

A REPORT BY
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Report 1509

**The Benefits of the California Connections
to Success Act to Contra Costa County**

Its Impact on Foster Youth Who Are Aging Out and Emancipated

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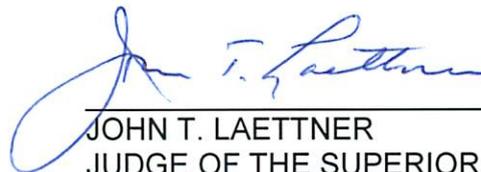
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Contra Costa County Grand Jury Report 1509

The Benefits of the California Connections to Success Act to Contra Costa County

Its Impact on Foster Youth Who Are Aging Out and Emancipated

TO: The Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors

SUMMARY

The Foster Care Independence Act, passed in 1999, doubled the statewide funding for independent living programs for foster youth. Overwhelming evidence indicated that youth who emerged from foster care into adulthood were in need of support. They were at increased risk of becoming early parents before they were ready for that responsibility, likely to fall into unstable relationships, perform poorly in school, and fail to graduate from high school, find themselves homeless, engage in substance abuse, develop physical and mental health problems, and suffer a high rate of unemployment.

In 2008, the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act passed, designed to improve the well-being and outcomes for children in foster care. The Act extends federal funding for foster care services for non-minors from ages 18-21 if certain criteria for participation are met. State participation in the program is optional.

California opted to participate in the federal program through California Assembly Bill 12. Together with later amendments, this legislation is known as the California Connections to Success Act. By providing federally funded services, AB 12 offers the possibility of safety and stability for foster youth ages 18-21 who are at risk of homelessness.

AB 12 extends payment benefits and transitional support services to these youth through the Adoption Assistance Program (AAP), Kinship Guardianship Payment Assistance (Kin-GAP) programs and Foster Care.

AB 12 programs benefit foster youth:

- Foster youth are able to maintain a safety net of support while living independently in a secure and supervised living environment.
- The additional support provided after the youth turn 18 assists foster youth to become better prepared for a successful transition into adulthood and self-sufficiency through education and employment training opportunities.

The benefits of AB 12 to the state have been well documented. From a financial standpoint, the program is largely funded by the federal government, which provides California with \$60 million each year for the program. One study estimates that supporting California youth in foster care after 18 years of age produces a return of \$2.41 for every public dollar committed in terms of reduced costs associated with better youth outcomes.

Contra Costa County has a strong commitment to and has taken advantage of AB 12 programs for targeted youth. Almost 100% of foster youth in Contra Costa County opt in to these programs.

METHODOLOGY

Members of the Grand Jury interviewed representatives from Contra Costa County Children and Family Services Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP).

The Grand Jury reviewed presentations and reports including:

- The California Child Welfare Indicators Project
- CDSS Independent Living Program (ILP) Annual Report & Plan – FFY 2014
- Youth in Extended Foster Care
Center for Social Services Research
School of Social Welfare
University of California, Berkeley
- Employment and Human Services Contra Costa County Family and Human Services Report, Dated September 2, 2009.
- Outcomes of the Contra Costa County Transition Age Youth Survey, Executive Summary, Dated September 9, 2009.

- California Fostering Connections to Success Act
Assembly Bill 12 Primer
Updated January 1, 2014

BACKGROUND

California law assumes responsibility for youth who become a part of the foster care system. The state remains responsible until the youth either exits the system through “emancipation” when they reach the age where foster care benefits and services are no longer provided, or “permanency” (i.e., by family reunification or adoption).

A new means of permanency for abused and neglected children was established in 1998 in California through SB 1901. This bill established the Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program (Kin-GAP). SB 1901 allows foster children to exit the foster care system by arranging for stable relatives to act as permanent guardians.

In October 2008, Congress passed HR 6893, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act. This law gives states an option to establish relative guardianship programs and provides federal funding for associated costs. Under HR 6893, states receive federal funds to provide foster care, kinship-guardianship and adoption assistance benefits to support youth who meet certain employment and education related requirements until these youth turn 21. Research shows that children in kinship care have more stable living situations and are less likely to have behavioral problems.¹

The California Fostering Connection to Success Act, (AB 12) ensures that California can opt into this federally funded program. AB 12 also re-enacted California’s existing Kin GAP program to align with federal requirements and to provide transitional support to some youth until age 21. Through AB 12, California uses federal funds for costs that were previously borne by the state and counties. The act also offers substantial savings to the county in the form of reduced expenses for youth who would have been otherwise forced out of foster care by age 18, such as costs associated with homelessness, teen pregnancy, unemployment and public assistance.

AB 12 became law on January 1, 2012. Prior to AB 12, foster youth were “emancipated,” meaning they were released on their own at age 18. Because they lack life skills, as many as 50% of former foster youth became homeless during the first two years after exiting foster care and many became incarcerated. Overwhelming evidence indicated that youth who left foster care needed further support into adulthood. The

¹ AB 12 Fact Sheet, California Fostering Connections to Success introduced by Assembly Members Beall and Bass.

federal government responded by instituting new laws to extend care for this population, and passed the Foster Care Independence Act in 1999, which doubled funding for statewide independent living programs. States responded to the increase in federal funds for independent living programs by enacting legislation. This legislation extended payment benefits and transitional support services through the Adoption Assistance Program (AAP), Kinship Guardianship Payment Assistance (Kin-GAP) program and Foster Care. Effective January 1, 2012, foster youth could elect to remain in foster care up to age 19; as of January 1, 2013, these youth could elect to remain in foster care up to age 20; and starting January 1, 2014, they could choose to stay in foster care up to age 21.

In addition, foster youth on probation may be eligible to remain in foster care after age 18. The foster youth must agree to reside at an eligible placement and to work with a social worker to develop and meet the goals of a transitional living plan. This program is voluntary; youth can exit the program at any time before they turn 21 years of age.

Benefits from remaining in the program after age 18 include a safety net of support services while experiencing some degree of independence in a secure and supervised living environment and additional time to prepare for a transition into adulthood.

DISCUSSION

Contra Costa County has taken a pro-active approach to informing youth about the benefits of AB 12. The opt-in rate in Contra Costa County among foster youth is almost 100%.

The key agency coordinating AB 12 services for the County is the Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP), a division of Contra Costa County Children and Family Services. ILSP prepares youth for life skills when they exit extended foster care. The ILSP program served 582 youth in the County in 2014. The program fills a void not addressed by the traditional foster care system. ILSP has two coordinators responsible for establishing collaborative partnerships with other foster youth programs and community based organizations serving this population. Their expertise in engaging youth, motivating them to stay in school, graduate, get valuable life sustaining skills, and employment is critical:

- ILSP helps foster youth prepare for emancipation by teaching valuable life skills needed to survive.
- The program offers a variety of workshops designed to provide assistance transitioning into adulthood as well as fun events and activities.
- ILSP helps with financial assistance for housing and attending high school. It assists youth with personal statements, applications to educational and vocational training institutions, and scholarship application assistance.

- ILSP is a team of professionals, specialists, and social workers working together to ensure foster youth are prepared for the challenges of adulthood, and emancipation from the foster care system.

Youth can choose to join ILSP between the ages of 14 and 18. They are continually informed of the importance of staying in the program. Those who choose to participate in ILSP receive assistance with housing, education, mental health, and general support. Contra Costa County Children and Family Services (CFS) works to connect the County's ILSP with other county departments and non-profit agencies to insure information regarding AB 12 programs is passed on to foster youth.

Contra Costa Health Services offers some options for housing programs and mental health via the Katie A Initiative. Through the Katie A Initiative, a student worker assists foster youth who qualify for AB 12 programs to navigate the county's mental health system. Further support is provided by the County's Workforce Development Board (WDB), which hires and trains AB 12 foster youth. Additionally, the Contra Costa County Office of Education (CCCOE) educates and provides educational supportive services to help foster youth graduate from high school or obtain GEDs. CCCOE also provides job training and assistance with job placements. Other support comes from Voluntary Emergency Services Team in Action (VESTIA), a local community based organization that assists with financial issues beyond the AB 12 stipend, and Workforce Services, which assists in processing payments for AB 12 and other benefits available to foster youth. Three community colleges, Los Medanos College, Diablo Valley College, and Contra Costa College, also provide educational services and other support for foster youth who qualify for AB 12 programs. Through ILSP, the County effectively coordinates these foster youth caregivers.

Researchers of emancipated youth in Contra Costa County found that 88% of the sample population received ILSP services and 95% of those receiving ILSP stated they would recommend ILSP. These data suggest that foster youth need support with education and finances, as well as help with physical and mental health care.

Non-Profit Partnerships

Several non-profit organizations assist foster youth. The assistance and support these organizations provide to youth aging out of the foster care, is a valuable complement to the County's programs. The following are some of the main organizations providing assistance:

1. Project YES. Project YES in collaboration with then Supervisor Susan Bonilla's office and ILSP began as a pilot program in the spring of 2008. Two former foster youth were employed to work with the County General Services Department in their Fleet Division. Project YES received funds from Conoco Phillips to support employment related expenses, provide mentoring and support to participants. Project YES works with Human Resources and the County Administrator's Office to

develop a specific classification for Project YES youth and to help them develop the needed skills to qualify for County positions. The project's vision is to provide career opportunities within the County for former foster youth. County entities that support the Project YES include:

- Human Resources
- Animal Services
- Library Services
- The Sheriff's Office
- Fire Districts
- County Office of Education
- Health Services
- Tax Collector
- Public Works
- Employment and Human Services Department, Children and Family Services, One Stop Centers and Workforce Development Board

2. Just in Time (JIT). JIT is a non-profit initiative designed to help transitioning foster youth achieve well-being and self-sufficiency. JIT mobilizes a caring community to serve as an extended family for these youth. This service is accomplished through a network of relationships and emergency resources provided by individual agencies, businesses and foundations that share Just in Time's goals and core values. JIT motivates youth to reach their goals of self-sufficient adulthood by filling the gaps of critical needs. They also provide connections to adults who become lifelong support systems.
3. Youth Homes. The Transition Age Youth Labor program offered by Youth Homes supports young people, ages 17-25, as they mature into adulthood. A safety net to promote stability is provided to these young adults through therapeutic support, mentoring support, as well as monetary/material assistance from the Youth Home Auxiliary, private donors, and grants.

These programs work in coordination with ILSP, which acts as the driving force to provide improved services to youth transitioning out of foster care.

Foster youth who emancipate from the foster care system are expected to become self-sufficient by age 18 or 19. To become self-sufficient, they must be able to obtain stable housing, find employment and remain healthy. Research indicates youth who are released on their own at age 18 are unlikely to achieve this expectation and as many as 42% of these youth become homeless. Housing problems are related to poverty and lack of stable family relationships. Foster youth have high rates of incarceration, especially those who have had multiple placements in foster care. Research shows, as

many as 72% of prisoners once were in foster care². However, there has been a significant drop in homelessness for emancipated foster youth in Contra Costa County due to their high rate of participation in ILSP and housing funds provided by AB 12. Much of the work of the ILSP Coordinators is to cultivate collaborative partnerships with organizations, other foster youth serving groups and community based groups. With support from the Board of Supervisors and commitment to the ILSP, foster youth are provided with quality skill building workshops, social skill development, and improved transitions into adulthood.

Youth between 15½ and 21 years of age are eligible to participate if they are a current or former foster youth, Kin-GAP youth, or probationary youth. Youth are encouraged to take advantage of the program, although participation is voluntary. ILSP provides information about the program via telephone, email, Facebook and on the web at www.cocoilsp.org.

Through the Staff Development Division of the County's Employment and Human Services Department, ILSP trains service providers regarding the services available for foster youth through AB 12. These service providers include social workers, probation officers, community providers, nurses, and high school counselors, among others. When needed, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), community organizations, foster care providers, and kinship providers are provided this training.

Although AB 12 funds housing assistance, finding housing locally can be challenging. ILSP provides updates regarding the types of housing available to youth through workshops and agency presentations. Housing possibilities include the Transitional Housing Placement Program(s) (THPP) available to youth ages 16-18 through Youth Transition Meetings (YTM's), social workers, probation officers, group home providers, other youth, welcome letters, CASA, ILSP, and social media. Eligible youth are referred for housing by either a social worker, probation officer, or another adult. To apply, each youth must complete an application and provide letters of recommendation from his or her social worker, probation officer, group home or resource provider, or community support person, along with a copy of the youth's high school transcripts. The application is submitted to the social worker or probation officer for approval and then given to the ILSP coordinator. A THPP interview is scheduled by an ILSP coordinator with the housing program provider, social worker, care provider, and the youth. When the application is approved, the youth is moved into a THPP placement or placed on a waitlist for the next available apartment in the youth's desired area of residence. The ILSP coordinator regularly meets with the providers that contract with the County to provide housing. The meetings ensure that the provider fulfills its contracted service plan including issues related to compliance.

² Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP) 2008-2009 Program Report.

ILSP also works with the Contra Costa County Homeless Program to provide emergency housing to youth who are either not AB 12 eligible or chose not to re-enter the foster care system. This program offers semi-permanent housing to youth not eligible for THPP.

Youth with special needs or a disability are referred to the Department of Rehabilitation, SSI, and the Regional Center for Services.

Currently, there are two non-profit organizations offering services through the Transitional Housing Placement Program (THPP) that enable youth 16 to 18 to experience some degree of independent living before emancipation. The youth must continue to attend school, have a part-time job, and at least a 2.0 GPA. This program is for youth under 18 years who are not yet emancipated and, therefore, cannot utilize AB 12 transitional housing. Youth in this program will have a seamless transition to THPP plus Foster Care when they gain AB 12 status after their 18th birthday. Support for the THPP program is provided by the following organizations:

- Amador Institute
- EMQ Families First

Currently, Contra Costa has a THPP+FC program for youth after they reach 18 years of age. These are:

- Amador Institute
- EMQ Families First
- First Place for Youth

A 24 month subsidized transitional housing program is also available for youth who do not participate in AB 12 programs through the following non-profit organizations: Mi Casa (Concord), Appian House (El Sobrante/Richmond) and Bissell Cottages (El Sobrante/Richmond).

Extended Foster Care

After the age of 18, participation in foster care under the California Fostering Connections to Success Act is voluntary. Since this program is voluntary, youth participate on an as needed basis. Of the 900 eligible youth, (all county youth living in Contra Costa County regardless of county or origin), 604 have participated.

Youth must meet four eligibility requirements to continue to receive support after 18 years of age as prescribed by AB 12:

- The youth must have an order for foster care placement on his/her 18th birthday;
- The youth must be under the jurisdiction of the juvenile court as a ward of the court, meet one of the five participation conditions, and agree to live in a

supervised placement that is licensed or approved under new standards for 18 to 21 years old;

- A youth must sign a mutual agreement, meet with his/her social worker or probation officer every month, and participate in a six-month review hearing; and
- The court must have a hearing prior to terminating a youth's dependency. In addition, the court must find that youth who want to opt-out are informed of their right to remain in care, the benefits of extended foster care, and the right to re-enter if under 21 years of age.

The right to participate in foster care after age 18 includes youth who are custodial parents. Providers who are caring for a minor parent and his/her child are paid a foster care benefit that includes an amount for both minor parent and the child.

A youth must remain under the jurisdiction of the juvenile court to receive foster care benefits after 18 years of age; this can be under the court's dependency, delinquency or transition jurisdiction. Every six months, the youth has a review hearing in court or through an administrative review. The court hearing ensures that the youth continue to meet the participation requirements for foster care benefits and that the social worker or probation officer continues to assist the youth in meeting the eligibility conditions. The court also assesses progress by the youth in meeting his/her Transitional Independent Living Plan (TILP) goals. In addition, the court reviews efforts made by the placing worker to assist the youth in obtaining permanent connections with caring and committed adults.

Extended Foster Care for Wards

Youth on probation and under the supervision of the delinquency court (also known as "wards" of the court), are eligible for extended foster care services in the same manner as dependent youth. AB 12 created a new jurisdiction status (known as "transition jurisdiction") for these wards that allows them to participate in extended foster care without remaining under delinquency jurisdiction if they meet certain requirements. To be removed from the jurisdiction of the delinquency court, the youth must first finish the terms of his/her probation. At the status review hearing close to the time when the youth turns 18, the delinquency court is required to consider modification of the youth's jurisdiction to either dependency or transition jurisdiction.

Re-entry into Extended Foster Care

If a youth has exited extended foster care prior to his/her 21st birthday, he/she is permitted to re-enter extended foster care and receive assistance if certain conditions are met. The youth also re-enter foster care after meeting these same conditions if the youth's guardian or adoptive parent dies before the youth turns 21. To re-enter the youth must sign a voluntary Re-Entry Agreement (SOC 163) stating his/her intention to re-enter foster care. The youth is eligible if (1) the youth was in the foster care system

on his/her 18th birthday; (2) is under the age of 21; and (3) meets one of the following criteria:

- Has completed high school or GED equivalency program;
- Has enrolled in college, community college or vocational education program;
- Is employed at least 80 hours a month (must be paid employment);
- Participates in a program or activity designed to remove barriers to employment (this “safety net” category is intended to capture all youth who are not eligible under the employment or education conditions.); or
- Has a medical condition and is unable to meet any of the above requirements.

There is no limit to how many times a youth can opt-out and re-enter foster care. After a youth reenters the system, support and benefits continue until age 21.

The Kin-GAP Program

Youth placed by the juvenile court with a relative may be eligible to receive foster care benefits while in foster care through participation in the federally subsidized Kin-GAP program. Those youth who are not eligible for federal funds may receive state funds under California’s new Kin-GAP program, enacted by AB 12. There are 295 Kin-GAP cases in Contra Costa County. Youth participating in Kin-GAP remain eligible for ISLP until their 21st birthday. They are referred to ILSP by their eligibility workers as their dependency cases are dismissed. Placement with kinship providers may provide foster youth with a sense of permanency. The following are recent significant changes to the Kin-GAP eligibility rules:

- Youth must be residing with the relative while in foster care under a Voluntary Placement Agreement for six consecutive months prior to entering Kin-GAP (previously it was 12 months). Kin-GAP benefits are adjusted periodically based on changed needs pursuant to a negotiated agreement (previously, Kin-GAP benefits were frozen at the amount the youth received in foster care the month before entering Kin-GAP).
- Youth continue to receive Kin-GAP benefits up to age 21 if certain conditions are met (previously, Kin-GAP only went to age 18 or 19). Kin-GAP is authorized to make out of state payments. If the juvenile court orders a guardianship at the Welfare and Institute Code 360 hearing, a child can enter Kin-GAP via the voluntary placement agreement process.

To be eligible for federal Kin-GAP benefits, the prospective relative guardian and the County agency must execute the negotiated agreement setting forth the amount of payment prior to the date when the court orders the guardianship. If the relative guardian fails to negotiate a written binding Kin-GAP agreement prior to the establishment of the guardianship and the child still meets all other eligibility criteria, the child is eligible for non-federal Kin-GAP benefits. To receive Kin-GAP benefits, the youth must:

- Have been declared a dependent of the juvenile court;
- Reside with an approved relative guardian or under a voluntary placement agreement for at least six consecutive months;
- Have a kinship guardianship established with that relative by the juvenile court; and
- Have had the court case dismissed by either the dependency court or the delinquency court at the same time subsequent to the establishment of the guardianship.

All youth who are eligible for Kin-GAP benefits do not remain eligible up until age 21. Kin-Gap benefits terminate at different times depending upon the youth's age when the Kin-GAP benefits commenced and the special needs of the youth.

Youth participating in the Kin-GAP Program (as with foster care after 16) can continue to receive Kin-GAP assistance until age 21 as long as they do one of the following:

- Complete high school or equivalent program (GED), (enrollment is defined according to the definition employed by the school or program);
- Enroll in college, community college or vocational education program (half-time enrollment, as the colleges, community colleges or vocational program defines half-time enrollment);
- Work at least 80 hours a month (this must be paid employment);
- Participate in a program or activity designed to remove barriers to employment (a "safety net" category that is intended to capture all youth who are not eligible under the employment or education conditions); or
- Show that they are unable to do one of the above requirements because of a medical condition (short or long term medical or mental health conditions as verified by a health practitioner), although the youth does not have to be currently seeking treatment.

CONCLUSION

On January 1, 2014, the California Fostering Connections to Success Act became effective. As of that date, foster care benefits, Kin-GAP and AAP benefits became available to youth who meet the eligibility requirements and are under 21 years.

Transitioning youth are an especially vulnerable group. They need support navigating the challenges of emancipating from foster care into adulthood. They often have housing instability, employment problems, financial insecurity, and health and mental health challenges. While efforts are made to prepare them for a successful adulthood, many of these foster youth need strong supplemental supports into adulthood, partially necessitated by the lack of developmental opportunities for these youth earlier in their lives.

Support for this group has significantly increased over the years. The 1999 Foster Care Independence Act amended Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to create the Chafee

Foster Care Independence Program. This amendment doubled the maximum amount of funds available to states for independent living services and gave states greater discretion over the use of such funds. With these funds, states are able to provide training in daily living skills, education and employment assistance, counseling, case management, and written transitional independent living plans. States are also able to use up to 30% of the funds for room and board. A more recent provision in the Foster Connections to Success and Increasing Adoption Act in 2008 gives states the option to extend eligibility for Title IV-E foster care youth beyond age 18, until age 21. States exercising this option allow targeted foster youth an additional three years of foster care support to help prepare them for the transition to adulthood. Contra Costa County fully participates in the program having close to 100% of youth opting-in.

In the past, there was a dearth of information about foster youth who leave the foster care system because after emancipation, youth are difficult to stay in contact with due to the fact they are highly mobile. However, since the implementation of AB 12, homelessness among foster youth has been easier to track because more youth are opting to stay in the system, and the County can track these youth through a database called Gold Mine. It appears that homelessness is less of a problem than prior to the implementation of AB12 because the legislation made more housing funds available to foster youth.

ILSP will be partnering with a new program called Foster A Dream, which has been awarded a grant for \$85,000 to improve services for youth transitioning out of foster care. The monies will be used to conduct research and evaluations to determine where gaps exist in provided services. This program may lead to additional funding from the Walter S. Johnson Foundation to improve outcomes for foster youth.

FINDINGS

- F1. Participation in foster care after age 18 under AB 12 is voluntary and youth may opt-out of the program before they turn 21.
- F2. Youth who opt out of foster care after age 18 can re-enter before they turn 21 if they re-enter within six months after opting out of the program.
- F3. Contra Costa County informs foster youth about AB 12 and works with governmental agencies and other organizations to offer programs and information about how the system works to this population.
- F4. Extension of foster care to emancipated or aged out youth (ages 18-21) benefits society because foster youth receiving extended services are less likely to rely on public resources and more likely to become self-sufficient adults.
- F5. Emancipated youth who face housing instability and employment difficulties are frequently financially insecure and often have health and mental health issues.

- F6. Emancipated youth often need strong supplemental supports into adulthood.
- F7. ILSP Programs help improve the lives of at-risk foster care youth by helping them secure housing, employment, educational opportunities, healthcare and community support, among other necessities.
- F8. The County has established a database called Gold Mine to track the progress of foster youth served by the County programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1. Contra Costa County Children and Family Services should continue to pro-actively inform foster care youth about AB 12’s programs.
- R2. Contra Costa County Children and Family Services Program should consider establishing more local housing options for aging out and emancipated youth, and identify funds to do so.
- R3. Contra Costa County Children and Family Services Program should continue to provide scholarship opportunities for youth so that they can have financial support while being trained or educated.
- R4. The County should continue to support the dedicated and professional skills offered by the ILSP service providers.
- R5. The County should maintain the Gold Mine database to monitor the progress and outcomes for County foster youth served by the County programs in order to help make future funding decisions about support services for foster youth.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

	<u>Findings</u>	<u>Recommendations</u>
Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors	1-8	1-5