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Experiences of Foster Youth in an Employment Training and Job Placement Program

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Introduction

In October 2008, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago was approached by the executive director of Community Assistance Programs (CAPs), a community-based agency, to evaluate the implementation of an employment training and job placement program for Cook County foster youth. The program provides 4 weeks of classroom-based employment training, and then places foster youth in subsidized jobs for a maximum of 2 months. At the end of that period, employers have the option of hiring the youth as regular employees.

As part of the implementation evaluation, we interviewed program staff at each of the four CAPs sites.[1] These interviews provided information about how the program is perceived by those who work directly with the foster youth. What was missing was the youths' perspective. In particular, we wanted to know (1) why foster youth participate in the program; (2) what the program does to help foster youth become employed; and (3) how foster youth would change the program to better address their needs. To address

[1] The researchers also analyzed administrative data from the CAPs program and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services to examine the characteristics of program participants, their foster care placement histories, and the employment training and job placement services they received. The results of that analysis are reported in Dworsky, A. & Havlicek, J. (2010). An employment training and job placement program for foster youth making the transition to adulthood in Cook County, Illinois. Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

these questions, we conducted focus groups with foster youth who were currently participating or who had participated in the program.

This report begins with a brief description of the methodology we used. It then explores each of the major themes that emerged. The report concludes with a discussion of the lessons learned and some recommendations for improving the program.

Methodology

Two focus groups were conducted at a local community-based agency where foster youth complete some of their training activities. Each focus group included six current or former program participants who had been recruited by the agency's director. Focus group participants were predominantly female and ranged in age from 18 to 20 years old. Many were enrolled in school, but only two were currently employed. Participants received a $20 incentive payment.

Both focus groups followed the same protocol and lasted approximately 90 minutes. The Principal Investigator and her research assistant co-facilitated the focus groups after explaining the purpose of the study and obtaining informed consent. The facilitators were guided by a list of questions (see Appendix), but sometimes deviated from this list in response to a comment made by one or more of the participants.

The focus groups were tape recorded and transcribed. Analysis of the transcripts involved identifying the following major themes:

- Reasons for program participation
- Reflections on program components: orientation, employment training, subsidized job placements
- Stigmatization
- Treatment by program staff

Each of these themes is discussed and illustrated using direct quotations in the next chapter.

Two caveats should be mentioned before turning to this discussion. First, focus group participants were not randomly selected from among the many foster youth who have participated in the program. Rather, they were selected because of their relationship with the community center director. Consequently, their experiences may be different from those of other program participants. Second, because our study was limited to a single employment training and job placement program, our findings may not generalize to other programs designed to address the employment training and job placement needs of transitioning foster youth. Nevertheless, the experiences of these young people may still be instructive.

Major Themes

Reasons for Program Participation

Foster youth gave several different reasons for wanting to participate in the program. Some were motivated by a desire to earn money.

> Because like in the beginning, it's quick money. And at that time, when you need money, you'll just say, "Let me run to CAPs and do this orientation." It's quick money.
>
> But it was just something to have a little extra in my pocket. That why CAPs was easy money then. Quick pay.
>
> Money is the root of everything. It makes you want to do everything.

Others viewed participation in the program as a way to achieve their goal of an ILO placement.

> I honestly started working because they told me I could get my own apartment if I have school and work.
>
> Plus it was a good opportunity for me to because I had to do that in order for me to get my ILO plus I had a son on the way.

It was also seen as an opportunity to gain skills or work experience.

> And it (CAPs) builds up work experience, so that is what I am working on more.

> So you got a lot of skills.
>
> Because if you don't have the work experience then how they hire you?

And some foster youth participated in the program because there was nothing else to do.

> I started CAPs because it was the summertime. I was out of school. I had nothing to do, so I could have my time to try to do a job or something to help out in the community with you….So that's the reason I took on CAPs. Just trying to find something to do to keep my mind straight and out of the streets.

Reflections on Program Components

We asked the participants to talk about their experiences with the program's different components.

Orientation

Overall, foster youth described the CAPs orientation as being overcrowded and disorganized.

> You stay and you sitting in this one room packed to the capacity.
>
> You sitting on floors and tables. And you standing there and this one person's standing in the front of you yelling and screaming, talking about this, talking about that, and you just don't understand.
>
> And then he's (staff) screaming….The teacher can't control the class. In my last class, when I had orientation it was over 40 students in one class. It was like all the chairs was packed and full.
>
> Like it's no type of order…And then they talk about the teacher and loud, like disrespectful. They'll tell her to shut up or say, "You're talking too much."
>
> You're not gonna understand like that…you have to sometimes break it down to small groups and get a better understanding. And CAPs don't do that.
>
> It's basically they need more order and structure. Without organization and structure, there's nothing.

Part of the problem, from their perspective, was that the orientation was not only for DCFS wards, but also for the adult populations that CAPs also serves.

> I feel like if they gonna do an orientation, especially with DCFS and the ways CAPs is set up, they got the convicts and then they got the DCFS part, they should split that down and make they own

> group for the DCFS side and the other side of CAPs do their own thing instead of stuffing us in one room.

> The convicts try to flirt with the people my age and it's just crazy.

Employment Training

What foster youth seemed to dislike most about the employment training was the use of worksheets, which they described as "boring."

> But it is boring having the packets and all that, writing.

> All we doing is just talking or doing packets and stuff.

> That's the most boringest thing you could sit through.

> They just go over packets.

> They just,– "If you ain't here to do this packet, you ain't getting no job."

Part of the problem seemed to be that doing worksheets felt too much like being in school.

> When I first joined CAPs, and I told them like if I wanted to be in school, I would go to school. But me coming here to find more skills and a better way to get a job for me….Y'all basically trying to teach me it like it's school and you can't do that with everybody.

> Basically the stuff they're teaching is it's all high school. That's all they are doing.

> I'm like okay well then they wanna make it like school, I'm gonna do my real homework. So then they was like "Well this is your homework.'" I'm like, "No. This ain't school."

Another factor was the content of the lessons—particularly those related to personal hygiene. Foster youth seemed to resent the implication that they did not know how to groom themselves.

> Like it's sheer stupidity. How you going to teach me how to brush my teeth? How you going to teach—I mean teach me something about the job, please. Don't teach me something about stuff that I already know.

> I think we was on one…. how to put deodorant on. How to get in the shower. Man, I'm like I don't need your assistance. I know how to wash myself up when I was about 4 or 5. So I don't need your help.

Foster youth often questioned the relevance of what they were being taught.

> They're just training us on resumes, how to dress at interviews. Like say I apply for cooking or something. They're not training me for cooking. They're training me for something else—something that ain't got nothing to do with that job.

> But they don't teach you what to do if you get the job and if you keep it.

> What wasn't helpful was the teaching like—We're supposed to be going through the packet but instead of going through the packet we're listening to her talk about her life experience and her kids. How she got a chandelier up in her living room and all of this other stuff. You're taking me through all of this and I don't want to know about your kids and everything. They ain't of no importance to me.

> Now my teacher talks too much. She makes everybody go to sleep on her.

The sense of disorganization foster youth experienced during orientation extended into the training.

> They'll give you a time sheet. You're supposed to fill it out with all your information and then 2 days later, you ask them for your sheet to sign in or to sign out and they done lost it.

That said, foster youth did have some positive things to say about the employment training activities.

> I'd say the best thing that was learned that we talked about is the mock interviews.

> I think that's the only part of the orientation that really helps a lot of people when get your certificate with certified CPR.

> We had an assignment where we had to pick out clothes that we thought would be good for an interview…..she was trying to help us dress in appropriate attire for our interviews.

> I like the way they taught me how to really format resumes. That's the only thing I enjoyed because I wondering how to really structure and go over my stuff to make sure my resume…..

> It helped me a little because I had no job experience so it kind of helped me how to find a job.

> I don't like talking in public. I'm kind of shy. So they helped my public speaking and all that stuff.

> I like the help where you actually get to like—where you practice.

They also reported that it was helpful to have a caring relationship with staff and to be able to talk with staff about their problems.

> Every time I had a problem she would try to figure out a way that she can give me a solution to my dilemma. Most people don't understand what we've been through so they won't understand us. She expects us to do well. Like they're trying to keep us down. She's trying to lift us up.

> I had a great relationship with [staff member]. He was more understanding and he helped me more.

> I had a good relationships with [staff member]. Well, like she would come once a week every Friday and we would all—she would have all of us there. And we would just still down and talk about stuff. Like she said anything that we have on our mind that we want to talk about, just come to her and we'd talk about it. And we could just sit there and get it off our chest with her. She'll sit there and talk use through it and everything. And it was really helpful.

> Because some of us like to feel loved, but some of us like myself, grew up without family. You know, I've been to 25 different foster homes. I didn't stay at one place for more than a year. I've been in four group homes and two shelters….I constantly moved. This was like something that just happens in my life….[I]t feels nice to come to someplace where nothing's pretty much changed. Everything's the same. And you still feel the warmth and the love….Like family. We kind of connected because I know after so long and she still thinks about me.

However, the most consistently positive feedback was reserved for their experiences at Pretend Town, a community-based agency where some of the training is conducted and the focus groups were held. In particular, foster youth expressed great appreciation for all of the help they received from Pretend Town's director (who also recruited participants for the focus groups).

> She teaches more things that we need to know.

> She don't beat around the bush. I know, she gets to the point.

> Really showing she cares.

> [Pretend Town] was the most goodest [sic] experience I ever had. Every time I had a problem, she would try to figure out a way that she can give me a solution to my dilemma.

> It's like she would go the extra mile.

Subsidized Job Placements

Foster youth voiced a number of concerns about the subsidized jobs in which they were placed. To begin with, there was often a mismatch between their interests/needs and the subsidized job.

> It's just—yeah you've got placement in an appointment and they give you a little sheet and you go "oh. I've got to go here to work?"

Another frustration was that the subsidized placements did not turn into permanent jobs. What made this even more frustrating was that they often did not know why they had not been hired.

> The [placement specialist] is supposed to call the employer and check on your work performance because they've got to do like an evaluation or something. And that's when they'll say they're going to hire you or not. But sometimes after the 3-month program you're wondering like why I ain't got no job at the end of the 3 months. Why ain't nobody said nothing?

> Finally they placed me somewhere. I stayed all the way over in no man's land and had to go all the way to 76th and Kedzie. On top of that I had to drop off my son at daycare. So, I am doing all of this traveling and no job…Didn't get hired. Didn't do none of that. Ended up right back at the CAPs office.

In fact, some foster youth believed that employers had no intention of hiring them and were only using them as free labor.

> They're not even looking for to hire anybody permanently. They just looking for free help.

> It's just free labor for them really because CAPs pays.

As a result, some foster youth had completed the training program more than one time.

> That just forces us to rejoin the program and do it all over again.

Foster youth also expressed frustration with the fact that they were not always paid for all of the hours that they worked.

> I was working at the security company, all the way out there, I was doing overtime. And that supervisor did not put that over there stating that I did overtime. I was like—after that I… I ain't coming back to CAPs no more.

> The check was supposed to be like 3-something… I know I worked them hours.

One young woman attributed this to a problem with funding.

> I worked in CAPs, and the reason why people's checks were so short was because they wasn't getting enough funding to give them their whole checks.

Foster youth sometimes felt that no care was taken in making their job placements, that they were placed wherever there was an opening even if would not be a particularly good fit given their interests or skills.

> Plus, you want a job where you can utilize a skill they done taught you in the orientation. They just place you anywhere and plus they do not think that it's important.

> [A] DCFS kid is a quick job placement, he's out of here. That's all they're going to be anyway. Quick job placement out of here. I don't think they cared at all.

Foster youth also reported being asked to perform tasks that were not in their job description

> They had me folding clothes, doing stuff that's not in my job title. They had me watching babies and stuff. I'm like, it's not in my job description. You don't even get minimum wage so it's like, why am I doing all this?

> That pastor had me babysitting his kids, grandkids.

At the same time, some young people were making a real effort to make a good impression on their employers.

> I know I'm only supposed to be working 3 days. Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday from 8:00am–3:00pm. But I was doing a little extra hours to let them know that I really wanted the job. You know what I'm saying. No one's going to hire me, so I was putting in more hours for them.

> I just only worked there for a couple of weeks and I never came to work with an attitude or nothing like that. One of the residents that live at the nursing home had actually lied on me and told the supervisor that I cursed him out. And I haven't said anything to that person. I'm just working minding my own business.

Stigmatization

A number of foster youth felt stigmatized because of their status as DCFS wards.

> And then, most of these employers discriminate because of the DCFS as far as—because you've got to give them your referral and your referral has your program, so you know they find out.

> I don't think they should be putting that information on there. They ain't got no business knowing that.

> You only get like 3 months or something like that because you're DCFS.

In particular, foster youth felt they were treated less favorably than the other CAPs clients.

> Because it's like CAPs is wishy washy with some of the programs. Like they got their IODC and their food stamps. It's like they treat them better than DCFS.

> That ain't right. If anything, it should be switched. We should get the good jobs and they (other populations) should get the part time jobs that pays $300 every 2 weeks.

> They're getting long-term jobs. They get the good jobs. There's favoritism.

> They [other populations] be in warehouses and stuff. You'd be like dang they're going to buy extra stuff and we can't even get no restaurant [job].

Treatment by Program Staff

Foster youth voiced many concerns about how they were treated by some CAPs staff. They consistently described themselves as being treated like "little kids" rather than young adults.

> They're going to treat me like I'm some little child. I just want to get a job like everyone else.

> Their demeanor towards you is different. It's like when they talk to you, they don't talk to you like a regular human being. They down talking about like you know you have to do this. You know you have to be on time…
>
> Like we're little kids. Like we don't know. Like we're going to go on a job interview, we can't wear all that.
>
> You don't have to talk to me like you're Lord. You know what I am saying? I'm here just like everybody else. I should be treated as if I'm an adult, and should be looked at as if I have a chance of possibly obtaining a job. Not treated like I'm just going—like I'm some type of child. You need to stop talking.

Many foster youth also felt disrespected.

> They unprofessional in some ways. They'll cuss you out and the secretary be hanging up on me every day.
>
> I think the way CAPs work is because they think we DCFS so we're young and youth, they can do whatever they want to do and be free with it.
>
> They treat us like they have the key to our life. Like if we don't give them highly utmost respect and humble ourselves to them.
>
> Like they're doing us a favor.
>
> Yeah, like they won't help us if we don't humble ourselves. They talk to us like we ain't nothing either.
>
> Most people don't understand what we've been through so they won't understand us. So they just talk to us in any kind of way because they don't know us or understand us.

Another common complaint about their treatment by staff was the sense that their time was not valued.

> You're sitting there for hours because they're walking around conversating, giggling, laughing. You could have had a placement at 9:00, but you probably won't be seen until like 10:00 or 10:30. It depends. It's going to be up to the employee—the person who places your schedule. It'd be that slow.

> Well, at CAPs, the orientation is supposed to be 9-1 pm. They run on whatever time they wanna run off. Like if you come here and the say, "Be there at 9am and you come n at 9:30am they don't even start until 10-10:30am. Then you supposed to leave at 1pm. They don't let you go to 2:30 or 3:00.

There was also a sense that some staff had little compassion.

> They have no sympathy. You're supposed to have like a little—not a lot, but a little sympathy, especially for your clients that are less fortunate than the others that really need it. They have none. Zero.

Recommendations

We organized these focus groups to better understand the experiences of foster youth who had participated in this employment training and job placement program, and based on those experiences, to suggest ways in which the program could be improved. The foster youth we spoke with had positive things to say about certain aspects of the program. They perceived some of the more hands-on or interactive training activities as particularly helpful. They also appreciated being able to talk with a supportive adult about their problems. On balance, however, the program did not appear to be providing foster youth with what they thought they needed or what they were expecting to receive.

Below, we summarize the major concerns that focus group participants raised about the program and make some recommendations for how those concerns might be addressed.

Concern #1: Foster youth described the orientation as being chaotic and overcrowded, and were particularly critical of being mixed in with the ex-offenders and other adult client populations that CAPs serves.

Recommendation #1: Consider organizing a separate orientation exclusively for foster youth. Providing foster youth with more individualized attention and guidance at the front end may encourage their engagement in the program.

Concern #2: Foster youth disliked the worksheet-based instruction. To them, sitting in a classroom doing worksheets felt too much like being back in school.

Recommendation #2: Adopt a more hands-on, interactive approach and provide more opportunities for foster youth to practice and apply the skill they learn in the community.

Concern #3: Foster youth objected to some of the curriculum, particularly the lessons on personal hygiene, and were frustrated by what they perceived as a lack of attention to the development of job-specific skills.

Recommendation #3: Ask foster youth about their employment training needs and tailor the training based on that asssessment, and provide more opportunities for foster youth to learn skills for specific jobs.

Concern #4: Foster youth perceive themselves as being disrespected by program staff and their needs as being taken less seriously than those of the adult populations that CAPs serves. They also feel stigmatized due to their age and status as DCFS wards.

Recommendation #4: Train staff to treat foster youth with respect despite their age or DCFS status. Also, encourage more information sharing between CAPs and DCFS/POS case workers so that program staff know more about the foster youth with whom they are working.

Concern #5: There is a mismatch between the career interests of the foster youth and the subsidized jobs in which they are placed.

Recommendation #5: Make a more concerted effort to place foster youth in jobs related to their interests and give foster youth more of a "say" in the process. .

Concern #6: Foster youth expressed frustration about the lack of on-site monitoring of their job placements.

Recommendation #6: Monitor subsidized job placements more closely. Review hours worked and progress made with both youth and their employers on a weekly basis to identify problems early and prevent job placement failures.

Concern #7: Foster youth believe that the employers who are providing them with subsidized job opportunities have no intention of hiring them as permanent employees. In fact, some foster youth have completed the employment training multiple times and still have not been hired.

Recommendation #7: Accompany youth to their subsidized job placements before they begin and review expectations with both the foster youth and the employer. Have the foster youth and the employer sign a contract that outlines these expectations as well as the conditions under which a foster youth will be hired as a permanent employee.

Appendix: Focus Group Protocol

First I would like to hear a little bit about why you decided to participate in this program.

Probe: How did you hear about the program?

Probe: Had you ever held a job before?

Probe: How close were you to emancipation?

Probe: What did you expect to gain from the program?

Next I would like to talk about the program orientation.

Probe: What did you do during the first week?

Probe: What you were told about the program?

Now I would like to hear about the training or other help that you received.

Probe: Can you describe some of the activities in which you participated?

Probe: Which of these activities were the most/least useful?

Probe: Was there any training or other type of help that you needed but did not receive?

Next I would like to hear about any jobs in which you were placed by the program.

Probe: Were you ever placed in a subsidized job?

Probe: In what type of subsidized jobs were you placed?

Probe: Were you given a choice of jobs?

Probe: How did you feel about this job? Did it match your interests or skills?

Probe: What happened once you were placed in this job? For how long did you keep it? Why did the job placement end?

Probe: What did you learn from this experience?

Now I would like to hear about your relationship with program staff.

Probe: How would you describe your relationship with program staff?

Probe: How responsive were program staff to your particular needs?

Finally, I would like you to pretend that you were designing an employment training and job placement program for foster youth.

Probe: What things would you keep the same?

Probe: What things would you do differently?

About Chapin Hall

Established in 1985, Chapin Hall is an independent policy research center whose mission is to build knowledge that improves policies and programs for children and youth, families, and their communities.

Chapin Hall's areas of research include child maltreatment prevention, child welfare systems and foster care, youth justice, schools and their connections with social services and community organizations, early childhood initiatives, community change initiatives, workforce development, out-of-school time initiatives, economic supports for families, and child well-being indicators.

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