

# VOICES SOLANO

## A Unique Youth-Designed and Youth-Led Drop-in Center to Support System-Involved Transition-Age Youth

### THE CHALLENGES FACING SOLANO COUNTY TRANSITION-AGE YOUTH

Across California, transition-age youth exiting systems of care, including the child welfare, mental health, and probation systems, struggle to become independent, successful adults. These young people face the combined challenges of establishing self-sufficiency at a young age while managing the impacts of neglect, abuse, and/or removal from their families. They are often misunderstood and forgotten. And too often, their challenges in early adulthood overcome them, resulting in a high incidence of homelessness, incarceration, unemployment, substance abuse, addiction, teen pregnancy, and mental illness.

Unfortunately, many transition-age youth are unable to access the range of support services available to them. Although there are some effective programs that can address housing, mental health, and employment needs, many youth are unprepared to access them. The lack of youth-friendly, accessible locations where young people can stabilize, form healing connections, and connect with the most appropriate resources results in many youth falling through the cracks.

These hardships are amplified for the over 500 transition-age youth being served by the child welfare, mental health, homeless, and probation systems in Solano County. These young people face daunting odds, some of which arise from the lack of resources and supportive services compared to other jurisdictions in the region.

Of the nine counties in the San Francisco Bay Area, Solano County possesses:

- The highest rate of poverty
- The lowest median income
- The lowest per capita nonprofit capacity
- The lowest level of philanthropic investments

Making matters worse, the most recent Point-in-Time Count in Solano County identified an estimated 14% increase in the homeless population between 2015 and 2017. Of the 1,232 homeless individuals counted, 21% spent time in foster care and 192 (16%) are transition-age youth between the ages of 18 and 24. Alarming, 84% of these youth are currently not regularly accessing services like food assistance, counseling and case management, and housing and employment support through a shelter.

### VOICES: A PROPOSED INTERVENTION

VOICES is a youth-developed, youth-led drop-in center focused on supporting youth in transitioning into healthy adulthood. VOICES' mission is to empower underserved youth ages 16-24 by providing holistic services throughout their transition from systems of care, while building a loving community and establishing the solid foundation for a healthy future. Since 2005, VOICES has provided comprehensive services to over 4,000 young people. Over the last ten years, VOICES has successfully founded programs in Napa, Sonoma, and Monterey counties and anticipates the opening of VOICES Solano in fall of 2019.

## MEETING THE UNIQUE NEEDS OF SYSTEM-INVOLVED YOUTH

By opening a new drop-in center in Vallejo, VOICES will reach, engage, and support the successful transition of Solano County youth transitioning from the child welfare, mental health, homeless, and probation systems. 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. VOICES creates lively and welcoming Centers where youth engage in leadership opportunities and access a comprehensive, trauma-informed service system. VOICES' one-of-a-kind Youth-Engagement Model has demonstrated the ability to consistently achieve positive outcomes among youth. The Model focuses on empowering each youth, integrating resources and services, and working with the entire community to address the barriers that youth 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 at each site and advocating to the community at large to listen and respond to youth voice.

The VOICES model is built upon six pillars that together constitute a unique, highly effective approach to transforming outcomes for transition-age youth:

### INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING

Young people and older people learning from each other, sharing points of view and wisdom

### YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Coaching young people to share power with adult co-leaders, make decisions, run a youth center and serve peer mentors

### SYSTEMS CHANGE

Challenging communities to build better and more innovative systems to support youth, caregivers, and professionals

### BUILDING COMMUNITY

Creating authentic relationships of support that give youth a place in the community and engage them as leaders outside of the community

### UNIQUE CULTURE

Developing a culture that values honest feedback, individuality, and opportunities to learn and grow through challenges and successes

### CO-LOCATED STAFF

Creating a highly-functioning developmentally-appropriate service system supported by multi-agency staff teams who are committed to youth-friendly practices

VOICES has developed and proven these strategies, using them to engage youth in services, maintain their participation, and empower them to create lasting change in their lives.

VOICES incorporates an extensive framework of partnership and collaboration for the delivery of responsive programming and services to support youth exiting systems of care. All crucial resources and services (health, housing, education, and employment) are housed under one roof. This co-location of services provides easy access for youth as well as the ability for staff from different agencies to employ a coordinated and integrated approach.

While the breadth and impact of services provided at VOICES centers are extensive, the true power of the model lies in the fact that, for the first time, the "experts" are the youth themselves. Through VOICES, youth are given opportunities to shape programs, services, and the community in order to transform the way in which foster youth are supported and served. VOICES' inter-generational leadership model has been identified as a promising practice and effective intervention that can support the needs of homeless youth in Solano.

## VOICES SOLANO

In 2018, VOICES was asked to engage local youth and adult leaders in a planning process focused on addressing the needs of transition-age youth in Solano County. VOICES staff conducted an in-depth assessment of community readiness involving youth and adult leaders from public and private agencies that identified both deep needs and highly motivated youth and adults. A team of nine original Youth Founders—between the ages of 16 and 24 and with direct experience in the homeless and/or foster care system—was recruited, and these young adults will hold staff roles beginning in spring 2019.

Working alongside current VOICES staff, the Youth Founders have gathered input from other youth and adult leaders and co-created a framework for a youth-designed and youth-led Center modeled after the existing centers in Napa and Santa Rosa. The center will open in late 2019 in Vallejo.

VOICES will provide comprehensive, youth-led, no-cost services that lead to positive outcomes in the areas of housing, wellness, education, and employment. Programming co-led by teams of youth and adults will encompass the following services:

### HOUSING SUPPORT

VOICES coaches will support 50 homeless youth in identifying their goals for housing while providing a team of caregivers, systems professionals, and permanent connections to support their transition from homelessness.

### HEALTH AND WELLNESS SERVICES

VOICES will promote the wellness of 200 youth each year by providing centralized services and coordinating a seamless referral system. Additionally, VOICES Health Navigators will coach youth to set wellness goals, connect to subsidized mental health counseling, nutrition, pregnancy prevention, and substance abuse recovery resources, and will provide ongoing support to maintain the youths' involvement in services.

### EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION SERVICES

VOICES will support 200 youth in achieving employment, academic success, and career exploration. Employment services will include job readiness training, placements, retention support, and career exploration. Education services will include tutoring, admissions and academic counseling, financial aid assistance, and financial literacy workshops.

Ultimately, it is anticipated that 300 youth will access services through VOICES Solano each year, bringing about positive change in a range of outcomes including:

**50%**

of VOICES youth will obtain safe and affordable housing.

**75%**

of VOICES youth will accomplish their educational goals to receive a high school diploma, GED, post-secondary enrollment, or enrollment in a trade program.

**75%**

of VOICES youth will accomplish employment goals of searching for and securing employment.

**85%**

of VOICES youth will report or demonstrate a change in health status, habits, or knowledge, leading to increased healthy living skills.