

HIRING, TRAINING AND RETAINING FORMER FOSTER YOUTH AS YOUTH PARTNERS ON WRAPAROUND TEAMS

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Hiring Former Foster Youth (FFY) as youth partners for Wraparound teams is very much like the Wraparound process itself. It is essential to know the outcomes for the process/interview, the needs for the organization and for the FFY, the strengths of the FFY and the organization, and the safety/training needs for the FFY and the program. Through the process of hiring a small number of FFY, several components relating to hiring, training and retention have been identified. These will be explored over the next few pages and will also be interspersed with some historical perspective from one of the FFY's personal experience within the foster care system and, later, as a Youth Partner employee.

The outcome desired by the program is to hire youth partners with personal experience in of the foster care system. These youth have either been in the foster care/dependency system or have been impacted by a family member or some other individual who had contact with the system. The question of how to locate these young adults is answered in many ways; however, the most common way is by way of a personal recommendation from someone who has personally observed the youth in question. As is common in many agencies, a staff member on a hiring committee will speak up and say they have the "perfect candidate" for the position. They will contact that candidate and invite them to submit a resume and/or complete an employment application. At this point there are

many variables that come into play that are typically idiosyncratic to the specific relationship between the staff member on the hiring committee and the FFY. Due to the nature of that relationship, FFYC may or may not, ultimately, be an appropriate agency for the individual. This is recognized as the interviewing process begins.

I arrived at FFYC early and felt my nerves kicking in. I sat in the parking lot looking up at a four-story building where I could see people working at computer desks. I wanted to turn around and go home, but at this point that was no longer an option for me. I swallowed my fear and entered the building. I found the suite and was greeted with warm welcomes and smiles. It had done very little to ease my nervousness. I was coming out of a job with parks and games to enter one of offices and paperwork. I questioned whether or not I was ready for it; I pushed myself to find out.

Typically, this is the first professional interview for the FFY and it is incumbent upon the interview team to set the tone of professionalism and comfort for the FFY so as to truly assess the skill level and the readiness of the candidate for the demanding work on a Wraparound team. It is essential to assess the individual's ability to keep a distance from the family's process and to maintain the personal equilibrium that will maximize their value as part of the service team. This is no easy task for the FFY or for the interview team. The areas of consideration include maturation, writing skills, compassion, understanding, system experience, the ability to self-reflect, and the ability to work on a team and receive feedback from a supervisor. All of these skills are important for the success of the FFY. It is the balance of needs of the FFY and the program that must be synchronized to maximize support for the families.

I didn't know what to expect during the interview. Across from me sat two professionals that asked question after question of which I had done nothing to prepare for. They asked about my skills, experiences, learning styles, etc., an interview that focused more on individual strengths rather than ability to perform. I felt overdressed and under qualified, but knew I must do whatever it takes to show them that I could perform the job. I walked out feeling both confident and uncertain. A part of me hoped that I would not receive a call back.

The initiation into the Wraparound program can be daunting for the FFY as they are presented with a great deal of information that is completely new to them. Compounding the difficulty of absorbing this new information is the often affecting task of delivering services to families who are struggling with many of the same issues that they, as a FFY, experienced personally. This raises a special issue/need that must be sensitively managed in a supervisory setting. The challenge of stepping into a family with highly charged, complex needs can be very stirring for the FFY and needs to be addressed on a regular basis so as to maximize the individual's offerings and minimize the stress and potential emotional distress of the FFY as well. It is essential that the relationship between the FFY and the supervisor be built on trust, safety, and openness to help the FFY navigate the challenges presented by multi-problem families. The issues that may arise include over-identification with the family, a sense of overwhelm by the FFY, an inability to become part of the team, a desire to distance themselves from the families' struggles, and also the possibility of undermining the professional team out of a misguided sense of wanting to protect the family from the "system." With these issues in mind, it is important to work closely with the FFY to ensure their safety, the safety of the family, and effective delivery of services.

I was given details about my job description and thrown into the water. I knew I had shared some experiences with all of our clients but what if I could not relate? What if my unique situation was the reason for my detachment, from coworkers and clients? What would happen if I couldn't do the job? More than anything I feared humiliation, of my employer, my family, and myself. My family had been well known throughout child welfare and I didn't want to disappoint anyone. I stuck with it though and took every opportunity to learn. Pretty soon I was working individually with kids a year or two younger than myself. The only difference is that I had emancipated from the system a year earlier. Some of the kids would tell me about problems they are having at home, I thought of my own life at home. My youngest sister was preparing to leave her foster home to reunite with my dad. My older brother was in prison and my older sister a drug addict on welfare. I knew then that I would be able to relate. I had come to the right place.

The basic skills training for the FFY is really an exercise in language and presentation that helps them define what they are undertaking, where they have been, and who these

relate. Learning and implementing the language and philosophy of Wraparound (strength and needs assessments; the safety planning; team rules; family voice/choice; goal setting; action steps and mission statements; and, adherence to ensuring services are consumer driven) are potential triggers for emotions and memories that help the FFY to work more effectively with the Child and Family Team. With the right supervisory, systematic, and programmatic environment, the true benefit of the FFY can be used to promote safety, trust and change in the current family situation with which the FFY is working. In addition, the FFY will ultimately see how the Wraparound process can improve their current situation and allow them to make inroads into resolving their family history.

After working with FFYC for more than a year, I began to use what I have learned from work in my personal life. It was not long before I looked to my own family to develop more community supports, look for the strengths in each individual, and create action plans to meet each of our needs. It would all blow up in my face at times but with wraparound you learn to rebound from that and try again.

As the process of training and initiation continues for the FFY, the administrative aspect of the job becomes more involved. It is essential that the expectations are high and the support and the training are maximized to aid in the process of becoming an effective documenter. As the training model develops and the supervision progresses in a developmental fashion, the FFY (as well as other employees) is taught to work with the Medi-Cal requirements to assess medical necessity, work from a treatment plan as well as a family wrap plan and to look at interaction with their assigned families as steps to meeting behavioral goals and family goals as well. It is incumbent on the program staff to work directly with the FFY to hone their skills, demonstrate and teach Medi-Cal requirements and language, offer writing support and supportive assistance to meet the needs of the FFY as they become proficient in their documentation skills.

I have been able to step into the wraparound process with some ease. However, my difficulty lies with the documentation side of it. With each client interaction we are required to write notes explaining how we address a medical necessity. This requires me to engage my clients as a clinician and identify things about them that I may otherwise not have noticed. Then I have to capture what I did in a note to be submitted to Medi-Cal explaining how my interaction with the client was necessary for their treatment. It has challenged me to step away from the point-of-view of the youth, and see them from the eye of “the system.”

Specifically, there are a number of areas that need to be attended to with thoughtfulness and compassion that may stretch some programs to think and act a bit differently than they have acted in the past. Community based programs have been changing to meet the needs of the FFY and the partner movement in general. Therefore, there are more partner-driven programs in line with the Wraparound principles/movement in general. Flexible weekday, weekend and partial day schedules can make the service more partner-friendly and enhance services to families. More specifically, the needs of the FFY’s must be taken into account on an individual basis. For example, a FFY who was to receive a raise for an annual performance evaluation needed special consideration due to the fact that the raise in pay may have put him out of compliance for continued participation in an income supported housing program. The agency needed to work with the FFY to make sure that his annual increase was available to him with out putting him at risk as an ongoing consumer of some support services.

Other intriguing issues are raised by the histories of the FFY as it comes face to face with current families enrolled in the Wraparound process. Two examples are particularly noteworthy:

A recent referral to the Fred Finch Wraparound program involved a 14-year-old adolescent on probation at a residential treatment facility who was preparing to step-down to a foster family setting. As the family picture unfolded, it was discovered that the foster family this youth was to be stepping down to was the same foster mother of our

current FFY when he was in the system. This FFY was to be assigned to his own previous foster family. Not only did this raise issues for the FFY, it also was an issue for the welfare department, the department of mental health, our own administrative team, and the CFT. The supervisory process of this referral was extremely important in making an informed decision so as to maintain the integrity of the program, the team, the family and the FFY.

The second example also involves this same FFY. During his stay in the welfare system, he was never in a group home setting. He spent his time in foster homes and then finally spent the last of his dependency time at an academy setting while he graduated from high school. During his stay in the welfare system, he and his family developed a close relationship with his county social worker. This social worker now refers families to the wraparound program where this FFY is employed. This relationship with the social worker and the FFY is multi-leveled and lends itself to a very creative and unique situation. As his youngest sister just graduated high school and moved back to her father's house, the social worker and the FFY were part of the same system that returned this young girl to her father and out of the dependency system.

Retaining FFY's in the Wraparound program is a function of many variables. It is essential that the FFY feels supported in their growing role of a deliverer of services. They have been receivers for many years and now the roles have changed as they approach youth who are in need and are experiencing traumatic events in their lives. In addition, as mentioned earlier, it is important that the organization is able to accept, manage and meet the unique needs of the FFY. Through strong supervision, a flexible Human Resources department and an open management system with a commitment to families, youth, and consumer based experience, the FFY has the opportunity to become part of an organization that gives back to the system from which they came.

Through our experiences we begin to value positive relationships, supportive figures, and the impacts they have on children. Sometimes children are unsheltered by an embrace or

not redirected through guidance. A need grows to fill that void of misplaced attachment, to seek out support that may otherwise have been vacant. Sometimes our supports are not the greatest, sometimes we learn. But when we find the support it becomes our home. I found it at a time that was best for me. At an age where one's curiosity could end behind bars. My peers would help me to be who I was, but it was few others that helped me become who I am. Through the spoils of my juvenile life, I was told of a better path. One that was attainable as long as I worked to obtain it. I was pushed harder to excel and stand up when I fail. I took advice from those that supported me and started controlling my own life for the first time. I decided to move and left it all behind. I was ready to start over, to do it the right way.

In conclusion, it is an honor to work with FFY who have successfully navigated the system and now are able to give back to the youth who are struggling with the same process. To see the system come full circle with a focus on consumer-based experience at the forefront is a very gratifying vision. To enter families' homes with a team of individuals who have been in that same situation brings wraparound planning to a very effective and meaningful step. To work with the FFY through the process from interviewing to training and on going service is to see the Wraparound process in operation as both consumer- and outcome-driven. It is in the best interest of the programs to use this model to promote the full circle of planning and change with families referred to Wraparound services.

I strongly believe in living with no regrets, and that's what I tell families. It is hard to know a father through a letter and a mother through a picture, but that isn't where it ends. Instead, take that harsh reality of life and show others that they do not have to live it. Grow stronger every time you fall, there'll be more rocks along the road. My life is only one story like so many others, but there are more to be told. Let all you have lived be what you will teach.