

MILLS COLLEGE PUBLIC POLICY PROGRAM

# **Evaluating the Alameda County Independent Living Skills Program**

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Improving Educational Outcomes for  
Former Foster Youth

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*May 1, 2009*

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## Executive Summary

When a foster child turns 18 years old, the youth is legally “emancipated” from the child welfare system, payments to their caretaker stop, and the youth is immediately expected to find their own housing and source of income. Nearly 70 percent of foster youth are released from the foster care system at the age of 18 without receiving their high school diploma (Shin, 2003). Additionally, only 15% of former foster youth (FFY) choose to enroll in college across the nation, while their non-foster youth counterparts are enrolled at a rate of 32 percent (Pecora *et al.* 2006). Intervention is required to assist foster youth in attaining financial independence and avoid poverty, and involvement in the underground economy.

The Alameda County Independent Living Skills Program (ACILSP) is a county run training program that works to promote positive outcomes in foster youth emancipating from the child welfare system. The ACILSP offers college counseling, job support, financial literacy, and communication skills training to foster youth between the ages of 15½ and 18. ACILSP also connects youth with many other resources including “aftercare” services such as housing, health care, and financial aid for higher education after foster care. This \$2 million budget program is the best case scenario for California, and despite the fact that ILSP is offered in nearly every single county, Bay Area youth travel long distances to access the high quality services at the ILSP in Alameda County. Focusing on the North County office, this report is prepared for Head Trainer Robert Jemerson, whose strong leadership has inspired many prestigious awards.

One goal of this research is to assess the program and to identify its strengths and weaknesses, determine whether or not ACILSP is cost effective and beneficial to the larger public, and recommend general improvements. The second goal is to maximize attendance and utilization of the program. The research for this report consisted of an effectiveness analysis, a cost benefit analysis, a brief literature review, and interviews with ACILSP staff as well as with foster youth.

ILSP was found to exponentially increase positive outcomes in emancipating youth. Through the cost benefit analysis, the researcher found that the ILSP program benefits the community ranging \$10,563.38 - \$36,162.91 per youth. This analysis is based on a Children and Family Services Review report (Packard, 2008), and it weighed the cost of the program with the estimated benefits that would accumulate to the youth and the community over a period of 7 years.

Overall, the Alameda County Independent Living Skills Program has more strengths than weaknesses and is an overall effective program. The researcher found these program weaknesses and strengths:

***There is no central data collection system:*** There is no data system that connects ILSP with its partners, Beyond Emancipation and Pivotal Point. Many counties have adopted ETO as an improvement to the CWS/CMS system, however due to the lack of success with the program, Alameda County has opted out.

***Need for more case managers and child welfare workers:*** Case managers and child welfare workers are currently overburdened, and social workers outside of ILSP may be neglecting ILSP referral. Although it is uncertain as to how many eligible youth are not participating in ILSP, anecdotal evidence shows that with a little outreach many more youth could and would attend ILSP.

***Youth Adult Partnership (YAP) to Assist in Making Classes more Youth Friendly:*** Some staff and youth interviewed saw a need for making ILSP more interactive to help encourage reluctant youth. YAP is currently evaluating ILSP classes to recommend youth oriented curriculum improvements. This is a strength of the ACISLP and should be adopted in other counties.

***Public transportation can be an issue, but it encourages independence:*** Depending solely on public transportation to attend ILSP was noted as a potential obstacle to attendance. Various options were reviewed however the researcher found that despite this obstacle youth travel long distances to access ACILSP and there have been no major problems noted.

***Behavior issues sometimes occur, but counselors are utilized for help:*** Some staff brought up the issue of youth who misbehave and/or cannot appreciate the services. It was noted that for some of the probation youth, a counselor's presence at the class can assist the trainer in helping manage any behavioral problems that may disrupt the class. Youth interviewed feel that discipline is not a major issue at ACILSP. With a system in place to address this issue, it seems that discipline is an area of strength for the program.

***Relationships between staff and youth are positive and flexible:*** Allowing for flexibility within the relationships between youth and staff lends towards a natural social environment and a practice of constant referrals. Youth interviewed said they feel comfortable approaching anyone in the ILSP office and asking for help.

***Co-locating with partners increases collaboration, but may need maintenance:*** The sharing of office resources between ILSP, Beyond Emancipation and Pivotal Point lends towards greater cooperation in helping

youth, especially emancipated youth. There may be a need for more explicit role definitions for each organization to increase efficiency and avoid future conflict.

***Options for Addressing Weaknesses:***

***Developing an emancipation specialist program in which components of ILSP curriculum were given to every eligible foster youth.*** This may include home visits by child welfare workers and working with foster parents. This option may require negotiations with labor unions representing child welfare workers.

The researcher also reviewed options to maximize ILSP participation and recommends the following options for increasing incentives to join ILSP:

- 1) Lowering the eligible age for ILSP participation.** ILSP staff overwhelmingly support this recommendation, as it would increase utilization and participation.
- 2) Allowing ILSP participants to receive credits for High School.** Currently, individual foster youth who are a few credits short of being eligible to graduate high school must apply to the school district to receive credit for ILSP participation with the support of an ILSP staff member. Oakland Unified School District is successful at supporting ILSP in this way and should be seen as a model for other districts. Furthermore, there should be statewide legislation supporting this practice.

The researcher offers the following recommendations to maximize efficiency.

- 1) Designating one staff person to coordinate Pivotal Point, Beyond Emancipation and ILSP.** This person would have the single responsibility of arranging relevant meetings, gathering data, or addressing any concerns that may come up about collocating.
- 2) Using the THP Plus database:** If AB 12 passes, and the THP Plus program is expanded as a result, than ILSP will experience added responsibilities. Given that there is no existing database and there is a window of opportunity to try a new database, I highly suggest choosing the THP Plus database because it would address immediate responsibilities.

Increasing collaboration with culturally relevant programs and taking advantage of green building initiatives is a small suggestion that would only strengthen the existing network of partners at ILSP and in the network of aftercare programs.