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Developing strategies for positive change: Transitioning foster youth to adulthood

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ABSTRACT

Foster youth encounter numerous challenges before reaching adulthood, with lingering impacts in many aspects of their lives once they leave state care: academic, employment, financial, housing, mental health, parenting, and social. In Hamilton County, Ohio, emancipating youth encounter similar struggles, limiting academic success for some participants in the Higher Education Mentoring Initiative (HEMI). This study utilized a Group-Level Assessment (GLA), an action-based, participatory research process, to generate information from various foster care system stakeholders, including foster youth, about the specific barriers and contextual factors that impact transitioning foster youth locally. Five themes emerged from the GLA process along with two, critical capacities necessary for successful outcomes: individual support and personal development. Post-research local action group community endeavors and implications to help transitioning youth experience more positive outcomes are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Foster youth face challenging life circumstances that result in them being moved in and out of homes as children. Each move typically means adjusting to new people, new rules, and new schools. For some youth who stay in state care, struggles arise when they "age out" or emancipate, as many of these youth have socioemotional and educational challenges resulting from their often complicated and difficult childhoods (Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2011; Harden, 2004; Pecora et al., 2005). Nationally, youth who age out of foster care are less likely to complete high school or graduate from a postsecondary education program and they are more likely to experience financial difficulties, unemployment, homelessness, incarceration, and teen pregnancy than their non-foster peers (Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2011; Pecora et al., 2005).

The Higher Education Mentoring Initiative (HEMI) in Hamilton County, Ohio (see Fig. 1), a mentoring program that encourages and assists foster youth interested in higher education attainment, noticed that transitioning youth in their program were experiencing challenges hindering both personal and academic progress. This study's objective was to better understand the barriers and contextual factors that impact transitioning foster youth in Hamilton County, Ohio, so that recommendations could be made to help aging-out foster youth experience a successful and fulfilling adult life.

1.1. Issue scope and relevance

Nationally, nearly 400,000 youth are in foster care and each year roughly 20,000 emancipate from care at approximately age 18—although some states continue care until 21 years of age (U. S. Department of Health Human Services, 2013). Children are removed from their homes primarily due to neglect and abuse, with about half of maltreated youth experiencing more than one type of maltreatment (Harden, 2004). Studies have found that maltreatment negatively impacts brain development, emotional/behavioral regulation, and social skills, which likely contributes to the unfavorable outcomes experienced by many emancipated youth (Harden, 2004; Kerker & Dore, 2006).

Once in care, foster youth experience an average of three home placement changes where they are typically moved between foster homes, group homes, and/or residential care settings (Casey Family Programs, 2011). Besides the obvious challenges of adapting to a new home, a move can also initiate a school change. More than one-third of foster youth have had five or more school changes (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004), which often adversely impacts their academic progress (Casey Family Services, 2010; Research Highlights on Education and Foster Care, 2014). In addition, foster youth are two times more likely to be absent from school versus their peers (Research Highlights on Education

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Higher Education Mentoring Initiative (HEMI)

HEMI is a mentoring program offered within Hamilton County, Ohio that encourages and assists transition-age foster youth interested in higher education attainment. It is a collaborative effort between the Hamilton County Board of County Commissioners, Hamilton County Job and Family Services, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati State Technical and Community College, Great Oaks Institute of Technology and Career Development, OhioMeansJobs (2014), and Mount St. Joseph University (2014). Since its inception in 2009, HEMI has connected more than 75 foster youth to mentors.

HEMI mentors are committed to working with their mentee for up six years in order to help them graduate high school and complete a post-secondary education program. Each mentor works uniquely with his/her mentee and may take on duties such as helping with homework, attending school and program events, helping find housing, guiding appropriate educational decisions based on each mentee's individual college readiness, and generally encouraging program youth to work toward their educational goals. Mentors also work with their mentees on key yearly HEMI events like academic conferences and a mentor/mentee retreat. Prior to meeting their mentees, HEMI mentors are trained on the needs of foster youth transitioning to adulthood. Continuous training opportunities, program activities, and support are offered to mentors throughout their involvement with HEMI. To date, 100 percent of active HEMI youth have graduated high school and most have enrolled in higher education. Currently, nearly three-fourths of the high school graduates participating in HEMI have begun working on a post-secondary program.

Fig. 1. HEMI program description.

and Foster Care, 2014). While truancy can be a contributing factor, these youth also miss school for court hearings related to their foster care placement and experience enrollment gaps when they are transferred between schools (Courtney et al., 2004; Kelly, Guenthner, Fink, & Warren, 2013; Pecora, 2012).

The compounded impact of maltreatment and school transitions affects academic achievements for many foster youth. Over 40% of foster youth 15–17 years old have repeated a grade (Wilson, Dolan, Smith, Casanueva, & Ringeisen, 2012) and foster youth receive special education services at 2.5 to 3.5 times the rate of their general population peers (Research Highlights on Education and Foster Care, 2014). As a result of these challenges, fewer foster youth graduate high school versus their non-foster peers (Casey Family Programs, 2011; Research Highlights on Education and Foster Care, 2014). Only 3–11% of foster youth graduate college with a bachelor's degree after 6 years, versus 28% of their non-foster peers (Casey Family Programs, 2011).

With academic setbacks, many youth experience employment and financial difficulties that further complicate life after aging out. Compared to low-income youth who are demographically similar, foster youth who age out of care typically earn lower wages and are less likely to have a job (Hook & Courtney, 2010). In a foster youth study done in the Midwest, approximately 50% of former foster youth 23–24 years old were employed versus 75% of their peers (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Rapp, 2010a). At 23–24 years old, the median income for emancipated foster youth was $8000/year, which was much lower than their non-foster peers who earned about $18,000/year (Courtney, Hook, & Lee, 2010b, Courtney et al., 2010a). Researchers have also found that the income disparity between former foster youth and their non-foster peers increases as the youth reach their mid-twenties (Courtney et al., 2010a, 2010b; Courtney et al., 2011; Stewart, Kum, Barth, & Duncan, 2014) and continues until youth reach 30 years old (Stewart et al., 2014)—little research on foster youth alumni exists beyond age 30. These employment and financial instabilities contribute to experiences with homelessness; somewhere between 20–40% of foster youth alumni experience a period of homelessness (e.g., sleeping in a homeless shelter, couch surfing, etc.) after leaving state care (Casey Family Programs, 2011; Courtney et al., 2010a, 2010b; Pecora et al., 2005).

Foster care alumni also experience mental health disorders at rates higher than the general population (Casey Family Programs, 2011; Pecora, Jensen, Romanelli, Jackson, & Ortiz, 2009). Among foster youth 12 years and older, roughly 60% have used some type of mental health service with about 40% using prescription medicines indicated for mental health purposes (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), 2013).

Additionally, transitioning foster youth are also more likely than their non-foster peers to experience parenting responsibilities and engage in delinquent behaviors. Studies have found that female foster youth are twice as likely to experience a teenage pregnancy relative to their general population peers (Courtney et al., 2005; Pecora et al., 2003; Wilson et al., 2012). Delinquency can also be a problem, as higher delinquency rates are observed among youth in care versus the general population. A study in Illinois found that children in foster care are at more than double the risk of delinquency when compared to children who do not leave their family home (Ryan & Testa, 2005). Moreover, youth involved in both the criminal justice system and in the foster care system are at a heightened risk for adverse developmental outcomes (Haight, Bidwell, Marshall, & Khatiwoda, 2014).

As HEMI youth began to experience life after emancipation, they also began undergoing challenges similar to aged-out youth nationally: service/support changes that resulted in financial and housing issues, problems obtaining and maintaining employment, academic challenges, minimal personal supports, mental health issues, and parenting responsibilities. Such difficulties were hindering postsecondary progress for most HEMI youth. While HEMI mentors could help their youth navigate some of these barriers, ultimately the challenges reached far beyond what HEMI alone could address. Other local agencies and individuals working with aged-out foster youth also noticed numerous unmet needs.

This study identified the barriers and contextual factors that impact transition-age foster youth in Hamilton County, Ohio by obtaining insights from relevant stakeholders and transition-age foster youth so that strategies could be developed within the community to make the transition to adulthood more successful and fulfilling.

2. Method

In order to tackle this large, community-based issue locally, HEMI was challenged to identify a collaborative research method that would quickly yield appropriate community action at minimal cost. Collaboration was particularly important due to the variety of community organizations and individuals working with transition-age youth. HEMI youth were already experiencing challenges aging out and these foster youth needed expeditious changes in the local community. Lastly, as a two-year-old, non-profit organization HEMI had minimal funds to support community research.

HEMI used a qualitative method called the Group-Level Assessment (GLA) because it utilizes an action-based, participatory research process that provides each participant with the opportunity to have an equal voice in data generation, evaluation, and action planning. The GLA is a validated method used to generate information about a specific community issue by engaging a wide range of stakeholders in a collaborative, issue-identification process that includes relevant, action-based plan generation which can then be applied (Vaughn, 2014; Vaughn, Jacquez, Zhao, & Lang, 2011; Vaughn & Lohmueller, 1998; Vaughn & Lohmueller, 2014).

This study targeted transition-age foster youth (age 16–25) within Hamilton County, Ohio, as well as other individuals within Hamilton County who worked closely with transition-age foster youth: county caseworkers, representatives from various organizations serving foster youth, magistrates, educators, and community volunteers. The GLA

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