

# Good-Better-Best: A Youth Welfare Approach to Employment

Youth formerly in foster care face significant barriers to employment. In fact, “studies of former foster youth who age out of care find that these youth generally experience high unemployment, unstable employment patterns, and earn very low incomes in the period between ages 18 and 21” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008, p. 1). By age 24, these youth continue to lag behind their counterparts nationwide, experiencing poorer measures in a variety of outcomes including regular employment and earnings (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). In addition, though nearly all of the participants in the Midwest Study reported that they had some work experience at age 26, only 45 percent were employed at the time of the study, compared with 80 percent of a nationwide sample of youth not in foster care (Courtney et al., 2011).

Outlined below is an example that agencies can use to provide services along the Good-Better-Best continuum to improve employment outcomes for youth currently or formerly in foster care by helping them get a summer job at age 16. This practice example is provided as a suggestion only and does not reflect official guidance from the Center for States, the Children’s Bureau, or any other federal agency.

**Service Need:** A 16-year-old youth in foster care expresses a desire to get a job over the summer.

## Good

- ▶ The caseworker gives the youth information on obtaining a job, including information about filling out a job application, resume writing, and other appropriate job readiness information. Work and services provided are documented.
- ▶ The caseworker provides the youth with resume writing and job search tip sheets, as well as a listing of job posting sites and youth employment centers. Caseworkers assist the youth with obtaining additional employment information as appropriate.
- ▶ If the youth asks for information on the logistics of summer employment, such as transportation or appropriate clothing, the caseworker is available to provide advice.
- ▶ The caseworker enrolls the youth in life skills classes on employment searches and appropriate work behavior.
- ▶ The caseworker makes sure that the youth has access to all the necessary documentation for job paperwork, such as a social security card.

## Better

### In addition to the above:

- ▶ The caseworker follows up with the youth and his or her support team regularly to discuss strategies for the job search. She or he also ensures that the youth is connected with community resources related to the youth’s interests to assist in the job search, for example, knowledge about local employment fairs.
- ▶ The caseworker ensures that the youth is engaged in assessing his or her work readiness and is connected to any needed skills training. She or he assists the youth in making the connections necessary to get a job (or internship) that best aligns with the youth’s future goals.

- ▶ At the outset of the job search, the caseworker helps the youth think through the logistics of summer employment, including transportation options and scheduling with the youth's other activities, and provides relevant printed or electronic information.
- ▶ The existing relationship between the caseworker and the youth forms the foundation for the caseworker to be able to provide targeted advice and assistance to help the youth with the job search. When needed, adult supporters assist the youth by writing reference letters or letters of support and offering help with "soft skills" that reduce the barriers to successful employment, such as knowing what to say when walking into a place of business to ask about a job, or understanding what to wear to an interview.

## Best

### In addition to the above:

- ▶ The youth spearheads the job search process, engaging in creative problem solving to address any challenges encountered and asking for assistance from mentors as needed.
- ▶ The youth reaches out to his or her team of supporters (e.g., family members, peers, resource parents, advocates, teachers, guidance counselors, therapists, etc.), to discuss interests, desires, and strengths related to work and jobs as well as needs related to job-seeking and maintaining employment. The youth is encouraged by family members, mentors, and peers to think about the summer job in the context of his or her future goals, as the first step in her or his career, and the start of building an employment history.
- ▶ The youth explores opportunities for supported, paid summer and part-time work experiences, such as internships or apprenticeships, to help him or her investigate interests, build a resume, and gain work experience. The youth discusses his or her options with peers, family, and community mentors, as needed. When he or she begins applying for work or internships, the youth asks for assistance from his or her support network if necessary, for example, by asking a teacher or coach for reference letters. Throughout the process, mentors and peers provide feedback for growth, as requested by the youth.
- ▶ The youth, together with his or her foster family, community mentors, and caseworker, collaborate to make sure that the youth has access to experiences that help build "soft skills"— such as leadership, communication, self-advocacy, and teamwork—and that provide hands-on opportunities to practice these skills. The youth, together with his or her support network, discusses what might happen on the job hunt and the ways in which soft skills could be used to help land the job. For example, if the youth isn't receiving any responses from job applications, he or she could discuss the situation with peers and brainstorm strategies to proactively reach out to potential employers. If the youth is unable to find work within a month, he or she might ask for advice from a foster parent on how the job search could be conducted more effectively or how to improve his or her interview skills.
- ▶ The youth thinks through the logistics of summer employment, including his or her schedule, other activities, and potential transportation issues. He or she asks foster family members and other mentors as needed to make sure he or she will be able to get to work at the scheduled times. If asked, a family member or caseworker can help the youth access bus and train schedules, obtain a driver's license, or coordinate a ride to work for the youth if necessary.
- ▶ Throughout the process of obtaining summer employment, the youth provides both formal and informal feedback on the experience of the job search and working with the caseworker, mentors, peers, and other supportive individuals. The feedback is taken seriously by agency staff.

## Where on the Good-Better-Best Continuum Do Your Agency's Services Fall?

Using the examples provided above, think about the services your agency provides related to employment and internship opportunities for youth in foster care. First, outline the local and federal policies or procedures your agency follows for services related to employment. Then, consider your own work with youth and that of other caseworkers at your agency—where do the services you provide fall along the Good-Better-Best continuum? In what areas can you take service provision to the next level?

### *Federal policies/procedures:*

### *State, county, and agency policies/procedures:*

A **Good** level of service provision includes:

- ▶ Satisfying federal requirements
- ▶ Basing service provision on individualized planning
- ▶ Ensuring that service provision takes into account each youth's level of cognitive, social, physical, and emotional development
- ▶ Providing the youth with printed or digital information
- ▶ Meeting regularly with the youth and responding when the youth reaches out for advice or assistance
- ▶ Arranging for the youth to be referred to or signed up for life skills or similar classes
- ▶ Documenting work and services provided and making the youth's official records and documents readily accessible

A **Better** level of service provision includes:

- ▶ Beginning the transition planning process early in a youth's development, around age 13 or 14 (as appropriate)
- ▶ Following up with the young person, monitoring developmental progress, and providing assistance as needed
- ▶ Providing extensive printed and digital information, as well as opportunities to discuss it and ask questions
- ▶ Working with young people to develop their knowledge and skills
- ▶ Using the caseworker's deep understanding of life skills development to help the young person develop the capacity to benefit from the information acquired in life skills or other training classes
- ▶ Building a close relationship with the youth, which will form the foundation for all assessment, planning, and service provision
- ▶ Connecting young people with community partners and resources to help them creatively plan for the future and reach their goals

A **Best** level of service provision includes:

- ▶ Ensuring that service provision is transparent, equitable, and developmentally appropriate
- ▶ Framing available services in a developmentally appropriate way that is easily navigable for young people
- ▶ Ensuring that services provided add real value to the youth's life from the young person's point of view without the need for additional incentives
- ▶ Working with the youth to develop "soft skills" so that concrete skill development occurs in the context of community and peer relationships
- ▶ Evaluating services provided from the youth's perspective and providing many opportunities for youth feedback
- ▶ Framing peer advocacy within the child welfare system as normal healthy behavior, providing opportunities for this advocacy, and modifying programming, when possible, based on youth feedback
- ▶ Creating a culture of problem solving led by young people themselves

What barriers might your agency face in providing the **Best** level of service related to employment for youth? How might these barriers be overcome? In what areas can you take service provision to the next level?

## References

- Courtney, M., Dworsky, A., Brown, A., Cary, C. Love, K., & Vorhies, V. (2011). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 26*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at University of Chicago. Retrieved from [https://ncfy.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/docs/20376-Midwest\\_Evaluation-Outcomes\\_at\\_Age\\_26.pdf](https://ncfy.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/docs/20376-Midwest_Evaluation-Outcomes_at_Age_26.pdf)
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2008). *Coming of age: Employment outcomes for youth who age out of foster care through their middle twenties*. Retrieved from <https://aspe.hhs.gov/system/files/pdf/75376/report.pdf>

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