

Taking Risks for Transition-Age Youth

On any given day, scores of young people with limited individual and social capital are simultaneously struggling to exit some systems and enter others: foster care, residential treatment centers, higher education, mental health programs, gainful employment.

Experts inside and outside these systems agree that, promising pilot programs aside, these big systems are ill-equipped to put young people first, and that places those most in need of individual support at tremendous risk of failure.

Numerous programs have been designed to bridge some of these support gaps some operating from within public systems, some based in the community. Leaders from both types of programs met recently to hear about efforts to strengthen supports for young people transitioning out of the child welfare and juvenile justice systems."

"I knew I had to do more to help my kids."

That's the way Judge Patricia Martin started a 20-minute summary of her pioneering work to transform her Cook County, Ill., courtroom into a setting where young people preparing to exit the foster care system articulate their goals, take control of their futures, and ask for support from those holding the keys to the systems they want to leave and the systems they want to enter.

Called the Benchmark Permanency Program, the initiative requires hearings at certain "benchmarks" in a foster child's life to plan for a future out of the system. More than 2,000 foster care youth have been referred to the program since its inception in 2001. Not only does Martin use the power of the bench to invite the participation of teachers, counselors, youth workers, family members, case workers and anyone else who is or should be playing a part in the lives of "her kids," she takes extra steps to ensure their engagement.

She has visited schools to find out why her kids are failing, only to find that the students are being marked absent when they are in the school building but not in the classroom. She has gotten law enforcement officials to look the other way temporarily so that family members with active warrants can attend her kids' benchmark hearings. She has gotten school officials to deploy staff (and data-system access) to her courtroom so that any questions about her kids' school progress can be answered during the hearing.

"Our young people are the 80 percent who didn't get caught."

That's how Molly Baldwin, founder of Roca in Chelsea, Mass., described the hundreds of young people who find transformative supports at Roca, a youth-centered, outcomes-driven organization that recognized several years ago that it was supporting young people but not helping them move forward.

While Martin has used her resources – the court – to help young people inside the system get the supports they need to complete high school and attend college, Baldwin is helping young people outside the system develop the capacity and motivation needed to hold down a job for six months.

While Baldwin, Martin and six other leaders spent the first day of the recent meetings hearing about one another's supports for disadvantaged and disconnected teens and young adults, they spent a second day comparing notes, joined by the staff members who planned the first day's meetings.

My job: Listen for commonalities. I heard four:

**The young people in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems are not as different as you would think. Step into two settings – a secure residential facility and an urban youth program – and measure assets and risks. The rankings might be different, but the overall scores will be close.*

**The systems that the young people need to navigate are not as different as you would think. All big systems – child welfare, juvenile justice, K-12 education, higher education, employment and training, health and mental health, public housing – lean toward risk management and away from creative problem-solving, making them extremely frustrating systems to navigate, especially for those with multiple risks.*

**The supports that young people need to navigate these systems and ultimately to succeed are not as different as you would think. The lists of needed supports were the same across the two days of presentations: consistent, constructive relationships with at least one experienced adult champion, flexible financial options, stable basics (housing, health services, transportation), clear goals and steady guidance, door openers (people with the clout to make things happen), second chances.*

**The strategies and practice models being developed to provide these supports within systems, across systems, and in communities are not as different as you would think. The recurring theme: Create a youth-centered team that meets the young person where he or she is and helps to chart and navigate a course forward, setting realistic goals and expecting setbacks.*

This list did not surprise me. What surprised me was the extent to which there was agreement about what to do and why.

The experts agreed that partnerships between community organizations and public systems should be stronger and that youth-focused community-based organizations (CBOs) can and should play a larger role.

Both sides, however, asked: Are CBOs really ready? Are there enough providers in every community who really want to take on the responsibility of supporting young adults as they traverse the end of the education/employment pipeline, where the leakage rates are legendary?

I plan to find out.

The Forum for Youth Investment will be hosting a series of informal discussions with community-based providers who are working with young adults to ensure college and workforce success. If you would like to participate, please e-mail us with a description of your program. We'll send you a brief questionnaire and schedule you for a conference call.

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