

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN THE ERA OF AB12:

FINDINGS FROM THE ALAMEDA COUNTY AB 12 HOMELESS YOUTH DEMONSTRATION PROJECT



A partnership between the Alameda County Foster Youth Alliance,
DreamCatcher Youth Shelter, and Bay Area Legal Aid

May 2013

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All publications documenting this project are offered in memory of Ms. Nika St. Claire, longtime director of DreamCatcher Youth Shelter and tireless champion of homeless and vulnerable youth in Oakland, CA.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Every day throughout the United States, an alarming number of children and youth between the ages of 12 and 21 seek safe shelter outside their families' homes, on their own. Many have been abused physically, sexually, or emotionally, and many have endured hunger, cold, and chaos. All have chosen or been forced to find somewhere else to stay for a night, a week, a month, or longer. DreamCatcher, one of three partners in the Alameda County AB12 Homeless Youth Demonstration Project and the only teen shelter in Alameda County serving homeless youth ages 13-18, receives an average of 6 calls per day from youth in need of safe shelter - hundreds of calls per year.

On January 1, 2012, AB12, California's Fostering Connections to Success Act, became law, providing for the expansion of federally funded, mandated supports and services to foster and probation youth ages 18 to 21. Timed to coincide with the implementation of this extraordinary new law, the Alameda County AB 12 Homeless Youth Demonstration Project uses a new

The Alameda County AB 12 Homeless Youth Demonstration Project works to alleviate homelessness among youth who are living without parental support through focusing on supported connections to permanency options, planned independence and stability, and entry or return to the foster care system.

approach to a set of established goals, working with youth to seek permanency and stable, sustainable independence, with expanded recourse to the foster care system when appropriate. For abused, neglected, or abandoned adolescents, the project also seeks to ensure that foster care is fully and appropriately leveraged to alleviate homelessness. Facilitated by project partners Bay Area Legal Aid, DreamCatcher Youth Shelter, and the Alameda County Foster Youth Alliance, the project locates, shelters, and stabilizes youth; develops multiple access points to facilitate services; provides civil advocacy to help youth achieve permanency, stabilization and independence or take advantage of foster care under AB12; and collects and analyzes important data.

As detailed in the full report, our project findings confirm many of our initial presumptions about the experiences and needs of homeless youth. Coming from extremely precarious home situations, homeless older adolescents are beset by a range of interconnected challenges with many if not most of their basic needs having gone unmet for some time. In addition to needing shelter and nourishment, their health and mental health are often in crisis, and they are at significant risk of being victimized. Nearly 90% of the youth served by the project in the first 18 months reported problematic dynamics in the home of their parents or caregivers with approximately half reporting neglect or abandonment and 37% reporting domestic violence in their home. The correlation between untenable home situations and economic distress is clear with 95% of youth reporting unemployment as a source of strain in their home. Two-thirds of youth struggle with mental health issues and well over half with alcohol or substance abuse. One-third of the young women had experienced sexual exploitation.

Not surprisingly, given these challenges in their family homes, nearly 75% of youth in the project have histories of previous juvenile dependency or wardship. Working with youth both in and out of these systems, project attorneys always seek first to stabilize youth and support their family systems so they can return home safely. For over half of the youth in the project, civil legal

representation resulted in improving independence and stability by securing youth and families' access to cash benefits, thus ameliorating one of the primary conditions underlying many challenges.

Bay Area Legal Aid's civil advocates and case managers pursue a youth's stated interest rather than a perceived best interest, as is prevalent among attorneys serving young people. Attorneys work with youth to secure access to benefits to which they are entitled yet not receiving, including foster care when appropriate. In the first 18 months, the project served 212 youth who were homeless or at extreme risk of homelessness, connecting them, and in some cases their families, to poverty-based income support, disability-based income support, food stamps, health care services via Medi-Cal enrollment, and appropriate education services, achieving the project outcomes of permanency, stabilization, and foster care when warranted. In all cases, civil legal representation and new access to benefits provided a crucial bridge from homelessness.

Youth in the juvenile probation system, while eligible for AB 12 benefits, have faced challenges in accessing those benefits. In Alameda County, 70% of AB12 eligible probation wards are described as "crossover youth," meaning that they were in foster care at the time of the offense that led to their wardship, making their barriers to accessing the extended foster care benefits particularly troubling. By providing training and technical assistance to probation staff and utilizing the courts to leverage improvements, BayLegal attorneys have facilitated access to AB 12 benefits for over a dozen probation youth.

Based on data analysis and project partner observations, as of the date of this publication, the project makes the following recommendations:

- Develop collaborations among community based organizations, legal advocates, and public systems to work with homeless youth more effectively and to better leverage funding.
- Re-examine CPS response to reports made on behalf of adolescents, especially older youth and Commercially and Sexually Exploited Children (CSEC).
- Develop long-term case planning for homeless youth, prioritizing stabilization and permanency.
- Fully leverage the Fostering Connections to Success Act (AB 12) to re-imagine foster care for 18-21 year olds.
- Invest in specialized free civil legal advocacy for homeless youth.

Future publications will document the project's legal advocacy and systems collaborations in more depth, and will include data on the many youth served by project partners every day.

The Alameda County AB 12 Homeless Youth Demonstration Project is currently funded to continue through June 2014. Partners are seeking additional support to ensure that this vital work can continue.

INTRODUCTION

While efforts are being made to improve the accuracy of the homeless youth count across the country, current reliable data is sparse. Still, studies and provider experience both show that unacceptably high numbers of unaccompanied youth experience homelessness in our nation, and in these tense economic times both their housing instability and their numbers are likely increasing.

Here in Alameda County, California, swaths of extreme poverty put children and youth at high risk of unaccompanied homelessness. At a one-stop center for former foster and probation youth, 84 youth from around the county who sought support over a 12 month period reported not having safe and stable housing and an additional 31 reported being in need of emergency shelter, indicating that well over one-third of youth who sought services were not stably housed. While 104 youth were sheltered at DreamCatcher during the 12-month period beginning July 1, 2011, nearly a hundred came to the shelter's Support Center for crisis counseling, laundry facilities, and to receive health screenings and other services.

Just as there is sparse data documenting the numbers of unaccompanied homeless children and youth, studies examining their life experiences and outcomes are limited. Yet not surprisingly, the existing body of research as well as our project sample show that youth who experience homelessness are living treacherously close to the edge of a range of negative outcomes. As a result of not being safely housed, their basic needs go unmet more often than not. Given the living situations they are fleeing, it is no surprise that DreamCatcher staff report most youth arrive at the shelter hungry, tired, and stressed.

Both before they leave home and once they are homeless, runaway and homeless youth are vulnerable to sexual exploitation, substance abuse, dropping out of school, and poor mental and physical health. One-third of female youth in the project reported that they had experienced sexual exploitation as minors. 57% of project youth sheltered at DreamCatcher were struggling with alcohol or substance abuse and 68% with mental health issues. Only 15% reported having recently attended school.

The guiding purpose of the Alameda County AB12 Homeless Youth Demonstration Project is to ensure that Alameda County's homeless youth are supported in transitioning from the county's streets and shelters to stable, safe, and healthy living situations.

As this report will show, an older adolescent who today comes to the door of DreamCatcher seeking safe shelter faces a very different set of options than she would have just a short time ago. On January 1, 2012, California's AB12 became law, providing for the expansion of federally funded, mandated supports and services to foster youth ages 18 to 21. The Alameda County AB 12 Homeless Youth Demonstration Project develops a new model of collaboration among agencies serving youth struggling to navigate life at the very margins of our communities, to support their access to any benefits for which they are eligible. While shelter staff, clinicians, lay advocates and others have long fought to connect homeless youth to the public benefits and community based organizations that can provide vital support as they struggle to return to safety and stability, this project provides the missing link: free, age-appropriate, well-

coordinated civil legal advocates as community partners to help remove barriers to safety and stability for these youth and to help shift the focus to youth driven case planning.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND GOALS

The Alameda County AB 12 Homeless Youth Demonstration Project, which began in July of 2011, is developing a new model of collaboration among agencies serving older adolescents who are homeless or at extreme risk of homelessness. Project partners provide emergency shelter, screening, connection to services, and case planning, all with a focus on responsible permanency, independence, and/or foster care. Project partners also provide case managers and advocates to work with homeless youth every step of the way to help them move from crisis to safety and stability.

PROJECT PARTNERS

DreamCatcher Youth Shelter, a program of Alameda Family Services, safely shelters more than 100 youth annually. DreamCatcher also serves hundreds more non-residential youth with support services at its drop-in center, where it provides access to such supports as mental health clinicians, case managers, computers, free legal help, laundry, and food.

Bay Area Legal Aid (BayLegal) is the largest provider of free civil legal services to the poor in the San Francisco Bay area. Its Youth Justice Project works with youth under the age of 25, providing free civil legal services in the areas of benefits, health access, education, housing, foster care, and family law.

The Alameda County Foster Youth Alliance seeks to assure the well being and empowerment of foster and probation youth by engaging in strategic advocacy to develop resources, provide for continuous improvement of programs, and maintain accountability in publicly funded service systems.

KEY PROJECT PREMISES

1) Many homeless youth are fleeing abuse or neglect and need additional support to achieve long-term safety and stability through permanency, increased independence, and/or foster care.

Embedded in the very notion of “runaway” is the assumption that youth are running away from something. This project assumes that many homeless youth have left or been expelled from their households due to abuse and neglect. Consistent with estimates from other jurisdictions, DreamCatcher staff estimate that as many as 85% of all sheltered youth are fleeing abuse or neglect. Nearly 30% of DreamCatcher youth identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning and many report serious conflict in their homes of origin arising from their sexual orientation. Homeless youth and youth at risk of homelessness often suffer untreated physical and mental health conditions, have very little or no income, are hungry, and have not been in school.

2) Homeless youth face barriers in accessing benefits and services to which they are entitled.

Homeless youth are transient. Their instability makes it less likely that they will successfully connect to the benefits and supports they need. Homeless youth are less likely to be in school, less likely to have health insurance or be receiving cash benefits for which they are eligible, and less likely to move into permanence or foster care without longitudinal support systems that follow them to safety.

3) AB 12 provides a comprehensive safety net for eligible youth to bridge the difficult transition to adulthood.

California's Fostering Connections to Success Act (AB 12) extends foster care to youth from 18 to 21 years old. This gives child welfare systems an additional three years to work with eligible youth to help them transition to stability and prevent them from becoming high utilizers of expensive county systems such as emergency rooms, homeless shelters, and county-funded welfare programs. Additionally, AB 12 is optional for youth. Consequently, many older youth who were hesitant to enter the system before AB 12 are eagerly seeking it out to obtain needed supports in a system where their voices are now being heard.

4) Free civil legal advocacy plays a key role in helping homeless youth navigate public benefits systems, supporting them in obtaining permanency, achieving stable independence, or entering or re-entering foster care if appropriate.

Free civil legal advocacy assures that homeless youth are able to access the services they need to achieve permanency, independence, and/or enter into foster care. Civil advocates work with youth to develop long-term case plans and remove barriers to supports. Advocates help youth identify caring adults and enter into legal permanency, stabilize in existing settings by helping improve access to cash benefits and food stability, and get better treatment through the mental health and education systems. Finally, advocates assist youth in navigating the child welfare system, so if they need to enter foster care, they can do so in a way that minimizes trauma and disruption while maintaining the youth's voice throughout the process.

5) Working collaboratively with community partners, government agencies can be more effective and efficient.

Building a safety net for homeless youth ensures that more youth will be identified, sheltered, and connected to supports they need. This in turn helps underfunded county-level systems leverage outside supports through federal nutritional programs, disability benefits, and health insurance – supports for which these youth are usually eligible but rarely receive. Connecting these youth to supports now will prevent them from needing more expensive supports (e.g., emergency rooms, residential programs, county-only welfare programs) later.

6) AB 12 eligible foster youth who are in the probation system may need extra support to access resources.

Both crossover youth (i.e., youth who move between the probation and child welfare systems) and foster youth in the probation system need additional support to access foster care supports and benefits. These youth are often the most vulnerable of an already vulnerable population

and are more likely not to be connected to supports when they exit care. Through trainings, dedicated clinics, and close collaboration with juvenile justice system partners, the Alameda County AB 12 Homeless Youth Demonstration Project has made strides in better connecting these vulnerable youth to AB 12 entitlements, permanency options, and independence.

PROJECT DESIGN

Project funding supports a full-time lawyer and additional staffing for supervision and coordination at Bay Legal, staff capacity and training at DreamCatcher, and data collection and analysis by Foster Youth Alliance.

The Project locates, shelters, and stabilizes older homeless adolescents.

Between July 2011 and December 2012, 167 youth were sheltered at DreamCatcher, where they received a safe place to sleep, food, counseling, and personal necessities. DreamCatcher also conducted a basic-needs assessment for all youth who were sheltered or who received services through their drop-in center. BayLegal provided additional support by staffing an on-site civil legal clinic twice a month to help youth access immediate-need benefits such as emergency food stamps or educational enrollment, plus case planning for long-term needs such as finding a mental health provider, meeting with relatives to consider permanency options, applying for disability benefits, or initiating contact with the child welfare system.

The Project develops multiple access points for easier services access through development of direct referral systems, on-site clinics, and system-wide trainings.

To augment the work at DreamCatcher, BayLegal established additional access points for youth to be able to receive Project services. BayLegal staff conducted periodic on-site civil legal clinics at homeless shelters, youth centers, and juvenile hall. They also provided training on identification and direct referral protocols for various service providers. BayLegal was involved in approximately 20 trainings on AB 12 during the first eighteen months of the project to help service providers across systems to better identify potentially eligible youth.

The Project provides civil advocacy to help eligible youth achieve permanency, stabilization and independence, or foster care.

Once youth are made safe through short-term stabilization, civil advocates and case managers work to help support long-term planning and stability. For youth who want to enter foster care, civil advocates provide information and support during the Child Protective Services' investigation. If CPS decides not to open a case, the civil advocate can file directly in court, appealing CPS's decision to a judge if necessary.

Not all youth who are referred to the Project are fleeing abuse, neglect, or abandonment. Some of them have left their caregivers' homes of their own accord following a dispute or are seeking linkage to supportive services, rather than being in immediate need of a safe place to sleep. Some youth simply want help and are not interested in foster care.

Civil advocates and case managers work with both youth and their families to assist them in

securing access to benefits that allow them to re-stabilize and safely remain together. These can include income support for parents through CalWORKs or SSI or health benefits necessary to treat conditions that threaten independence. Civil advocates also work with youth to develop permanent connections with relative or non-relative care providers through guardianships or adoptions.

The Project collects and analyzes important data.

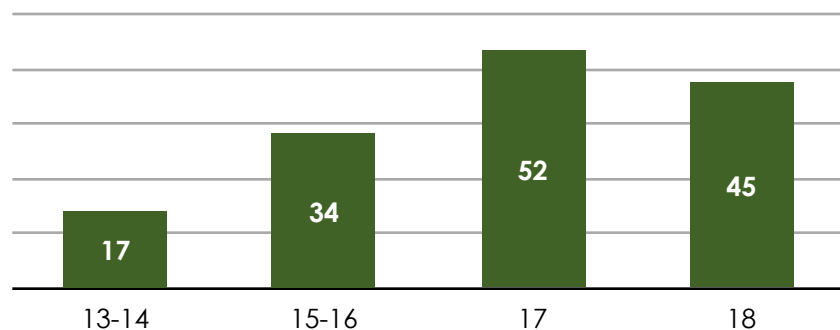
DreamCatcher and BayLegal each maintain extensive databases designed both to meet the reporting requirements of funders and to facilitate efficient ongoing casework. At the start of the Project, partners developed additional process and outcome indicators, including details regarding youths' foster care, probation, and mental health histories, their experience of abuse, neglect, abandonment, and exploitation, their eligibility for and interest in extended foster care, and the impact of civil legal representation on youth and family well being.

Upon completion of the first full year of the Project, its partners approached the relevant Alameda County public agencies to present findings and to request case-level data regarding project participants. The Social Services, Behavioral Health, and Probation agencies have all agreed to share data and support analyses on systems interaction and outcomes. Project partners are also designing research and analyses to take full advantage of this opportunity.

PRELIMINARY PROJECT FINDINGS AND OUTCOMES

From July 1, 2011, to December 31, 2012, Project partners served 212 unduplicated youth who were homeless or at extreme risk of homelessness. 103 minors, ages 12-17, accessed DreamCatcher Youth Shelter, along with 45 youth who were 18 at the time of intake. During this same period, an additional 26 youth accessed services other than shelter through the DreamCatcher support center.

Age of Youth Accessing DreamCatcher Youth Shelter:



82% of youth accessing DreamCatcher were African-American, 10% self-identified as Hispanic or Latino, 2% as Asian, and 6% as mixed-race or "other." According to the US Census Bureau, African-Americans made up 13% of the population of Alameda County in 2011. 54% of DreamCatcher youth were female, 46% were male.

DreamCatcher Youth: Presenting Needs at Intake:

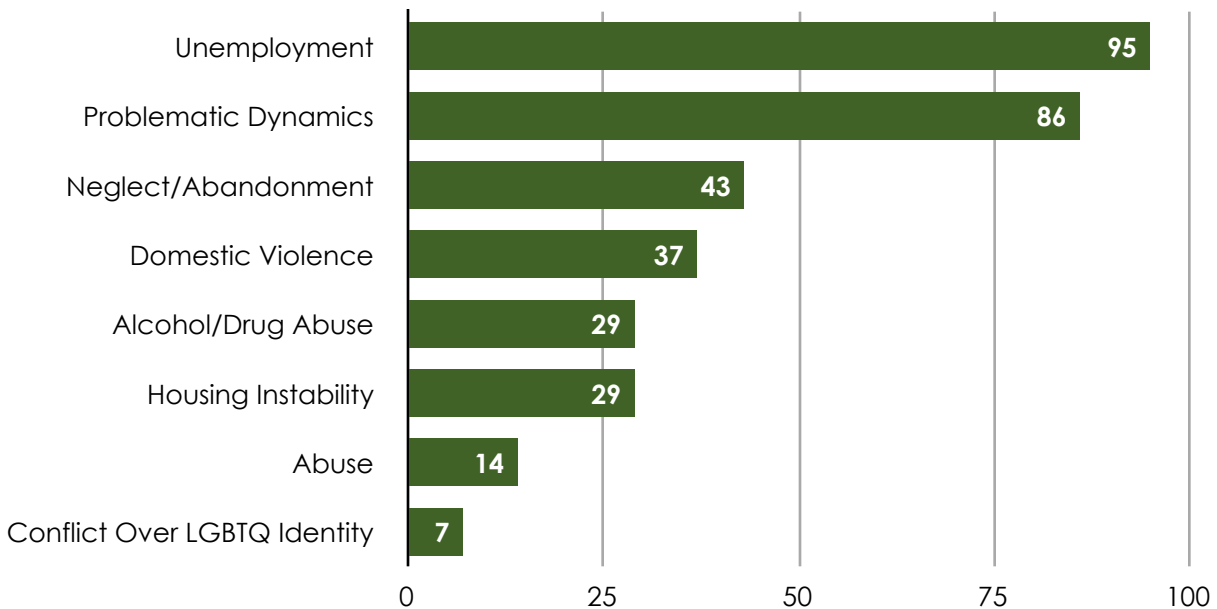
How do youth become homeless? Information collected by DreamCatcher staff via their intake and exit processes paints a stark picture of the situation facing homeless youth and their families of origin. 86% of youth accessing the shelter reported experiencing problematic dynamics in the home of their parents or caregivers, including difficulty resolving conflicts, frequent arguments, and other indications of highly unstable home situations. 29% of the youth reported alcohol or drug abuse as a source of problems in their family home. 7% of the youth reported conflicts with caregivers arising from their sexual orientation.

Youth also reported significant economic stresses in their family home. 95% of youth reported unemployment as a source of strain in their family home, with 29% reporting housing instability or homelessness among their parents or guardians. 37% of youth reported domestic violence in their family home, while 14% reported that they themselves had experienced abuse. 43% of youth accessing the shelter reported neglect or abandonment.

After working with youth during their shelter stays, DreamCatcher staff reported that 68% of youth were struggling with mental health issues, and 57% were struggling with alcohol or substance abuse.

29% of female youth (16% of all youth) accessing the shelter reported to DreamCatcher staff that they had experienced sexual exploitation as minors. No male youth reported sexual exploitation.

Problems in the Family Home Reported by DC Youth (% of Youth)



DreamCatcher Youth: Educational Participation:

While troubling, it is not surprising that youth accessing DreamCatcher reported only marginal educational participation. Just 15% of youth reported having recently attended school regularly, while 21% reported that they had been attending irregularly. Fully 53% reported having dropped out of school or not having recently attended school at all. 57% of youth reported school-related problems including truancy, suspension, or expulsion. Of the youth who were 18 or older at the time of intake, just 11% reported having graduated from high school.

Only 11% of project youth over the age of 18 had graduated from high school.

Reports of suspected abuse, neglect, or abandonment made by DreamCatcher staff:

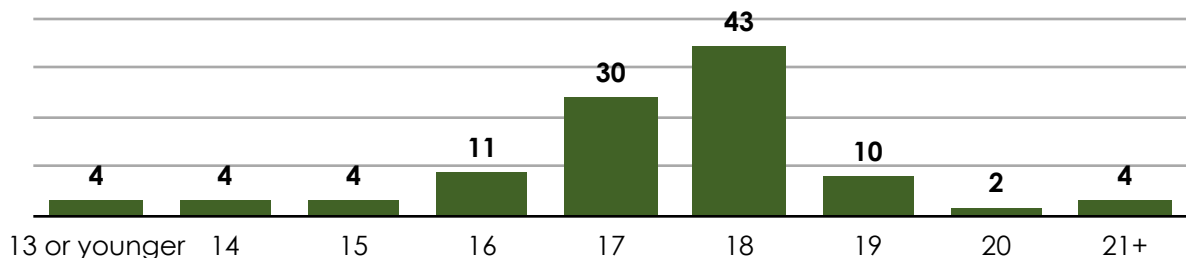
As mandated reporters, DreamCatcher staff made 38 reports to Alameda County Child Protective Services of suspected abuse, neglect, or abandonment of minors accessing the shelter. In 30 of these cases, the minor subjects of those reports were subsequently connected to and engaged with BayLegal attorneys. DreamCatcher staff reported that 4 of the 38 youth were found to be current dependents who were AWOL from foster care placements. 8 youth either left the shelter prior to the completion of the CPS investigation or otherwise interfered with the investigation. In 13 cases, the reports of abuse were not substantiated during the investigations, and the youth returned to the care of their custodial parent or guardian, often with additional support and services provided by BayLegal to improve family stability. 3 youth were diverted to the care of a relative. One youth turned 18 before the investigation was completed and was thus no longer subject to child protection laws. For 2 youth, shelter staff had no information about the outcome of their investigation.

After investigation, 9 of the 38 youth for whom DreamCatcher Staff made reports of suspected abuse, neglect, or abandonment were taken into foster care. BayLegal attorneys assisted another 20 project youth referred from other sources, resulting in a total of 29 project youth entering foster care or accessing AB12 benefits.

Referral of DreamCatcher Youth to BayLegal:

48 of the youth sheltered at DreamCatcher also became BayLegal clients. BayLegal opened cases on behalf of another 64 youth referred from other sources: 29 youth referred directly from the Juvenile Justice Center; 15 referred directly by dependency attorneys representing foster youth approaching age 18; 9 referred by community-based housing providers; 5 from providers serving Sexually Exploited Minors; and 6 from other sources.

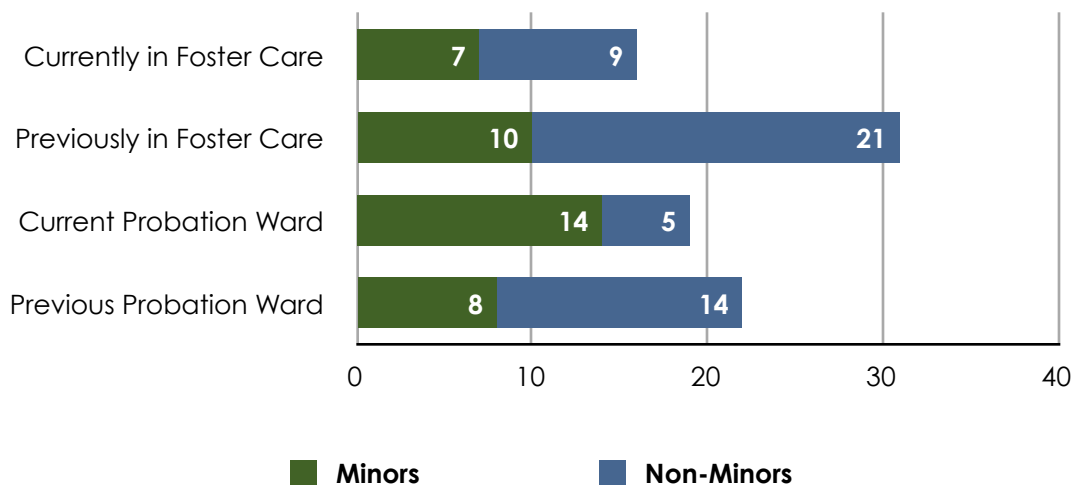
Age of Project Youth Accessing BayLegal



Involvement with the foster care and juvenile justice systems:

The homeless youth served by this project had very high rates of involvement with the foster care and juvenile justice systems. In all, 82 of the 112 young people served by BayLegal had a history of juvenile dependency or wardship. At the time of intake, 7 minors and 9 non-minors were currently in foster care, while 10 minors and 21 non-minors had previously been in foster care. 14 minors and 5 non-minors were currently wards of the delinquency court, and 8 minors and 14 non-minors had previously been wards.

Systems Involvement Among Youth Accessing BayLegal



It is important to note that the above figures include the first six months of the project, from July 1 to December 31, 2011, when AB 12 was not yet in effect. As discussed in the Lessons Learned section below, prior to AB 12 implementation, no one knew whether eligible youth would choose, as legal adults, to participate in extended foster care under AB12. As of this writing, nearly all Alameda County youth becoming eligible during the first year of AB12 have chosen to stay in foster care.

Sexual Exploitation:

Homeless youth are at extreme risk of being sexually exploited, whether as a result of a history of sexual abuse or due to the struggle to meet their basic needs. Studies have found that as many as one-third of homeless youth have experienced sexual abuse. Among the 33 project youth identified as having experienced sexual exploitation as minors (all females – at the time of intake, 13 were still minors and 20 were 18), the rates of systems involvement were even more pronounced than that of other project youth: 5 were currently in foster care, while 12 were wards of the delinquency court. Five 18-year-olds had previously been in foster care, while 7 had previously been wards. Only 4 youth who identified as having been sexually exploited (all non-minors at the time of intake) had no current or previous systems involvement.

Nearly one-third of young women served by the project had experienced sexual exploitation. Over 90% had previously been dependents or wards.

Mental Health:

Studies find that as a result of the prevalence of histories of abuse and/or other exposure to trauma or violence, many homeless youth suffer from anxiety disorders, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Many others have diagnosed serious mental illnesses, and a significant number have multiple diagnoses. As noted above, DreamCatcher staff reported that nearly

DreamCatcher staff report that 70% of the youth they serve are struggling with mental health issues, and 60% with substance abuse. Just under half of youth accessing BayLegal had been diagnosed with at least one serious mental health concern.

70% of youth accessing the shelter were struggling with mental health issues and nearly 60% with alcohol or substance abuse issues. For most of these youth, their shelter case plan will call for them to meet with a staff clinician. However, shelter staff report that only about 30% of these youth will comply and/or be able to meet with a clinician before they leave the shelter.

Almost half of all youth accessing BayLegal - 54 out of 112 - had been diagnosed with at least one serious mental health concern. 24 of these were minors, and 30 were adults at the time of intake. 21 of the 33 youth reporting sexual exploitation as minors reported having been diagnosed with a serious mental health condition.

The most prevalent diagnosed conditions across all project youth included Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, Major Depressive Disorder, Bipolar Disorder, and Anxiety Disorder. Additional diagnoses included Intermittent Explosive Disorder, Conduct Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Mental Retardation, Schizophrenia, and Psychotic Disorder.

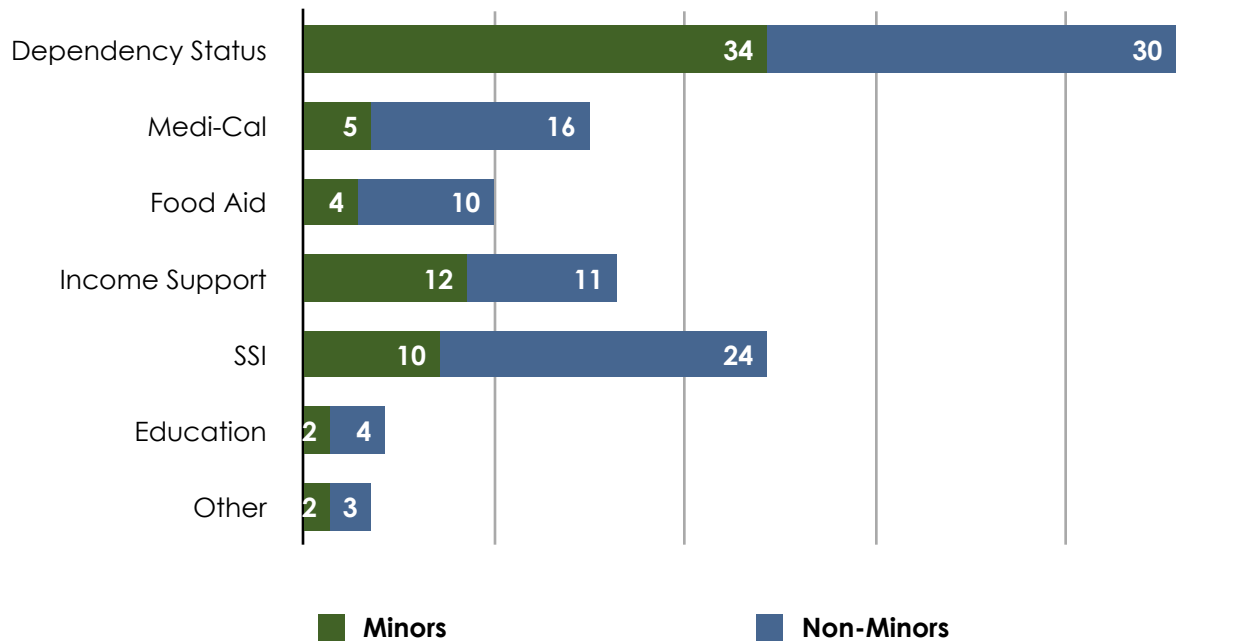
Youth Income:

BayLegal documented project-eligible youths' income at the time of intake, which revealed an alarming picture of economic marginalization and a lack of means to attain basic self-sufficiency. Only 3 of 112 youth reported any employment income at all, and then under \$7,000 per year. 8 youth, all 18 to 21 years old, had income from General Assistance, which in Alameda County provides a maximum of \$336 per month. 12 non-minors were attempting to subsist on Supplemental Security Income, receiving between \$8,400 and \$14,800 per year. 4 youth were receiving cash aid through CalWORKs, and 3 through Social Security (generally the benefit owed to a deceased parent). Fully 82 of 112 youth reported no income at all over the previous year - 58 of these were minors, and 24 were non-minors. As explored in the Outcomes section below, a key outcome of BayLegal representation is increased access to cash aid and economic benefits.

Civil Legal Needs:

BayLegal attorneys open a case for each discrete benefits issue identified during the evaluation of each client. Therefore, many individual youths have multiple cases opened by BayLegal attorneys. It is important to remember that if BayLegal attorneys open a case, it most frequently indicates that a youth is entitled to a benefit that he or she is not accessing. BayLegal attorneys opened 140 cases on behalf of 95 youth. The chart below shows the number of project youth requiring civil legal representation to resolve benefits issues by category of benefit.

Civil Legal Representation Needs Among BayLegal Youth



Outcomes: Stabilization, Permanency, and Foster Care

Consistent with policy priorities and direction set by all government agencies involved in the administration of the foster care system, BayLegal attorneys first seek to stabilize youth and improve their ability to remain with their families. For more than half of the project youth represented by BayLegal - 38 of 73 cases - representation resulted in this outcome, in many cases by securing access to cash benefits for youth and their families and thus alleviating conditions that had contributed to neglect. In other cases, youth were supported in accessing mental health care, allowing them to function more successfully at home.

For another 5 youth, 3 of whom had previously been incarcerated or had been wards of the juvenile delinquency court, BayLegal attorneys were able to identify and facilitate a new "permanency option" – a new supported relationship with a family member or other permanent connection to a caring adult. All child welfare systems consider establishing permanency to be the most desirable outcome for youth.

For those youth for whom neither stabilization in the family's home nor transition to a permanent supportive relationship was an option, BayLegal attorneys facilitated entry to foster care. 14 minors, 9 of whom had initially been seen at DreamCatcher, and for whom shelter staff had filed CPS reports, entered foster care. 15 non-minors who had exited foster care, but who were eligible for AB 12, re-entered dependency to take advantage of extended foster care placement and services, as did 8 former wards of the delinquency court.

Outcomes: Increased Access to Other Public Benefits

In light of the inadequacy of the income available to project youth at intake, the role of civil legal representation in securing youths' receipt of cash benefits is a critical tool in assisting youth in moving off the streets. While BayLegal had many open cases for project-eligible youth at the time of this writing, the outcome of closed cases provides additional insight into the benefits to which youth are entitled but not receiving at the time of intake.

- 21 youth received increased access to poverty-based income support
- 35 youth received increased access to disability-based income support
- 14 youth received increased access to food stamps
- 21 youth received increased access to health care services via Medi-Cal enrollment
- 6 youth received increased access to appropriate education services

Outcomes: Equitable AB 12 Access for Probation Youth

The Alameda County experience illustrates some unique challenges that probation youth currently face in accessing AB12 benefits. These include disruptions caused by several years of budget cuts during the recent recession, changes to California's criminal justice system, options left open by AB 12 as to how to administer AB 12 for probation youth, and the cultural shift that AB 12 demands of the probation department. All of these conspired to make accessing AB 12 benefits more difficult for probation youth. This is particularly troubling considering that in Alameda County fully 70% of AB12 eligible probation wards are "crossover youth" – that is, they were in foster care at the time of the offense that led to their wardship. That said, BayLegal attorneys have provided training and technical assistance to probation staff, have collaborated with both the department administration and the courts to leverage improvements, and have facilitated continued benefits and placement for over a dozen youth.

OBSERVATIONS AND PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS

1) Develop collaborations among community based organizations, legal advocates, and public systems to work with homeless youth more effectively and to better leverage funding.

Helping homeless youth move to stability through permanence, independence, or foster care involves the cooperation of a wide array of systems and service providers. Homeless youth have already slipped through the seams. Building a better safety net to support these youth requires multi-systems collaboration between government agencies, community organizations, and youth advocates. This project's design and interim findings and outcomes begin to illuminate the benefits that can accrue to homeless youth by way of such collaboration. Such collaboration also benefits local government by ensuring that outside funding (e.g., federal, state, and private dollars) are maximized in building a safety net and supportive structures for these youth.

2) Re-examine CPS response to reports made on behalf of adolescents -- especially older youth and Commercially and Sexually Exploited Children (CSEC).

The evaluation of reports of abuse, neglect, and abandonment among older youth is complicated by conventional responses that prioritize younger children. Extended foster care provides a unique opportunity to provide greater attention and involvement with older youth while also leveraging outside funding and entitlements to better help them over a longer period of time. This is vitally important from a social services and public health perspective; the alternative for many of these young people will otherwise become higher use of expensive, county-only funded programs such as emergency rooms, shelters, and county jails. From a child advocacy perspective, giving more supports to older youth makes good sense because it will lead to far better outcomes. Also, in the simplest terms, it is what older youth want. AB 12 in California has a participation rate of over 90% by youth over 18, a number that is even more impressive given that these young people never opt out early.

3) Develop long-term case planning for homeless youth, prioritizing stabilization and permanency.

Case managers and legal advocates help youth by collaboratively developing long-term case planning. Youth in crisis often focus on immediate needs. A project that helps to provide short-term relief for immediate crises (e.g., emergency shelter, food stability, immediate mental health stabilization) can then work with them on the larger issues, which can include independent living, permanency options, or entering into foster care.

4) Fully leverage the Fostering Connections to Success Act (AB 12) to re-imagine foster care for 18-21 year olds.

It is important to remember that the "Extended Foster Care" made possible by the Fostering Connections Act is structurally different from foster care for minors. First and foremost, it is voluntary. Youth voice, choice, and preference are to be operationalized and built into case planning and court processes. New placement options are provided for, including additional transitional housing and supported independent living options. Jurisdictions that fully embrace these opportunities and take on the challenge of building a truly youth-centered and transfor-

mational foster care system for 18- to 21-year-olds stand a better chance than ever before of building a comprehensive safety net and moving towards the day when no youth begins adulthood in homelessness.

5) Invest in specialized free civil legal advocacy for homeless youth.

Homeless youth face many barriers to independence and stability. Civil legal advocacy can be vital to removing those impediments in a timely fashion. In the context of public benefits, there are barriers at the application, eligibility, and service delivery stages. Civil legal advocates are essential to help remove these barriers and ensure that systems are responding to the needs of youth in an appropriate manner. Working collaboratively with public social service, behavioral health, and juvenile justice systems, civil advocates can also help build better fiscal structures, leveraging entitlements to better serve youth, create more efficiency in government departments, and comply with various government mandates. Lastly, legal advocates are central to court processes that can directly lead to permanency (e.g., guardianships, adoptions,) independence (e.g., emancipations, benefits appeals,) and foster care (e.g., representing in dependency or appealing child welfare denials.)

CONCLUSION/LOOKING AHEAD

The Alameda County AB 12 Homeless Youth Demonstration Project is meant to ensure that all of Alameda County's homeless and insecurely housed older adolescents receive the support they need to move from the county's streets and shelters to stable, safe, and healthy living environments. To that end, the Project partners have expanded capacity, conducted outreach, and increased the number of referral sources and pathways. At the same time, the Project is developing a detailed portrait of homeless youth in Alameda County that will significantly inform future policy and program development and help more youth move from homelessness to stability.

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To receive updates about the project as well as other program and policy news affecting foster and probation youth, sign up for the Foster Youth Alliance bulletin from the FYA homepage at:
www.fosteryouthalliance.org.

