

Interview with Josh Leonard, Executive Director, Bay Area Youth Centers

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Josh Leonard has been with Bay Area Youth Centers for 16 years and has headed the organization since 2002. Founded as a group home provider in the early 1970's, under Mr. Leonard's direction, BAYC has broadened its range of services to include a robust mental health program and transitional housing for emancipated youth through THP-Plus. Mr. Leonard sat down with THP-Plus News to share insights gained from that process.

When I began with Bay Area Youth Centers, as a residential counselor, the agency worked with adolescents in a number of group homes scattered about Alameda County. But there was little clear vision about the long-term impact that our services would make in young people's lives. One of BAYC's strengths had always been that staff really tended to form long term bonds with the youth, and so youth stayed in touch. This is wonderful, but it also meant that we heard a lot of very hard stories about what happened after they left us.

Those stories, along with the research that began to become widely distributed and discussed in the early 1990s, provoked a lot of soul searching. We wondered about the true achievements of our programs if youth continued to struggle so profoundly just after leaving. We settled into the recognition that the notion that youth could go from 24 hour care to independence over night was pure folly, and we resolved to transform our agency to address this reality.

We began by bringing an explicit focus on emancipation planning into our group homes programs. We overhauled our policies and curriculum, and began discussing the realities of

independent living with every one of our clients. In 1998, the legislature created THPP, creating the opportunity to allow youth 17-18 years old to live quasi-independently.

We opened our THPP program in 2002, and revised our mission statement to reflect our new focus on emancipation preparation. It was then that we wrote Youth Development practice and philosophies into every aspect of our work.

In February 2008, we were successful in securing a THP-Plus contract for 16 beds. Because we had funding from other sources already in place, we are able to serve a total of 20 youth in post-emancipation housing.

There are a number of aspects of our programs about which I am particularly proud. I think that our continuum model is fairly unique. Youth in our THPP program can move into the more structured and supervised environment of our group homes should they temporarily need the increased support. They can then receive assistance in evaluating their individual challenges, and in planning to address them in a positive manner. Our programs are truly a place where youth are allowed to reach for challenging goals, and to make developmentally appropriate mistakes. Thus they can learn and grow and move on, without fear of being kicked out. Now, with our THP-Plus program, they can stay with us even after emancipating.

We continue to seek every opportunity to solidify our ability to deliver on our commitment to our youth. As of October 1st, BAYC has merged with Sunny Hills Services. We are confident that the merger will provide fiscal sustainability for the agency, allowing us to expand our existing programs and to start new, innovative programs to ensure that we support our clients in their transition to independent adulthood."

"TRACKING SYSTEM" CONTINUED FROM FRONT PAGE

According to Bedrae Davis, who manages the THP-Plus program for Los Angeles County, "We are looking forward to using the THP-Plus participant tracking system. The system will allow us to track the progress of THP-Plus participants on a quarterly basis and to examine how they fare after exiting the program. We recognize the importance of this data, and all Los Angeles County THP-Plus providers will be using the system." Los Angeles County has the largest population of transitioning foster youth in the state, and plans to serve 150 youth in THP-Plus by the end of fiscal year 2008-09.

The system is online in time to allow providers to enter participant data for the second quarter of the fiscal year. Analysis of the aggregate data will be included in a Policy Brief released by the John Burton Foundation after the end of the fiscal year.

For additional information, please contact Michele Byrnes at michele@johnburtonfoundation.org or (415) 693-1323.



NEWS

Welcome to **THP-Plus News**, a quarterly newsletter of the THP-Plus Statewide Implementation Project. The Project is a partnership between the John Burton Foundation, the California Department of Social Services, and the Corporation for Supportive Housing. Our goal is to expand access to THP-Plus, California's only housing program for former foster youth. THP-Plus provides former foster youth with affordable housing and a rich array of supportive services, including job training, educational advocacy, mentoring, and case management.

INSIDE:

- THP-Plus Annual Report
- THP Allocation
- Youth Perspective
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To submit a question to a practitioner or to comment on the newsletter, e-mail nicole@johnburtonfoundation.org

This is a publication of the John Burton Foundation for Children Without Homes—a non-profit organization based in San Francisco, California dedicated to improving the quality of life for California's homeless children and developing policy solutions to prevent homelessness.

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Expanding Housing Options for Youth In Transition

THP-Plus Participant Tracking System Released December 3rd

The John Burton Foundation is pleased to announce that the THP-Plus participant tracking system is live and accessible as of December 3rd. The foundation released the system through two web seminars designed specifically for THP-Plus providers and THP-Plus County administrators. For those of you who could not attend or would like to revisit the web seminars, the tutorials have been recorded and are available on the THP-Plus website.

The secure, web-based system allows THP-Plus Providers to collect vital information about THP-Plus participants on a quarterly basis. County THP-Plus administrators will have access to the data to enhance their capacity to provide effective oversight of contracted THP-Plus programs.

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Landmark Child Welfare Federal Legislation Signed into Law

On October 7th, President George Bush signed the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (House Resolution 6893). Hailed as the most significant federal child welfare legislation in over a decade, H.R. 6893 includes a range of provisions intended to improve outcomes among children and youth in foster care, including the creation of a federal subsidized guardianship program for kinship providers.

Of the many provisions of the bill, the one that potentially affects THP-Plus most directly is a state option to extend foster care to age 21. While many states have statutes that authorize the juvenile court to retain jurisdiction beyond age 18 (including California), most states rarely elect to do so, and only then for the minimum amount of time necessary. The reason for this is that the primary source of federal foster care funding (Title IV-E of the Social Security Act) is terminated when a youth reaches the age of majority, defined as age 18 in most states. Without the Title IV-E federal contribution, most states consider foster care for older youth cost-prohibitive and discharge them from foster care.

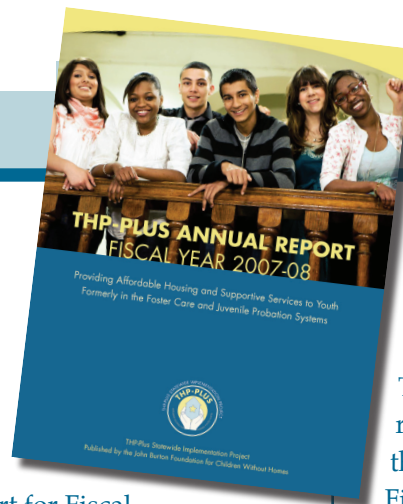
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THP-Plus Annual Report Released October 20th

On October 20th, the THP-Plus Statewide Implementation Project released The THP-Plus Annual Report for Fiscal Year 2007-2008. The report highlights progress in THP-Plus, including the past year's remarkable growth in housing availability statewide. As the Schwarzenegger Administration proposed significant increases in THP-Plus funding statewide, the program reached a total of 1,548 youth in 39 counties around California. This represented an increase of more than 130% in the number of youth served statewide.

The report also provides an overview of findings from the John Burton Foundation's survey of more than 450 THP-Plus participants from 34 programs around the state. The results demonstrate that the program is working: after receiving THP-Plus housing and services, young adults reported significant increases in work participation, hourly wages, educational enrollment, and connections with a stable, caring adult.

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THP-Plus Allocation to be Released in Tight Budget Climate

The California Department of Social Services is expected to release a County Fiscal Letter by mid-December outlining the distribution of THP-Plus funds among 48 counties for Fiscal Year 2009-09. Fiscal Year (FY) 2008-09 started on July 1st, but the allocation was not released until November due to the delay in passing the state budget.

The statewide THP-Plus budget includes \$40.8 million, an increase of \$5.2 million from FY 2007-08. An additional nine counties are planning to participate in THP-Plus this fiscal year, and funding requests surpass the available funding. Therefore, a methodology is being developed to allocate funds to all participating counties.

The allocation will be released in the context of a growing budget shortfall. Since the state budget was passed in September, the estimated shortfall has grown from an estimated \$3 billion to \$11.2 billion in the current year. The Governor has called a special session of the Legislature to consider a range of spending cuts and revenue options proposed by the Governor.

tional attainment were among the strongest. The young adults who remained in foster care until age 21 were 1.9 times more likely to have ever attended college and 2.2 times more likely to have completed at least one year of college than their peers who exited foster care at age 18. Additionally, the odds of completing at least one year of college were approximately 3.5 times higher for the young adults who remained in foster care to age 21 than for the young adults who exited foster care at age 21.

The new federal law is a much needed fix, according to former President Pro Tem of the California State Senate John Burton. "Foster youth in higher education have overcome tremendous challenges to get where they are, without the emotional and financial support that students from in-tact families receive," said Burton. "This landmark legislation will improve their preparation for college and provide the necessary housing, financial and emotional support in their first years of college."

Interview with Georgette Todd, Youth Adult Partnership Coordinator

Georgette Todd emancipated from the foster care system in San Diego County in 1997, and now works with transition age youth in Alameda County, most of who live in housing provided through THP-Plus. She sat down with THP-Plus News to share her insights about the needs of youth in THP-Plus, gained both through her work and through personal experience.

I entered foster care at 14, and didn't know anything about it at all. My mother passed away, my father was in prison, and my stepfather was in jail. I was really worried about high school, really concerned about maintaining my grades. But I got bounced around a lot - foster care was constant chaos. I was beginning to slip behind in my education, and I started to despair, started to get into some trouble, to fall apart. Luckily, I got a call saying that a foster parent wanted me to come to live with her.

I knew that I needed to play catch up. I had an after school job, and I just buckled down and worked hard. What really made the difference was that I had a single place to live. I had some stability, structure, normalcy, a routine. I started to get back into my schoolwork and my grades came back up. I was saving money, and I barely made it into Sacramento State.

In college, I worked and saved and took out all the loans I could get. I finished in 2003 with two degrees: in English and Journalism.

When I graduated I knew I wanted to go to the Mills creative writing program. My thesis was about how I entered care and how I left my first placement. It is titled "The World's Tallest Flagpole: Case Number 510846A." The publication of my thesis was very empowering because it was like rewriting my own story. Those years at Mills turned me into a true whole person.

After graduation though, it was like emancipating from foster care for most young people - I got a real shock to the system. I had the education, the work history, internships, great recommendations and grades, but I had no connections.

I got my first job about 6 months after I graduated. I now work as the Youth Adult Partnership Coordinator at Be-



yond Emancipation. I coordinate a board of county officials, service providers, and current and former foster youth to provide the voice of the youth to Alameda County. It's a very exciting forum to be a part of.

Youth need a stable place from which to act. I see some youth who really acknowledge and understand that opportunity that THP-Plus provides, and are able to take advantage of it. Other youth, though, only see THP-Plus as not having to worry about housing for two years. They have a really hard time looking beyond that, understanding that they need to get a lot done in those two years. Others don't realize that the two years is a maximum, but that they still have to work to maintain it.

The youth who are making it are those who meet program staff halfway - that's the difference. You have to be careful because you don't want to hand-hold them, even though, depending on the youth, it may be the only way to get something done in the initial stages. You don't want to teach dependency. It's a difficult line to walk. I find that I am most successful when I try to create a mentoring relationship from my very first conversation with the youth, rather than just providing information.

I also have success when I am extremely clear in my expectations and am consistent with those expectations instead of constantly changing the core principles and rules on them. You always have to have high expectations, because it communicates that you believe in them, in their ability to do not only what you ask, but also to succeed in general.

"CHILD WELFARE" CONTINUED FROM FRONT PAGE

Under the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, youth would continue to receive the support of the foster care system up to age 21. The link between extending foster care to age 21 and improved educational outcomes was demonstrated in the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth. This study compared the experiences of foster youth from three states, Iowa, Illinois and Wisconsin who "aged out" at 18 with those who remained in foster care to 21. Youth from the three states were interviewed at age 18, 19 and 21. Illinois has a policy of allowing youth to remain in foster care to age 21, while at the time of the study, Iowa and Wisconsin discharged youth at the age of majority, age 18.

Of the various effects of remaining in foster care past age 18, increased participation in higher education and educa-