


## CHANGING THE STORY

# Recommendations to Improve Services for Transition Age Foster Youth in Sonoma County

DEVELOPED BY THE VOICES AB 12 YOUTH COHORT



“Through this project, I’ve gained a deeper understanding of the workings of the foster care system, and what it takes to make change... For me, the project has been a great experience of growth and building upon myself, and I want to see it become a chain reaction of change.”

—VOICES AB 12 YOUTH  
COHORT MEMBER

MAY  
2016





## A COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIP WITH TRANSITION AGE YOUTH IN SONOMA COUNTY 2014-2016

In the spring of 2014, the Walter S. Johnson Foundation (WSJF) approached Sonoma County Family, Youth and Children's (FYC) Services Division to participate in a multi-year planning effort focused on improving services and policies for transition age foster youth in partnership with VOICES.

Sonoma County was selected because the public and nonprofit partners recognized the unique opportunity for reform, and both understood that youth engagement and leadership were critical to bringing about changes to benefit youth. The county was an early adopter of AB 12, with a majority of eligible Sonoma County youth enrolled in extended foster care beginning in 2012. As a mid-size county with a population of transition age foster youth neither too small nor too large for impactful reform, Sonoma County was well-suited for this planning effort.

While there are various services available to transition age youth in the county, including educational support, THP-plus housing, health care, and employment services, there is no unified plan. WSJF saw a need for the development and implementation of a unified system plan for transition age foster youth and other vulnerable youth in the county. The foundation recognized that formulating and implementing such a plan through a public-private partnership would have a lasting impact for transition age foster youth.

When FYC was approached by WSJF about launching a program to identify local systemic changes that would enhance the experiences of transition age foster youth, Division Director Nick Honey recognized that the project's success would be dependent on engaging youth with direct experience in the child welfare system. Thus, VOICES, a community based organization that provides leadership opportunities for current and former foster youth in Sonoma County, was the ideal partner.

VOICES and FYC designed a program that would engage a group of passionate and dedicated foster youth to draw upon their own expertise in order to re-imagine the current local service system for transition age foster youth. Together with other public and private sector partners, they have developed a roadmap to a sustainable path to independence for all foster youth in Sonoma County.

## ABOUT VOICES SONOMA

Voice Our Independent Choices for Emancipation Support (VOICES), a nonprofit dedicated to supporting and empowering foster youth in their transition to independence, was founded in Napa County in 2005 as a one-stop community and resource center. Three years later, the model was replicated in Sonoma County, and since then, VOICES programs have also expanded into Santa Clara and Monterey Counties.

VOICES Sonoma is committed to authentic youth engagement and providing youth with the support necessary for achieving successful outcomes. VOICES utilizes an innovative Youth Engagement Model focused on empowering each youth, integrating resources and services, and working with the entire community to address the barriers youth face as they leave various systems of care. The youth of VOICES are not only recipients of social services, they are active leaders in supporting their peers, guiding the evolving vision of program delivery at each site, and conducting trainings to enable social service agencies to become “youth-friendly.” They also advocate that the community at large listen and respond to youth voice. As a youth-led organization providing leadership opportunities, VOICES Sonoma has reached out to, and engaged with, hundreds of foster youth throughout the county.

At the VOICES Sonoma center in Santa Rosa, foster youth, with assistance from their peers and other VOICES staff, can access a comprehensive service system to meet their health and wellness, employment, education, and housing needs. In addition, due to the close working relationship between VOICES Sonoma and the County of Sonoma Family, Youth, and Children’s (FYC) Services Division, youth visiting the center have immediate access to Sonoma County Independent Living Program (ILP) coordinators who support their access to ILP benefits and services and provide case management. More than 600 transition age youth access the Santa Rosa VOICES center each year.

## ABOUT SONOMA COUNTY FAMILY, YOUTH AND CHILDREN’S SERVICES

The Family, Youth and Children’s (FYC) Services Division is the only entity in the county with the mandate to protect children from abuse, neglect or abandonment. They work closely with law enforcement and the court system to meet that mandate. They are responsible for ensuring the safety and well-being of children and youth in the community and in the foster care system. Additionally, FYC strongly believes in the importance of authentic youth engagement. The Division makes a special effort to ensure that youth have the opportunity to be actively engaged in their own case planning as well as engaged in defining services for foster youth in Sonoma County.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across the U.S., youth who have experienced foster care struggle to establish independence in their early twenties, as do many of their non-foster care peers. Without the safety net that parents often provide to their young adult children, foster youth who “age out” of care face significant barriers as they seek a foothold in adulthood.

In Sonoma County, as elsewhere in the country and throughout California, outcomes among transition age foster youth are concerning, as far too many are homeless or unstably housed, disconnected from education and employment, and struggling with poor physical and mental health.

California took a significant step toward strengthening support for transition age foster youth with the passage of Assembly Bill 12 (AB 12), the California Fostering Connections to Success Act of 2010. Sonoma County has embraced AB12, and continues to develop a system of supports and services for youth ages 18 to 21 who participate in extended foster care.

Over the past decade, Sonoma County’s government and public agencies have shown commitment to improving the support system for transition age foster youth. The Sonoma County Human Services Department (HSD) released two reports, *Patchworked Lives: Sonoma County’s Emancipating Dependents* and *Patchworked Lives Revisited: Services for Former Foster Youth in Sonoma County*, which provided a list of steps to build community awareness about the challenges facing foster youth and potential strategies to overcome them. *Patchworked Lives Revisited* calls for expanding and improving coordination among existing services as well as funding new programs to support transition age foster youth. The *10-Year Homeless Action Plan: 2014 Plan Update* produced by the Sonoma County Continuum of Care recommended approximately 270 units of Permanent Supportive Housing targeted to youth under age 25.

In 2014, Voice Our Independent Choices for Emancipation Support (VOICES), a nonprofit dedicated to supporting and empowering foster youth in their transition to independence, received a multi-year grant from the Walter S. Johnson Foundation and support from the May and Stanley Smith Charitable Trust to convene a cohort of Sonoma County transition age foster youth to identify systemic, county-level barriers facing foster youth in their transition to independence and develop recommendations to address them.

The county’s culture of collaboration, authentic youth engagement, and commitment to supporting foster youth set the stage for the VOICES AB 12 Youth Cohort Project, which launched in January 2015. The Walter S. Johnson Foundation approached the leadership of Sonoma County which had a long and productive partnership with VOICES. The Youth Cohort was charged with looking in particular at AB 12 services as they are delivered and accessed in Sonoma County as well as in other jurisdictions around the state. With the support of VOICES staff, the cohort began studying the foster care system and AB 12, examining resources and challenges unique to Sonoma County. They then met with youth receiving AB 12 services, county and nonprofit leadership, content experts, and other stakeholders.

Through their meetings and research, the Youth Cohort developed and refined the following four recommendations for transforming outcomes for foster youth in Sonoma County in the areas of independent living, housing, health and wellness, education and employment:

- **GOAL: ENSURE FOSTER YOUTH ACCESS, ENROLL, AND RECEIVE BENEFITS**
  - **RECOMMENDATION ONE:**  
Enhance screening and assessment for all vulnerable youth, and support access to benefits, programs, and services. The steps described in this recommendation seek to:
    - Improve access to AB 12 benefits among probation youth, and
    - Improve benefits enrollment and receipt among vulnerable transition age youth throughout the county.
- **GOAL: ELIMINATE HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING INSTABILITY AMONG FOSTER YOUTH**
  - **RECOMMENDATION TWO:**  
Develop a mixed-use, single-site housing model for current and former AB 12 foster youth and other at risk community members.
  - Within this model, create a wellness center and supportive community for residents to utilize as a tool for their personal growth.
  - The program should also incorporate supports for independent living, including training and guidance in financial literacy.
- **GOAL: INCREASE HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES AND COLLEGE ACCESS**
  - **RECOMMENDATIONS THREE AND FOUR:**  
Develop a Summer Academy Program for high school age foster youth to help them become familiar with and prepare for postsecondary education, and establish an Education Navigator position to collaborate with the Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE) to support foster youth postsecondary academic, financial, and emotional readiness and success.

“Through intergenerational collaboration in creating bridges and filling in gaps in youth services, we understand more about what authentic youth engagement is and how we want to use it and what value it has in playing a part in systems change.”

–VOICES AB 12 YOUTH COHORT MEMBER

The overarching goal of these recommendations is to improve the lives of foster youth by strengthening the ability of Sonoma County’s child welfare, probation, education, and housing systems to support their transition to independence. They are fundable through a number of county, state, federal, and nongovernmental resources and programs, and among the four recommendations, there is considerable overlap in potential funding streams, which are detailed in this report. The process of developing these recommendations, supporting the cohort, and producing this report has been funded through a public/private partnership from the beginning, including contributions from Sonoma County, the Walter S. Johnson Foundation, and the May and Stanley Smith Charitable Trust. This collaboration models a powerful strategy for innovation, and establishes a foundation for sustainability. This report offers concrete suggestions for how to do that, and is offered as a roadmap to assist funders, policymakers, governmental agencies, and other stakeholders to strengthen the systems, programs, and practices that can transform outcomes for the young people in Sonoma County who age out of foster care on their own.

*The views represented in this report do not necessarily reflect the endorsement of the county or foundations whose contributions have made this report possible. The report reflects the ideas and innovative thinking of the VOICES youth participants as captured by the VOICES consultants and staff.*

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

In January 2015, VOICES convened a cohort of Sonoma County transition age foster youth to identify systemic, county-level barriers facing foster youth in their transition to independence and develop recommendations to address them. The Youth Cohort met with youth ages 18 to 21 who were receiving AB 12 extended foster care services in Sonoma County as well as experts and external stakeholders. Through their research, the cohort developed and refined four recommendations for transforming outcomes for foster youth in Sonoma County. The recommendations encompass education and employment, independent living, housing, and health and wellness.

### SONOMA COUNTY OVERVIEW

Home to a half-million people, Sonoma County, California, is a largely rural and agricultural area encompassing more than 1,700 square miles. With 55 miles of rugged Pacific coast along its western edge, the county is bordered by Marin County to the south, Napa County to the east, and Mendocino County to the north. The county's major population center, the City of Santa Rosa, is home to over 170,000 residents. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the median household income countywide is \$64,000; the unemployment rate between 4 and 5 percent; and the median price of a single-family home is currently \$541,000.<sup>1</sup>

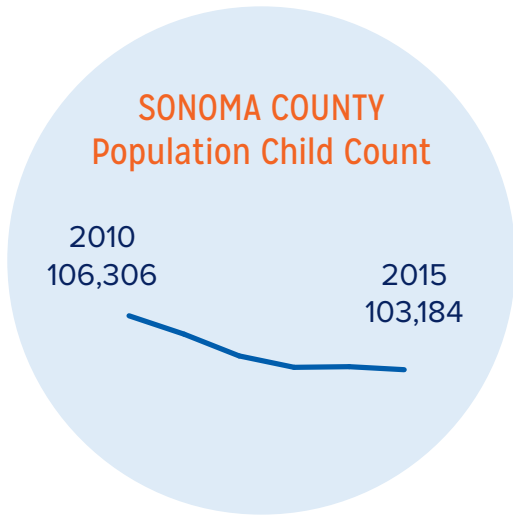
Sonoma County has 40 school districts serving more than 70,000 K–12 public school students, almost half of whom are considered economically disadvantaged.<sup>2</sup> Another 5,500 students are enrolled in private schools.<sup>3</sup> The public high school graduation rate is 82 percent.<sup>4</sup> The primary institutions of higher education are Sonoma State University, with an enrollment of 9,414,<sup>5</sup> and Santa Rosa Junior College with 26,735 students,<sup>6</sup> including nearly 600 current or former foster youth.<sup>7</sup>

In 2015, Sonoma County's poverty rate was estimated at 2 percent of the general population<sup>8</sup> and 14 percent of the child population.<sup>9</sup> According to the 2015 homeless count, over 3,100 people are homeless in Sonoma County, two-thirds of whom are unsheltered<sup>10</sup> The survey estimated that 630 of these individuals were young people between the ages of 18 and 24. Of these homeless "transition age youth," 20 percent had previous involvement with the foster care system. In total, the count estimated that 17 percent of the homeless population, or 528 individuals, had spent time in foster care at some point in their lives.

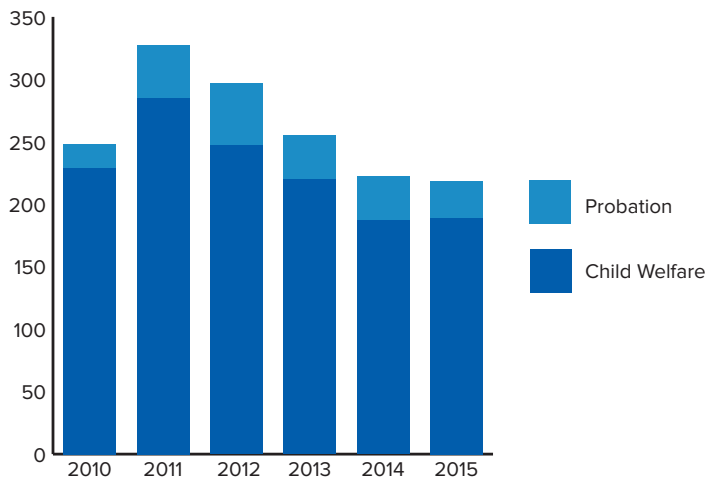
Since 1998, more than 3,000 children have experienced foster care in Sonoma County. Foster care caseloads in the county have declined about 12 percent in the past decade, with a current foster care population of approximately 450 at the time of this writing.<sup>11</sup> It is estimated that there are more than 1,100 former foster youth under age 24 living in the county.<sup>12</sup> Approximately 100 of these youth between the ages of 18 and 21 are currently participating in the county's extended foster care program, available since 2012, while a significant number of youth who qualify still choose to opt out upon turning 18.

As elsewhere in California, outcomes among transition age foster youth in Sonoma County are disappointing. Focus groups with current and former foster youth in Sonoma identified a number of common problems experienced by AB 12 youth approaching age 21: housing instability, difficulty accessing higher education, a lack of preparedness for employment and independent living, and disconnectedness from their communities.<sup>13</sup> The VOICES AB 12 Youth Cohort was convened to propose solutions to these challenges.

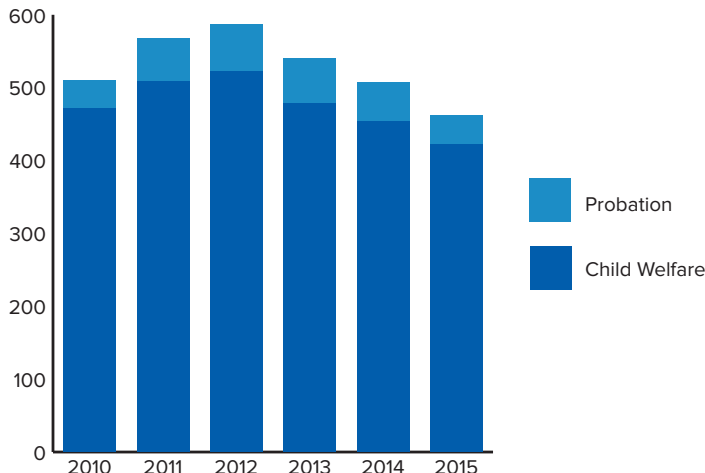




### SONOMA COUNTY Entries to Foster Care



### SONOMA COUNTY Children in Foster Care



## BACKGROUND

Over the past decade, Sonoma County’s government and public agencies have demonstrated commitment to improving the support system for transition age foster youth. The Sonoma County Human Services Department (HSD) has taken a lead in this effort by conducting research and needs assessments, culminating in the release of two reports, *Patchworked Lives: Sonoma County’s Emancipating Dependents*<sup>14</sup> and *Patchworked Lives Revisited: Services for Former Foster Youth in Sonoma County*.<sup>15</sup> In developing the reports, HSD surveyed foster youth, investigated the adequacy of the current service array, identified barriers and gaps within the existing support systems, and provided a list of steps focused on building community awareness of the challenges facing foster youth and potential strategies to overcome them. The *10-Year Homeless Action Plan: 2014 Plan Update* produced by the Sonoma County Continuum of Care recommended approximately 270 units of Permanent Supportive Housing targeted to youth under age 25.<sup>16</sup>

However, despite the best efforts of county and nonprofit leaders, foster youth emancipating from care in Sonoma, like their peers across the country, continue to slip through the cracks and experience extremely poor outcomes. Research has documented much higher rates of homelessness, incarceration, substance abuse, and mental health challenges among foster youth than are found in either the general population or a demographically matched population. Youth who have spent time in foster care furthermore struggle to access higher education, find stable employment, and attain financial independence.<sup>17</sup> *The Patchworked Lives* reports and VOICES' experience serving foster youth over the past several years confirm that these challenges are very present among young adults in Sonoma County.

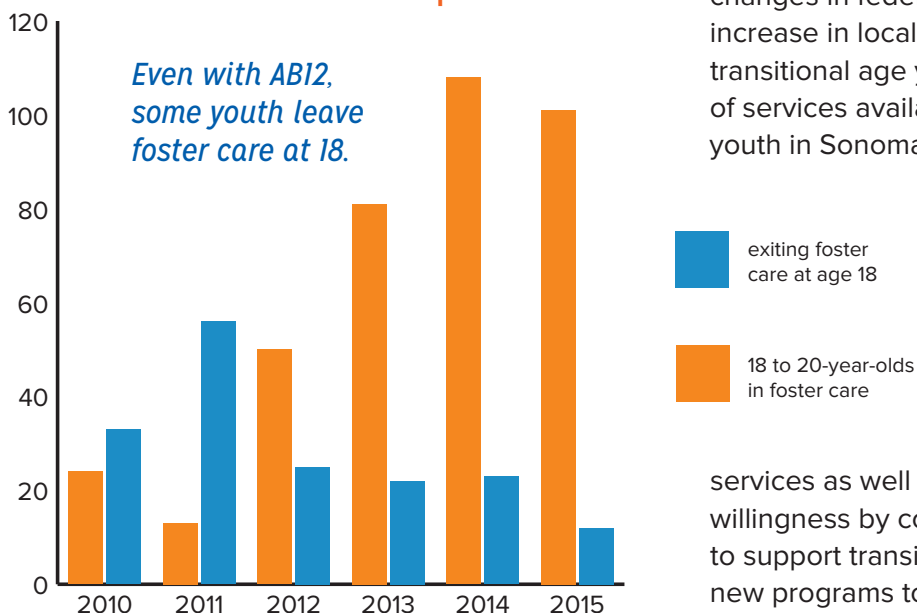
Assembly Bill 12 (AB 12), signed into California law in 2010, extended eligibility for foster care supports and services to age 21 for youth still in foster care at age 18. As it provides a comprehensive

**ASSEMBLY BILL 12 (AB 12)**, signed into California law in 2010, extended eligibility for foster care supports and services to age 21 for youth still in foster care at age 18. The law gives 18 to 21-year-old foster youth the right to be housed in developmentally appropriate independent living settings, solidifies their continued access to healthcare, and provides ongoing team-based planning, case management, and advocacy supports.

set of benefits, AB 12 laid the groundwork for achieving better outcomes among transition age foster youth. The law gives 18 to 21-year-old foster youth the right to be housed in developmentally appropriate independent living settings, solidifies their continued access to healthcare, and provides ongoing team-based planning, case management, and advocacy supports. By extending the safety net for these vulnerable youth, AB 12 provides a critical opportunity for them to build skills, find stable housing, and prepare for independence. However, in Sonoma, as elsewhere around the state, implementation of AB 12 has not been seamless, and far too many transition age foster youth continue to experience significant barriers to housing, education, employment, and self-sufficiency.

As stated in *Patchworked Lives Revisited*: “Despite changes in federal and state funding as well as an increase in local efforts to provide more services to transitional age youth, there remains a patchwork of services available to current and former foster youth in Sonoma County.”<sup>18</sup> The report further notes that despite the programs and services in place, “more needs to be done,” and identifies “housing, employment, education and mentoring programs” as specific areas of need.<sup>19</sup> It also calls for expanding and improving coordination among existing services as well as funding new services, indicating willingness by county leaders to direct more dollars to support transition age foster youth and to develop new programs to support them.<sup>20</sup>

### SONOMA COUNTY AB12 and Emancipation



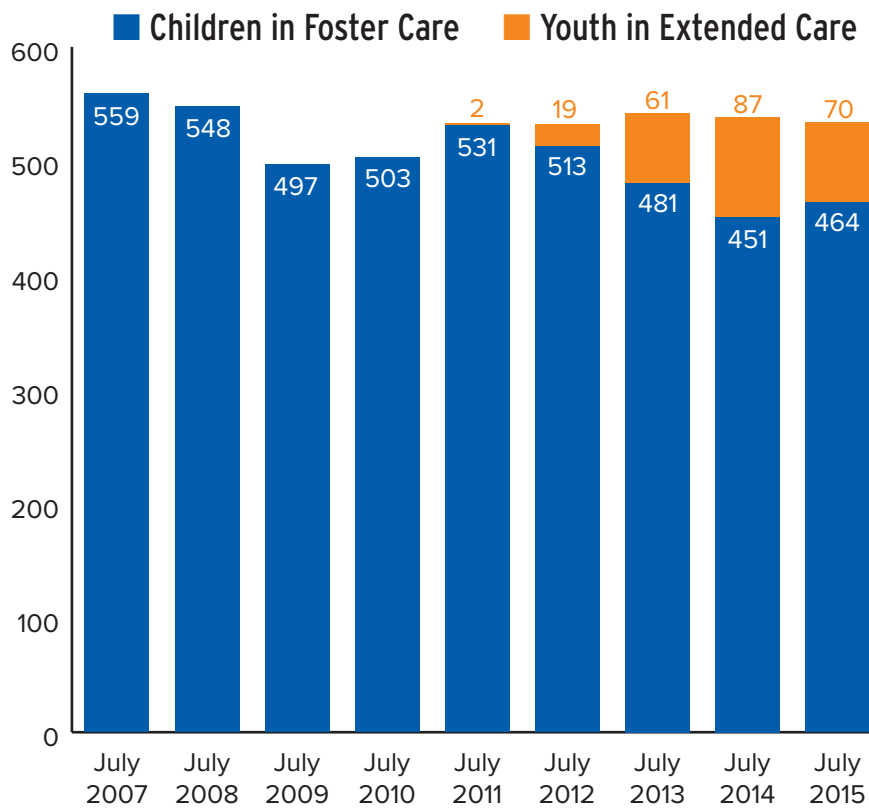
In the meantime, the burden of shortcomings in the systems designed to support foster youth in Sonoma County falls ultimately on the youth themselves. Fortunately, county leadership has committed to working collaboratively, across systems, to address these many challenges. Providers in the county offer a wide variety of support services to youth, an excellent resource base from which to implement strategies to overcome barriers and improve outcomes among youth leaving the foster system. This leadership and shared desire for positive change is critical, as transforming outcomes will require collaborative planning, united voice, and co-investment of time, expertise, and resources.

As evidenced by their robust support of VOICES and this project, the county’s agencies have recognized that engaging, integrating, and honoring the voices, experiences, and perspectives of youth is essential to creating systems, programs, and practices that truly transform lives.

“Through this project, I’ve gained a deeper understanding of the workings of the foster care system, and what it takes to make change. I not only understand my own experiences better, but what my peers have been through. For me, the project has been a great experience of growth and building upon myself, and I want to see it become a chain reaction of change.”

–VOICES AB 12 YOUTH COHORT MEMBER

## SONOMA COUNTY CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE AND YOUTH IN EXTENDED CARE



DATA SOURCE: CWS/CMS 2015 Quarter 2 Extract. UC Berkeley California Child Welfare Indicators Project

## ROLES OF KEY PLAYERS AND SUCCESS FACTORS

This project represents an ongoing collaboration between philanthropy, nonprofits, and public agencies, an arrangement that broadens the coalition of those seeking change and utilizes the strengths and resources of each sector. The shared investment of the major players has been critical in supporting the youth in developing their recommendations. As the process moves forward, the commitments from these key players should ensure that the proposals are meaningfully heard and acted upon.

In addition to providing grant funding, the Walter S. Johnson Foundation provided guidance and considerable technical expertise in youth development, program design, and public sector collaboration. Walter S. Johnson has also helped project participants connect with its vast network of advocates and professionals throughout California. Funding from the May and Stanley Smith Charitable Trust was also essential to funding the cohort and VOICES' unique model of youth development.

VOICES has served as the lead grantee and project manager, with VOICES staff designing, supervising, and facilitating the work of the youth cohort. They have also provided technical guidance for research and outreach, facilitated and prepared youth for external meetings, convened weekly check-ins, and helped establish partnerships with other community leaders. The support VOICES has provided to the project has been undertaken with complete fidelity to the organization's Youth Engagement Model and its commitment to authentic youth engagement. See Appendix A for additional detail on the VOICES Youth Engagement Model and the process by which the youth cohort developed the recommendations contained in this report.



This project would not be possible without the ongoing involvement of Sonoma County public agencies, including the Department of Human Services and the Family, Youth, and Children's Services Division, the Probation Department, the County Office of Education, and the Community Development Division. The leaders of each department are committed to working collaboratively to improve outcomes for transition age foster youth, as evidenced by their investments, their continual search for ways to strengthen county program delivery and coordination, and their dedication of time and energy to engaging and learning directly from youth. Other stakeholders including service providers, educators, and partners in the nonprofit community have also been highly engaged with the project, dedicating their time and expertise to help the youth develop and fine-tune their recommendations and identify additional actions that can be taken. See Appendix B for a list of local stakeholders who supported the project.

# RECOMMENDATION ONE

**GOAL** Ensure Foster Youth Access, Enroll, and Receive Benefits

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**RECOMMENDATION** Enhance screening and assessment for all vulnerable youth and support access to benefits, programs, and services. This recommendation seeks to:

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✓ **Improve access to AB 12 benefits among probation youth.**

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**STEPS**

1. Provide training to county departments, the courts, and local nonprofits on leveraging AB 12 benefits.
2. Provide training and technical assistance to address recurring issues.

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✓ **Improve benefits enrollment and receipt among vulnerable transition age youth throughout the county.**

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**STEPS**

1. Provide training to agencies on public benefits program eligibility and enrollment.
2. Develop and implement a standardized benefits-eligibility tool. Track and aggregate data.
3. Create and fund an Independent Youth Advocate or Ombudsperson position.
4. Provide additional social workers or case managers as needed.
5. Create structure for interagency collaboration.

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**WHY IT'S NEEDED** Each of these steps will advance the goal of ensuring that every youth understands their rights and the benefits for which they are eligible, and that they are actually able to access the programs and services that can support their success.

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**POTENTIAL FUNDING STREAMS INCLUDE**

- Title IV-E training or administrative funds
- Title IV-E waiver funds
- Realignment revenues
- Medicaid administrative claiming
- Federal Runaway and Homeless Youth funding
- Federal and state benefits programs, including CalWORKS and CalFresh
- Board of Supervisors' discretionary funds

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## GOAL: TO ENSURE FOSTER YOUTH ACCESS, ENROLL, AND RECEIVE BENEFITS

### RECOMMENDATION ONE

#### Enhance screening and assessment for all vulnerable youth, and support access to benefits, programs, and services.

Currently in Sonoma County, approximately 100 former foster care dependents and seven former probation wards ages 18 to 21 are receiving AB 12 benefits by participating in extended foster care. At age 18, youth are legally adults, and their participation in AB 12 is entirely voluntary. While the “uptake rate,” or proportion of all eligible youth who choose to remain in foster care past their 18th birthday, is higher than was projected by the state prior to the implementation of AB 12, there are still many eligible youth who either choose not to participate or who are unaware of their eligibility. In the latter category, community stakeholders estimate that there are significantly more probation youth eligible than are currently accessing AB 12 benefits.

Based on historical caseload demographics, the Sonoma County Human Services Department (HSD) also estimates that there are as many as 1,100 former Sonoma County foster youth under age 30 living in the area. In its recent application for Cooperating Agencies Foster Youth Educational Support (CAFYES)<sup>21</sup> funding, Santa Rosa Junior College identified nearly 600 current and former foster youth enrollees. This count likely overlaps with the HSD estimate, although it also includes former foster youth who were dependents of other counties, but who have chosen to attend SRJC.

In addition to foster youth, VOICES serves over 100 homeless youth every year, many of whom have previous systems experience. In general, these youth are not enrolled in benefits programs

or connected to systems of care at the time that they arrive at VOICES. This experience aligns with the findings of Sonoma County’s 2015 Homeless Count,<sup>22</sup> which identified nearly 700 unsheltered youth ages 18 to 24 countywide. The count estimated that 65 percent of these homeless youth had previous involvement with the foster care system.

These various counts indicate that there are at a minimum several hundred youth in Sonoma County who are extremely vulnerable to homelessness and the myriad challenges and negative outcomes that result from it. Given client counts for VOICES and the county’s several other youth-serving agencies, it is clear that a large proportion of this very vulnerable population interacts with programs that could connect them to benefits and services to help them stabilize and gain independence.

The Youth Cohort recognizes that a number of subgroups with distinct experiences and needs exist within the broader population of disconnected youth in Sonoma County. For instance, probation youth who are eligible for but not receiving AB 12 benefits would need different information, assistance, and advocacy than homeless youth with undiagnosed and untreated mental health needs but no previous foster care involvement. All of the county’s youth serving programs conduct outreach, and thus come into contact with youth presenting a diverse range of needs and eligibilities.

The Youth Cohort’s first recommendation is that Sonoma County invest in enhanced, standardized screening and assessment of all homeless, at-risk, and systems-involved youth, and provide them with expert assistance in applying for and accessing all benefits and programs for which they are eligible.

## 1. To improve access to AB 12 benefits among probation youth:

- **STEP ONE:** Provide specialized cross-training on how to fully leverage AB 12 benefits to all appropriate Probation and Child Welfare department staff, dependency attorneys, public defenders, legal aid providers, non-profit staff, and judges.
- **STEP TWO:** Provide ongoing training and technical assistance to address special cases and recurring issues.

The implementation of AB 12 has greatly increased awareness that probation youth in out-of-home placement are eligible for all of the same benefits as foster youth. These include both Independent Living Program services, as provided by VOICES, and AB 12 benefits. Specifically, probation youth who on their 18th birthday are supervised by the Probation Department under a Care, Custody, and Control order, and who live in a non-parent out-of-home placement, are eligible for extended foster care. Yet for a number of reasons, eligible probation youth access AB 12 benefits at a lower rate than do eligible foster youth.

Some of the barriers to access appear to be cultural: According to feedback from youth participants, probation departments have not historically operated with an ethos of “youth voice, choice, and preference.” Yet as that ethos is integral to AB 12, probation departments around the state are now adapting to the expectation that they partner with young people in a new way. Many other barriers arise from misunderstandings or differing interpretations of the law.

Given that Sonoma County’s Probation Department has embraced the intent and opportunity of AB 12, it is these administrative and legal concerns that the Youth Cohort seek to target with their recommendation for specialized training and technical assistance.

## 2. To improve benefits enrollment and receipt among vulnerable transition age youth throughout the county:

- **STEP ONE:** Train or retrain all transition age youth-serving agencies, both public and non-profit, regarding public benefits program eligibility and enrollment, including specific instruction on how to apply for benefits in Sonoma County.
- **STEP TWO:** Integrate a standardized benefits-eligibility screening tool with the outreach and intake procedures of all youth-serving agencies. To the extent possible, track and aggregate data from across agencies.
- **STEP THREE:** Increase capacity to provide specialized assistance and problem-solving regarding youth benefits by creating an Independent Youth Advocate or Ombudsperson position.<sup>23</sup>
- **STEP FOUR:** Provide additional dedicated, highly trained social workers or case managers as necessary to ensure that all youth can access benefits and navigate the county’s network of programs. This will ensure that establishing eligibility leads to enrollment in benefits programs, and that enrollment leads to actual receipt of benefits and services.
- **STEP FIVE:** Create a formalized structure for interagency collaboration to resolve recurring issues, guide practice improvement, and develop policy recommendations as indicated.

Each of these steps will advance the goal of ensuring that every youth understands their rights and the benefits for which they are eligible, and that they are actually able to access the programs and services that can support their success. While the steps can be implemented in sequence, all will eventually be necessary in order to move the median towards more positive outcomes in the vulnerable youth population.

By beginning with community-wide training and the implementation of standardized screening tools and procedures, the cohort’s recommendation is to create a “no-wrong door” policy across Sonoma County’s child serving agencies. Given the extreme

instability and unpredictability that is typical in the lives of vulnerable youth, it is important that any contact with available support systems be a connection to the information, guidance, and advocacy necessary to transform their situation. Training service providers and providing additional information to youth will, in and of itself, result in more youth accessing benefits and services.

This outreach, education, and screening process will reveal administrative and logistical barriers. The recommendation to provide for an Independent Youth Advocate or Ombudsperson is intended to address this eventuality. To ensure independence, this position should be contracted to a local non-profit or legal advocacy organization. The hiring process should focus on recruiting candidates with detailed knowledge of youth rights and benefits across systems and a commitment to youth-centered practice, and an ideal candidate would have some existing relationships with Sonoma County agencies. The host agency should negotiate MOUs and working agreements with local youth-serving agencies, both public and non-profit, that ensure independence while integrating the Advocate within existing systems, and spell out procedures for outreach, training, referral, and follow-through.

The cohort's recommendations recognize that the success of these initial steps will result in more youth who need additional support being identified and engaged, and their eligibility for benefits and services being established. Additional case management and coordination capacity will likely be needed to ensure that youth are able to fully access the services to which they are entitled.

Each of the steps above will generate important data and insights about how Sonoma County's systems succeed and struggle in serving homeless, disconnected, and systems-involved youth. This information should then be maximized by creating a regular process through which the various youth-serving agencies can convene to review data, address complex cases, resolve recurring issues, make refinements to practice, and ultimately develop improved policies.

## RELATED SONOMA COUNTY INITIATIVES AND ACTIVITIES

### AB 1331 SSI Screening Process:

AB 1331 (Evans–2007) requires that county child welfare agencies screen all foster care dependents and probation wards age 16.5 and above for eligibility for SSI, and initiate applications on behalf of those youth found to be eligible. Sonoma County staff currently conduct the screening and applications for all dependent youth.

- *County staff should coordinate these efforts with the screening, benefits advocacy, and case management implemented under this recommendation.*

### Social Advocates for Youth (SAY)—Street Outreach Team, Crisis Services, Coffee House Teen Shelter, and Dream Center:

The SAY Street Outreach Team connects with homeless youth throughout the county; Crisis Services reach youth and families at moments of greatest risk; The Coffee House Teen Shelter provides short-term shelter, food, counseling, and referrals for youth under age 18. The SAY Dream Center provides 63 units of transitional housing along with counseling, vocational, and educational supports.

- *Benefits screening and assessment tools should be developed in collaboration with SAY program staff, and eventually integrated into the SAY intake process.*

### Community-based Organizations Serving Homeless and Disconnected Youth:

A range of youth-serving organizations in Sonoma County can be key collaborators in locating and screening homeless youth for benefits programs. These include Chop's Teen Club, West County Community Services, Conservation Corps, Positive Images, Community Support Network, Youth Build, a range of healthcare providers, and educational and campus support programs for disadvantaged or at-risk youth.

- *All Sonoma County public and non-profit agencies should be engaged in developing benefits screening and assessment tools and procedures, and should receive specialized training.*



## EXISTING MODELS

Over the past several years, Oakland-based **Bay Area Legal Aid (BayLegal)** has developed specialized civil legal representation for homeless and disconnected youth through their **Youth Justice Initiative (YJI)**. In 2011, the YJI launched the **Alameda County Homeless Youth Demonstration Project (HYDP)**, a collaborative of youth-serving agencies that identify, assess, and stabilize homeless youth; provide legal representation to fully leverage and maximize all public benefits; and provide ongoing case management to ensure that youth access appropriate services.

HYDP began by developing referral and access points throughout Alameda County and a standardized benefits eligibility screening tool to be integrated with the intake procedures of homeless shelters, teen drop-in centers, transitional housing providers, and other locations serving vulnerable transition age youth. Staff in these agencies were trained to screen for benefits eligibility and make referrals to YJI. YJI attorneys both receive referrals from these service providers and conduct on-site legal clinics in youth homeless shelters, the Juvenile Justice Center, and other locations. Attorneys provide civil legal representation as requested by young people, coordinate service access, and facilitate

collaboration between agencies. YJI attorneys also meet regularly with the leadership of Alameda County's youth-serving agencies, attend and facilitate a number of planning and problem solving meetings, and regularly collaborate with the bench.

The development of YJI and HYDP coincided with the implementation of AB 12. An early finding of the project was that nearly 70 percent of homeless youth accessing shelter and other emergency services in Alameda County were former foster youth. Project attorneys thus developed significant expertise in how to maximize AB 12 benefits as an essential support for eligible homeless youth. AB 12 is voluntary, and BayLegal attorneys pursue only those benefits and services that youth themselves identify as likely to support their stability and independence. As most homeless youth are eligible for a range of benefits programs, YJI attorneys collaborate with youth to develop supports that address both their immediate needs and their own goals.

The VOICES Cohort has visited HYDP in Oakland, and toured a number of the project sites. BayLegal's Director of Youth Programs, Brian Blalock, has also presented to the cohort, county leadership, and community stakeholders, and assisted the cohort in identifying the elements of the YJI model that are best suited to Sonoma County's current needs.

- *These agencies should coordinate intake procedures, data collection, and referrals. Human Services Department's current "Learning Cohort" process provides a foundation.*
- *Increased youth advocacy and case management capacity should be available to all youth-serving agencies to follow through on referrals by enrolling eligible youth and facilitating their access to services.*

### **Sonoma County FYC/HSD and Probation Intake, Eligibility, and Placement Departments:**

The county child welfare and juvenile probation departments have expertise in the benefits programs for which homeless youth may be eligible, and have legal responsibility for facilitating enrollment and access.

- *These departments should receive cross-training and technical assistance to maximize AB 12 benefits for probation youth.*
- *Enhancing and standardizing screening, and maximizing benefits for homeless youth will require close collaboration with each of these departments.*

## POTENTIAL FUNDING STREAMS

### Title IV-E Training/Admin, Title IV-E Waiver,<sup>24</sup> 2011 Realignment Revenues

Some proportion of the needed investments in training and technical assistance and case management can be financed through foster care funding streams that provide significant local flexibility.

- **Title IV-E Training or Administrative funds** can be used to provide for training and technical assistance regarding AB 12 eligibility.
- The flexibility granted by the IV-E Waiver is intended to allow for investments to prevent foster care entry. **Title IV-E Waiver funds** can be used to provide for screening, assessment, and case management to link minors (and their families) to benefits.<sup>25</sup>
- Beginning in 2012, the state transferred significant additional financial responsibility for a set of foster care and related programs to counties; this “Realignment” provides Sonoma County with both increased flexibility regarding how to invest state dollars, and provides for significant revenue growth, as the underlying revenue source is responsive to the current strong statewide economy.<sup>26</sup> **Realignment revenues** could be used to finance any of the recommendations.

### Medicaid Administrative Claiming

Medicaid (referred to as Medi-Cal in California) provides federal matching funds to finance outreach to communities likely to be eligible but not enrolled in Medicaid, as well as infrastructure to support individuals with enrollment and access.<sup>27</sup> **Medicaid Administrative Claiming** could be used to finance portions of the outreach and case management recommendations.

### Runaway and Homeless Youth Act

**Federal Runaway and Homeless Youth** funding from the federal government provides grant funding in several categories including Street Outreach and Basic Center grants.<sup>28</sup> In Sonoma County, Social Advocates for Youth operates both programs. While there may not be additional grant dollars available to fund discrete investments in these recommendations, the RHY funding provides a foundation that could be matched or expanded to increase capacity for either assessment or case management.

### Other Benefits Program Outreach Funds

Many **federal and state benefits programs** make provision for outreach, eligibility, and enrollment activities (including CalWORKs and CalFresh).

### Board of Supervisors’ Discretionary Funds

The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors also controls a number of **discretionary funding streams** that could support some of the cost associated with these recommendations.

BayLegal’s Youth Justice Initiative has found that the provision of specialized civil legal screening, assessment, case management, and representation results in long term cost savings to county agencies by maximizing federal financial participation and mediating the development of service packages that allow youth to reunify with family or live independently, reducing the utilization of more expensive emergency or institutional interventions and placements. As an example, many Alameda County youth receiving General Assistance, financed entirely by the county general fund, were found eligible and enrolled in SSI, which is 100% federally funded with no state or local share of cost.



## **COST ESTIMATE AND FUNDING STRATEGIES**

Initial costs associated with this recommendation include consultant fees and travel costs for the training and technical assistance steps, as well as facilitating the process of developing standardized screening and assessment tools and integrating those with the existing intake procedures. The cost of creating an Independent Youth Advocate or Ombudsperson position and adding case management capacity depends on whether those are stand-alone positions or expansions of existing roles, and whether the positions are located within a county department or contracted to a community-based organization.<sup>29</sup> The county should make additional provision for consultant fees as necessary to structure and expedite the process of developing and implementing standardized benefits screening and data collection procedures, as well as facilitating interagency collaboration.

## **TIMELINE AND INTERMEDIATE STEPS**

This recommendation is already divided into sequential steps—the first several of which require minimal investment. The existing relationships with BayLegal make training and technical assistance immediately available. A consultant-led process of developing a standardized eligibility and assessment tool for youth-serving agencies can be initiated immediately and supervised by one of the county’s existing committees or collaboratives. Training on benefits eligibility for youth service providers should be undertaken concurrently with this process.

Planning for an Independent Youth Advocate or Ombudsperson position as well as increased case management capacity can be considered in developing the 2016–17 fiscal year budget. However, the ongoing staffing need will be determined over time, as more youth are identified and enrolled in programs, and the frequency and complexity of administrative or practice issues is revealed.

# RECOMMENDATION TWO

## GOAL **Eliminate Homelessness and Housing Instability Among Foster Youth**

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**RECOMMENDATION** Develop a mixed-use, single-site housing model for current and former AB 12 foster youth and other at risk community members. Within this model, create a wellness center and supportive community for residents to utilize as a tool for their personal growth. The program should also incorporate supports for independent living, including training and guidance in financial literacy.

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**WHY IT'S NEEDED** The 2015 Sonoma County Homeless Count identified 630 homeless transition age youth living on the streets of Sonoma County, 20% of whom (126) reported previous foster care history.<sup>30</sup> The combined capacity of Tamayo Village and the Dream Center in Sonoma County is 75 beds. The cohort envisions the Dream Center providing emergency shelter and entry to the continuum. AB 12 eligible youth would then have the option of accessing transitional housing or the Supervised Independent Living Placement (an AB 12 placement option that subsidizes rent in market rate apartments or shared living situations). The permanent supportive housing model proposed by the cohort would then be available to those youth who need additional time to heal from trauma and work towards self-sufficiency.

Through wellness-focused, permanent supportive housing, the cohort's model both responds to the extreme lack of affordable housing stock in Sonoma County and ensures that youth are able to experience the stability necessary to focus on healing and building self-sufficiency, without the "ticking clock" of transitional housing programs.

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**POTENTIAL FUNDING STREAMS INCLUDE**

Land and Buildings:

- US Department of Housing and Urban Development
- Federal Home Loan Bank
- Community Development Block Grant and other block grants
- Tax credit programs
- Capital campaigns

Programming:

- Title IV-E (AB 12) / THP-Plus/2011 Realignment / ILS
- THP-Plus Foster Care
- THP-Plus/2011 Realignment
- Independent Living Skills funding
- Medi-Cal Early, Periodic Screening Diagnosis and Treatment program (EPSDT)
- Mental Health Services Act (MHSA)

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## GOAL: ELIMINATE HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING INSTABILITY AMONG FOSTER YOUTH

### RECOMMENDATION TWO

**Develop a mixed-use, single-site housing model for current and former AB 12 foster youth and other at risk community members. Within this model, create a wellness center and supportive community for residents to utilize as a tool for their personal growth.**

Former foster youths' vulnerability to homelessness is well established. Over the past 20 years, a series of programs and policies have been developed in California and across the nation to address the issue, from earmarking Section 8 vouchers and affordable housing slots for former foster youth, to creating both transitional and permanent supportive housing programs. These efforts culminated in the 2008 passage of the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, which extended foster care supports and services to foster youth from ages 18 to 21.

AB 12 implemented the provisions of the Fostering Connections Act here in California, providing youth with a comprehensive set of benefits including continued case management and legal representation, secure access to health and mental health services, and most importantly, the right to safe, appropriate housing. Housing through AB 12 continues to be referred to as "placement," but the act established two new placement types—THP-Plus Foster Care, a type of transitional housing, and the Supervised Independent Living Placement, which provides youth with a cash stipend to cover or offset the cost of market rate or shared housing arrangements.

Prior to the passage of AB 12, California had established the THP-Plus program, which provides up to 24 months of transitional housing to former foster youth ages 18 to 24. The THP-Plus program was always operated at county option, and continues to exist, but the funding for the program was consolidated with several other foster care and related programs under 2011 Realignment. Many counties, including Sonoma, have continued to offer THP-Plus housing to former foster youth even in the era of AB 12, as THP-Plus is available until age 24, while AB 12 benefits cease at age 21. As THP-Plus is a state-created program, it has less rigid regulatory and licensing requirements, allowing greater flexibility in program design. Sonoma County currently provides 16 beds of THP-Plus housing through a contract with TLC Child and Family Services.

The members of the cohort have experienced the range of currently available AB 12 housing options, and are familiar with other programs that exist in the community. Nonetheless, they were unanimous in selecting housing as an area of continued need. This recognition aligns with the *10-Year Homeless Action Plan: 2014 Plan Update* from the Sonoma County Continuum of Care—specifically, the recommendation that approximately 270 units of Permanent Supportive Housing be targeted to youth under age 25.<sup>31</sup>

To avoid feeling like "just another placement," the cohort seeks to develop a program that includes youth from a range of backgrounds—not just AB 12 youth or former foster youth. They want to strike a balance between promoting community by having the program on a single site, and affirming independence by ensuring privacy and keeping the total number of units low (8–12).

The cohort's vision is motivated by a strong belief in the role of home in healing, health, and a sense of independence as well as belonging. Their recommendation is to develop a mixed-population, single-site housing model with an integrated wellness center and peer mentorship component to promote community and healing. The program should also incorporate supports for independent living, including training and guidance in financial literacy.

## RELATED SONOMA COUNTY PROGRAMS

### Social Advocates for Youth Tamayo Village

Tamayo Village is a single site, mixed-population housing program for former foster youth and other vulnerable young adults. Rather than full apartments, youth have personal rooms, but shared kitchen, bathroom, and living areas. Tamayo Village provides significant onsite programming, including employment services, educational supports, and peer mentorship.

### Social Advocates for Youth Dream Center

The Dream Center is a shelter and 63-unit short-term housing complex located on a renovated former hospital campus. Dream Center includes significant on-site vocational programming and educational supports and a range of integrated services.

### Social Advocates for Youth—Stepping Stone

Stepping Stone is a temporary housing solution for young people who have elected to stay in or re-enter extended foster care after the age of 18 and do not have housing. SAY and its partners provide young people with social, educational, and health services during their short stay in the program. In 2013–2014, Stepping Stone enrolled 18 youth in its program.

### TLC Child and Family Services Transitional Housing

TLC offers three housing programs for current and former foster youth. All three programs support youth in securing housing, learning the skills necessary for independent living, and connecting with resources in their local communities. The Transitional Housing Placement Program (THPP) gives foster youth ages 16 to 18 the opportunity to learn critical life skills from professional staff. The Transitional Housing Placement Plus Foster Care Program (THP-Plus FC) is an extended foster care

placement option for youth between 18 and 21 years old who have chosen to remain in care. The Transitional Housing Placement Plus program (THP-Plus) is for youth who have exited the foster care system and are between 18 and 24 years old.

### Community Support Network—Sanctuary House

The TAY Sanctuary House is a structured permanent housing program designed to support homeless Transition Age Youth with mental health challenges in establishing positive habits to realize their individual potential. The TAY Sanctuary House supports residents toward making the transition to using positive coping strategies learned through evidence based programs. In order to best serve residents' meaningful and permanent transition into independent living, there is no time limit to this program.

The cohort recognizes the value of these housing options for transition age foster youth. Yet there are urgent additional needs in the community. The most recent homeless count identified more than 200 homeless youth, while the combined capacity of Tamayo Village and the Dream Center is 75 beds. Furthermore, the program proposed by the cohort addresses a different need in the continuum—the need for wellness-focused, permanent supportive housing. The cohort's model both responds to the current reality of Sonoma County's housing situation—the extreme lack of affordable housing stock—and ensures that youth are able to experience the stability necessary to focus on healing and building self-sufficiency, without the “ticking clock” of transitional housing programs.

The cohort sees their model as “further out” on the continuum of housing for former foster youth. They envision the Dream Center providing emergency shelter and entry to the continuum. AB 12 eligible youth would then have the option of accessing transitional housing or the Supervised Independent Living Placement (an AB 12 placement option that subsidizes rent in market rate apartments or shared living situations). The permanent supportive housing model proposed by the cohort would then be available to those youth who need additional time to heal from trauma and work towards self-sufficiency.

## EXISTING MODELS

Upon deciding to include a housing recommendation, the cohort conducted research on models in other jurisdictions, and drew upon the following as inspiration for their vision:

### **Meadow Glen Apartments—Modesto, California.**

Meadow Glen was the first permanent supportive housing development for former foster youth in the Central Valley. The Stanislaus County Affordable Housing Corporation, City of Modesto, and the Housing Authority of the County of Stanislaus assembled the \$6.7 million in development costs through a range of federal loans and inter-agency transfers. Meadow Glen provides 32 units—24 one-bedroom and 8 two-bedroom apartments—with case management and supportive services provided by Aspiranet, a large multi-service agency. Meadow Glen apartments are available to current and former foster youth ages 18 to 28.

### **Neighborhood Economic Development**

**Corporation—Eugene, Oregon.** NEDCO partnered with the City of Eugene and raised \$1.26 million via a capital campaign to purchase a two story apartment building in downtown Eugene. The complex provides 12 units for former foster youth at below market rates, and integrates Independent Living Services provided by Looking Glass Community Services.

**Youth Moving On—Pasadena, California.** A Program of Hillside, Youth Moving On provides former foster and probation youth affordable quality housing and numerous support services to help them transition successfully to adulthood. Youth learn skills for lasting independence and a lifetime of personal fulfillment through healthy connections with supportive adults, career and education counseling, workforce development, weekly life skills classes, financial education, and connections with other community resources in the Los Angeles area. Youth also have access to the Youth Moving On Peer Resource Center, a safe, welcoming environment in which to build community and develop individual resilience.



## POTENTIAL FUNDING STREAMS

The full implementation of this recommendation will require building and/or acquiring appropriate housing units, and financing the ongoing programming. In general, the funding streams that create housing options for the impoverished general population do not fund significant supportive services, while those designed specifically for foster youth provide both housing and an array of services. To fully realize the vision of the cohort, the project will have to combine a wide range of funding sources.

### Land and Buildings

The primary sources of funding for permanent supportive housing are the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Federal Home Loan Bank, the Community Development Block Grant (and other block grants), tax credit programs, and capital campaigns. Most affordable housing developments in Northern California have between seven and twelve funding sources, with no one source accounting for more than 15 percent of the total. Affordable housing corporations possess the expertise to finance the various stages of acquiring property and building housing. Some continue to have a role in operating the developments and providing programming, but most partner with non-profit service providers with expertise in serving the target population.

### Programming

**Title IV-E (AB 12) / THP-Plus/2011 Realignment / ILS:** As noted above, AB 12 provides federal and state funding for new foster care placement types that could be built into the model for financing the ongoing cost of the housing program.

- **THP-Plus Foster Care:** THP-Plus Foster Care is a form of transitional housing placement for AB 12 youth provided by a non-profit that generally master-leases units, and provides them to youth under an individual agreement or program contract. Youth also receive case management and other supportive services from the provider, along with a stipend to offset their daily living expenses. Some units in the cohort's recommended program could be operated as part of a THP-Plus foster care program.

- **THP-Plus/2011 Realignment:** Counties have always had the flexibility to set their own THP-Plus rates, and now that THP-Plus funding is included in 2011 Realignment, there is additional flexibility to increase total investment in the program. As noted, Sonoma County currently offers 16 THP-Plus beds. This investment could be expanded by utilizing Realignment flexibility or growth to fund some of the units in the cohort's recommended program.
- **Independent Living Skills funding** was also included in 2011 Realignment, allowing counties to increase their total investment in that program. ILS funding would be appropriate to fund some of the wellness programming, and any life skills programming, like financial literacy or job coaching.

**Medi-Cal & MHSA:** Depending on the demographics and needs of the residents, certain aspects of the cohort's recommended programming could be financed by health and mental healthcare funding streams.

- Youth under age 21 with a qualifying mental health diagnosis are eligible for services through **Medi-Cal's Early, Periodic Screening Diagnosis and Treatment program (EPSDT)**. EPSDT provides a very broad and flexible array of community-based services, including case management and counseling. EPSDT may be able to provide some of the wellness programming that the youth envision. At a minimum, for youth who qualify, EPSDT could fund case management and counseling services delivered at the housing site.
- The **Mental Health Services Act (MHSA)** also provides a potential funding source for wellness programming, particularly through its Prevention and Early Intervention component. Sonoma County's current MHSA plan funds a number of youth programs from prevention to intensive intervention for seriously mentally ill young adults.<sup>32</sup> The likely multi-year timeline for planning and building the program envisioned by the cohort will allow for coordinating with the county Mental Health department regarding the possibilities for utilizing MHSA dollars.





## INCREMENTAL STEPS

Significant additional deliberation and collaboration will be needed to finalize a plan to finance and launch the cohort's recommended housing program. In the interim, a number of steps can be taken to advance their goals for housing:

- **Merge cohort recommendations into county homeless task force activities.** As noted above, the county's Homeless Youth Task Force is charged with developing recommendations for investment to meet the needs of Sonoma County's homeless residents.<sup>33</sup> The Task Force has made a number of recommendations regarding expanding services for homeless youth. The cohort should be represented in the proceedings of the Task Force, to seek political support for their vision and technical assistance to continue to develop the model.
- **Set aside slots in affordable housing developments for FFY/AB 12 youth.** Sonoma County's skyrocketing rents and lack of rent control or other renter protections mean that it is only going to be increasingly difficult for former foster youth and other impoverished individuals to stay stably housed. In addition to continuing to maximize funding streams available through AB 12 and Realignment, Sonoma County should continue to commit to setting aside proportions of all affordable housing programs for former foster and/or systems-involved youth.
- **Improve access to existing wellness programming among current and former foster youth.** Collaborate with youth programs to ensure that youth around the county are able to access their programming. Secure funding to provide wellness classes, retreats, and other programming at sites frequented by current and former foster youth, including VOICES and Social Advocates for Youth programs.

## COST ESTIMATE

Given that the cohort recommends establishing a new, single-site housing program, the startup costs will be considerable. To be faithful to the cohort's vision, the program would have to control an entire site, either through master leasing or acquisition. However, with the county's current near-zero rental vacancy rate, it's unlikely that a suitable complex would be available.

The cost of purchasing and possibly renovating an appropriate site would also be considerable. Buildings in Santa Rosa with 8 to 12 units are priced in the \$2–3 million range. Acquiring a vacant lot and building a new complex would cost multiples of that. It is possible that through collaboration with the county's housing authority and Homeless Youth Task Force, the real estate costs could be reduced or minimized—for example, the task force has identified a number of county-owned properties that could be sites for new development. Regardless, construction costs alone would be measured in millions.

Once the site is secured, though, a number of strategies could be deployed to finance the ongoing program costs, including the cost of housing and the programming components. Until these are more defined, it is difficult to estimate the total cost.

# RECOMMENDATIONS THREE & FOUR

## GOAL **Increase High School Graduation Rates and College Access**

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**RECOMMENDATION** Develop a **Summer Academy Program** for high school age foster youth to help them become familiar with and prepare for postsecondary education, and establish an **Education Navigator** position coordinated with the Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE) to support foster youth postsecondary academic, financial, and emotional readiness and success.

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**WHY IT'S NEEDED** The cohort envisions the Summer Academy and Education Navigator programs as being complementary and highly integrated, not only with each other but also with the other existing programs designed to support foster youth pursuing higher education in Sonoma County. Creation of these two programs will fill the gaps in the county's current support system and enable a more seamless transition for foster youth from secondary to postsecondary education.

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- POTENTIAL FUNDING STREAMS INCLUDE**
- Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF)
  - Chafee Foster Care Independent Living Program (ILP)
  - Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)
  - Workforce Development Board
  - Title IV-E Waiver
  - Philanthropy
-

## GOAL: INCREASE HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES AND COLLEGE ACCESS

### RECOMMENDATIONS THREE AND FOUR

**Develop a Summer Academy Program for high school age foster youth to help them become familiar with and prepare for postsecondary education, and establish an Education Navigator position coordinated with the Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE) to support foster youth postsecondary academic, financial, and emotional readiness and success.**

For a variety of reasons, including emotional, mental, and behavioral health challenges, their concentration in poor-performing schools with inadequate supportive services, frequent school changes, and lack of parental support, foster youth suffer from a range of poor educational outcomes including low rates of high school graduation and postsecondary degree pursuit and attainment. As a result, foster youth struggle to achieve independence, as studies show that high school graduates typically earn \$8,500 more per year than non-graduates.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, those who complete at least some college earn an average of \$129,000 more over the course of their lives than those who do not,<sup>35</sup> and those who earn a four-year degree can expect to make \$481,000 more over the course of their lives than those who only have a high school diploma.<sup>36</sup>

Two recent reports out of California, *At Greater Risk*<sup>37</sup> from the Stuart Foundation and *Charting the Course* from California College Pathways,<sup>38</sup> document the difficulties foster youth face in accessing and completing postsecondary education. *At Greater Risk* tracked educational

outcome data for 4,000 foster youth in the state, and found that just 45 percent finished high school, compared to 79 percent of their peers.<sup>39</sup> About 70 percent of those who did finish high school never enrolled in community college,<sup>40</sup> and overall just 43 percent of foster youth enrolled in community college compared to 59 percent of the general population.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, from *Charting the Course* we learn that those who do go on to community college are less likely to have enrolled within 12 months of completing high school. Delayed enrollment has been shown to result in worse education outcomes.<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, not only are many foster youth unaware of or not encouraged to pursue higher education opportunities, those who do enroll “disproportionately face serious academic and economic challenges... and are not being adequately served by federal and state programs, including financial aid programs.”<sup>43</sup> As a consequence, they often find themselves woefully underprepared for the academic and financial as well as emotional realities of college.

Recent research reflects these obstacles, finding that foster youth who pursued postsecondary education were less likely to persist toward a degree than their peers.<sup>44,45</sup> A 2011 national longitudinal study of foster youth found that just 8 percent earned a two or four-year degree by age 26,<sup>46</sup> something that 46 percent of their non-foster care peers had accomplished. Other studies estimate the rate of bachelor’s degree attainment for foster youth as low as 2 percent.<sup>47</sup>

According to *Charting the Course*, foster youth enrolling in community colleges and universities have greater need for remedial courses.<sup>48</sup> When compared to their peers in college, foster youth also more often delay their enrollment for more

than a year after finishing high school; are less likely to attend school full-time; and have lower course completion rates; all of which are strongly correlated with a decreased likelihood of degree completion.<sup>49</sup> Research also suggests that despite their unique needs and high rates of eligibility, foster youth frequently do not access financial aid and student support services designed to support them.<sup>50</sup>

These challenges are confirmed by the individual postsecondary education experiences of each of the cohort members. All five enrolled in community college, but as of this writing only one is still taking classes and is in just his first semester. A variety of issues caused the youth to quit school, ranging from financial considerations to academic struggles to challenges in their personal lives. None of the youth felt very well integrated into their community colleges and they also expressed frustration that their class options were very limited due to curriculum and financial aid requirements.

A common pattern seemed to emerge based on their experiences: Disconnected and unprepared, foster youth typically begin to struggle academically, and soon end up on academic probation. Discouraged and with little support to get back on track, youth then often disengage or drop out, and if they have taken loans, then find themselves in debt and quickly fall behind on payments, presenting a significant barrier to reenrollment at a later date.

Clearly, greater efforts are needed to support foster youth in finishing high school and pursuing higher education. One critical strategy should be demystifying postsecondary education for foster youth, including familiarizing them with the college experience and helping them understand academic requirements, financial aid resources, and the enrollment process. Through outreach to their peers and research on effective educational supports, the VOICES youth cohort concluded that a comprehensive and accessible Summer Academy Program developed by the county and targeted to high school age foster youth could enhance awareness about higher education and establish a foundation to help them prepare for, access, and succeed in college.

While the proposed Summer Academy Program will help high school-aged foster youth become aware of postsecondary education opportunities and increase their likelihood of pursuing them, in order to improve rates of completion, additional services will be needed to ensure youth are supported throughout their time on campus. Based on their own experiences and interviews with peers, the cohort members believe that Sonoma County foster youth enrolled in college could be better served by creating an Education Navigator within Sonoma County Government.

The Navigator will supplement and extend past high school the services provided by the county's Foster Youth Services (FYS) Coordinator. The purpose of the Education Navigator position will be to provide youth with a range of supports bridging their application, matriculation, and early campus experience. These will include exploration of various post-secondary educational opportunities; support in accessing academic counseling; ensuring youth are aware of and apply for all financial aid benefits; and support coping with the stress of life after high school and connecting them to services related to emotional well-being. If properly implemented, the Navigator will help prevent the youth from slipping through the cracks and into the dropout pattern experienced by the cohort members.

The cohort envisions the Summer Academy and Education Navigator programs as being complementary and highly integrated, not only with each other but also with the other existing programs designed to support foster youth pursuing higher education in Sonoma county. Creation of these two programs will fill the gaps in the county's current support system and enable a more seamless transition for foster youth from secondary to postsecondary education.

## EXISTING MODELS

### SUMMER ACADEMY PROGRAM

Summer programs designed to enhance student awareness of and preparation for postsecondary education have been implemented across California, and in designing its own program, Sonoma County can look to and learn from these other models.

- **California GEAR UP:** GEAR UP is a federal grant program aimed at increasing the college awareness, preparedness, attendance, and success of students at middle and high schools in communities with high rates of poverty.<sup>51</sup> A collaboration between the California Education Round Table and the University of California,<sup>52</sup> California GEAR UP sponsors the Bridge to Students Model, a program providing a cohort of 11th grade students in Elk Grove with individualized tutoring, specialized courses, college exposure, academic tracking and support, career exploration, and readiness workshops to create a “college-going culture” and increase the rate at which they pursue higher education.<sup>53</sup> Other California GEAR UP projects are focused on middle school students and involve college preparatory workshops and access to an online college planning tool for students and families.
- **I Have a Dream Foundation—Los Angeles:** The LA chapter of the national I Have a Dream Foundation provides a “comprehensive suite of services”<sup>54</sup> including “free year-round mentoring, tutoring, enrichment programs, and case management”<sup>55</sup> to hundreds of selected elementary school through high school children in at-risk neighborhoods. The foundation helps participating students prepare for and access college, and secures tuition assistance for their higher education.<sup>56</sup>
- **Breakthrough Collaborative:** Breakthrough Collaborative provides summer programming targeted to underserved middle school students in four California locations: San Francisco, Sacramento, Silicon Valley, and San Juan Capistrano. Over three consecutive summers, students attend six-week programs, including 240 hours of academic instruction provided by specially trained peers from local high schools and colleges, along with postsecondary education counseling.<sup>57</sup>

They also offer a nine-week teaching residency for high school and college students who are interested in becoming teachers.<sup>58</sup>

- **First Star Academies:** First Star is a national nonprofit organization that partners with universities across the country to establish four-year Academies dedicated to helping high school age foster youth access postsecondary education. These Academies include a four to six week residential summer program on campus where students receive a range of academic services, college preparation, and life skills training.<sup>59</sup> During the school year, they return to the campus on a monthly basis for ongoing support.<sup>60</sup>
- **SOAR for Youth:** SOAR for Youth is a multi-year program supporting foster youth from middle school through college in accessing and succeeding in postsecondary education and attaining independence.<sup>61</sup> While the program provides continuous support for participating youth throughout the school year, it also features one-week residential summer academies on the UC-Berkeley campus for students. The program provides comprehensive support to youth, including academic and tutoring services, independent skills development, and counseling.
- **Other College and University Programs:** In addition, many public universities and colleges in California have college readiness programs, often referred to as Upward Bound or Summer Bridge. Indeed, these exist in Sonoma County, and are discussed at length below.

While these programs all aim to orient students to the college experience and prepare them for matriculation, there are significant differences in terms of their availability, target population, program duration, curriculum, and services provided.

As Sonoma County works to develop a new Summer Academy Program, the VOICES youth believe it is critical that the program first and foremost be readily accessible for and targeted to foster youth. To this end, the youth suggest engaging local community-based organizations to support foster youth awareness about, financing of, and transportation to the program.

Furthermore, the scope of the program should be comprehensive, not only making foster youth aware

of the possibility of postsecondary education but also breaking down what getting into college requires academically and financially, and helping youth understand the steps to making the most of higher education. The program should also incorporate a significant peer support component, where foster youth participants can interact with and learn from other youth with systems involvement who have successfully navigated postsecondary education.

Finally, the youth believe the program should start early, targeting 14 to 16-year-olds, and be flexible enough to accommodate a range of students from advanced incoming high school freshman to more challenged high school sophomores. Active outreach should be conducted to older youth eligible for the program to encourage their participation so that they do not miss the opportunity.

## EDUCATION NAVIGATOR

In conceiving the role and responsibilities of the Education Navigator, the youth cohort examined a number of similar programs in California.

- **Opportunity Youth Collaborative (OYC) Transition Navigator:** In Los Angeles County, OYC is a “cross-sector, multi-agency effort that will improve education and employment outcomes for transition age youth,”<sup>62</sup> involving public agencies, the nonprofit community, education systems, and employers. Among the program goals are to improve foster youth high school graduation and postsecondary education participation and completion. Under the program, a team of Transition Navigators working alongside community partners, foster parents, mentors and volunteers, manages a caseload of youth and helps them make informed decisions about their education and careers, connects them with resources and programs, and assists them in overcoming obstacles to their education and employment goals.
- **b2b Learning Community:** A collaboration between Beyond Emancipation (BE), a nonprofit service provider in Oakland, and Laney College Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS), the b2b Learning Community is a two-year program providing current and former foster youth enrolling at Laney College with continual

“coaching, case management information and referrals,” “guidance on college and financial aid applications and issues,” and “academic counseling, education planning and support.”<sup>63</sup> Additional services provided by BE and Laney EOPS include financial assistance, counseling, peer advising, a summer orientation session, cohort classes, internships, and transportation and housing support.<sup>64</sup>

- **Guardian and Renaissance Scholars Programs:** The California UC and CSU university systems have been national leaders in developing campus-based programs dedicated to supporting current and former foster youth. Frequently known as “Guardian Scholars” or “Renaissance Scholars,” these programs aim to ensure that “comprehensive, holistic support services”<sup>65</sup> are provided to foster youth throughout their time in college. Commonly, these programs help youth access financial aid, housing, academic supports, mentoring, personal guidance and counseling, and supplemental support services like child care and transportation.<sup>66</sup> California’s Guardian and Renaissance Scholars programs are generally funded with a mix of foundation and public funds.

Despite sharing a common goal of helping foster youth access and succeed in postsecondary education, these programs possess significant differences in terms of target population, duration, services provided and funding sources. After examining these structural differences, the cohort members believe the Education Navigator position should be built into the Sonoma County Government infrastructure to ensure authoritativeness, access to records, and sustainability. The Navigator should work closely and collaboratively with the county’s FYS Coordinator, assuming responsibility for youth as they age out of FYS eligibility upon completion of high school, and continuing to support them as they pursue a degree through to age 24. Finally, the youth believe it is critically important that the Navigator’s responsibilities include supporting the emotional well-being of foster youth transitioning to higher education, in addition to their academic and financial needs.

## EXISTING SONOMA COUNTY PROGRAMS

### Summer Academy Program

While Sonoma County may currently lack a fully developed Summer Academy Program specifically designed for foster youth, a number of programs are already in place that can help foster youth prepare for post-secondary education.

- **Upward Bound Sonoma County (UBSC)/ Summer Academy:** Funded by the federal TRIO program, UBSC aims to “academically prepare low-income, first generation college students to enroll and graduate from the four-year college/ university of their choice.”<sup>67</sup> The program incorporates academic and financial aid support and college exposure, including during six-week summer academies held at Sonoma State University (SSU). Participation is limited to students attending ten high schools in Sonoma County.
- **Santa Rosa Junior College (SRJC) Programs/ Summer Bridge:** Through its Counseling Department, SRJC offers an “Introduction to College”<sup>68</sup> class both in person and online as well as a “College Prep Skills” class to help students prepare for college. Awareness of these programs is spread through partnerships with local high schools and a College Preview Day<sup>69</sup> on campus featuring a number of workshops for students and parents. The college also operates a Summer Bridge program<sup>70</sup> for Hispanic and low-income students, providing academic counseling, orientation, and community engagement for enrolled students between high school completion and their first semester at SRJC.
- **10,000 Degrees College Institute:** Targeted to a broader population of low-income students, including foster youth, this privately funded program for high school students entering their junior year provides ongoing college advising and mentoring as well as a six-day Summer Intensive experience where youth receive an introduction to college, “social/emotional cohort building,” and SAT/ACT assistance on one of four Northern California university campuses, including SSU.<sup>71</sup> There are no academic requirements, youth must only apply and demonstrate financial need. However, program

“I enrolled in college and signed up for all the programs designed specifically to support foster youth. I realized quickly that these programs were not set up to give me the individual support I needed, and I started participating for the program requirements more than for my own education.”

–VOICES AB 12 YOUTH COHORT MEMBER

capacity is capped due to funding and staffing limitations. 10,000 Degrees also offers a range of other “programs and resources to help students access, enroll and successfully complete college”<sup>72</sup> including scholarships, college tours, financial support for workshops, college and financial aid counseling, and their College Support program.

These programs represent partnership opportunities as the county works to develop the Summer Academy Program. A seamless system of support for foster youth in high school as they plan for, apply to, and enroll in college can be achieved through coordination among academic support programs.

### Education Navigator

A number of programs already exist in Sonoma County assisting foster youth success in higher education.

- **Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE) Foster Youth Services (FYS) Coordinator:** Funded through the state Foster Youth Services program, the county-level FYS Coordinator is responsible for supporting foster youth and their families in K–12 education and preparing them for college. The coordinator helps foster youth access educational resources and receive tutoring, and assists youth in the school transfer process. They also collaborate and coordinate services with other county agencies, public schools, foster parents and foster care providers, and VOICES

of Sonoma. Due to program restrictions, the coordinator typically only provides these services to youth through high school.

- **10,000 Degrees College Success Program:** Currently serving approximately 1,000 low-income college students, this private program provides ongoing academic support and counseling, peer mentorship, access to financial aid, professional development workshops, and other services to help participants successfully complete college.<sup>73</sup> Monthly office hours are also offered at SRJC. The program estimates that it currently supports around 40 current and former foster youth. 10,000 Degrees also offers a range of other “programs and resources to help students access, enroll and successfully complete college”<sup>74</sup> including their College Institute (described above), scholarships, college tours, financial support for workshops, and college and financial aid counseling.
- **Valley of the Moon Foundation Education Fund Scholarship Program:** Founded in 2007, the Valley of the Moon Foundation’s scholarship fund provides financial assistance to current and former foster youth in Sonoma County who want to pursue higher education.<sup>75</sup> Scholarships are awarded competitively with the support of private funds raised to finance the program. Participation in Sonoma County’s Independent Living Skills Program is a prerequisite, and ILP Coordinators conduct outreach directly to youth to make them aware of the program. Most participating youth attend local higher education institutions, including SRJC and SSU.
- **Santa Rosa Junior College Support System:** A range of educational, career, and personal counseling services are available at SRJC through its Counseling Department, including individual sessions and workshops. The college also operates a Foster Youth program to increase the academic performance of former foster youth offering one-to-one management, enhanced counseling and academic assessment services, specialized classes, goal setting and support, and community identity.<sup>76</sup> In addition, the college operates the SRJC Summer Bridge program<sup>77</sup> for Hispanic and low-income students, providing

academic counseling, orientation, and community engagement for enrolled students between high school completion and their first semester at SRJC.

- **Sonoma State University Support System:** The Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) at SSU provides an array of services for low-income and educationally disadvantaged students, including foster youth. EOP students participate in a one-week residential Summer Bridge program prior to their freshman year to introduce them to campus, inform them about support services, and support their academic needs.<sup>78</sup> After completion of the Summer Bridge program, EOP students join the Freshman Year Academy where they enroll in core classes, receive peer mentorship, and are able to access academic, housing, financial aid, and personal support services.<sup>79</sup> Since EOP serves a broad range of students and is not uniquely designed to support foster youth, SSU recently established Seawolf Scholars, a program to “increase the academic and personal success”<sup>80</sup> of foster youth enrolled at the school. Seawolf Scholars helps foster youth access resources and services both on and off campus, and works to develop a greater level of familiarity about and support for foster youth among the broader campus and community.

The Education Navigator position should be implemented in a way that improves coordination with these existing programs and utilizes their resources and strengths while simultaneously filling the gaps. It will be important to collaborate with these stakeholders in designing the Navigator position to minimize overlap and maximize impact.



## POTENTIAL FUNDING STREAMS

A number of state, federal, and nongovernmental resources and programs can potentially be accessed to finance the initial and ongoing costs of these two new education initiatives.<sup>81</sup>

**Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF):** In 2013, the State of California overhauled its education financing system by increasing local control through the LCFF. In addition to funding based on total enrollment, under LCFF, school districts now receive dedicated supplemental funding based on their enrolled population of disadvantaged students (defined as low-income students, English language learners, and foster youth). LCFF is intended to direct a greater percentage of resources to schools to serve students with higher educational needs, including these disadvantaged groups. School districts are given considerable latitude under LCFF to use these resources to support disadvantaged students, but must annually submit a Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) documenting how they will do so. See Appendix C for additional detail on Sonoma County LCAPs.

**Chafee Foster Care Independent Living Program (ILP):** ILP is a federal program that provides \$140 million in annual funding to states and counties to support transition age foster youth ages 16 to 21 in achieving independence and self-sufficiency, including through access to higher education. In California, counties have significant flexibility to design and implement their own ILP services. Sonoma County uses funding to support two ILP social workers that are co-located at VOICES Sonoma to assist transition age youth in developing the skills and accessing the resources needed for independence.

**Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)/Workforce Development Board (WDB):** Youth employment is a core focus of the federal workforce programs. Services are funded through Youth Workforce Investment Activities grants that are targeted toward “in-school youth” ages 14 to 21 and “out-of-school youth” ages 16 to 24. Under WIOA, 75 percent of all Youth Workforce Investment Activities funds must be used to support “out-of-school” youth, a category that includes school dropouts, students who have not attended school for the most recent quarter, low-income students,

and foster and homeless youth. WIOA youth funding can be used, among other things, for “activities leading to attainment of a secondary school diploma or recognized postsecondary credential” and “preparation for postsecondary education or training.”<sup>82</sup> More specifically, one of the eligible uses of Youth Activities funds is “activities to prepare youth to transition to postsecondary education and training.”<sup>83</sup>

Improving foster youth high school graduation rates and postsecondary and career preparedness<sup>84</sup> has been identified as a major goal of the local Sonoma County Workforce Investment Board (WIB). Sonoma’s WIB collaborates with the County Board of Supervisors and the Human Services Department on the Upstream Investments initiative, which aims to “ensure equal opportunity for quality education”<sup>85</sup> for Sonoma’s at-risk youth, as well as the Cradle to Career Initiative,<sup>86</sup> which involves a broader coalition of local government leaders and schools to “address barriers and challenges to educational attainment and workforce development”<sup>87</sup> for Sonoma County youth.

**Title IV-E Waiver:** In 2015, Sonoma County began operating its child welfare system for minors under California’s Title IV-E Waiver. The Title IV-E Waiver is a federal finance reform demonstration project that allows counties increased flexibility in the use of federal funds in exchange for accepting a cap on the total federal contribution in any given year. While California’s IV-E Waivers only apply to the child welfare system that serves minors (meaning that youth over 18, whether in extended foster care via AB 12 or not, are excluded), nonetheless, the Waiver creates significant additional flexibility in the financing of Sonoma County’s child welfare system. While this flexibility does not allow the direct investment of Waiver funds in the Education Navigator program, as it is intended to serve 18 to 24-year-olds, these funds could be used to offset other investments, potentially freeing up funds that could be used for the position.

**Philanthropy:** Many Northern California foundations provide time-limited start-up funding to help launch programs and to facilitate the leveraging of other resources, including government funding.

## COST ESTIMATES

Taking into consideration the key components the VOICES youth believe that the program should incorporate, operating a Summer Academy Program in the county would require significant investment. The cost of the program would vary depending on its capacity, duration and programming, including whether or not it involved overnight stays in dormitory rooms, and the degree to which it was able to leverage in-kind discounts, donations, support, and volunteers.<sup>88</sup>

By raising awareness and stoking ambition for postsecondary education among foster youth, the Summer Academy Program will greatly improve foster youth educational outcomes. An increase in high school graduation and college enrollment rates will result in a more independent, highly educated and skilled population of youth prepared to enter the local workforce.

Meanwhile, the annual staffing cost of an Education Navigator position within the Sonoma County Office of Education would be approximately \$70,000 per year plus benefits. This estimate is based on the current level of compensation provided to the county's existing Foster Youth Liaison, a position comparable to the Navigator in terms of scope of responsibilities as well as required skills and experience.

Funding this recommendation would be a cost-effective investment by the county, as the presence of the Navigator will enhance foster youth postsecondary outcomes and increase degree attainment; improve foster youth employment rates and lifetime earnings; and reduce dependence on public assistance programs. This will yield significant benefits to the County of Sonoma and the local economy.

## INTERMEDIATE STEPS & STAKEHOLDER ROLES

In order to improve foster youth high school success and college access, multiple agencies across several sectors will need to collaborate on an ongoing basis. At a minimum, this will require the involvement of the Sonoma County child welfare, probation, and education agencies, school districts, postsecondary education institutions, and nongovernmental partners.

Coordinating these stakeholders and conceptualizing, developing, financing, and implementing a Summer Academy Program in Sonoma County could take considerable effort and time. In the interim, a number of actions should be taken to help Sonoma foster youth prepare for and access higher education.

### 1. Bolster K–12 Supports for Foster Youth

Concurrent planning should be undertaken between county child welfare, probation, and education agencies, school districts, and the nongovernmental organizations serving foster youth in Sonoma to address identified obstacles to success and to cultivate a continuum of academic and developmental supports designed to prepare foster youth for, and transition them to, college. A range of services is offered within SCOE and the Sonoma school districts that foster youth can benefit from, and all parties should collaborate to ensure that youth are aware of and engaged in these programs. Efforts should also be made to increase foster youth awareness of and application to the successful 10,000 Degrees College Access program. Finally, the full range of Sonoma County stakeholders should conduct a coordinated advocacy campaign to raise awareness within school districts about the unique educational challenges encountered by foster youth and to enhance the dedicated school-based support services provided to foster youth through LCFF funds.

## 2. Improve Ability of Existing Postsecondary Programs to Support Foster Youth

Additional collaboration and co-planning should occur between county child welfare, probation, nongovernmental organizations, and higher education institutions to engage as many foster youth as possible in Sonoma County's postsecondary outreach and preparation programs. These programs should also consider revisions to their outreach and program activities that would allow them to better reach and serve foster students. A first step would be incorporating curriculum and a peer component tailored specifically to foster youth. Outreach and access among foster youth can be further developed through close collaboration with VOICES.

At the same time, defining, developing, and funding the Sonoma County Education Navigator can be modeled after the existing FYS Coordinator position, which presents a similar model and budget. However, planning, focusing, and fully leveraging this role to improve outcomes among 18 to 24-year-olds will require active collaboration from the Sonoma County child welfare, probation, and education agencies, public school districts, higher education institutions, and nongovernmental organizations. In the interim, Sonoma County can take the following steps to support foster students in higher education.

## 3. Enhance Foster Youth Higher Education Preparedness

SCOE, the public K–12 system, higher education institutions, nongovernmental organizations, and county child welfare and probation agencies all play a role in ensuring that foster youth who choose to pursue higher education are academically, financially, and emotionally prepared for college. However, the cohort youth and their peers report a lack of program coordination and clear lines of responsibility that interfere with aligning resources and improving outcomes. These entities should be convened to plan a more intentional, efficient, and collaborative system of support.

Until the Navigator is established, the county can utilize its FYS Coordinator to provide some of the desired supports for older youth. The FYS Coordinator position should be made permanent and supplemented with additional funds that would empower the coordinator to continue to support foster youth after they have enrolled in college.

In addition, Sonoma public school districts should explore using Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) resources to enhance and tailor the college and career counseling they provide to foster youth.

Lastly, all agencies supporting foster youth should actively outreach to current and former foster youth and encourage their application for the 10,000 Degrees College Access and College Support programs and the Valley of the Moon Foundation's scholarship program. The latter two programs should also jointly examine ways to eliminate overlap, streamline application processes, and coordinate their services.

#### 4. Modify Current Postsecondary Education Programs Serving Foster Youth

The reach and impact of the existing postsecondary campus-based foster student support programs can be improved. While these programs aim to provide foster youth with a comprehensive support system, the persistence of academic difficulty and dropout among foster youth at colleges in the county indicate the limits of their effectiveness. Some of the youth in the cohort participated in these programs, but were unable to knit their services into sufficient support for their achievement in college.

Sonoma’s postsecondary institutions should consider engaging the cohort to seek ways to improve their program delivery, including through curriculum reforms and better integration of peer mentors. Outreach efforts should also be improved so that all enrolled foster youth are aware of the programs and the services they provide. Postsecondary institutions should collaborate directly with foster youth, 10,000 Degrees and Valley of the Moon Foundation, public school districts, and county child welfare, education, and probation agencies during this process.

“When I went to college my first semester I was told to take 12 units to be eligible for a specific scholarship but I wasn’t aware how much coursework there would be and how to accomplish it all. When I wasn’t able to keep up I had to start dropping classes—it started with one, then eventually it was all of them. Throughout the semester, I realized I was never prepared for this in high school and I didn’t have the skills or support to make it. That was really damaging to my self esteem and confidence.”

–VOICES AB 12 YOUTH COHORT MEMBER



# A ROADMAP FOR IMPLEMENTATION

After spending much of the past year researching, reflecting on their own experiences, and reaching out to their peers, community stakeholders, and subject matter experts from across California, the VOICES AB 12 Cohort is confident that they have identified the persistent gaps within the systems in Sonoma County that support transition age foster youth. The youth have conducted extensive research on proven solutions, and developed and refined their four recommendations. The culmination of their work is a roadmap for Sonoma County to enact meaningful systems change and improve outcomes for youth exiting foster care.

In the coming months, cohort members will present this roadmap to the directors of Sonoma County's relevant departments, non-profit leaders, and community stakeholders in hopes of enlisting their support for advancing each of the recommendations in 2016. Meanwhile, new youth members will join the project to carry forward the work and engage county leaders in putting these recommendations and other helpful intermediate steps into action.

Following the release of this report and "public" presentation, the project will focus in 2016 on the design and rollout of pilot programs informed by these recommendations. The ultimate goal is to improve the ability of Sonoma's child welfare, probation, education, and housing systems to produce better outcomes for transition age foster youth. During this pilot phase, each new investment will be monitored and evaluated with the intention of revising, expanding, and making the programs permanent in 2017. The success of this effort will require the continued engagement of not only county government leaders but also stakeholders in the courts, nonprofit community, public school system, and higher education institutions.

None of the recommendations made by the VOICES Youth Cohort can be successfully implemented by a single agency. As vulnerable youth in Sonoma County touch multiple systems, those systems must come together to meet their needs and transform their outcomes.

The effective implementation of this project's vision will require:

## 1. Establishment of a County-Level Position to Oversee Implementation

Sonoma County should assign responsibility for managing and carrying forward the project's next phases to a specific point person. This individual will help to facilitate inter-department communication and collaboration to hold public agencies accountable. They will also serve as the lead liaison to the youth and community members who conceived and supported this process, and should ensure the integration of youth into county planning and implementation efforts.

## 2. Maximizing County Leveraging of Funds

While the proposals offered in this report promise to yield substantial long-term savings to the county, their implementation will likely require up-front county investments. In order to help offset these costs, Sonoma County should seek to maximize its leveraging of state and federal programs to enhance county revenues.

### 3. Leadership of the VOICES Steering Committee

For the past six years, a group of Sonoma county leaders, all of whom support the health and well being of transition age foster youth, have identified themselves as the VOICES Steering Committee, a group responsible for ensuring the successful launch of the VOICES program as well as identifying and reacting to trends among the emancipating foster care population within Sonoma County. In 2015, the group partnered with Sonoma County Human Services Agency to create *Patchwork Lives Revisited* as a way to understand the current needs of the transition age foster youth. The report states that the “VOICES steering committee should take the lead in forming a new committee with a broad community base to focus specifically on the service needs of transitional age youth in Sonoma County. This committee should create a road map to address the needs brought up in this report and elsewhere. The committee must engage and include current and former foster youth.”

In late 2015, the VOICES Steering Committee voted to re-form itself and invite additional members to form the Sonoma County Coalition for Foster Youth, a group that will act as a policy advisory wing to the Sonoma County Youth and Family Partnership, the coalition responsible for planning, implementing and overseeing the Sonoma County Wraparound Program.

### 4. Develop Evaluation and Measurement Capacity

The Sonoma County Coalition for Foster Youth and other community stakeholders will also need to plan evaluation, data tracking, and outcomes measurements procedures from the start, in order to examine and document the impact of the proposed investments and practice changes. The collaborating public agencies, non-profit partners, and other stakeholders can and should collaborate to develop shared outcomes measures, share data, and refine program and policy as necessary to ensure improved outcomes for youth.

Pursuant to the recommendations put forward in *Patchwork Lives Revisited*, the Sonoma County Coalition for Foster Youth will “support the current AB 12 Project through coordinating efforts, providing organizational support, and focusing on the project’s activities” as well as “develop and publish data on transitional age youth in Sonoma County.”

### COLLABORATION IS KEY

Perhaps Sonoma County’s greatest asset is the willingness of its public systems and community members to work together. Not only do they talk about collaboration, but they truly co-invest time in planning and collaboration. Equally importantly, they are willing to invest money to improve outcomes.

This has been, and will continue to be, a unique opportunity for Sonoma County youth to work side-by-side with committed county and community leaders to bring about urgently needed, youth-driven, and ultimately transformational systems change.

Cohort members have felt inspired and empowered by this project, and the process has been transformative for them. They look forward to the implementation of these recommendations and the lasting improvements they will bring for Sonoma County’s transition age foster youth.

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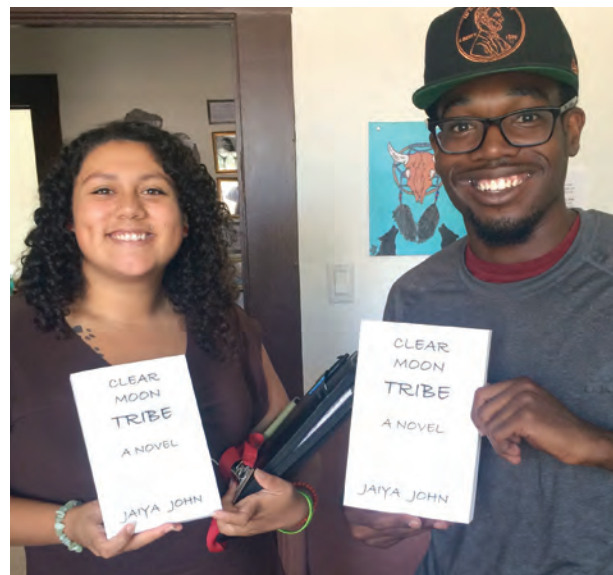
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## APPENDIX A

# VOICES YOUTH ENGAGEMENT MODEL & PROCESS OF DEVELOPING THE RECOMMENDATIONS

VOICES’ mission is to empower underserved youth, ages 16–24, by utilizing holistic services throughout their transition from systems of care, while building a loving community and establishing a solid foundation for a healthy future. At the core of VOICES are youth-led programs designed to address the independent living, housing, education, employment and wellness needs of transition age youth. Since 2005, VOICES has provided comprehensive services to over 5,000 young people.

VOICES Sonoma has become the hub of services for transitioning foster youth throughout the County. Young leaders have created a lively, welcoming Center where youth are able to engage in leadership development opportunities and access a comprehensive service system that supports their education, employment, housing and wellness needs. In partnership with Sonoma County Family, Youth, and Children’s Services Division and 15 community-based service partners, VOICES has developed a system of collaboration that has resulted in many positive changes for Sonoma County youth, including the establishment of the VOICES Sonoma Center, increased engagement in the Independent Living Program, a coordinated approach to meeting youths’ educational and employment needs and an expansion of multiple housing opportunities for youth.

VOICES’ one of a kind Youth Engagement Model focuses on empowering each youth, integrating resources and services, and working with the entire community to address the barriers that young people face as they leave systems of care. VOICES youth are not only recipients of social services, they are active leaders in supporting their peers, guiding the evolving vision of program delivery, training growing numbers of social service agencies to become “youth-friendly,” and advocating for youth voice in the community.

The VOICES model is built upon six pillars that result in a unique, highly effective approach to transforming outcomes for transition age youth.

<b>INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING</b>	<b>BUILDING COMMUNITY</b>
Young people and older people learning from each other, sharing points of view and wisdom	Creating authentic relationships of support that give youth a place in the community and engage them as leaders outside of the community
<b>YOUTH LEADERSHIP</b>	<b>UNIQUE CULTURE</b>
Coaching young people to share power with adult co-leaders, make decisions, run a youth center and serve peer mentors	Developing a culture that values honest feedback, individuality, and opportunities to learn and grow through challenges and successes
<b>SYSTEMS CHANGE</b>	<b>CO-LOCATED STAFF</b>
Challenging communities to build better and more innovative systems to support youth, caregivers, and professionals	Creating a highly-functioning developmentally-appropriate service system supported by multi-agency staff teams who are committed to youth-friendly practices

Since the project's conception, VOICES has designed and managed the AB 12 Cohort process in a manner that maintains fidelity to the agency's commitment to authentic youth engagement. VOICES believes that appropriately and ethically engaging youth is the key to ensuring system accountability and bringing about meaningful change. If effectively empowered and supported, youth can draw from their own experiences to identify gaps in systems that might otherwise be overlooked, while also proposing practical solutions to address them.

Furthermore, the experience of participating in a project like this often proves transformative for the youth themselves. Foster youth often feel powerless in their personal lives, frequently subjected to the decisions of others without much consultation. Entrusting them to lead discussions with County and community leaders genuinely interested in hearing their opinions and reform recommendations provides youth with a sense of validation and control that many have rarely if ever experienced, building confidence, self-esteem, and skills that are transferrable to every area of their functioning.

In order to ensure authentic youth engagement throughout this project, VOICES:

- Selected Cohort members not only based on their individual needs, skills, and commitment, but also on their ability to collaborate with other youth.
- Conscientiously built a cohort identity that incorporated the dynamics particular to this group of young people.
- Supported youth in researching and understanding AB 12 and related policies and laws prior to any external engagement.
- Led the Cohort in consulting with their peers to develop and refine their recommendations, and to ensure that they addressed the needs of a broad spectrum of young people.
- Assisted youth in preparing for and participating in meetings.
- Prepared external project participants to respect the youth engagement model, and ensure that

meetings and presentations were youth-led and directed.

- After receiving feedback from external participants, supported youth in determining how to incorporate suggestions into the Cohort's recommendations while maintaining fidelity to their original ideas.
- Solicited and embedded Cohort member feedback into the structure and content of this report.

## PROCESS OF DEVELOPING THE RECOMMENDATIONS

In 2014, VOICES received a three-year grant from the Walter S. Johnson Foundation to convene Sonoma County transition age foster youth as stakeholders and experts to identify and address systemic, county-level barriers facing foster youth in their transition to independence.

The first phase of the project involved recruiting a small cohort of Sonoma County transition age foster youth. Beginning in January 2015, VOICES identified and interviewed youth interested in advocacy, policy, and program design. Candidates had to commit up to 12 hours per week, for which they would be paid, for at least a year. After conducting individual interviews, VOICES staff observed candidates in a number of group activities to assess their ability to work collaboratively with their peers. From among this initial pool of candidates, eight youth were selected to participate in the cohort.

With support from VOICES staff, they began learning about the foster care system and AB 12, and exploring resources and challenges unique to Sonoma County. By spring 2015, the cohort had begun an exploration process consisting of meetings with Sonoma County leadership and public agency staff, social workers, service providers, and other subject matter experts and community stakeholders. Cohort members traveled to Alameda County and Sacramento to meet with experts and visit model programs. The cohort set a goal of connecting with 90 of their approximately 100 peers receiving AB 12 services in Sonoma

County to understand the challenges youth experience when trying to access services and to gather suggestions for reform. While reaching that original goal was impossible due to a number of factors including placement changes and some youths' reticence to share their experiences, the cohort was ultimately able to connect with almost half of the County's AB 12 youth through a range of strategies, including focus groups, one-on-one meetings, social media outreach, and community events.

After conferring with peers, experts, and external stakeholders, the cohort felt prepared to diagnose gaps in AB 12 and related services in Sonoma County. With no shortage of ideas to consider, the youth developed criteria by which to select specific recommendations to develop in depth. Working with VOICES staff, the youth established primary criteria for the recommendations, including:

- Feasibility
- Urgency of need
- Resonance with their own experiences and those of their peers, and
- Likelihood of impact, not only on individual youth outcomes, but on systems change.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the cohort also chose to focus on recommendations related to the core areas of expertise of VOICES: employment and education, independent living, housing, and health and wellness.

With their criteria in mind, the cohort was able to narrow their ideas to four consensus recommendations. Each member chose one recommendation to research more deeply, identifying potential models across the state and country that could be borrowed from, replicated, or improved upon. They also began the process of soliciting external feedback on their recommendations by making public presentations at conferences in Los Angeles and Monterey, and hosting a series of meetings with Sonoma County stakeholders.

In all of their external meetings, the youth received consistent support for their recommendations. However, they found that during this process, in an effort to be helpful, external project participants had a tendency to suggest tweaks to the recommendations to conform them to existing or planned programs, or ongoing processes. While appreciative of the many additional recommendations put forth by other stakeholders, many of which are embedded in this report as intermediate steps to address the need underlying each recommendation, the cohort members maintained their commitment to their core recommendations, and decided to reassert their original ideas by specifically illustrating the key components and goals within each of the recommendations.

The four recommendations outlined in this report are the product of this process. Each of these recommendations is both critically impactful and eminently achievable. In the coming year the newly established Sonoma County Coalition for Foster Youth and Sonoma County leadership will work in partnership with a new cohort of youth leaders to identify the process for implementing the recommendations put forward.



## APPENDIX B

# LIST OF PROJECT PARTICIPANTS

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## APPENDIX C

# SONOMA COUNTY LCAP ANALYSIS

In order to assess the degree to which the major school districts in Sonoma County have utilized their Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) resources to support enrolled foster youth, a review was conducted of the Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs) of four districts. Consistent with a pattern that has emerged across the state, these four districts dedicated significant resources to programs that can support foster youth but are designed to support a broader population of students. These include school climate and discipline approaches, attendance efforts, and expanded academic and social-emotional programs. The degree to which these programs reach and effectively serve foster students varies greatly. However, within these four LCAPs we did identify a few foster youth-specific initiatives. Below are some of the highlights from each of the LCAPs.

### SANTA ROSA CITY HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

- Hiring of school counselors to provide case management to foster youth and help them develop individualized learning plans to support school connectedness and academic achievement.
- Dedicated funds to expand wraparound services, including behavioral health, mental health, and restorative justice, for students and families.
- Partnering with community based organizations and Sonoma County to provide therapists to expand social work services, including behavioral health counseling and other mental health services, to support struggling students.
- Dedicated funds to support the development of informal education plans for foster youth in conjunction with the Foster Youth Liaison.

### PETALUMA CITY SCHOOLS/ JOINT UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

- Expansion of multi-tiered systems of interventions for students in need.
- Resources to support summer school programming for struggling K–11 students.
- Funding for the Family Resource Center at McDowell Elementary to provide assistance to parents and families in need.
- Hiring of Guidance Specialists to provide individual and small group support to students most in need.

### HEALDSBURG UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

- Bolstering collaboration with the Foster Youth Liaison and/or foster parents to identify social/emotional and/or academic counseling needs of foster youth and to provide individualized services.
- Adding a K–8 School Psychologist and implementing the Toolbox Program to focus on and address social/emotional barriers to learning.

### WEST SONOMA COUNTY UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

- Granting access to a supplemental summer school program for students in need of further support.
- Providing “special population intervention classes” for foster youth.
- Implementing strategies to support parent engagement to strengthen support system for foster youth.



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