat to extremely unhelpful.

Somewhat more specific questions were asked regarding the helpfulness of the young adult’s last placement in terms of helping to deal with problems and preparation for adulthood. Seventy-six percent rated the placement as being helpful in dealing with problems. The ratings of extremely or somewhat unhelpful and neither helpful nor unhelpful each garnered 12 percent of the responses. The ratings regarding how helpful the last placement was in preparing for adulthood were similarly positively rated at 75 percent; however, the ratings of extremely or somewhat unhelpful rose to 15 percent. The remaining 10 percent were neutral.

Exit Survey: Qualitative Results

Respondents thought that it was important for the staff and foster parents to understand them and openly communicate with them on a personal level. Respondents also wanted help from their foster parents and staff in making and achieving their own goals. Along those same lines, they recognized that they needed support and motivation in the process of reaching those goals. Developing the characteristics of responsibility was seen as an essential aspect of being prepared for adulthood. To assist in the development of those traits, youth would like to have more freedom in their living situations and to be trusted

more by their guardians. Participation in more after-school activities and sports would also further round out their preparation for adult living. One of the most common and important responses given was that youth in foster care should be treated like normal kids. They do not like being referred to as “foster children.”

Youth preferring foster homes as their placements provided several reasons. Foster homes were believed to have a more home/family environment. Youth also felt they were given more one-on-one attention. They liked the privacy or personal space they were allowed to have in their foster homes, as well as having more freedom. Youth enjoyed having more of a social life because they were allowed to attend a public school and participate in after-school activities. They believed that foster parents gave their children more opportunities to learn basic life skills, such as cooking and cleaning in the household.

Youth who preferred group home placements did not seem to desire a “pretend family” and wanted to surround themselves with peers with whom they related. Respondents believed that group homes’ staff was better trained to help with their personal problems. They also enjoyed the structure of the group home setting and the group activities.

Despite a 71 percent favorable rating to the question about helpfulness, comments received on the exit surveys indicated considerable dissatisfaction with the lack of contact and involvement of their caseworkers in their everyday lives. They would like for their caseworkers to be more available and also suggested that caseworkers be given smaller workloads in order to meet their needs. Youth expressed a desire to be more involved in their own case; they want to be informed and they want their views or opinions to be taken into consideration. Respondents wanted caseworkers to have a greater understanding of their problems and have more empathy and compassion for their situation. Several youth complained about being treated like a case number, and not like a human being. Respondents suggested that caseworkers should keep child personal information more confidential. Many youth wanted a stronger emphasis on caseworkers trying to prevent the separation of sibling groups, and would like more visitations with biological family members. Many comments also suggested that each child should have his/her own mentor, preferably a foster care alumnus. Finally, other comments suggested that more provision of individual therapy rather than group therapy would be helpful.

Survey Results – Summary

Taken as a whole, both the annual randomized survey and the exit survey indicate that youth are generally satisfied with the quality of all services and benefits made available to them – they simply need more. Particularly high on their list of preferences are those services offered one-on-one, such as counseling, therapy and mentoring. They want more of their caseworker’s time

and attention and requested that caseloads be lowered to accommodate more access to their caseworker.

Results showed that the youth would like more information in the areas of job skills, money management, housing and transportation, health education, PAL, getting a GED, and Driver's Education. Also, youth still in care suggested that each child in care receive a packet listing and explaining available services.

With regard to financial benefits and access to them, the results suggest that more work needs to be done to ensure that youth are aware of these programs and that work may need to begin at a younger age. Since all of these programs are addressed in Preparation for Adult Living class curriculum, this information may need to be presented in other ways. Some of the respondents had attended classes where this information was covered but they indicated they had not been informed. More varied styles of learning may need to be incorporated to increase the retention of this information.

Other suggestions were made to increase funding for services and decrease the time delay in receiving funds. Also, respondents suggested a need for more assistance in applying for college and in gaining a better understanding of the Medicaid system.

Discussion of Current Transitional Living Services Efforts

In Texas, a new and improved baseline of transition services and life skills training and support services for youth 16 years and older was developed as a result of the Transitional Living Services Program Initiative. Establishing a consistent baseline of services helps to ensure that youth aging out of the foster care system can expect the same quality of services statewide. Transitional Living Services includes Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) Programs, the Education and Training Voucher (ETV) Program, formal transition planning, identifying caring adults for youth in care prior to discharge, support services to youth who have left foster care, Circles of Support (COS)⁵, transition centers and networks of transition services, continuous Medicaid for youth 18 to 21 years of age with a single application, youth surveys and assessments, ongoing training for caseworkers related to PAL and transitioning youth services, and independent PAL program studies for young people and their caregivers when circumstances or transportation do not allow on-site participation.

⁵ A Circle of Support is a formal gathering of friends and family identified by the youth. The purpose of the gathering is to identify and support longer-range goals for the youth and to help establish ongoing support services in young adulthood.

Preparation for Adult Living

Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) policy requires that each youth 16 and older who is in paid substitute care receive services to prepare for adult living. The PAL program was started in 1986 to help older youth in foster care prepare for their departure from state care. PAL services are aimed at improving the young person's self-esteem and ability to face challenges and decisions in their lives. Through the PAL program, youth acquire skills and resources they will need to become a self-sufficient adult. Supportive services and benefits are provided to eligible youth ages 16 to 21 (and in some cases up to age 23 for certain educational/vocational needs) to assist when they leave foster care. Preparation for Adult Living Services include independent living skills assessments; time-limited financial help; basic self-help skills; and life skills development and training in areas such as money management, health, job skills, planning for the future, housing and transportation, and personal and interpersonal skills.

Additional support services are provided to youth preparing to age out of care and are funded through purchased services dollars and supports from stakeholders, such as local child welfare boards. Support services can include high school and college items, counseling, tutoring, driver's education, and mentoring. Aftercare Room and Board Assistance is based on need. This funding pays for living costs such as groceries or utilities. Case Management is provided to assist with transition planning and to help connect the youth to needed resources.

While in care, youth 16 years of age and older are exposed to the transition planning process and to information about support services and benefits that will be available to them when they leave foster care. Information about all benefits and resources available is also included in the informational packet youth receive when they are discharged from care. Information is updated as changes occur.

The Ansell-Casey Youth Life Skills Assessment is utilized to evaluate a youth's basic life skills. The instrument assesses youth abilities in different domains: communications, daily living, housing and money, work and study habits, social relationships, and self-care. The questions within each domain assess a variety of behavioral skills and practical knowledge. Both the young person and caregiver complete this assessment prior to the youth participating in PAL services. Once PAL services are complete, they take the assessment again to see progress over time. By having an assessment completed by the youth *and* the caregiver, both results can be used to help identify a realistic view of skills and gaps in knowledge and to inform the development of a realistic individualized plan for the youth. The agency makes efforts to partner with local housing authorities, workforce development boards, and other community resources to make sure that youth in need receive services to help them move on to self-sufficiency.

Transition Centers

Transition Centers exist in Austin (LifeWorks Youth Resource Center opened June 2006), Dallas (TRAC opened March 2003), Houston (HAY Center opened July 2005), and San Antonio (BCFS PAL Youth Center opened January 2005) and expanded services to Kerrville in January 2007, Kingsville (The Institute of Rural Development opened January 2007), with another scheduled to open in Corpus Christi fiscal year 2007. In a transition or “one-stop” center, a young person can go to one location to complete their GED certification, receive PAL services, take a community college prep course, talk to the onsite apartment locator service, and receive employment training and placement services. Transition Centers provide an opportunity for the youth to develop personal and community connections, another important step in transitioning to adulthood. The Houston Alumni and Youth Services Center, or HAY Center, is particularly noteworthy because it is the result of a federal grant. The Texas Workforce Commission submitted the grant proposal in collaboration with DFPS to receive one of five federal demonstration grants to establish the center. DFPS has a goal of partnering with local entities to assist in the development of transition centers in each of the 11 regions. To that end, a *Transition Center Planning Guide* is currently under development, targeted for completion in April 2007.

Transition-Planning Process

In February 2005, caseworkers, with assistance from PAL staff, began using a consistent statewide discharge/transition-planning format with youth age 16 and older. In fiscal year 2006, a standardized transition-planning process and transition plan was developed. The process provides a template for all DFPS regions through flowcharting related services and associated forms, guidelines, and roles and responsibilities. The template identifies for each youth what services are needed to accomplish goals for transition. Its use across the state and incorporation into the child’s plan of service will help to ensure that all youth are receiving consistent services. Procedures for identifying caring adults for youth and involving them in transition planning and Circles of Support (COS) help to ensure that personal and community connections are incorporated into the transition-planning process. Circles of Support, a youth-driven process based on the Family Group Decision Making model, is offered to youth 16 years of age and older. It is a facilitated meeting with participants that a youth identifies as “caring adults” who make up their support system. COS participants can be a youth’s foster care providers, teachers, relatives, church members, and mentors. Each caring adult participant identifies a personal way they can help support the youth’s transition plan by attaining short- and long-term goals toward self-sufficiency. Signatures on the transition plan seal their agreements.

Education and Training Vouchers

In fiscal year 2006 (September 2005-August 2006), there were approximately 435 students participating in the Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program. As of January 31, 2007, there were 539 ETV participants. ETV is not an entitlement program. The funds authorized under the ETV program are discretionary funds that Congress must appropriate each year. Students must meet certain eligibility and qualification criteria to be accepted into the ETV program. Additional services include vocational assessment, vocational training, tutoring, and GED tests. Many more youth receive assistance through partnerships with colleges, community organizations, and foster care placement providers. DFPS Education Specialists⁶ continue to assist youth with educational needs to ensure better educational outcomes for youth in foster care.

Tuition and Fee Waivers

Tuition and Fee Waivers enacted in 1993 are available for eligible youth who age out of care or who were adopted from foster care. Waivers cover the cost of public post-secondary education in colleges, universities, or vocational programs. Every year, colleges such as the University of Texas or Texas A & M and their extension campuses provide mentoring to college students who are PAL youth. Critical supports such as mentoring or scholarships strengthen the youth's ability to be successful in their college experience. College partnerships also provide for residential housing and leadership camps and conferences.

Medicaid

Additional financial support was made available through Texas Senate Bill 51, which was passed and signed into law, effective September 1, 2005. It requires Texas to provide uninterrupted Medicaid coverage to young people who age out of foster care at age 18 through the month of their 21st birthday. The renewal application process changed to further ensure that young people who meet the eligibility requirements do receive uninterrupted medical coverage. DFPS youth in foster care are made aware of this benefit through a copy of the fact sheet, "Medicaid for Young People Transitioning from Foster Care." It is included with youth packets of materials prior to discharge from foster care. This fact sheet includes a brief overview of the certification process, eligibility requirements, and contact information.

Transitional Living Allowance

Youth who fully participate in the PAL program are eligible to receive federally funded assistance once they leave care. The Transitional Living allowance may

⁶ Education Specialists are located in each region of the state. They coordinate and track the educational needs and requirements of youth in foster care in order to maximize the benefits of the school setting.

not exceed \$1,000, and it may be distributed in increments not to exceed \$500 per month. Young adults who are between 18 and 21 years old and have aged out of the foster care system at age 18 or older are eligible for aftercare room and board assistance. Financial assistance up to \$500 per month may be used for rent, rent deposit, utilities, and food/groceries. There is a lifetime cap of \$3,000 of accumulated payments per client. Certain guidelines must be met to receive these benefits. Youth are made aware of these benefits through various means, including transition planning meetings, Circles of Support, the Texas Youth Connection website, the Texas Youth Foster Care Handbook, and the DFPS internet. Information about all benefits and resources available is included in the informational packet youth receive when they are discharged from care.

Texas Youth Hotline

An ongoing resource to assist youth in becoming aware of the variety of benefits available to them is the Texas Youth Hotline. The Texas Youth Hotline is a resource for youth who are under 21 years of age, including those who have aged out of the foster care system. Youth may contact the statewide hotline at 1-800-210-2278 for telephone counseling and information and referrals. The hotline can help young adults locate services available in their communities. Youth are informed of the hotline through various means, including PAL life skills trainings, transition planning meetings, Circles of Support, the Texas Youth Connection website, the Texas Youth Foster Care Handbook, and the DFPS internet. Information about all benefits and resources available is included in an informational packet youth receive when they are discharged from care. DFPS continues to develop ways of sharing this and other information with youth throughout their stay in care. One such example is the Texas Youth Connection website, which contains information on all available services and benefits. The website was developed by youth and designed to address their needs.

Training

Changes have also been made in the training of both foster parents and CPS staff in order to further the enhancements of services preparing youth for adult living. Curriculum was designed and launched as Basic Skills Development (BSD) training in 2005, providing a full day of interactive learning for caseworkers related to transitional living program services for youth in and exiting foster care, along with clarification of roles and responsibilities for caseworkers, contract providers, and caregivers. Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) classes and activities are designed to teach not only basic life skills to older youth in care, but also to attend to “soft skills” development, such as assuming responsibility for one’s own decisions and actions, how to turn discouragement into motivation, etc. Foster parent trainings across the state address policy and best practice related to caring for older youth in care. The objective of these trainings is to demystify the aging-out process; thus, better preparing young adults for the many challenges of independent living.

Youth Participation

Finally, a critical factor in the continuing enhancement of transitional services is the ongoing solicitation of input from youth in the foster care system. In addition to the two surveys addressed in this report, DFPS offers Youth Leadership Activities. These efforts engage young people in partnership with CPS personnel and community partners to address the concerns of youth and recommended solutions. Youth Leadership Activities feedback forums include youth focus groups, youth leadership councils, CPS youth specialist meetings, and an annual “fishbowl” which results in a report at the statewide teen conference for older youth in care. In fiscal year 2006, six groups of youth participated in the annual fishbowl activity and reported their discussions directly to the DFPS Commissioner and CPS leaders in attendance.

The method for the fishbowl focus groups was to organize six groups each comprised of approximately 30 youth and adult participants to discuss and record key issues they identified about the foster care system and to agree on recommendations to be presented by the youth participants to the DFPS Commissioner and other groups during a general session later in the day.

Many of the results of these focus groups echoed the issues reported in the youth surveys. Fishbowl participants in general conveyed both positive and negative views about their foster care experience and transitional living / PAL services. They identified and discussed foster family placement issues and concerns related to cross-cultural placements, educational benefits, PAL services, and caseworker availability. One group of participants stated, “Bureaucracy gets in the way of being normal,” citing criminal background checks, court hearings and splitting up sibling groups as examples. “We want to know where our siblings are—help us by removing barriers.” Another group expressed a lack of trust in caseworkers due to slow responses to phone calls, and, added they believed the problem is a result of varied quality of caseworkers and the fact that “Caseworkers have enormous caseloads that get in the way.” Participants generally appreciated educational benefits, but expressed difficulty with paperwork and being so young when having to make choices like Educational Training Vouchers (ETV), adding that post-PAL benefits are also confusing. Participants expressed a desire for more PAL training and to make sure training is more than just sitting in a classroom or watching a movie. Participants also expressed the need for PAL services to start at an earlier age (at least age 14) and for care to continue up to age 25. One group reported that young people still leave foster care scared and confused.

Recruitment will begin in early 2007 for the Statewide Youth Leadership Council. Youth Specialists have been hired as full-time employees in each region. Alumni support groups exist in several colleges and universities. A statewide alumni group is in the early stages of development. All of these groups will be door

openers to increased opportunities for mentor relationships between youth in care and those who have aged out of care.

More than 240 youth participated in formal mentoring programs during fiscal year 2006. Regions continue to explore potential mentor programs and collaborations for both formal and informal mentors for youth. Regions with formal mentoring programs report that matching youth with adults who work in careers that interest the youth continues to be most helpful.

Conclusions

Continually seeking the voice of youth in foster care is seen as an optimal avenue for improving the delivery of DFPS services and preparing youth for the experience of adult living. To that end, several efforts are being made.

In preparation for the second annual youth survey in 2007, improvements are being made to the survey process based on feedback and recommendations from Youth Specialists and PAL staff who conducted the interviews. Changes and improvements include ensuring the random sample of youth is compiled in a timely manner so that contacts with the youth are attempted in their most current placement. Greater efforts will be made to conduct the surveys on Saturdays and after hours when it is easier to reach the youth. Youth Specialists in each region will be trained to conduct the annual youth survey in 2007. Additionally, the exit survey will be upgraded in preparation for fiscal year 2008 surveys. With input from the Youth Specialists and PAL staff, the survey will be better designed to measure changes made through the Transitional Living Services Program. The Texas Statewide Youth Conference held at the University of Texas in Arlington each year will continue to include the fishbowl. Evaluations of this event indicated that it provides a valuable opportunity for youth to dialogue with DFPS leadership. Youth participation will be increased in fiscal year 2007, as Youth Specialists will co-facilitate the fishbowl groups.

Comments provided during the course of these surveys reinforce current Transitional Living Services Program goals of ensuring that youth entering the PAL program will receive the same quality of program services regardless of where they live in Texas. The new and improved baseline of transition services and life skills training and support services for PAL youth 16 years and older directly responds to several of the issues raised in the surveys. The enhanced and improved baseline of life skills training includes minimum standard requirements for life skills training in job skills, money management, housing, transportation, personal/interpersonal skills, health, and planning for the future.

While youth expressed the desire for more flexibility in funding (taking less time to receive funds), the Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) and Educational Training Voucher (ETV) programs are not entitlement programs. The funds authorized

are discretionary funds that Congress must appropriate each year. Federal and state requirements direct the allocation and use of funds for PAL program services, and students must meet certain eligibility and qualification criteria to be accepted into the ETV program. Therefore, while DFPS cannot increase or alter the funding methodology, continued efforts to walk youth through the process will be made through the Transitional Living Services Program.

Ensuring that youth receive the information they need regarding programs, support services and benefits available to prepare for adulthood and life after foster care is a priority. Youth will continue to be informed through various means, including PAL life skills training and classes, transition planning meetings, Circles of Support, youth events, activities, and conferences, the Texas Youth Connection website, the Texas Youth Foster Care Handbook, and the DFPS internet. Information about all benefits and resources available will also be included in an informational packet youth receive prior to discharge from care. At age 13, youth will be provided with information documented in the Texas Foster Care Handbook about the services and benefits that will be available to them. Then, again, when formally entering the PAL program, youth and their caregivers will receive the Texas Foster Care Handbook, which describes the program, resources and the benefits available to youth leaving the foster care system.

Although a wide variety of support services are available to youth, the survey results indicate that too many youth remain unaware of what may personally be available for them. The fact that several youth indicated a service had not been received even though the youth had participated in the class where that information was made available was informative. A review of the curriculum with regard to the variety of learning styles utilized to present information is expected to improve the retention of this information.

Regions continue to explore potential mentor programs and collaborations for both formal and informal mentors for youth. In fact, the number of youth with mentors more than doubled over the past year. Youth Specialists, added in fiscal year 2006, also increase access to mentoring relationships through their presence as well as their efforts to support the development of regional youth leadership councils. These councils engage alumni and youth in joint activities and foster the development of mentoring relationships.

Finally, in response to the need for increased access to their caseworkers, DFPS has implemented a weekly performance report at the caseworker level that measures face-to-face contacts with youth in foster care. The emphasis created by this increased monitoring has more than tripled the rate with which caseworkers visit youth in care. Policy is also being revised to ensure the quality and variety of these contacts.

DFPS' commitment to improved preparation of youth in foster care for adult living is sincere. Youth surveys, forums and a variety of program enhancements designed to elicit youths' feedback and recommendations will continue to set the stage for program improvements.