Life After Foster Care: Strategies for a Successful Transition to Adulthood

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Abstract

Youth who have been in the foster care system are at a higher risk of adverse life outcomes compared to their peers who have not experienced the child welfare system. Former foster youth have higher rates of poverty, incarceration, behavioral health issues, and housing insecurity. Due to histories of maltreatment, potential challenges forming trusting relationships, and a lack of familial ties to their community, this population is particularly vulnerable. While mentorship of former foster youth has long been considered by the nonprofit sector and standards established by social services as promoting positive life outcomes for these youth, recent studies have found that identifying a mentor from within the youth’s personal network, often results in the longest and most enduring connection between mentor and mentee. The purpose of this project was to understand the types of services that exist, what are considered the most critical areas to strengthen, and if/how mentors (as part of a youth transition plan) can support youth as they age out of care. Mixed-method research conducted using a review of literature from peer-reviewed journals, periodicals and publications, and government-funded websites, such as the US Department of Education, as well as expert interviews with six direct service providers from four separate Bay Area agencies. Together, the literature and qualitative data collected from interview participants suggest 1) transition-age youth (TAY) need more support dedicated to securing and maintaining housing, 2) natural mentor networks should be expanded, trained and supported, and 3) there are opportunities to utilize technology to improve service delivery.
Acknowledgments

The initial concept of this project was born out of a conversation with the team at Think of US. I owe them a great deal of thanks for providing their insight into the topic and asking the original question that sparked my attention, *how can mentors best support former foster youth*.

I would like to thank the professors that I have had the pleasure of learning from while at USF, especially Professor Louise Carroll, Dr. Julia Arno, Dr. Marco Tavanti, and Dr. Richard Waters, who have all inspired me as I begin a new journey in the nonprofit sector. Through their guidance and support, I have been challenged both professionally and personally. I would also like to thank my family and closest friends who continue to root for my success as I chart this new career path, as well as my cohort for continuing to offer support at all hours of the day and night. You’re all incredible!
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Section 1: Introduction

The experience of teens in their transition to becoming adults can be filled with challenges—big and small. Brain development, critical to one’s physical and emotional health, occurs during this time and is supported through connections with family, friends, and one’s broader community (Fryar et al., 2017). When a child or teen experiences foster care, this support system can break, or worse, be removed entirely (Avery, 2011). A national survey conducted by Fryar et al. (2017) found that youth and young adults with foster care experience often miss out on some of the key resources needed during this time, reducing their chances to locate safe and stable housing, find steady and meaningful employment, and build strong and positive relationships with members of their social networks” (Fryar et al., 2017). In addition to experiencing childhood trauma that originally led them to the child welfare system, they also often lack the supportive relationships common to non-foster care youth (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018). Compared to their peers who have never been in the child welfare system, former foster youth experience more negative outcomes, including neglect, maltreatment, and adverse effects on brain development (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018; Fryar et al., 2017; Avery, 2011; Woodgate et al., 2017). Furthermore, these youth have more difficulty finding steady employment, securing safe housing while being at a higher risk of teen pregnancy, and mental health illness (Fryar et al., 2017; Collins & Ward, 2011).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Life Outcomes</th>
<th>Youth Involved in Foster Care</th>
<th>General Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graduate high school by age 19</td>
<td>58 percent</td>
<td>87 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earn a college degree by age 25</td>
<td>&lt;3 percent</td>
<td>28 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed at age 26</td>
<td>46 percent</td>
<td>80 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have their own residence at age 26</td>
<td>9 percent</td>
<td>30 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience at least one economic hardship, i.e. not enough money to pay rent or utility bills</td>
<td>45 percent</td>
<td>18 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women who reported that they had ever been diagnosed with a sexually transmitted infection (STI) by age 26</td>
<td>44 percent</td>
<td>23 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men who reported that they had ever been diagnosed with a STI by age 26</td>
<td>18 percent</td>
<td>11 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females who had been arrested since age 18 by age 26</td>
<td>42 percent</td>
<td>5 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males who had been arrested since age 18 by age 26</td>
<td>68 percent</td>
<td>22 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females who had been convicted of a crime since age 18 by age 26</td>
<td>22 percent</td>
<td>3 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males who had been convicted of a crime since age 18 by age 26</td>
<td>48 percent</td>
<td>11 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females who had been incarcerated for a crime since age 18 by age 26</td>
<td>33 percent</td>
<td>3 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males who had been incarcerated for a crime since age 18 by age 26</td>
<td>64 percent</td>
<td>9 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average earnings of employed 26-year-olds.</td>
<td>$13,989</td>
<td>$32,312</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Outcomes of Former Foster Youth, Compared to the General Population
Source: Adapted from Supporting Young People Transitioning from Foster Care: Findings from a National Survey. Fryar et al. November, 2017.

Several interventions exist in the US welfare system, including services and programs that focus solely on preparing foster youth for life as an adult. The
Interventions provided to this population can primarily be classified as support related to housing, education, employment, independent living, and health care (Woodgate et al., 2017). Interventions for youth transitioning out of foster care can vary by state, funding sources, and political context (Fryar et al., 2017). Also, the number of youth who utilize these services and how the services are implemented isn’t adequately tracked (Chor et al., 2018). Given the variation of services offered and gaps in reporting which services have been received, further research and investment in resources are critical in order to understand how we, as a community, can best serve this vulnerable population.

Often, youth who have experienced foster care also lack a trusting relationship with an adult. Unfortunately, there is a great deal of research that finds that the presence of a consistent relationship with at least one non-parental adult can reduce the adverse outcomes in the youth’s transition to adulthood (Duke et al., 2017). Recognizing the importance of mentoring in influencing positive youth outcomes, the state of California requires identifying mentors, in addition to housing, health care, and employment, as part of a youth’s 90-Day Transition Plan (CA Department of Social Services, 2014).

The use of technology, while widespread in society, has not been integrated into current service delivery systems and processes. The fact that web-based resources are available regardless of time and location, leveraging technology may offer solutions for direct service providers to further engage with transition age youth (TAY).

The research questions that guided this project were: 1) of the interventions that currently exist for TAY aging out of foster care, what services or resources are most helpful in ensuring successful transition 2) The type of supporter who is viewed as most helpful in ensuring a successful transition, and finally, 3) whether there is an opportunity to leverage technology to support the transition planning process.

Following a review of the definitions and key terms found in the document, an overview of the current literature is presented, followed by an analysis of the data, limitations of the research, and implications and recommendations based on those findings.

Section 2: Literature Review

Definitions and Key Terms

Aging out or Transitioning out

There are several different terms used to refer to children leaving the child welfare system. In this review, the terms “aging out” or “transitioning out” of care or foster care is referenced throughout, which refers to the “termination of court jurisdiction over foster care youth” (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Transition Age Youth (TAY)
The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimated that in 2015, 27,703 youth transitioned out of the child welfare system. While the age at which youth must leave foster care varies by state, the average in the US is 18. The US enacted the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions and Act of 2008, which enables states to extend care up to age 21 (Woodgate et al., 2017). As such, because the studies included in this research involve transition-age youth in various states, for the purpose of this project, the term “transition age youth” or “TAY” refers to youth between the ages of 18 - 21. The map presented in Appendix A illustrates the age at which youth are no longer eligible to receive care from a state’s child welfare agency (Fryar et al, 2017).

Interventions

The term “interventions” is used in this project to encompass services, programs, and policies.

Natural Mentors

The term natural mentor refers to mentors who already have a place in the life of a youth. The natural mentor and mentee are both familiar with each other and have a relationship that’s formed gradually rather than programmatically, or having been matched with a volunteer. Research has found that these mentor relationships tend to be less pressured, as they’ve formed organically, and have higher chances of continuing over time, rather than ending as a result of a change in programming (JK Greeson et al., 2010).

Youth-Initiated Mentoring (YIM) or Youth Initiated Mentor (YIM)

Research indicates that youth initiated mentoring (YIM), whereby youth identify adults in their existing networks to become mentors in a formal program, has become popular among service providers serving TAY. The National Mentoring Resource Center, a website funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention under the US Department of Justice defines the practice of YIM as, “supporting youth with engaging nonparental adults from their social networks (e.g., teachers, family friends, extended family members) in mentoring interactions and relationships. Key elements of the practice may include 1) providing youth with the opportunity to nominate potential mentors from their existing social networks as part of their participation in a formal mentoring program as well as 2) training youth in skills for initiating mentoring interactions or relationships with nonparental adults” (nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org). YIM differs from natural mentoring as it formalizes the mentorship by providing programmatic support. YIM also refers to Youth-Initiated Mentors (rather than mentoring).

Transitional Housing Program Plus (THP-Plus)
THP-Plus is a transitional housing program for youth who have transitioned out of foster care, and are between the ages of 18 and 24. Under SB 1252, some counties in California have opted to extend the age to 25 (http://www.cdss.ca.gov).

**Transition Plan**

Federal law requires that child-welfare professionals, provide youth with assistance and support in creating a transition plan which must include a youth-led plan to secure housing, health insurance, education, mentors, and employment services (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Some states, including the state of California, have additional requirements in order to prepare youth in their transition out of foster care (CA Department of Social Services, 2014).

**Existing Interventions**

According to Chor et al. (2018) the John F. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP), has supported transition-age youth with the skills they need to live independently after foster care. While states are required to report the CFCIP services they are providing to the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD), there is not consistent compliance with reporting mandates. Due to this lack of adequate tracking, the number of reported service recipients is unclear (Chor et al., 2018). Addressing this gap are a number of studies, including work by Woodgate et al. (2017) to better understand the services provided to this group. Collins & Ward examined self-reported services received by foster youth aging out of care in the State of Massachusetts. The research collected consisted of: services received, perceived helpfulness of those services, feedback about experiences while in care, risk behaviors, and current outcomes (Collins & Ward, 2011). Collins & Ward categorized the self-reported interventions into education (completing high school or a GED), reconnecting with family, employment services/job training/job search, life skills training, accessing health care, housing assistance, and other (Collins & Ward, 2011). Interventions for youth transitioning out of foster care differ by geography and funding sources. These various approaches to programs, policies, and services in addition to the inconsistency in reporting, make large bodies of data difficult to collect (Woodgate et al., 2017). A review was conducted by Woodgate et al. to examine the “extent, range, and nature of research activity, and identify knowledge gaps, especially in an area where there is a limited number of randomized controlled trials” (Woodgate et al., 2017). Woodgate et al. utilized a framework employed by Arksey and O’Malley’s in 2005 for identifying and reviewing over 1978 articles across 13 databases. The majority of interventions they traced were considered to promote independent living and provide resources to positively impact a youth’s education, housing, and employment (Woodgate et al., 2017).

**Interventions Cited as the Highest Priority**
Consistently found across virtually all research is that former foster youth are more likely to be economically vulnerable and face the threat of homelessness and unemployment compared to youth who have not experienced foster care (Collins & Ward, 2011). Based on youths’ perspectives of available services, Collins & Ward found that assistance in housing was perceived to be their greatest need, in addition to educational assistance before aging out, as well as employment and life skills training both before and after they reached 18 (Collins & Ward, 2011). Consistent with these findings, studies referenced by Woodgate et al. (2017) revealed that youth transitioning out of care experience difficulty in completing their education, finding and maintaining employment, securing housing, all basic needs that must be met in order to avoid living in poverty — experiencing poverty results in a myriad of health issues, including a lack of access to care which can exacerbate physical and mental health illness (Collins, 2016). Furthermore, without stable housing, youth face a higher risk of challenges such as staying in school, gaining employment, accessing physical and mental health services, and reaching self-sufficiency (Fryar et al., 2017).

**Supportive Relationships for Transition Age Youth**

Mentoring is considered an integral part of the transition planning process, as evidenced by the federal government requiring all TAY to include mentors in their transition plan (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018). It has long been established that if a youth has at least one caring adult in their life, adverse outcomes that youth typically face transitioning out of foster care are lessened (Greeson et al., 2015). Collins et al. (2010) further found that youth who reported having a mentor for at least 2 years before turning 18 reported fewer adverse outcomes related to health, education, physical aggression, suicide, and sexually transmitted infections, compared to foster youth without a mentor. It’s crucial for child welfare agencies to help current and former foster youth build what Avery terms as “social scaffolding.” Recognizing that “parental and mentor relationships differ in both permanence and function,” optimizing for an enduring, consistent presence in a youth’s life requires identifying and establishing these relationships as early in a child’s life as possible (Avery, 2011). As youths who experience foster care can often have a history of maltreatment, abuse, or abandonment by former caregivers, this population can find it difficult to form strong, trusting bonds with assigned mentors. Thompson’s research finds that “for these youth, the achievement of factors associated with effective mentoring (e.g., enduring, close, meaningful, nonparental adult relationships) may be difficult to attain within the context of formal mentoring programs” where volunteers are matched with youth by agency staff (Thompson et al., 2016).

**Positive Effects of Natural Mentors**

The involvement of non-parental adults in the transition planning process, especially when they are able to assist youth with developing interpersonal awareness
and skills needed as part of their transition, can often have a positive effect on TAY (Ahrens et al. 2011). Ahrens et al. model a youth’s attainment of several positive life skills based on analysis of their relationship with natural mentors. Figure 2 illustrates the impact of mentor relationships on foster youth, as well as the factors that influence those relationships.

Figure 2. Model of the Impacts of Mentoring Relationships on Foster Youth
Source: Qualitative exploration of relationships with important non-parental adults in the lives of youth in foster care, Ahrens et al. 2011.

Research consistently finds that the existence of non-parental adults who have strong relationships with former foster youth, serve as a support, and can reduce negative outcomes in the youth’s transition to adulthood (Duke et al., 2017). A substantial number of studies suggest that a relationship with at least one significant non-parent leads to improved outcomes for youth (Greeson et al., 2009). Mentors who
provide emotional and financial support to youth, in addition to advice and guidance, were found to promote the development and positive changes in their lives overall (Duke et al., 2017). Results were considered to be particularly beneficial for youth with a non-parental adult mentor, including: “improving the youths' social and emotional wellbeing, including fewer symptoms of depression, less stress, improved academics and self esteem, cognitive abilities, and advocating for personal growth and identity formation” (Duke et al, 2017). In addition, Greeson et al., (2009) found that mentors who provide guidance and serve as role models to former foster youth, can facilitate financial literacy and increase the likelihood of former foster youth holding assets, such as owning a car or home. Many studies have found that a relationship between TAY and a natural mentor during a youth’s transition, can result in improved social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes (Thompson et al., 2016). Avery found that mentor programs can help TAY achieve social goals and that positive effects of mentoring are derived from enhancing a youth’s social relationships, emotional well-being, and improving their cognitive skills through conversation and the development of a positive identity. (Avery, 2011). Additional research concludes that foster youth who had natural mentors reported less suicidal ideation, experience less physical violence and were more likely to attend college compared to foster youth who did not have non-parental adults serving as natural mentors (Duke et al., 2017). Given these positive factors associated with this type of support, including heightened academic success, improved social, emotional well-being, and fewer instances of reported depression, organizations working with TAY should utilize non-parental adults as mentors whenever possible. Collins’ research (2010) found that the higher the number of relationships a youth has, the better, as the presence of strong, enduring relationships improves the likelihood of positive outcomes for youth. Compared to youth without a single healthy relationship or only one strong social network, youth with three secure connections were less likely to experience anxiety and depression.

Factors that Lead to Effective Mentorship

Multiple studies support the notion that a youth’s attachment history, the quality of the mentor, and the length and stability of the mentorship all contribute to how close the mentor and mentee become. Furthermore, a caring, close relationship between a mentee and mentor is instrumental in establishing positive outcomes for the youth. Without a close relationship, mentors are often unable to influence the emotional, social, or cognitive development of the mentee that results in positive outcomes (Thompson et al., 2016). The length of mentorship has also been found to influence the level of effectiveness. Spencer et al. (2018) found that the longer the mentorship, the most significant improvement in positive outcomes related to the completion of HS, college, and employment. Various factors that contribute to the growth of a supportive mentor relationship found by Ahrens et al include, “the length and quality of the relationship, the mentor's background (i.e., whether or not they are in a helping profession), and the youths' past relationships with parents and other caregivers, their competency in
Social service staff included in research conducted by Nagpaul reported that an essential need for youth was relatedness, particularly the opportunity to connect with and have a relationship with a caring adult (Nagpaul, 2019). Youth receiving social services, especially residential care, reported to Nagpaul that they had a lack of meaningful relationships with staff, which negatively impacted their feelings of relatedness. As staff turnover in an organization can inhibit long-lasting relationships, service providers should monitor their ability to meet the needs of the youth they serve. Having found that giving youth a sense of belonging is a top priority for some service organizations, Nagpaul recommended that incorporating the following characteristics positively impacts feelings of relatedness among TAY: “empathy—seeing the situation through the client’s perspective, affection—showing genuine appreciation and concern, attunement—paying attention to the client and gathering knowledge about him/her, dedication of resources—volunteering time and energy, and dependability—availability in case of need” (Nagpaul, 2019). Mentors should be trained to ensure that these values are prioritized before establishing a mentorship with this vulnerable population.

Youth Initiated mentoring (YIM)

Research has found that YIM has become increasingly popular among service providers. This particular approach offers youth a stronger voice in the mentor selection process, which has been found to contribute to mentorship effectiveness, while empowering them in their transition planning process (Spencer et al., 2018). Compared to adults who volunteer with programs in order to more generally “make a difference” in their community (Spencer et al., 2018), YIM are often viewed as having a stronger bond to their youth. A longer, more impactful relationship may occur as a result of this familiarity, as mentors may already be acquainted with the youth’s life and history, therefore more easily able to evaluate the needs of the youth at that point of time. Another critical factor contributing to the strength of a mentor relationship is that because these mentors are already known by the youth, they do not require the same length of time to get to know one another and build an entirely new rapport (Spencer et al., 2018). For youth accustomed to losing relationships, it is vital that volunteer mentor programs that provide temporary and transitional support not create even more damage to an already vulnerable population (Avery, 2011). The fear of abandonment that often faces youth who have experienced life in foster care may be less likely to occur with mentors who have existed in the life of youth, compared to those from formal programs that they are just meeting (Spencer et al., 2018).

The study conducted by Spencer et al. (2018) examined the quality of the relationships formed between YIM and youth transitioning out of foster care as well as the impact of that relationship from the perspectives of both the youth and mentors. Informal mentoring with nonparental adults who are already known to the youth and have a place in their lives may have a more significant positive impact compared to
structured programs with adult volunteers unknown to the youth (Avery, 2011). As studies suggest that foster youth often already have informal mentor relationships with adults, whether a coach, neighbor, or family friend, formalizing these YIM relationships may provide stable support that they may not get from a formal mentorship program (Spencer et al., 2018). One advantage to formalizing these types of relationships is that YIM can build on an already existing relationship and form an even stronger bond. In addition, formalizing YIM provides youth with a framework that supports them in participating in a healthy relationship. An example of this programmatic support was observed by Spencer et al. (2018) in assisting older foster youth with not only identifying potential mentors but also to formalize a stronger mentor relationship that worked for both them and their mentor. It was also found that youth applied their experience with their mentors to other relationships in their lives, which both broadened and strengthened their support networks. A programmatic approach to YIM was also found by Spencer et al. (2018) to facilitate the establishment of a new mentor relationship, as it provides youth who have an adult in mind but are unable or unwilling to approach them without assistance or support.

Even though YIM have an advantage due to their familiarity with a youth’s background and the circumstances that led them to foster care, these mentors still benefit from programmatic support standard in formal mentor programs, such as training in conflict resolution. Spencer et al. found that, “mentors would benefit from training and support to help them understand the concept of interdependence in order to specifically foster that trait in their mentee and to be aware when the mentee’s tendency toward independence might in fact be detrimental. In addition, if youth are still involved in foster care, it would be important for both the agency staff and the mentor to be in contact with social service providers to understand the precise needs of the youth at the time as well as other supports in place” (Spencer et al., 2018). Consistent with these findings, research identified by Munson et al. (2010) and JK Greeson et al. (2010) established that youth with the added source of support from natural mentors, this group is more prepared for life after foster care. Training for these natural mentors is vital to help them navigate challenges that are unique to former foster youth.

**Qualities of an Effective Mentor**

Research has identified qualities commonly associated with mentoring relationships and personal characteristics that foster youth have found to be most supportive (Spencer et al., 2018). A review of the literature and data collected through interviews indicate that the positive effects on TAY vary by youth. Despite individualized results, meta-analysis finds that positive outcomes are stronger when the mentor relationships have frequent contact, a measure of emotional closeness between the mentor and mentee, and the relationship persists overtime (Avery, 2011).
The research conducted by Duke et al. concluded that relationship qualities that were central to an effective mentorship are quality advice and effective mutual communication between the youth and mentor (Duke et al., 2017). While the qualities youth reported as being relevant to them in their natural mentoring relationships were similar to those of youth who have never experienced foster care, given the extent of emotional trauma former foster youth have known, it unsurprising, that they too value this stability. When asked about their natural mentors, TAY frequently reports that they are understanding of teenagers, easy to relate to, and found similarities between themselves and their mentor. Youth also reported that there is a need for their mentor to have had similar life experiences, such as experience being in foster care, having a parent with substance abuse, or being a parent themselves which helped them to both relate and listen to their mentors as well as see them as credible sources of support (Munson et al, 2010). Valuing relationships that have lasted longer than three years, with mentors accepting the youth, encouraging them and being reliable, are all listed as critical characteristics of forming a close relationship with their mentor (Collins et al., 2010).

TAY cited that the support they wanted most in preparing for their transition was informational, emotional, and appraisal support (Munson et al., 2010). Research by Samuels & Pryce established self-reliance as a source of resilience for foster youth, which they concluded may hinder them from forming healthy relationships (Samuels & Price, 2008). numerous studies have been conducted to examine the qualities of successful mentor relationships and the roles the mentors most commonly held in the youth’s life.

Findings suggest that these mentors are often described by youth as being caring, accepting, reliable, patient, empathetic, trusting, and authentic. Other characteristics that youth value is being given advice without judgement. Also important to foster youth is that the support offered, be tailored to fit their needs, timely, and offered without judgment (Spencer et al., 2018; Collins et al., 2010; Munson et al., 2010; Ahrens et al., 2011; Thomson et al., 2016). The type of attributes that youth found present in their mentor relationships, as reported to Muson et al. (2010), included longevity, trust, authenticity, respect, empathy, nature of support, keeping youth “on track,” practical advice, and emotional support. Similarly, Collins et al., (2010) and Thomson et al. (2016) found that those mentors who had the most significant positive impact were reported to be accepting of their mentee, offer constant encouragement, were reliable, and able to assist whenever needed (i.e., “always there”). This constant presence and ongoing encouragement leads to feelings of closeness and facilitates trust that is crucial to the development of youth who have experienced foster care. Youth report that the ideal natural mentor should be honest and trustworthy, similar to that which they’d have from a familial bond, and feel as though the relationship is mutually meaningful (JKP Greeson et al., 2015). Furthermore, TAY maintain that having youth suggest their potential mentors is preferred to more traditional volunteer matching, and should these mentor relationships be implemented, could serve as a needed relationship in their lives (JKP Greeson et al., 2015). Youth reported that they could benefit from their mentors, providing guidance around independent living skills which is preferable
to them learning these skills in a classroom setting. JKP. Greeson et al. (2015) also found that youth reported the difficulty they faced in forming trusting relationships with adults and recognized the importance of peer support or third-party support in helping them open up to their mentors.

**Identifying Mentors**

TAY identify a wide range of roles that their natural mentors hold in their lives. According to youth, these non-kin mentors tend to have been in their lives for a number of years, including relatives they’ve known since birth, as well as teachers, coaches, and other adults in their community (Collins et al., 2010). While transition age youth who have not encountered the child welfare system also frequently cite extended family and adults they know in their community through school or church, former foster youth most often name adults they’ve encountered through government and agency services, such as therapists, program staff or foster family members (Collins et al., 2010). Valuing mentors who have shared similar life experiences, former foster youth reported to Munson et al that those natural mentors were most frequently” professionals (e.g., teachers, and child welfare professionals), friends of the family and community members (e.g., neighbors)” (Munson et al, 2010).

In addition to reporting the specific individuals that provided mentorship, Collins et al. asked youth whether any programs, groups or organizations offered them support. Youth most frequently mentioned religious organizations, closely followed by therapeutic programs, support programs, and high school or college. While some of this support was reported to be specific programs, such as a food pantry, other organizations were reported as providing comprehensive care such as what might be found at a teen drop in center that offers wrap around services (Collins et al., 2010). While every person, regardless of background, needs some level of social support to survive, due to the emotional vulnerability of youth who have experienced foster care, the stronger the social network, the better a youth’s chances for positive life outcomes. In addition to mentors, a robust social network, including connections to schools, religious organizations, and the larger communities, the greater chance of a positive connection for TAY (Collins et al., 2010).

**Leveraging Technology**

Technology, including the widespread adoption of smartphones, continues to increase in the US, allowing the nonprofit sector to engage with their clients and partners online. “As internet and mobile technology continue to permeate society across demographic characteristics, more psychosocial interventions are being delivered via computers, tablets, and cell phones, increasing access to empirically-supported treatment for many marginalized groups” (Braciszewski et al., 2018). These web-based interventions are accessible to individuals regardless of time and location, creating an advantage to offering training, services, and programs online as they offer a broader range of engagement.
Using Technology to Identify Natural Mentors

Utilizing technology and social media has proved successful in several national demonstration projects involving identifying and locating natural mentors youth have lost contact with (Avery, 2011). The Homecoming Project, a federally funded project which began in 2003, demonstrated the success of child-specific recruitment to identify adoptive families, with the explicit goal of relational permanency. Avery’s analysis of the records and data outcomes showed that “51% of youth in the Homecoming Project achieved permanency during the funding period. Family-finding efforts for youth in residential care in Santa Clara County, California, located more than 220 relatives for 8 youth by doing only 9 hours of family search work” (Avery, 2011). Citing another successful attempt at leveraging technology to benefit foster youth, Avery referenced, “In 2006, the California Permanency for Youth Project created the Emancipated Youth Connection Project to assist 20 young adults who left the foster care system without sustained relationships to a caring adult. This 18-month project was tremendously successful in finding family or other caring adults to lifelong connections. Data available for 19 of the 20 participants showed that 139 new permanent connections were made with biological family members, and 42 new permanent connections were made with non-biological family members” (Avery, 2011).

The use of technology offers promising solutions for direct service providers to support youth in identifying and locating natural mentors and reunify TAY with their family or community.

Using Technology to Train Natural Mentors

Research cited by Sullivan et al. (2018) found that at least 50% of youth in foster care have experienced emotional and, or behavioral issues. Based on this research, which considered the unique needs of these youth, it’s imperative that caregivers and direct service providers have the skills and training that explicitly address past trauma. Implementing trauma-informed training in addition to other resources provided to direct service providers, natural mentors, and non-kin caregivers are one way to prepare individuals for the role they are about to take on in a child’s life. Widespread implementation of this type of training may be supported through the use of mobile technology as it has proved helpful in the context of family-based interventions. Citing difficulty caregivers have in regularly attending in-person training, Sullivan et al. found that “…theory suggests the use of supplementary smartphone apps, specifically, promote treatment engagement in behavioral parent training via increases in caregiver motivation, autonomy, and therapist-patient communication” (Sullivan et al., 2018). Given the wide-spread use of smartphones, researchers further established that implementing this type of training would have a minimal economic burden on participants. Citing data collected from the Pew Research Center in 2019,
“With smartphone prices on the decline, 77% of the U.S. population now owns a smartphone. This prevalent use also includes low-income populations, with 67% of adults earning less than $30,000 annually, and 82% of adults earning between $30,000 and $50,000 annually, owning smartphones” (Sullivan et al., 2018).

Creating and implementing an app or web-based training for caregivers and direct service increases the convenience and accessibility to the curriculum, therefore increasing the likelihood of widespread adoption. Experimenting with the use of an app designed by experts in behavioral parent training, social workers, and app developers, researchers tested an evidence-based interventions to collect qualitative data on its usefulness to trainees. These focus groups comprised of specialists and educating resource caregivers reported feedback on the use of an app for training. Users cited that the app would be “most useful if it included (1) brief reminders and words of encouragement; (2) ongoing access to resources; (3) platforms for connecting with other resource caregivers and the trainers; (4) self-tracking tools; and (5) a straightforward, user-friendly interface” (Sullivan et al., 2018).

While the qualitative data support the usefulness of the app, it also indicates that it is most useful as a supplement to other training as it aids in caregiver engagement and increases the interaction with program content (Sullivan et al., 2018).

Section 3: Methods and Approaches

This project utilized a mixed-method research approach consisting of both primary and secondary sources.

Secondary Data Collection
The first phase of data collection included a literature review of scholarly articles found in multiple online databases found through the USF Gleeson Library. The research was conducted in two phases. The first included resources that focused on mentoring transition-age youth who were formerly in foster care. Keywords and phrases used to conduct the search included: “foster youth,” “natural mentoring,” “aging out of foster care,” and “transition-age youth.” Inclusion criteria was also limited to the English language, publication date of 2010 - 2019, and the US. The second database search was on the topic of technology-based solutions for foster youth and caregivers or service providers. Keywords and phrases used to conduct the search included: “foster youth,” “natural mentoring,” “aging out of foster care,” and “transition-age youth.” Inclusion criteria also included the following: The searches were conducted separately, as the keywords and subject areas didn’t produce any overlapping results. While each search was conducted using separate keywords, the inclusion criteria were the same. The sources reviewed were limited to studies matching the English language, publication date of 2010 - 2019, and the US. Finally, included in this project, are articles from peer-reviewed journals, publications, and government-funded websites. Table 1. identifies the specific databases and periodicals that were reviewed for background of the subject area.
Table 1. Sources referenced in secondary data collection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peer-reviewed Journals</th>
<th>Periodicals &amp; Publications</th>
<th>Government Databases &amp; Websites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children and Youth Services Review</td>
<td>Vulnerable Children &amp; Youth Studies</td>
<td>National Mentoring Resource Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pediatric Nursing - Jannetti Publications, Inc.</td>
<td></td>
<td>CA Department of Social Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Directions for Youth Development - John Wiley &amp; Sons Inc.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Sources referenced in secondary data collection

**Primary Data**

As a former Court Appointed Special Advocate in San Francisco and a current board member of Edgewood Center for Children and Families, I have a personal interest in the services my community provides to youth who have experienced the child welfare system. Due to my familiarity with various service providers in San Francisco County, I reached out to individuals I knew at various agencies to inquire in their willingness to be interviewed or if they were not in direct case management, introduce me to a colleague who would be willing to share their perspective and personal experience.

After approaching five Bay Area agencies that fit the criteria of providing direct mentorship services to TAY, four agencies accepted. Table 2 outlines the characteristics of the four Bay Area agencies included in this project.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Edgewood</th>
<th>SF CASA</th>
<th>Larkin Street Youth</th>
<th>Seneca</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct Service Provider</td>
<td>Direct Service Provider</td>
<td>Direct Service Provider</td>
<td>Direct Service Provider</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>San Bruno &amp; Redwood City</td>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program</td>
<td>Drop-In Center</td>
<td>CASA</td>
<td>LEASE</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Focus</td>
<td>Mental Health</td>
<td>Mentorship &amp; Advocacy</td>
<td>Housing Insecurity</td>
<td>Mental Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentor Type</td>
<td>Peer-Mentors (Employees)</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>Employee</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Organizations represented in expert interviews

Six expert interviews were conducted across the four agencies:

- Jamila L.P. McCallum, Executive Director, San Mateo Region, Edgewood Center for Children and Families
- Manith Thaing, Drop-in Center Manager, Edgewood Center for Children and Families
- Jamie Coronato, Case Supervision Manager, SF CASA
Each interview was with a direct service provider to transition age, former foster youth who reported working in “case management” in some capacity. The interviewees identified themselves as female and had worked as direct service providers between 4.5 months and 15 years. Five of the interviews were conducted by phone with one in-person; all took approximately 30 - 45 minutes. Please reference Appendix A for a full list of the interview questions asked. Roughly 10 minutes of conversation occurred before I began asking questions which included a background into why I was conducting research and informed consent obtained before the start of the interview. Interviews were recorded and transcribed before being analyzed.

Limitations

Given the time constraints, I wasn’t confident that I would have enough time to distribute and collect a survey from enough TAY participants properly. Multiple interviewees cited that they don’t survey their clients and were hesitant with including them. Because I didn’t want to rely on their staff to distribute and collect surveys in the allotted time I had to complete the project, I opted to conduct interviews instead. If I had been able to partner with an organization and provide surveys directly to TAY who had been in foster care, more data would be available to inform this project’s research.

There isn’t consistency in interventions across states, nor a database that provides a holistic view at all programs and services offered to TAY. In order to form policies and build programs that adequately address the gaps that exist across regions, service receipt numbers must be accurate.

Section 4: Data Analysis

This project set out to understand: 1) of the interventions that currently exist for TAY aging out of foster care, and of those services, which are most helpful in ensuring youth are adequately prepared for life as an adult, 2) the type of supporter who is viewed as most helpful in contributing to a positive transition to life after foster care and, 3) whether there is an opportunity to utilize technology to support foster youth in their transition planning process.

The six interviews were coded, replacing names with letters, A - F. Several major themes were presented during the interviews with direct service providers that aligned with current literature on youth aging out of foster care. These perspectives were synthesized and outlined in corresponding Tables 3-8. Some direct quotes were rephrased for clarity and consistency such as changing “getting help with employment”, “help with resumes”, and “employment training” to “job training” and replacing “communicating effectively” with “communication skills”.
Perceptions of Interventions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What services do you provide for TAY?</td>
<td>Case Management Academic advocacy Mentoring Counselling</td>
<td>Case Management Referrals Mental Health Care Housing Support Advocacy Independent Living Skills</td>
<td>Case Management TIP</td>
<td>Case Management Independent living coaching Job training Housing Assistance Referrals</td>
<td>Referrals Housing Support Clinical Therapy Advocacy Independent living skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of the existing resources/services/tools that you provide, what do you consider to be the most valuable for them in their transition planning?</td>
<td>Mentorship Being an Advocate in school</td>
<td>Mentorship</td>
<td>Mentorship</td>
<td>Independent Living skills Transportation services Graduating from HS Job training Housing</td>
<td>Social Skills Making Friends</td>
<td>Employment training, Independent living skills Soft skills Communication skills Making friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you measure this in any way? Collect feedback from TAY?</td>
<td>Client survey</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Client survey</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Retention as an indicator</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of the existing resources, what do you feel is lacking? (in other words, based on what you’ve seen with your clients, where would you put additional resources?</td>
<td>Not sure Housing Physical healthcare Mental healthcare</td>
<td>Mentors such as CASA Mentors such as CASA Housing</td>
<td>Marketing or referrals so more kids know that we’re here</td>
<td>Independent living skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Interview responses regarding existing interventions

In addition to all of the interview participants being direct service providers, two described their work as being mentors and academic advisors. This is consistent with research found by Collins et al., (2010) that indicated individuals employed in the child welfare system often work beyond the specific roles they are assigned, and go above and beyond in order to best serve their clients. Analyzing the interview feedback, it became clear that these direct service providers serve youth to meet their most critical needs. In the interviews, participants most frequently cited that youth need more preparation in securing housing after foster care, independent living skills (including cleaning and maintaining an apartment), and mentorship through their transition. Specific quotes provided by interview participants regarding those interventions and critical needs are illustrated in Table 4.
### Table 4. Interviewee perspectives on most needed interventions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Themes</th>
<th>Exemplar Quotations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Building relationships</td>
<td>&quot;Relationship building is the key. They need a strong relationship that they can depend on&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;They need to make more connections in person vs. social media. It's important they have friends outside of facebook&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td>&quot;May have learned poor communication growing up, so learning how to talk to a Supervisor, in an interview, or even a doctor. Have to rewire them so they know how to communicate in the world&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;I text and email them, but if something's important, I talk to them in person or on the phone. It's important that they know when to text and when you need to speak with someone face to face, like a manager or boss&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life skills</td>
<td>&quot;We need more help to support their life skills. Even the most basic things - proper cleaning, signing up for the DMV, how do I make an appointment. All these little things that you take for granted. Especially with cleaning.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Need more life skills. Not just how to rent an apt, but even how to clean an apt, doing the dishes every day&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Accountability is really important. Have experienced group homes and foster families, taken, put back, always a social worker and judge to do things for them, and then at 22 or 23 someone will always pay for housing. Sense of accountability. No matter what the past was like we need to prepare them&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>&quot;Housing the biggest issue. Most Youth don't live in County because there isn't anywhere for them to live. They're being taken out of their communities, familiar places, schools, peers. There's larger effects than just being removed from the home. Service providers change, when you change between mental health providers that relationship also has to be terminated, so they say I'm tired of doing this, I'm done participating. This drastically affects their schooling, being so far away, so even with laws on schools of origin, credits slip through the cracks. A lot of it has to do with a lack of housing in SF&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing and Mental Health</td>
<td>&quot;Housing and mental health issues are intertwined. Do you address mental health, substance abuse, chronic issues that are keeping people unhoused. I believe we need to do both. There isn't enough supportive housing that will address behavioral support. Housing units are under-used because there are too many guidelines that are written to address adults. More broadly, there's a huge disparity/gap in community understanding of mental health.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A similar challenge to data collected by Woodgate et al. (2017) the interviews largely revealed that most of the organizations do not measure their impact or collect detailed feedback on services provided to youth.

**Types of Mentors Most Effective in Supporting TAY**

The major theme found in the expert interviews related to mentors was the critical need for continued support that youth can grow to rely on. Although only one interview participant was employed by CASA, the need for CASA was mentioned by four of the six interview respondents. Respondents also repeatedly mentioned that they viewed “peers”, whether former foster youth or individuals with similar life experience, as most successful in being able to connect with TAY.
Table 5. Interview responses regarding mentors

Direct quotes underscoring the importance of youth having consistent support from mentors through the transition to adulthood are included in Table 6. Direct services providers note how critical this support can be in knowing a youth’s history, to keep track of academics or medical records, and also provide them a consistent relationship that they can trust.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Themes</th>
<th>Exemplar Quotations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mentors</td>
<td><em>Some have kept their CASAs through the age of 21. Really anyone who can continue a relationship - a big brother, big sister for youth after they transition out, ast Foster Youth who are further along in their transition process</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistent relationship with mentors</td>
<td><em>A couple mentioned having CASAs and thought that was really fulfilling. One of their first full faith relationship, where they were able to trust and connect</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>One of the things that I’ve noticed with THP+, a lot had CASA workers when they were minors, but then they moved and lost them. It would really serve them if they could keep them from any county as long as they qualify</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>With CASAs, they can help with transcripts or IEPs. They can help fill in those blanks. I’m seeing similar trends in psychotropic medication. Meds get changed/switched. We’ve tried this before, we’re gonna try again. CASAs know the history and really advocate for them</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Peer Partners work wonders. One youth didn’t like vegetables. Veggies cooked and then made into chips, all of a sudden they are eating veggies. If they like art, they’ll connect with them. Do yoga, meditation</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6 Interviewee perspectives on mentors

Interviewee Perceptions of Using Technology

Consistent feedback from all interview participants was the positive sentiment of using technology. While direct service providers listed their experience using it with their clients as limited to text, email, and in one case social media, all six were open to new solutions that would enable them to deliver services to TAY.
Data collected in the expert interviews indicated that participants viewed technology as being helpful to locate youth or potential mentors. All six respondents noted that using tech with this age-group would be particularly effective in reaching them as a result of their familiarity with it and history of usage.

Table 8. Interviewee perspectives on utilizing technology with TAY

Based on the data collected by interview participants, this group of direct service providers recognize utilizing technology as a potential method to provide services for TAY.

Section 5: Implications and Recommendations

The data collected through expert interviews combined with sector research of former foster youth provide a number of insights, including that youth are not adequately prepared for life after foster care. Based on research presented in the literature review and interviews conducted with direct service providers, two significant areas seem to show the most substantial gap in preparation-housing and long-term mentorship. The findings are consistently found across the various studies presented, as well as the experiences of those interviewed. The resulting recommendations can be implemented by agencies, nonprofit program staff, and
direct service providers. While some of the data isn’t surprising, given what the sector has found, and the vulnerability of this population, we can draw a number of conclusions from this research to test new approaches to existing programs. The following recommendations represent an analysis of research included in the literature review and data collected in the interviews referenced in Tables 3 - 8.

Recommendation 1: Housing Preparedness
Additional investment in time and resources should be directed to housing preparedness.

Resources should be directed to better prepare youth for the challenges they may face in finding, paying, and maintaining safe and secure housing. Several interviewees noted that youth transitioning out of foster care are ill-equipped and unprepared for the difficulty in finding housing, the cost they’ll incur, and the steps needed to maintain a livable residence. Housing was also most commonly reported as a need to prepare TAY better, as evidenced in research conducted by Fryar et al. (2017). When states were asked the primary area in which they could do better in supporting youth transitioning from foster care, twenty-one states responded that housing was a primary area in need of improvement, explicitly providing transitional and, or affordable housing (Fryar et al., 2017). Consistent with this finding was feedback provided in expert interviews, which identified housing as being the area these youth need the most support while lack of affordable housing is an issue in the Bay Area affecting many families across socio-economic backgrounds, this group in particular faces more acute challenges, given their lack of familial ties in the community. As families are priced out of the Bay Area, foster youth can become more disconnected as families are displaced.

Recommendation 2: Trusting, Consistent Relationships with Adults
Increase research, funding, and programs directed at supporting stable, trusting long-term connections between former foster youth and adults.

Forming real-world connections (as opposed to online), honing social skills, and learning the difference between communicating with friends versus professionals were all noted in the literature review and mentioned in the expert interviews as being critical for youth to form healthy adult relationships. These social connections and a resulting sense of community have been found to create the support system needed by multiple researchers and direct service providers (Fryar et al., 2017; Ahrens et al. 2011; Spencer et al., 2018). While research included in the literature review focused on natural mentors and YIM, a number of the direct service providers noted in their interviews that having a consistent CASA has been an extremely positive experience for youth.

2A. Extend CASA
CASA has 950 programs in 49 US states, giving them the infrastructure and training to support more than 85,000 mentors and 260,000 youth annually (casaforchildren.org). While Collins notes that the formal systems of child welfare (caseworkers, foster parents, therapists) can be immensely supportive, with individuals often acting above and beyond their required role e.g., by continuing to be a resource after the formal relationship has ended, this isn’t guaranteed (Collins et al., 2010). Noted repeatedly in literature (Duke et al., 2017; Avery, 2011) and in expert interviews, the consistency of these relationships is essential and can provide invaluable support in identifying gaps in care that may otherwise go unnoticed. Data collected from expert interviews indicated a strong desire for CASA to be extended beyond a youth aging out of care.

2B. Grow Network of Natural Mentors

While CASAs were mentioned repeatedly in the expert interviews and fill a critical void for these youth, there is research to suggest that losing these connections can harm youth and create yet another lost relationship. While one can argue that experiencing a healthy adult relationship is better than not having one at all, the end of a program and loss of a mentor may negatively impact a youth. Mentors who already exist in a youth’s life may not create that same level of risk. Furthermore, there is a growing body of research that finds natural mentors are better for positive youth development than the existence of volunteers. JK Greeson et al. (2010) find that building a network of natural mentors provides the most substantial likelihood of a continuing relationship. Those shaping interventions should encourage, support, and help identify natural mentors. Having had similar experiences or familiarity with the challenges that these youth have faced, is often reported by youth as a factor that leads to an enduring mentorship (Munson et al., 2010). In discussing this shared experience and its effect on youth, Munson et al. note that,

“The importance of similarities in life experiences stood out throughout the youth’s responses. These older youth appreciated mentors whom they felt were “like them” in personality, that liked to do the same things, and that have been through similar situations or struggles coming up in the world. It was particularly important to youth that natural mentors understood what they had been through and the youth’s statements revealed that this was possible when mentors had shared experiences such as engagement with public systems themselves (e.g., jail, foster care)” (Munson et al., 2010).

2C. Use Identified Indicators of Successful Relationships to Locate and Train Mentors

To contribute to positive outcomes and increase the likelihood of successful relationships, mentors should receive training in the indicators identified by youth that lead to positive outcomes. Research conducted by Munson et al. (2010) revealed who youth most frequently consider their mentors to be, the roles they serve, and the characteristics they found most helpful in facilitating trust. Building on those findings, those building programs and assisting in identifying natural mentors, should
encourage the behaviors and characteristics as reported by those youth. Having found that giving youth a sense of belonging is a top priority for some service organizations, Nagpaul recommended that incorporating the following characteristics positively impacts feelings of relatedness among TAY:

“empathy- seeing the situation through the client's perspective, affection- showing genuine appreciation and concern, attunement-paying attention to the client and gathering knowledge about him/her, dedication of resources, volunteering time and energy, and dependability availability in case of need” (Nagpaul, 2019).

To facilitate healthy, positive relationships between mentor and mentee, mentors should be trained to ensure that these values are prioritized before establishing relationships with this vulnerable population.

Recommendation 3. Technology
Leverage technology to benefit foster youth and former foster youth.

While all of the interviewees were receptive to using technology, they were unsure of how or where to best include it in programs they offered. They mentioned the use of text, email, and social media, and while they had limited experience with other applications of technology in their service delivery, the experience they did have was positive.

3A. Utilize tech to offer training and support to mentors
Present in the literature was the positive effect of augmenting the resources mentors received through in-person training with resources made available online. Because these youth are often more vulnerable to the harmful effects of a relationship ending, it’s essential for those serving as mentors to be well-prepared and ready to address the issues facing this population. If utilizing technology for training and support of these mentors can even partially mitigate the risk of a negative experience for the youth, investment in research and funding of this topic should be explored.

3B. Utilize tech to identify natural mentors
Research indicates that utilizing tech to find/locate potential natural mentors has been successful and leads to positive social and emotional outcomes for youth. Feedback collected from multiple interviews as well as research conducted by Muson et al (2010) indicated that those developing programs to support natural mentors, should “recruit adults that have similar life experiences, particularly those that have had some type of involvement themselves with public systems of care, as this seems to matter to older youth” (Munson et al., 2010). There is an opportunity to further leverage technology and social media to identify and locate potential natural mentors for youth who have experienced foster care.

Section 6: Conclusion
Former foster youth can experience emotional and physical hardships that impact their life as an adult. As these youth may end up experiencing a lack of secure housing, higher rates of incarceration, and more difficulty obtaining housing, they need support from their community to better prepare for the challenges they may face after aging out of the foster care system. This project set out to understand: 1) of the interventions that currently exist for TAY aging out of foster care, and of those services, which are most helpful in ensuring youth are adequately prepared for life as an adult, 2) the type of supporter who is viewed as most helpful in contributing to a positive transition to life after foster care and, 3) whether there is an opportunity to utilize technology to support foster youth in their transition planning process. To better understand the interventions that exist for foster youth in their preparation for their transition out of care, literature was reviewed, and primary data from expert interviews were collected. The findings were consistent that youth who experience mentorship show signs of positive outcomes, and lower rates of depression, and tangible outcomes such as their academic or medical records being more closely monitored. While mentorship has positive benefits for mentees, natural mentors and YIM, both relying on familiarity with the youth suggest that they have stronger outcomes related to closeness, and creating more enduring bonds. These natural mentors represented a variety of roles in the youth’s lives but were most commonly friends of family, relatives, or community members such as teachers or coaches (Munson et al., 2010). Future research of this population could include data on housing scarcity in the Bay Area and whether youth in foster care lose connections to relatives as a result of displacement.

There are several implications of this research. These results suggested that those shaping programs directed at former foster and current TAY focus more resources on preparing this group for challenges they may experience related to housing, as well as utilize technology to assist youth in identifying natural mentors. As former foster youth experience unique challenges, trauma-informed systems of care and training must be provided to those individuals participating in mentorship. As there is a wide range of services provided to youth in foster care, which is not consistently tracked, there is an opportunity to utilize technology to improve this system of care. Additionally, recent technological adoption of smartphones and social media have made it easier to locate individuals in the youth’s life they may have lost connection to (Avery, 2011). Consistent with the literature, locating natural mentors and reunifying them with members of their community to provide support through
their transition, provides TAY with stronger community ties and can be a source of enduring relationships for which they can rely upon.

References


Transitional Housing Programs for Current and Former Foster Youth. CA Department of Social Services (nd) Retrieved from: http://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/Foster-Care/Transitional-Housing-Programs


Appendix A: Map of Transition Age Youth by State

Appendix B: Interview Questions

[Pre-Interview Intro]

Thank you! I’m interviewing service providers to collect data for my capstone and hoping to gain insights into the needs and resources that best serve children transitioning out of foster care and in their preparation for adulthood.

[Interview Questions]

R1:

1. How long have you directly worked with TAY foster youth?
2. What services do you provide to TAY?
3. Of those resources/services that you provide, what do you consider to be the most valuable for them in their transition planning?
   a. Do you measure this in any way?
   b. Do you collect any type of feedback from TAY?
4. Of the existing resources, is there anything that you see as lacking that could assist them in becoming more prepared for this life transition?
   a. What has informed your opinion of this need?

R2:

5. What types of mentors have you seen have successful influence/positive effects on preparing TAY?
   a. What has that positive effect looked like?

R3:

6. Do you connect with TAY through any existing technology or apps?
7. Do you see an opportunity for Staff to utilize technology for program delivery or for TAY to utilize technology to access services?

[Ending]

8. Is there anything else you want to share about the services offered to TAY to ensure a smooth transition into adulthood?

Thank you!
Author’s Bio

After spending 12 years working alongside tech executives in operational functions, Alicia realized that she wanted to combine her personal passions and professional strengths full-time at an organization that provides resources to underserved youth in her community. She most recently spent four months working on operations and expansion efforts at an orphanage in Tanzania, where her role was focused on implementing new business processes, including building and maintaining a website and creating and managing a roadmap to outline the construction schedule and programs for the year ahead.

Before Tanzania, she spent four years at Square as the company’s first Diversity and Inclusion Lead and as Jack Dorsey’s Chief of Staff overseeing a team of 10. Her professional strengths center around thinking creatively and collaboratively to build programs, proven by the successful design of Square’s Diversity and Inclusion strategy, as well as her ability to design and implement the key initiatives that supported it.

She is passionate about applying her professional experience to improving the current child welfare system. Her commitment to this goal has led her to meaningful and substantive work including volunteering for the past six years with children in transitional housing at Edgewood Center for Children and Families. She also served as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) for four years, representing court-appointed foster youth, regularly reporting to a Judge on progress, while coordinating with a social worker, district attorney, teacher, and therapist.

Alicia is currently a Master of Nonprofit Administration Candidate at the University of San Francisco and holds a B.A. in Political Science with an emphasis in Global Peace and Security from UC Santa Barbara. She is currently a member of the board of directors of Edgewood Center for Children and Families and a member of Ronald McDonald House Charities Bay Area’s Young Professionals Advisory Committee. In addition, she recently completed Trauma Informed Systems of Care Training.