

Title: Preparation for Adulthood – Supervising for Success (PASS); Site Visit Report

Award #: 90CW1131

Cluster: Training of Child Welfare Agency Supervisors in the Effective Delivery and Management of Federal Independent Living Service for Youth in Foster Care

Grantee: Hunter College School of Social Work, CUNY RF

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Project Website: www.nrcfcppp.org/pass

Last Update: December 2008

SUMMARY

Young people who age out of foster care often require a number of specialized services in order to make a successful transition to adulthood. Child welfare supervisors and workers who are knowledgeable about the needs of these youth, familiar with the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program and other initiatives, and able to work well with youth are in the best position to help youth make a successful transition.

To build supervisor knowledge and competency in this area, the Hunter College School of Social Work and its partners used a Children's Bureau discretionary grant to develop and disseminate a training curriculum for public child welfare agency supervisors. The training, called Preparation for Adulthood – Supervising for Success, or PASS, consisted of learning circles of 10 to 16 supervisors who met for six full-day sessions over 6 months. In these sessions, participants discussed six core perspectives important to helping youth:

- Developing and maintaining positive permanent connections between youth and caring adults
- Actively engaging youth in developing life skills that will prepare them for successful transition
- Relating to youth as resources rather than just recipients of services
- Creating environments that promote physical and emotional safety and well-being
- Valuing the individual strengths and uniqueness of each youth
- Involving a diverse array of stakeholders in the development of a comprehensive continuum of services and supports for youth transitioning out of the foster care system

As part of the curriculum, trainees viewed digital stories created by foster youth, former foster youth, caseworkers, and supervisors. At the end of each session, supervisors created personal action plans for implementing what they learned and how they would transfer this knowledge to their caseworkers.

Evaluation results reveal that responses to the training were positive, highlighting both the usefulness of the curriculum content and the successful integration of the content into the supervisors' practice. Pre- and posttest questionnaires suggest that trainees did increase their knowledge of youth issues through the training.

In January 2008, the project's website was launched, containing the learning circle competencies, agendas, discussion guides, training materials and tools, and 10 digital stories. This has sparked interest among several States in using the curriculum.

Hunter College had a number of partners in developing the curriculum and training, including Child Welfare League of America; the National Foster Care Coalition; the Oregon Department of Human Services, State Office for Services to Children and Families; the New York City Administration for Children's Services; and the Mississippi Department of Human Services, Division of Family and Children's Services. The mix of city, state, and rural partners enabled project leaders to test effectiveness of the training materials in diverse settings.

Reprinted from *Children's Bureau Express*, "Learning Circles Engage Foster Care Supervisors" (<http://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov/>).

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Abstract (*adapted from the online Compendium of ACYF Funded Programs*)

The Hunter College School of Social Work, in collaboration with its subcontractors, the Child Welfare League of America and the National Foster Care Coalition, along with its State and city partners in this project, the Oregon Department of Human Services, State Office for Services to Children and Families; the New York City Administration for Children's Services; and the Mississippi Department of Human Services, Division of Family and Children's Services, proposes to develop, implement, evaluate, and disseminate a competency-based training curriculum for public child welfare agency supervisors to insure the effective delivery and management of federal independent living (IL) service for youth in foster care. The objectives of the project are to develop, field test, revise, evaluate, and disseminate a training curriculum and supervisory transfer of learning guidebook to be used by child welfare agency supervisors in the effective delivery of services.

The Hunter College School of Social Work is one of the largest graduate schools of social work in the United States and the only public graduate school of social work in New York City. Its mission is to serve vulnerable populations, particularly children, youth, and families. The school also is the current site for the National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning.

Need for This Service (*adapted from information and materials provided by the grantee during the site visit and from information included in the Program Announcement*)

Youth represent approximately 30 percent of the nation's foster care population, with approximately 20,000 young people aging out of the system each year. All too often, these youth have no permanent connections, little employment history or stability, lack of a high school diploma or GED, and an overall lack of IL skills. Given these facts, these young people face numerous challenges, including crime (as victims or as perpetrators), homelessness, early parenthood, juvenile prostitution, mental and physical health issues, drug/alcohol abuse, and poor social support systems.

Youth who transition from the New York City, Oregon, and Mississippi child welfare systems face the same challenges as those exiting on the national level, highlighting the need to strengthen supervision of staffs' interventions with transitioning youth. These

young people, mostly ages 16 to 21, need assistance in making a successful transition to adulthood, as well as help in avoiding long-term dependency on the social welfare system. There is a need for the supervisors of the staff who are working with foster youth to have a knowledge and understanding of the needs of the youth, as well as a need for them to be intimately familiar with the Chaffee Foster Care Independence Program, which provides States with increased funding and flexibility in helping youth make the transition from foster care to self-sufficiency.

Goals of Project *(adapted from information and materials provided by the grantee during the site visit)*

The goal of the project is to develop, implement, evaluate, and disseminate a training curriculum for public child welfare supervisors, a curriculum that will strengthen supervision of staff's interventions with older youth who are in foster care. In addition, the curriculum and related tools will increase supervisory knowledge about their States' Chafee Programs, as well as additional Federal, State, and local initiatives available to youth who are in or are transitioning from foster care. Finally, the training was designed to increase child welfare supervisors' ability to supervise caseworkers in the following areas:

- Assessing a youth's readiness for IL planning services, supports, and training
- Identifying culturally competent IL program services and activities
- Utilizing positive youth development principles for involving youth in decision-making, implementation, and evaluation of training and program activities
- Identifying areas of stress and its impact on youth in foster care
- Working with youth to help them deal with crisis situations and to assess the results of the intervention
- Assisting youth in developing and maintaining permanent connections
- Collaborating with both inter- and intra-agency resource people to achieve positive outcomes for youth transitioning to adulthood

SITE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS

The site visit took place on September 4, 2008, and consisted of a meeting with the Principal Investigator, the Project Director, and the Evaluator. The meeting included a thorough presentation by team members of the project and the curriculum development processes, the development of the learning circle training model, and the use of digital stories in the curriculum. The Evaluator also gave a presentation on the evaluation process and some of the preliminary findings. Information shared during this meeting is incorporated throughout this report.

LESSONS LEARNED

Unique and Innovative Features *(adapted from information and materials provided by the grantee during the site visit)*

- Not only did this project use digital stories prepared by foster youth and former foster youth to bring the voice of the young people into the training, it also used digital stories prepared by both child welfare supervisors and caseworkers to

bring the voice of the field to training participants. These digital stories now provide a valuable resource on the website.

- The mix of city, State, and rural partners (the New York City Administration for Children's Services; the Mississippi Department of Human Services, Division of Family and Children's Services; and the Oregon Department of Human Services, State Office for Services to Children and Families) was selected in order to test whether the training materials developed would be effective in diverse settings (e.g., State and locally administered, rural and urban systems, as well as States with a strong child welfare private provider community).

Challenges (*adapted from information and materials provided by the grantee during the site visit*)

- Project staff report that strong relationships with their partners in Oregon and New York City facilitated the delivery of the learning circles and the production of digital stories. There was consistent staff support in Oregon during the project's tenure and even with changes of staff in New York City, they were able to keep the project going. However, Mississippi had a total change in personnel, both in staff training and in adolescent services, during the second year of the project, making it extremely difficult to build project sustainability there.

Successful Strategies and Keys to Success (*adapted from information and materials provided by the grantee during the site visit*)

- The learning circle training model, with its focus questions and discussion, voices from the youth and from the field through digital stories, varying tools and techniques, integration activities and action planning over several sessions, was very well received. This training format provides consistency for the participating supervisors and creates continuity between sessions as participants report back on their action plans at each session. It also encourages networking and ongoing contact, allowing for continued peer-to-peer support, sharing, and learning.
- Learning circles need to have at least 10 participants at the outset as these circles run for a period of 6 months with the same supervisors participating 1 day a month. Supervisors are willing to make the time commitment as long as the ongoing learning circles do not exceed one day for each of the six sessions.
- With so many training priorities in all of the sites, having the curriculum materials posted on the project website at www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/pass facilitated the supervisors' access to ongoing training and use of the materials.
- Building the curriculum content with feedback from supervisors and child welfare caseworkers meant that it was practice relevant and meaningful for participants. The evaluator reports that the learning circle format, training tools, and delivery style were effective and well-received, with outstanding ratings of satisfaction across the board.
- The Preparation for Adulthood – Supervising for Success training was not billed as a mandatory training. In fact, interested parties had to apply and be accepted in order to participate, a fact that seemed to increase the demand for participation.

OUTCOMES

Summary of Activities and Accomplishments *(adapted from information and materials provided by the grantee during the visit and available on the PASS website)*

The curriculum was developed by staff at the National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice and Permanency Planning (NRCFCPPP), working closely with the partner States and incorporating their ideas and models into the design. For example, Mississippi had developed supervisory learning labs which formed the basis of the learning circle design, New York City had developed caseworker curriculum guided by a series of core principles, and Oregon had developed a template for on-the-job training activities, all of which were incorporated into the Preparation for Adulthood – Supervising for Success (PASS) training model.

Prior to beginning curriculum development, project staff conducted eight focus groups, three each in Mississippi and New York City with caseworkers, supervisors, and youth, and two in Oregon with caseworkers and youth. Focus group participants identified positive youth development, relationship building, crisis intervention, collaborative skills, and cultural competence as training needs. Supervisors expressed a preference for small, seminar style trainings that involve youth and provide participants with tools they can take with them and consult as they begin to share their new knowledge with their staff.

Based on the four core principles of positive youth development, permanent connections, collaboration, and cultural competency, and on input from child welfare supervisors and caseworkers during the focus groups, the curriculum addresses the following six core perspectives:

- Develop and maintain positive permanent connections between youth and caring adults
 - Actively engage youth in developing life skills that will prepare them for successful transition
 - Relate to youth as resources rather than just recipients of services in the child welfare system
 - Create and maintain environments that promote physical and emotional safety and well-being
 - Value the individual strengths and uniqueness of each youth
 - Involve a diverse array of stakeholders in the development of a comprehensive continuum of services and supports for youth transitioning out of the foster care system
- **The Curriculum:** The training model was designed to create small learning communities, or learning circles, of supervisors who meet for six full-day sessions over a 6 month period. The first session provides an overview of child welfare supervision with a series of self-awareness inventories. It focuses on the role of the supervisor as educator to their staff. The next five sessions are guided by the six core perspectives listed above, with principles and practices to support each.
 - **Learning Circles:** Learning circles are small (no more than 16 participants, no fewer than 10), facilitated, focused, discussion groups designed to increase the knowledge, skills, and abilities of child welfare supervisors in supporting the successful preparation for adulthood of youth in foster care. They are designed to build a cohesive learning community and provide a structure for high quality peer-to-peer learning and networking. Learning circles are ritualistic. They define

real world challenges specific to the supervision of foster youth, and they identify incremental action steps that address issues raised by circle members. The learning circles are built around the six core perspectives of the curriculum, and each session begins with participants reporting back on implementation of their action plans from the previous learning circle. Then the two focus questions for the day are used to frame the session's discussion. One of the questions is about the topic of the day (i.e. What does permanency for young people in foster care mean to you? How are young people viewed in the foster care system? How does this impact the opportunities that are available to them?). The second question is about supervision (i.e. In your supervision, how do you address creating permanent connections for young people? In your supervision, how do you help your staff create opportunities for young people on their caseloads? What are the challenges in supervising staff towards helping young people acquire life skills?). After discussion of the focus questions, the trainer shows digital stories that address the day's topic and facilitates discussion of those stories and their message. In this training model, participants are asked to take charge of their own professional development through active participation in the learning community. With support from the facilitator, members use a variety of techniques to identify innovative strategies for addressing their concerns.

- **The Training:** During the 3 years of the PASS program, six complete learning circles (a total of 36 1-day training sessions) took place, with 60 participants being trained. There also were two Train the Trainer sessions, one in New York City and one in Oregon. These were 2-day sessions, which prepared a total of 24 training staff from those two jurisdictions to facilitate learning circles.
- **Action Plans:** In this training model, at the end of each session, supervisors create their personal action plans for implementing the knowledge, skills, and abilities acquired during that learning circle. These action plans are used to help participants focus on concrete steps they will take to incorporate the learning circle content into their practice and to pass the knowledge they have gained on to their staff. At each subsequent session, supervisors report on how they implemented their action plans with their staff.
- **The Transfer of Learning Guide:** Detailed discussion guides have been developed and posted on the website for each of the six segments of the learning circle. These guides walk the trainer who is working with a "class," or the supervisor who is working with her/his staff, through each step of each learning circle session and include all of the tools and techniques used during the training.
- **The PASS Website:** Launched in January 2008, the project website, located at www.nrcfcppp.org/pass, contains the learning circle competencies, agendas, discussion guides, and all of the training materials and tools for the six learning circles, as well as 10 of the digital stories prepared by foster youth, former foster youth, child welfare staff, and child welfare supervisors. Supervisors can and do download the discussion guides and use the materials in one-on-one supervision, group supervision, unit meetings, and staff retreats.
- **The Digital Stories:** The project has created 25 digital stories to use in the training and to be used by supervisors as they train their staff. Digital stories are short video autobiographies created by individuals in order to share their life experiences, in this case as part of the child welfare system, whether as a foster youth, a former foster youth, or as a child welfare caseworker or supervisor. These stories are used to enhance the quality of the supervisory learning circles by bringing the voice of the youth and the voice of the field into the training. The

stories are told from personal points of view and reflect issues of permanency and preparation for adulthood services, supports, and opportunities foster youth.

Evaluation *(adapted from information and materials provided by the grantee during the visit)*

A 24-item questionnaire is distributed after each learning circle. Participants are asked to evaluate the curriculum content and the training delivery through a five-point rating scale. An overall rating for the entire session also was included in the questionnaire. During the third year of the project, pre- and posttest knowledge surveys for learning circle content also were administered. Follow-up focus groups and interviews with PASS participants, evaluating the extent to which they had incorporated training content into their practice and the impact the training had had on their practice, if any, also are being conducted.

Preliminary evaluation results reveal that responses to the training have been overwhelmingly positive, highlighting both the usefulness of the curriculum content and the successful integration of the content into the supervisors' practice. There also has been a statistically significant difference between the pretest and the posttest scores of training participants, suggesting that there has been an increased knowledge of youth development and youth-focused practice among supervisors who participated in the PASS program.

Dissemination Activities *(adapted from information and materials provided by the grantee during the visit)*

- Since the website went live in January 2008, the grantee has had many expressions of interest in the curriculum, the training model, and/or the digital stories, and has distributed DVDs of their digital stories to numerous States, including Connecticut, New Jersey, Idaho, California, Oregon, Hawaii, New Mexico, Virginia, Colorado, Louisiana, Delaware, Texas, Utah, Florida, Alaska, Pennsylvania, Wyoming, and Arkansas.
- The grantee has made numerous presentations at major conferences across the country. They also have the ability to offer technical assistance on this material and on the training model nationally through the NRCFCPPP.

Sustainability *(adapted from information and materials provided by the grantee during the visit)*

- The PASS website, where the curriculum and training material have been posted, will remain live after the grant ends. Since the site was launched, several States have expressed an interest in the curriculum, the digital stories, and the learning circle model. The grantee also will continue to support the material content and the training format through the NRCFCPPP.
- Two Train the Trainer sessions were conducted during the third year of the project, one in New York with 13 participants and one in Oregon with 11 participants. These sessions prepared training staff in the two States to facilitate the learning circle model in their jurisdictions.
- Supervisors have reported using the training materials on a regular basis with their units. They also report that both they and their caseworkers have increased

the extent to which they engage in youth-focused practice. A number of participants also referred to the supports that the program facilitated, including the website and the networking and support that resulted from participating in the learning circles.

- The learning circles were structured in such a way that makes them easy to replicate. Each learning circle starts with participants reporting back on the implementation of the action plans they developed at the end of the previous session, followed by discussion of the focus questions and digital stories addressing the topic of the current session. Each session also is packed with tools and techniques that supervisors can use with their staff and with experiential activities they can use in group supervision to further promote learning. Each learning circle then ends with the creation of individual action plans for implementing what has been learned during that session, with participants reporting back at the beginning of the next session on their implementation of their plan (see PASS website for agendas, training guides, teaching tools, and other materials for each of the learning circles).