

CHANGING CHALLENGED PASTS INTO BRIGHTER FUTURES

San Luis Obispo County (County) has long been involved in foster care programs for children under the age of 18. In 2010, our County stepped out in front of the state by instituting a program that serves the needs of youth, ages 18 through 24, who need support with their transition into adult life. This program is known as the Transitional Aged Youth-Financial Assistance Program (TAY-FAP)¹.

Society views these ‘children’ over the age of 18 as adults but, in many cases, their difficult backgrounds have left them ill equipped for transitioning to adulthood. These young adults may choose to emancipate themselves and leave social services support because many are ready or feel the need for independence. If others choose to remain in social services programs, they are referred to as non-minor dependents.²

The 2013-2014 San Luis Obispo County Grand Jury (Grand Jury) examined the process through which these young men and women utilize support services³ under the County TAY-FAP and/or the more recent 2012 state⁴ mandated After 18 program⁵.

ORIGIN

Public service announcements on local radio and television indicated to the Grand Jury that foster care and foster care families are important to the citizens of our County. Presentations and interviews with County Social Services and partnering private companies confirmed that foster care for young adults over 18 is a valuable, progressive and dynamic program. San Luis Obispo County is in the forefront of establishing programs to serve this need. This report intends to bring relevant information to citizens of San Luis Obispo County about these outstanding efforts.

¹ Housing services for those over age 18 includes programs not investigated in this report, notably Transitional Housing Placement - Plus (THP-Plus).

² Dependency relates to Juvenile Court supervision.

³ County Department of Social Services.

⁴ California Department of Social Services.

⁵ California Fostering Connections to Success Act for non-minor dependents from 18 to 21 initiated in 2012. This program is most frequently referred to as ‘After 18.’

METHOD

The Grand Jury received presentations from the Director and Assistant Director of the County Department of Social Services regarding County foster care programs.

The Grand Jury also conducted interviews with the Assistant Director of Social Services, the Probation Department⁶ and the Chief Executive Officer of a not-for-profit private corporation, Financial Care Network, Incorporated (FCNI), concerning county and private programs and the relationship between them.

Members of the Grand Jury participated in a Superior Court hearing in which an emancipated non-minor dependent elected to transition from a probation program to the After 18 foster care program. Discussions were held with the Juvenile Court Judge, the social worker, the non-minor dependent and her attorney.

NARRATIVE

The Grand Jury learned that the County of San Luis Obispo was providing additional programs and assistance for former foster care youth (infancy to age 18). The County administered TAY-FAP supports the often difficult transition from traditional under 18 foster care to full emancipation. Young adults aged 18 to 21 in the state After 18 program and aged 18 through 24 in the County program may access a variety of social resources upon the recommendation of a social worker, court provided attorney, judge or probation officer.

After 18 Program

This California State program is an important safety net in assisting a non-minor dependent's transition from foster care to adult independence. About 50% of our County's foster care youth who emancipate from foster care at age 18 enter the After 18 program. A non-minor dependent must have been in foster care to participate in the After 18 program. It is administered by the

⁶ Supervisor of Placement and Transitional Age Youth Unit.

Department of Social Services (about 48 cases in early 2014) and the Probation Department (with about 22 cases). These two County departments administer very similar social programs tailored to the individual, referred to as a client. The departments provide the necessary interface between Juvenile Court monitoring of the non-minor dependents and the program implementation through an accredited California Alliance Family Care Services agency (Family Care Network, Inc., in San Luis Obispo County). These support services involve required client appearances at Juvenile Court at least once every six months, as well as frequent caseworker contacts. These support resources are never more than a phone call away. The programs are entered into voluntarily by the clients but are subject to mandatory court and social worker supervision. It is a “trust but verify” approach designed to ensure the non-minor dependent is shouldering his or her responsibilities. Each client must comply with one of the following four criteria (with an exception for medical disabilities):

- Be in high school or a GED program,
- Enroll in college or an approved vocational program,
- Be employed at least 80 hours a month or
- Participate in a program designed to promote employment or remove barriers to employment.

Interestingly, about half of the After 18 non-minor dependents are enrolled in colleges, universities or vocational schools. This appears to be a remarkable indicator of success for these young adults who faced significant difficulties and challenges in their childhood years.

Most County social workers have a bachelor’s or higher degree. Hiring and retaining such talent is a constant challenge. The not-for-profit private corporation, FCNI, is intimately involved in most After 18 cases and manages the County's TAY-FAP. Most of FCNI's caseworkers also have a master’s degree in social work, including some with behavioral therapy specialties. A few of the caseworkers have bachelor degrees with a focus on rehabilitation.

The state After 18 program is in its infancy and is effective within the limits of available funding. This program would benefit from more mental health specialists for its continued expansion and maturation. Those specialists can only be provided with increased and stable state funding. The open question is whether the funding growth can match the operational need.

TAY-FAP

The County's highly specialized program, Transitional Aged Youth – Financial Assistance Program, is less financially robust (about \$500,000 budgeted in fiscal 2013-2014) than the state funded program (about \$1 million for San Luis Obispo County in fiscal 2013-2014). TAY-FAP funding is crucial in providing financial assistance to further the non-minor dependents' education and empower them to strive for independence and self-sufficiency.

TAY-FAP began in 2010 prior to the state's After 18 program. In early 2013, it served 117 youth and is unique to San Luis Obispo County. TAY-FAP was started by the Assistant Director of the Department of Social Services and the Chief Operations Officer of FCNI with the approval of the Director of Social Services and the Chief Executive Officer of FCNI. The Supervisor of Cuesta College's Independent Living Program assisted with the TAY-FAP implementation.

TAY-FAP utilizes the resources of FCNI and derives its funding from state approved reassignment of foster youth funding to operate wraparound services program (i.e., group homes). This use of financial and intellectual resources was a creative and collaborative effort on the part of several dedicated staffers in the day-to-day work environment of the County's social services support network. The essential concept boils down to:

- If you need assistance with housing, transportation, school costs, school supplies, etc., we will help you financially if you're meaningfully helping yourself by going to school.
- You can work with a mentor, a case manager or proceed on your own.
- You will have a contract to promote your goals.
- The County will be involved in the follow-through for that contract.
- If your goals are not met, funding may be revoked.

TAY-FAP is unique to the County and makes good use of its funding. Participants at related state-wide conferences have shown substantial interest in inaugurating similar county- level programs. To date, County Social Services has succeeded in securing increased funding for this important program.

These two programs, After 18 and TAY-FAP, and their partner agencies use a collaborative approach, individually tailored for each client. County social workers, probation officers, the clients, FCNI case workers, school counselors, housing supervisors and others all work together to create the goals and desired outcome for each participant. The graphic in Appendix A depicts FCNI's interpretation of the collaboration required for an effective program.

CONCLUSIONS

San Luis Obispo County Departments of Social Services and Probation have implemented effective programs to transition former foster care youth into functioning young adults. The program is made up of two parts: the After 18 program, a state mandate for each county for young adults from 18 to 21 who turned 18 in foster care, and the unique San Luis Obispo County program called TAY-FAP (Transitional Aged Youth – Financial Assistance Program) for young adults from 18 through 24. In a hugely collaborative effort, the Department of Social Services and Probation have drawn in and utilized private not-for-profit organizations to augment the highly educated and trained staff necessary to support these non-minor dependents.

Client involvement in these programs is voluntary. Flexibility in the program allows clients to choose from a slate of service options that best meet their needs. At the same time, case managers require clients to abide by the terms of their contracts to insure measurable progress is being achieved.

COMMENDATIONS

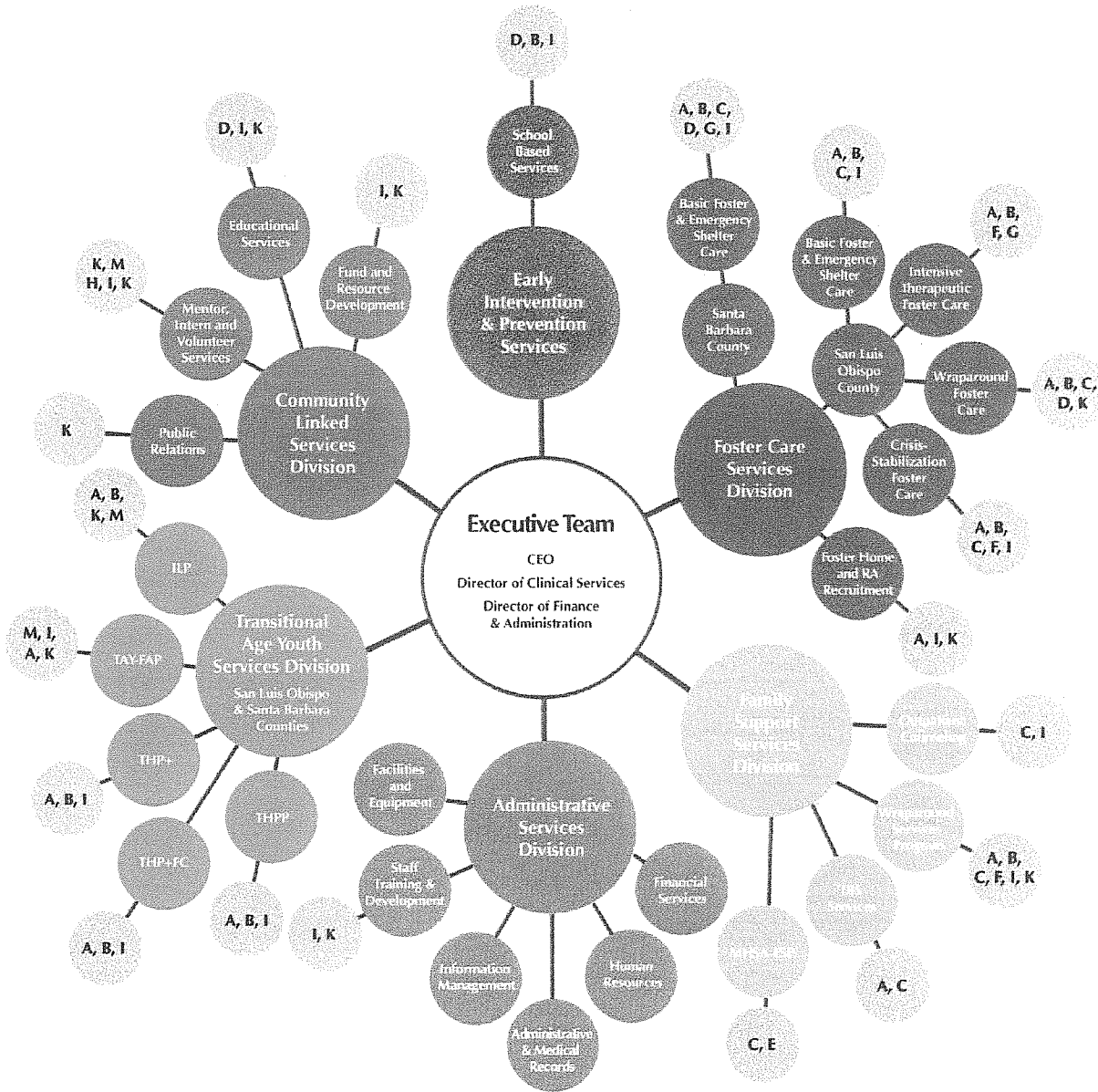
For the professionals in our County responsible for the State mandated After 18 program and the stellar County TAY-FAP, the Grand Jury applauds you, and in the words of a client, “YOU ROCK!”

This is an informational report. No responses are required

Presiding Judge	Grand Jury
Presiding Judge Dodie Harman Superior Court of California 1035 Palm Street Room 355 San Luis Obispo, CA 93408	San Luis Obispo County Grand Jury P.O. Box 4910 San Luis Obispo, CA 93403

APPENDIX A

This graphic, courtesy of Family Care Network, Inc., depicts the management and organizational interactions necessary to achieve a solid support network for non-minor dependents.



Partner Agency Key			
A - Social Services	D - County Schools	G - Law Enforcement	J - City/County Planning
B - Probation	E - Drug and Alcohol	H - CAP-SLO	K - Community
C - Mental Health	F - Health Department	I - Other CBOs	M - Colleges/Universities