



The Premise and Promise of  
**THE CALIFORNIA CONNECTED  
BY 25 INITIATIVE**

IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR TRANSITION  
AGE FOSTER YOUTH



CALIFORNIA  
**25**

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CALIFORNIA CONNECTED BY 25

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**STUART FOUNDATION**  
INVESTING IN CHILDREN & YOUTH TO CREATE LIFELONG IMPACT

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The Walter S. Johnson Foundation



***“The California Connected by 25 Initiative provided a circle of support for me. It helped me access housing, improve my grades, and find a full-time job. It connected me to scholarship programs so that I can afford to go to college. And it provided opportunities to interact with people and give back to the community.”***

Former Foster Youth, Santa Clara County

## **THE PREMISE AND PROMISE**

In general, the road to independence for young adults is one of trial and error; where detours and wrong turns are the norm. Education, employment, housing, financial assets, and supportive relationships allow youth to survive and thrive as they make their way into adulthood. Without a place to live, a high school diploma, the skills to find work, and a support network, young people struggle to make ends meet and become engaged members of society.

Every year more than 4,000 young people age out of California’s foster care system and many leave without the safety net or life skills they need to succeed.<sup>1</sup> Removed from their homes due to abuse and neglect and often disconnected from their families and communities, these youth face many more obstacles on their path to adulthood. Foster youth are less likely to complete high school and become employed and more likely to suffer from mental health problems, be a victim of crime, go to jail, become homeless, live in poverty, and rely on public assistance.<sup>2</sup>

## **THE GOAL**

The California Connected by 25 Initiative (CC25I) was developed to fundamentally change the trajectory for youth emancipating from foster care. Led by Stuart Foundation and Walter S. Johnson Foundation, CC25I was a six-year, \$6 million investment to transform county child welfare practice in order to improve outcomes in key areas of the lives of foster youth ages 14 through 24. Additional support was provided by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation.

<sup>1</sup> Child Welfare Dynamic Report System, Exits per Year, All Agencies. Data accessed online August 31, 2011. [http://cssr.berkeley.edu/ucb\\_childwelfare/Exits.aspx](http://cssr.berkeley.edu/ucb_childwelfare/Exits.aspx).

<sup>2</sup> Mark Courtney, *Network on Transitions to Adulthood Policy Brief: Youth Aging Out of Foster Care*. MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy, April 2005, Issue 19. <http://www.transad.pop.upenn.edu/downloads/courtney--foster%20care.pdf>.



**Highlighted Youth Outcomes from CC25I County Sites:**

Youth Outcomes	2008-09	2010-11	% Change
Youth reporting a lifelong connection	54%	79%	47% ↑
Completion of some or all high school requirements (A-G)	31%	45%	45% ↑
Youth satisfaction with transition services	45%	65%	44% ↑
Youth report they have a safe housing plan	53%	72%	38% ↑
Passed the CAHSEE high school exit exam (Math and English)	44%	54%	25% ↑

CC25I provided grants to eight county child welfare departments based on the premise that California’s foster youth deserve a chance to succeed in life and the promise that with support and structure, California can do a better job in meeting their needs. Fresno, San Francisco, Santa Clara, and Stanislaus counties joined the initiative in 2005, followed by Humboldt, Glenn, Orange, and Solano in 2007. The eight sites were selected to represent both rural and urban communities throughout the state and for their ability to build upon previous child welfare reform efforts, as well as their willingness to innovate, grow, and change.

Foundation support also enabled the sites to benefit from multiple resources and services, including: technical assistance provided by the California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC) at UC Berkeley; support in implementing the Efforts to Outcomes (ETO) data collection system<sup>3</sup> from the Center for Social Services Research at UC Berkeley; and assistance from a project management staff to guide implementation, coordinate county efforts, and provide the foundation partners the information they needed to oversee the initiative.

<sup>3</sup> Efforts to Outcomes (ETO) is a web-based database developed by Social Solutions and was designed to track key outcomes for transition age foster youth. For more information on ETO, visit [www.socialsolutions.com](http://www.socialsolutions.com).

## Core Focus Areas

- Permanency
- Education
- Housing
- Employment
- Financial Literacy

## Key Strategies

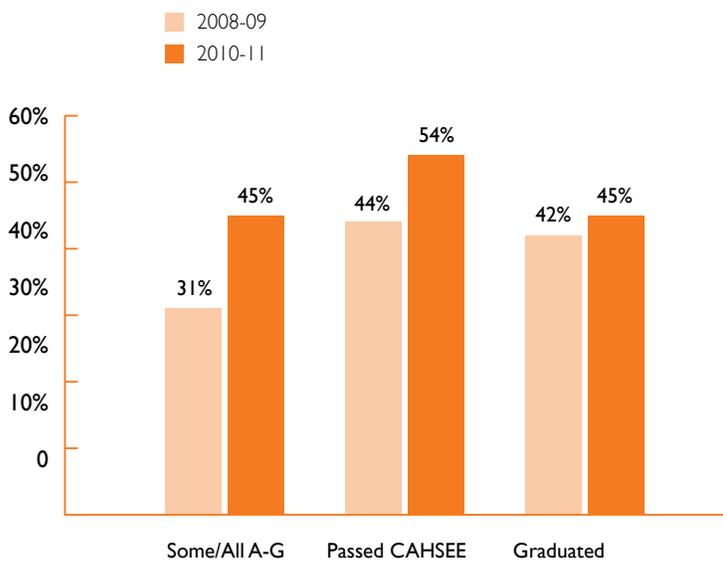
- Community Partnerships
- Youth Engagement
- Data and Evaluation

## CORE FOCUS AREAS AND KEY STRATEGIES

Although multiple agencies, community partners, and schools provide services for foster youth, they often work in silos without establishing common goals, sharing information, and leveraging resources. Through CC25I, all eight county sites set out to transform their systems of care and “connect” transition age foster youth to comprehensive, integrated, and youth-focused supports and services. Leading these efforts, the county child welfare agencies worked with community partners, local agencies, and the youth themselves to build relationships and implement effective practices. They focused on ensuring better outcomes in five core focus areas: permanency, education, housing, employment, and financial literacy.

Although no two counties utilized the same approach to achieve these outcomes, they all relied on three key strategies: developing meaningful and fruitful community partnerships, engaging foster youth as leaders and decision-makers, and collecting and evaluating data to inform and improve practice.

### CC25I Education Outcomes for Foster Youth:



**Note on the Data:** Data and results highlighted in this report are from the Efforts to Outcome “Assessment C” survey administered to child welfare supervised foster youth just prior to emancipation. Highlighted data are from early implementing CC25I counties (Fresno, San Francisco, Santa Clara, and Stanislaus), as well as Humboldt County, and were collected from 2008-2011. Note that these results have not been analyzed for statistical significance. Data from Glenn, Orange, and Solano counties are not included in this analysis due to the limited number of years available. However, these counties now have a solid baseline for future analysis as they continue to collect data and track outcomes.

**Number of Youth Surveyed:** A total of 858 youth were surveyed over the three-year time period, representing 56% of the 1,525 foster youth that emancipated in the select counties. In 2008-09, the N=248; 2009-10, N=311; and 2010-11, N=299.

## FIVE BIG RESULTS

### I. Outcomes for Foster Youth Improved

**Focus on Education Pays Off.** Overall, CC25I was successful in improving educational outcomes for foster youth. Over a three-year period, the percentage of emancipating foster youth that completed some or all of their A-G requirements<sup>4</sup> increased from 31% to 45%. The percentage of foster youth passing both the English and Math sections of the high school exit exam (CAHSEE) increased from 44% to 54% and the high school graduation rate increased from 42% to 45%.

**More Youth Report Having a Safe and Affordable Housing Plan.** The CC25I sites also saw improvements in housing outcomes for youth. From 2008 to 2011, the percentage of emancipating foster youth that reported having a safe housing plan increased from 53% to 72%, and the percentage of youth reporting affordable housing increased from 55% to 59%.

One of the ways that CC25I was able to increase housing options for youth was through the development of the Transitional Housing Placement-Plus (THP-Plus) host family model. The model was created as a strategy to provide emancipated foster youth with financial resources to live in a family home or with a supportive, caring adult.

<sup>4</sup> A-G requirements refer to the high school courses required for entrance to the University of California and the California State University systems. The California State University (CSU) system requires a minimum of a “C” grade in all A-G courses while the University of California (UC) system requires a 3.0 Grade Point Average in the A-G courses meaning that a “C” grade can be balanced by an “A” grade in another class. (Source: Silicon Valley Education Foundation)

**“In terms of how our system transformed, youth were at the table for the first time.”**

Rochelle Trochtenberg, Youth Organizer  
Humboldt County Transition Age Youth Collaboration



## 2. Child Welfare Agencies Transformed

**Creating a Culture of Accountability and Respect.** As a result of CC25I, counties reported having an increased focus on the needs and challenges facing transition age foster youth. Many counties noted that before CC25I, when youth left the system they were out-of-sight and out-of-mind. Now there is recognition of responsibility and accountability to provide support services to help youth succeed after they leave care. At the same time, more youth in CC25I counties report being satisfied with the transitional services they receive.

**A Holistic, Integrated Approach to Permanency.** One of the most dramatic shifts was the increased focus on developing permanent and supportive relationships to ensure that youth leaving care established lifelong connections to caring adults. All counties reported ways in which they embed permanency into all of their work and, as a result, have increased youth reports of lifelong connections. In 2008-09, 54% of emancipating youth reported having a lifelong connection in CC25I counties. By 2010-11, 79% reported having a permanent connection.

## 3. Youth are Genuinely Engaged and Empowered

**Youth as Leaders and Decision-Makers.** When youth are genuinely respected, heard, and included in decision-making processes, they become more engaged in their own destinies and make positive choices.<sup>5</sup> In order to genuinely engage youth in this manner, many CC25I county agencies hired former foster youth to lead engagement efforts and integrate youth perspectives into service delivery. The sites also developed youth-focused practices, included youth in workgroups and agency meetings, and developed Youth Advisory Boards where youth were able influence agency decisions and develop and participate in activities to improve services.

**The Impact of Real Life Experiences.** The CC25I sites connected youth to their communities through jobs, internships, college tours, sports events, and other activities. Youth were encouraged to take leadership positions, engage in public speaking, and advocate for themselves. These efforts helped to build their self-esteem and de-stigmatize foster youth in the community.

CC25I County Sites	2008-09	2010-11	% Change
Youth Involvement with Transition Services	50%	69%	38% ↑
Youth Satisfaction with Transition Services	45%	65%	44% ↑

<sup>5</sup> Search Institute and Social Development Research Group, University of Washington. *Executive Summary: Successful Young Adult Development*. December 2004. [www.search-institute.org/system/files/GatesFdnReport-EmergingAdulthood2004.pdf](http://www.search-institute.org/system/files/GatesFdnReport-EmergingAdulthood2004.pdf).

*“One of the most important things that came out of CC25I has been the relationships with community partners. I was caught off guard to the extent that they stepped up and joined us. The experience reformed my understanding of how dedicated people are to foster youth.*”

Christopher Cassels,  
Social Services Supervisor  
Solano County Child Welfare Services

#### 4. Meaningful Community Partnerships Were Established

**It Takes a Community.** In order to leverage limited resources, the CC25I child welfare agencies reached out to the community and developed partnerships with other public agencies, private employers, and community-based organizations related to the core focus areas: education, permanency, housing, employment, and financial literacy. These partnerships brought in a new level of support for foster youth in the community.

**Buy-In from Agency Leaders and Line Staff.** To ensure that partnerships with local public agencies were successful, the CC25I site leads knew that they needed buy-in from both high-level management and line-staff. As a result, concerted efforts were made to bring leadership to the table along with youth, staff, and community partners to establish shared goals for success and create agreements and contracts for true collaboration.

#### 5. Data is Collected and Evaluated to Inform and Improve Practice

**What You Count, Counts.** Through the initiative, all of the county sites used the Efforts to Outcome (ETO) system to track education, housing, permanency, and other key outcomes for this population.

In addition, the counties reviewed and updated their education data to ensure that they knew where youth were going to school, the requirements they had fulfilled, and what their academic needs were. The counties also established education data sharing agreements.

**More Accountability and Transparency.** Before CC25I, counties were not systematically collecting data and tracking outcomes on transition age foster youth. Once they left care, they were not on any radar. As a result, they were not aware of youth needs and what transition support services and practices were effective. With the ETO system, agencies now have access to data to evaluate and adjust their practices.

### LESSONS LEARNED FOR PRIVATE AND PUBLIC INVESTMENT

There were important lessons learned from CC25I that can help inform future child welfare initiatives. Some of the most important takeaways include:

**Flexible funding for counties works.** All of the counties reported that having non-categorical funding allowed them to be more strategic. It helped them leverage additional federal funding, better meet youth needs, target resources in more flexible ways, and facilitate systems change.

**Offer planning grants.** Allowing counties to build the infrastructure needed to both implement and measure practice change requires planning time. Many agencies found it difficult to simultaneously integrate new data collection system protocols and implement promising practices. A planning period ensures county buy-in early on, which can help align expectations.

**Hone in on key focus areas.** Having too many focus areas and deliverables can spread county efforts thin and impact results. Narrowing the model to several key components and setting clear priorities focuses county efforts, as well as the technical assistance they need to succeed. Requiring all sites to engage in similar core activities provides a foundation to measure outcomes consistently. Too much variation between sites creates confusion and doesn't allow for group learning and improvement.

**Consider impact of having multiple funders.** Although there are many benefits of joint initiatives, there is always a potential for private and public funders to exit the work, resulting in a loss of resources and thought leaders.

## WHY THIS MATTERS

### Child Welfare Realignment

Not long after CC25I was started, the country entered a recession and California unemployment rates skyrocketed. Not only did this economic downturn impact the ability of foster youth to find jobs in the CC25I counties, it also resulted in dramatic decreases in California state revenues and subsequent state and county child welfare budget cuts.

In response to ongoing state budget shortfalls, the legislature passed the 2011-12 budget plan known as “realignment,” an agreement that shifts state program responsibilities and revenues to local governments. Under realignment, billions in revenue goes to local governments every year to fund various criminal justice, mental health, and social services programs, including child welfare. Counties now have greater authority and flexibility in determining which services are funded and at what level.

For child welfare agencies already struggling to achieve better outcomes for foster youth with limited resources, realignment has significant implications. Child welfare has a responsibility to provide federally mandated services and because many services for transition age foster youth are not required, there is a very real potential that some of these services will be cut.

In these hard budget times and with realignment, child welfare agencies have to work more effectively and leverage community partnerships to achieve better results. By improving outcomes and helping older foster youth successfully transition to adulthood, the CC25I approach has a broad, positive economic impact. The initiative also provides a template for other counties to leverage resources and develop effective, accountable community partnerships.

### Extension of Foster Care to 21

With the passage of Assembly Bill 12 (AB 12), California’s Fostering Connections to Success Act, foster youth will now be able to continue to receive child welfare supports and services past their 18th birthday until the age of 21. Under AB 12, youth that stay in extended care will be expected to meet certain criteria, including working towards a high school diploma or GED, being employed at least 80 hours a month, going to college, or participating in a vocational or employment program. Counties will also be required to track outcomes for youth in extended foster care.

The extension of foster care through AB 12 is an unprecedented opportunity to change how child welfare agencies support older youth in foster care. But with this opportunity comes the challenge of making sure that extended foster care provides youth with the opportunity to thrive, not just survive. CC25I offers important lessons learned and promising strategies to inform AB 12 implementation. Over the six years of the initiative, the counties learned to effectively develop community partnerships, engage foster youth, improve education outcomes, access a variety of housing options, and connect youth to employment services and jobs. In addition, the ETO database provides accountability and transparency to allow county agencies to document their progress, adjust services, and satisfy the federal requirements to measure their impact.



## BACKGROUND & COMPLIMENTARY INITIATIVES

CC25I has its roots in several initiatives, both at the national and state level. CC25I was initially built upon the work of Annie E. Casey Foundation's Family to Family initiative, a nationwide effort to reform child welfare. In 2004, working with Annie E. Casey Foundation, Walter S. Johnson and Stuart Foundations decided to create an initiative with a focus on transition age youth in select California Family to Family sites. At the same time, a national funder collaborative called the Youth Transitions Funders Group had brought together foundations with a common interest in supporting vulnerable, transition age youth. From this effort, the national Connected by 25 Initiative was established and sites in Indiana, Florida, and California were identified to support community efforts to improve outcomes for youth leaving foster care. In 2006, California's fledgling initiative focused on transition age foster youth merged into the national Connected by 25 and the California Connected by 25 Initiative was formed.

CC25I was also able to leverage the successful work of numerous complimentary initiatives working towards similar goals for foster youth. These initiatives include California College Pathways, California Permanency for Youth Project, Career Advancement Academies, and the THP-Plus Statewide Implementation Project.

## CONCLUSION

Through the course of the CC25 Initiative all of the county sites were able to improve education, permanency, housing, and other critical outcomes for transition age foster youth, ultimately increasing their opportunities and ability to succeed in life. As a result of their efforts, the CC25I child welfare agencies became more responsive and accountable, working towards a more youth-focused system.

The implementation of AB 12 is an unprecedented opportunity for California's county child welfare agencies to connect older foster youth to the services and supports they need and raise awareness about the issues facing young people who "age out" of foster care. However, given the current fiscal climate, extending foster care presents many challenges. With the flexible foundation funding, complimentary initiatives, and technical assistance CC25I county sites received, they were able to implement strategies and services that improved outcomes for transition age foster youth. Their work offers lessons learned that will help inform AB 12 implementation across the state.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CC25I was a collaborative effort guided by a Leadership Team, managed by CC25I staff, and led by the eight child welfare agencies who worked in partnership with public agencies, service providers, stakeholder organizations, and the youth they served. Technical assistance was provided by CalSWEC and the Center for Social Services Research, both based at UC Berkeley, and CC25I staff. We gratefully acknowledge all of the individuals and organizations that contributed to CC25I for their research, insights, and contributions. We would also like to acknowledge the youth that were a part of the California Connected by 25 Initiative for their perseverance, determination, and numerous contributions towards making this initiative a success.

Photo Credits: Pictures in this report were provided by CC25I sites in Glenn, Humboldt, Orange, and Santa Clara counties; BUILD; and First Place for Youth in Alameda County. BUILD and First Place for Youth photos were taken in Oakland by Ana Homonnay of Ana Homonnay Photography.

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