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**IMPROVING ADULT OUTCOMES FOR
FORMER FOSTER YOUTH:
CALIFORNIA'S STATE-FUNDED
TRANSITIONAL HOUSING PLACEMENT
PLUS (THP-PLUS) PROGRAM**

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ABSTRACT

Youth in foster care face particular challenges in transitioning to adulthood, and research shows that many former foster youth experience poor outcomes with regard to self-sufficiency, educational attainment, and housing in the years immediately following their mandatory exit from state-supported care at the age of majority. Because the state serves as the legal parent for foster youth, there is a special public responsibility to promote their successful transition to productive adulthood. Thus, a number of federal and state policies have been proposed to address the needs of transition-age former foster youth. In California, a primary policy approach has been the Transitional Housing Placement Plus (THP-Plus) program, created by the California State Legislature and overseen by the California Department of Social Services. This program provides up to 24 months of affordable housing coupled with supportive services. THP-Plus has shown positive preliminary results in improving outcomes for former foster youth and has sustained substantial financial and political support despite a difficult state budget climate. This program may serve as a productive model for other jurisdictions seeking sustainable and effective strategies to promote successful adult transitions for former foster youth.

INTRODUCTION

The transition from adolescence to independent adulthood is a challenging period. Although legal adulthood begins at age 18 in most of the United States, most young adults rely on their parents and families for significant support and guidance well into their twenties or beyond. Whether families pay for college tuition, provide a home to live in, or help repair the consequences of a poor decision, they serve as a vital safety net and launching pad for most young men and women entering adulthood.

Young people in foster care, however, often lack this support when they transition to adulthood. Youth who are removed from abusive or neglectful families and enter foster care in adolescence, and many whom enter at much younger ages, may live in the foster care system until they reach the age of majority. When they become legal adults, at age 18 in most states, these young people "emancipate" or "age out" of the foster care system. No longer legal dependents of the state, they lose their entitlement to state-provided housing, board, medical care, and supervision and must find a way to support themselves on their own.

Nationally, the number of youth who age out of foster care is currently at an historic high. Analysis by the Pew Charitable Trusts, based on U.S. Department of Health and Human Services data, shows that nearly 25,000 youth aged out of foster care in the United States in 2005, up 41 percent since 1998.¹ In California, the growth in aging-out youth has matched national trends. According to the University of California at Berkeley's Center for Social Services Research, a total of 4,391 young people aged out of foster care in California in 2006, representing a 44% increase since 1998.²

¹ See MADELYN FREUNDLICH ET AL., *TIME FOR REFORM: AGING OUT AND ON THEIR OWN 1* (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative and Kids are Waiting 2007), available at <http://kidsarewaiting.org/tools/reports/files/0006.pdf>.

² See BARBARA NEEDELL ET AL., *CHILD WELFARE SERVICES REPORTS FOR CALIFORNIA* (University of California at Berkeley Center for Social Services 2008), http://cssr.berkeley.edu/ucb_childwelfare/Exits.aspx (last visited Sept. 28, 2008).

Figure 1.

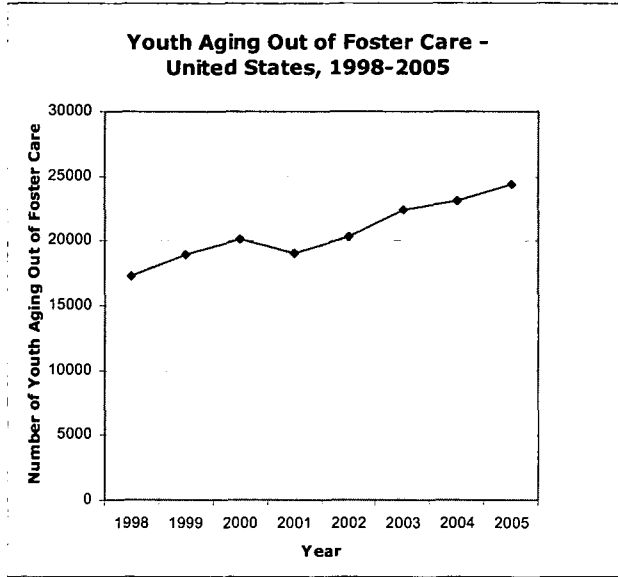
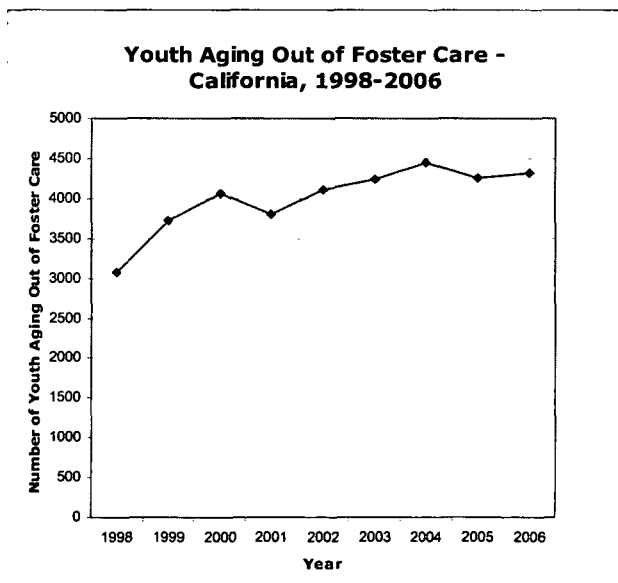


Figure 2.



This rapid growth in the number of youth aging out of foster care is of particular concern given the challenges they face in their transition to adulthood. A study conducted by researchers at the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall Center for Children compared the outcomes of over 600 former foster youth from multiple Midwest states to those of young adults in the general population surveyed for the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. The study found that 19-year-old youth who left foster care at age 18 were nearly three times more likely than their peers in the general population to be out of work and school. They were twice as likely to be unable to pay their rent and were four times as likely to be evicted. Within less than two years of leaving foster care, significant numbers of foster youth had been incarcerated and approximately one in seven had experienced homelessness.³

Research specific to California has also found evidence of poor outcomes among former foster youth. A 2001 survey of California's county welfare directors found that 65 percent of youth aging out of foster care in California had an imminent need for safe and stable housing.⁴ Furthermore, a study using multiple administrative data sets found that within six years of aging out of care, California's female former foster youth were over four times as likely to receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families/Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TANF/AFDC) as similar-aged young women in California.⁵ In addition, while over half of aged-out California youth in the Needell study attended community college for some period of time, 86 percent of those who enrolled earned fewer than 30 college credits, and less than 2 per-

³ See MARK E. COURTNEY ET AL., MIDWEST EVALUATION OF THE ADULT FUNCTIONING OF FORMER FOSTER YOUTH: OUTCOMES AT AGE 19 (Chapin Hall Center for Children - University of Chicago 2007), available at http://www.ncset.org/summit05/docs/NCSET2005_2a_Courtney.pdf (showing that before the age of 21, many young adults who had recently emancipated from foster care experienced homelessness (13.8%) and had been incarcerated (23.7%)).

⁴ See INDEP. LIVING PROGRAM POLICY UNIT CHILD AND YOUTH PERMANENCY BRANCH, REPORT ON THE SURVEY OF THE HOUSING NEEDS OF EMANCIPATED FOSTER/PROBATION YOUTH 1 (California Department of Social Services 2002), available at <http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/cfsweb/res/PDF/RptontheHousingNeeds.pdf> (reporting that 2,843 young adults emancipated in California in 2001 (65%) were in need of immediate housing at the time of emancipation).

⁵ See BARBARA NEEDELL ET AL., YOUTH EMANCIPATING FROM FOSTER CARE IN CALIFORNIA: FINDINGS USING LINKED ADMINISTRATIVE DATA 76 (University of California at Berkeley Center for Social Services Research 2002), available at http://cssr.berkeley.edu/pdfs/ffy_entire.pdf.

cent actually completed an Associate of Arts degree and transferred to a 4-year college.⁶

These poor outcomes for recently aged-out foster youth – including high rates of homelessness, incarceration, and poverty and low rates of educational attainment – are causes for serious concern. They indicate a lack of self-sufficiency and disproportionate use of public resources by former foster youth in early adulthood. Moreover, because the state serves as the legal parent for adolescents aging out of foster care, there is a special public responsibility to ensure that these youth are able to successfully transition to stable, productive adult lives.

I. POLICY SOLUTION: CALIFORNIA'S TRANSITIONAL HOUSING PLACEMENT PLUS PROGRAM

Governmental responsibility for children in foster care is shared between the federal, state, and local governments. Laws enacted at multiple levels of government have recognized the public responsibility to promote the successful adult functioning of youth leaving the foster care system. The first federal investment in the needs of transition-age youth in foster care was the creation in 1986 of the Independent Living Program (ILP) for youth 16 to 18 years old.⁷ This federal investment expanded in 1999 with the passage of the Foster Care Independence Act, which doubled the federal funding for ILP services from \$70 million to \$140 million and increased the upper age limit for ILP eligibility to age 21.⁸

A small number of states have also enacted legislation aimed at supporting foster youth in their transition to adulthood. States such as Arizona, Florida, and New York have extended access to affordable housing and supportive services, both within and outside the context of juvenile court jurisdiction. In Illinois, foster youth who need support beyond the state's age of majority may elect to remain in foster care through age 21, continuing to live with foster families or in other foster care arrangements paid with state-only funds.

⁶ See NEEDELL ET AL., *supra* note 5.

⁷ See Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1985, Pub. L. No. 99-272, § 12307, 100 Stat. 82 (1986).

⁸ See Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, Pub. L. No. 106-169, 113 Stat. 1822 (1999).

In California, multiple policy approaches to supporting former foster youth have been attempted. As in Illinois, California statute allows youth to remain in foster care until age 21, but this option is rarely exercised due to lack of funding. In the last five years, two legislative efforts in the state have attempted and failed to allocate the state funding that would be necessary to allow California youth to access foster care services until age 21.

The alternative policy approach to meeting the needs of former foster youth in California, an approach with greater implementation success, is the Transitional Housing Placement Plus (THP-Plus) program created by the California State Legislature. Funded through the California Department of Social Services, THP-Plus provides up to 24 months of affordable housing, coupled with comprehensive supportive services, for former foster youth ages 18 to 24. Initial program evaluations have shown significant positive outcomes for participating young adults, and the program has grown rapidly and garnered substantial political and financial support. California's THP-Plus program may serve as a productive policy model for other states seeking to improve outcomes of former foster youth.

A. Legislative History of THP-Plus

California's THP-Plus program was created in 2001 through Assembly Bill 427⁹ to address the problems of homelessness, unemployment, welfare dependency, incarceration, and other adverse outcomes among the "vulnerable population" of former foster youth.¹⁰ Concern about the issue of homelessness among former foster youth was brought to the attention of the California State Legislature by California Youth Connection (CYC), a non-profit advocacy organization comprised of current and former foster youth, which was an organizational sponsor of Assembly Bill 427. The program design for THP-Plus reflected in this legislation was modeled on demonstration projects underway at the time in California, including programs of The First Place Fund for Youth in Oakland and United Friends of the Children in Los

⁹ A.B. 427, 2001-02 Leg. (Cal. 2001).

¹⁰ See INDEP. LIVING PROGRAM POLICY UNIT, *supra* note 4, at 10 (concluding that obstacles facing newly emancipated youth are "daunting" and include cycles of poverty, homelessness, substance abuse, and increased rates of incarceration).

Angeles.

In this initial legislation, THP-Plus was linked to participation in a Supportive Transitional Emancipation Program (STEP), an optional program providing assistance payments to aged-out former foster youth, up to age 21, who were pursuing education, training, or other activities outlined in their individual Transitional Independent Living Plans (TILPs). Counties could opt into the STEP program, and those that opted to provide STEP could choose to offer THP-Plus to STEP participants. Both STEP and THP-Plus required California counties to provide substantial matching funds; the state provided 40 percent of the program funds - through a one-time General Fund allocation used to create a Transitional Housing for Foster Youth Fund - and counties were required to provide the remaining 60 percent share via local funds.

STEP posed a particularly difficult barrier for THP-Plus implementation because it was designed as an entitlement; counties that opted into STEP could not opt out. Given the financial climate of California counties in 2002, STEP's status as an entitlement made it financially unfeasible for counties to opt in, thus also preventing implementation of THP-Plus. Foster youth advocates successfully pushed for modification of this requirement, and in 2002, Assembly Bill 1119¹¹ de-linked THP-Plus from the Supportive Transitional Emancipation Program.

B. Local Initiative Creates Demand

Soon after passage of the initial THP-Plus legislation, community-based organizations attempted to implement THP-Plus programs at the local level. The most notable effort was based in the Bay Area, led by The First Place Fund for Youth and the Tri-City Homeless Coalition, both community-based nonprofits that had operated affordable housing programs for former foster youth using private funding. In 2003, the organizations jointly approached the Alameda County Social Services Agency and requested that it contribute the 60 percent share of cost required to draw down state THP-Plus funds.

At the time, Alameda County was facing a budget deficit and

¹¹ A.B. 1119, 2001-02 Leg. (Cal. 2002).

was unable to dedicate county funds to THP-Plus. After a period of analysis, both organizations approached the county again, this time requesting that the county accept private donations to serve as the 60 percent county match to draw down state THP-Plus funding. A workgroup was created in July 2003 to establish the technical process for receiving private donations from the two nonprofits and claiming state funds. Once established, the county of Alameda became the first in California to draw down THP-Plus funds in October 2003, almost two years after passage of the initial legislation. Over the next two years, the THP-Plus programs in Alameda County achieved measurable success in improving outcomes for former foster youth.

This local effort was instrumental to demonstrating the demand for THP-Plus and the effectiveness of its services. It also served as support for subsequent legislative initiatives, promoted by foster youth advocates, to remove the remaining barriers of implementation and increase the THP-Plus program's scope. In 2004, state funding for THP-Plus was restructured, eliminating the one-time-allocation-funded Transitional Housing for Foster Youth Fund in favor of annual budget appropriations. In 2005, Assembly Bill 824¹² extended the upper age limit for THP-Plus from 21 to 24 years old. Most significantly, in 2006, Senate Bill 1808¹³ removed the 60 percent county match requirement, making the program fully state-funded. This change made it feasible for many more counties throughout the state to choose to participate in the program.

C. From Legislation to Implementation

In 2006, with the county match rescinded, foster youth advocates recognized an opportunity to press for significantly expanded implementation of the THP-Plus program. Thus in 2006, the John Burton Foundation for Children Without Homes initiated and secured private foundation funding for the THP-Plus Statewide Implementation Project, a collaborative initiative in partnership with the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) and the Corporation for Supportive Housing.

Rather than focusing on legislative action, the THP-Plus State-

¹² A.B. 824, 2005-06 Leg. (Cal. 2005).

¹³ S.B. 1808, 2005-06 Leg. (Cal. 2006).

wide Implementation Project emphasized administrative, regulatory, technical assistance, and constituency organizing strategies to expand the reach, promote the quality, and enhance the political sustainability of THP-Plus. The objectives of the Project, to be achieved over a two- to three-year timeline, were (1) to develop and disseminate technical assistance materials in order to facilitate expanded implementation of THP-Plus, (2) to provide individual technical assistance to counties and nonprofit contractors interested in implementing THP-Plus, focusing on the 12 counties with jurisdiction over 85 percent of the foster youth aging out in California, (3) to develop consistent statewide monitoring and evaluation practices for THP-Plus in order to generate data for program self-evaluation and for state-level budget advocacy, and (4) to lead statewide organizing and advocacy efforts to promote the expansion of THP-Plus and to organize the program's constituency.¹⁴

Following the elimination of the local funding match requirement, the THP-Plus Statewide Implementation Project's efforts resulted in a dramatic expansion of THP-Plus throughout California. Prior to 2006, THP-Plus had been implemented in only five counties, for a total statewide capacity of less than 170 program slots. In contrast, in fiscal year 2006/07, a total of 16 counties implemented THP-Plus, representing an expansion of point-in-time capacity to over 500 program slots, serving 650 former foster youth during the fiscal year. By the end of fiscal year 2007/08, a total of 44 out of California's 58 counties planned to implement THP-Plus, representing an estimated capacity of more than 1,000 slots, projected to serve over 1,200 young adults over the course of the year. This expanded service capacity represents approximately one in four of the total number of youth aging out of foster care in California each year.

Moreover, at a time when many social programs in California were facing severe budget cuts due to a \$14 billion state deficit, funding for THP-Plus actually increased from \$1.3 million in fiscal year 2005/06, to \$4.8 million in 2006/07, to a full \$35 million in 2007/08, with \$40 million proposed in the Governor's preliminary budget for 2008/09. Politically, the program has benefited

¹⁴ Materials and updates are posted on the website developed for the Project. See THP-Plus Statewide Implementation Project, <http://www.thplusplus.org> (last visited Sept. 20, 2008).

from strong bipartisan support from a few prominent state political figures, specifically former California State Senate *Pro Tem* John Burton, a Democrat, and current California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, a Republican.

Figure 3.

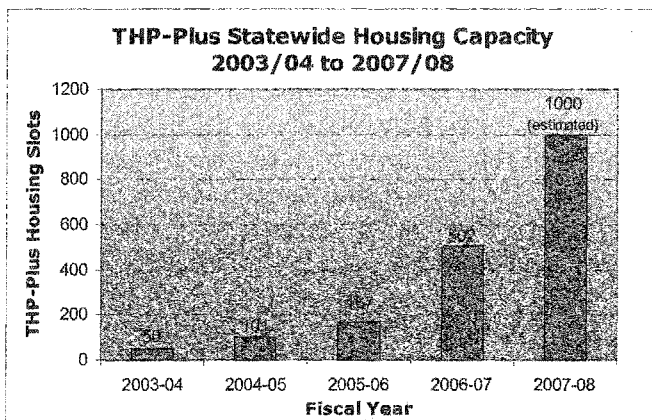
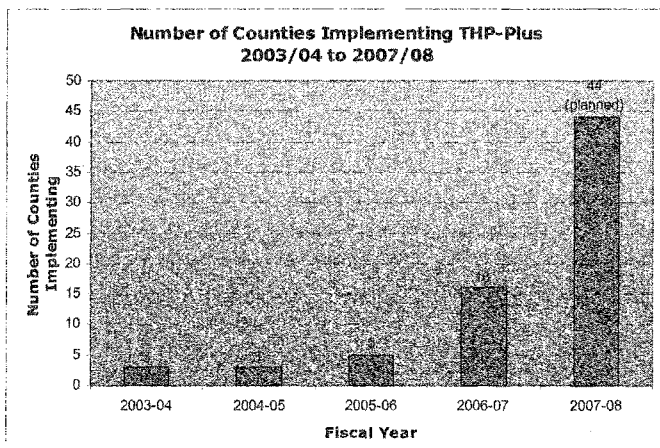


Figure 4.



D. THP-Plus Program Structure and Services

Program policies and procedures for THP-Plus are found in the California Social Service Standards Manual.¹⁵ The program policies reference the California Welfare and Institutions Code,¹⁶ the Health and Safety Code,¹⁷ and the Civil Code.¹⁸

The administration of THP-Plus reflects the structure of California's child welfare system. California is one of 11 states with a state-supervised, county-administered child welfare system, which places considerable administrative and financial responsibility on each of California's 58 counties. Like California's child welfare services, THP-Plus is administered by county governments, with state-level oversight by the California Department of Social Services (CDSS). Prior to implementing THP-Plus, counties must file a THP-Plus Plan with CDSS that outlines the local need, number of youth to be served, projected budget, service model, fee-for-service rate, and implementation schedule. Most counties elect to subcontract THP-Plus housing management and services to local nonprofit service providers, though some counties provide services directly. CDSS develops the statewide program regulations, determines county funding allocations, and approves county plans and program and budget reports.

Individuals eligible to participate in THP-Plus are defined as young adults ages 18 to 24 who have aged out of foster care (including those who were supervised by probation departments but living in out-of-home placements funded by federal Title IV-E foster care funds). Eligible young adults may receive up to 24 months, which need not be continuous, of THP-Plus housing and supportive services, and may access the program in any county in California that operates a THP-Plus program, depending on availability of a funded THP-Plus slot in that county.

¹⁵ California –DSS-Manual-SS, Service Program No. 9: Transitional Housing Placement Program, Ch. 30-900 (2004), available at <http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/ord/entres/getinfo/pdf/ssman4.pdf>.

¹⁶ CAL. WELF. & INST. CODE §§ 602, 10553, 10554, 11403(a)(1), 11403.1 – 11403.4, 15200(c), 16522, 16522.1 -16522.6, 1896.6 (West 2008).

¹⁷ CAL. HEALTH & SAFETY CODE §§ 1502(a)(1), 1503.5(a), 1559.110, 1559.115, 50580 (West 2008).

¹⁸ CAL. CIV. CODE §§ 1940 – 1954.1 (West 2008).

Program regulations outline a few different service models for THP-Plus. The scattered-site model consists of individual rental units that are leased within larger rental properties scattered throughout the community, where youth live either alone or with a roommate. This model can include housing in college dormitories. Some scattered-site programs allow participants to keep or take over the lease for the unit at completion of the THP-Plus program, while others require participants to vacate the housing unit upon program completion. The single-site model consists of a single property that is either owned or rented by the THP-Plus provider, where all of the housing units or bedrooms in the property are used for THP-Plus. In the host family model, a former foster youth lives in a family setting with one or more adults (often former foster parents) with whom they have a long-term caring, committed relationship.

All THP-Plus programs must provide participants with a minimum of 15 specified supportive services, either directly or through referral:

1. Coordination with the Independent Living Program (ILP) to meet the goals outlined in the participant's Transitional Independent Living Plan (TILP);
2. Case management;
3. 24-hour crisis intervention and support;
4. Individual and group therapy;
5. Educational advocacy and support;
6. Assistance to pursue college or other post-secondary training;
7. Job readiness training and support;
8. Mentoring;
9. Services to build and support relationships with family and community;

10. System of payment for utilities, telephone, and rent;
11. Allowance adequate to purchase food and other necessities;
12. Apartment furnishings, provided directly or through a stipend;
13. Assistance in securing an affordable housing unit (rent no more than 30% of gross income) at completion of the program, if occupancy of the THP-Plus housing unit is time-limited;
14. Aftercare services, including support groups and referrals to community resources;
15. Individual THP-Plus savings accounts, into which \$50 is deposited monthly by the THP-Plus provider for each participant.

Community-based providers for THP-Plus must be certified by the contracting county. Certification requires documentation of compliance in five areas: California Welfare and Institutions Codes; Transitional Independent Living Plan (TILP) requirements; participant rights to due process and confidentiality; housing statutes, including fair housing and housing safety laws; and employee regulations, including criminal background checks.

E. Implementation Accomplishments and Challenges

In fiscal year 2006/07, the first year of large-scale implementation of THP-Plus throughout California, the THP-Plus Statewide Implementation Project surveyed implementing counties and their subcontracted nonprofit providers to produce a THP-Plus Annual Report outlining program achievements and challenges. Data on participant outcomes was solicited from local THP-Plus programs, as a standardized statewide system for collecting detailed program outcome information had not yet been developed. Examples of outcomes from two local THP-Plus programs, serving a combined total of more than 200 young adults during the fiscal year, included over 80 percent of participants secured employment; over 75 percent of participants in services for at least a

year enrolled in post-secondary education; and over 90 percent remained in THP-Plus housing or transitioned to another stable housing option after one year in the program.¹⁹ These results are particularly positive in comparison to the poor outcomes identified in prior research on former foster youth in early adulthood; a 2005 study found that only 40 percent of 19-year-old former foster youth were employed, less than 12 percent were enrolled in two-year or four-year colleges, and one in seven had experienced homelessness since leaving foster care.²⁰

As part of the fiscal year 2006/07 Annual Report, THP-Plus participants from 12 programs in 9 counties completed participant satisfaction surveys in which they were asked to rate their satisfaction with a variety of THP-Plus program components. Overall, the survey respondents reported a positive experience in THP-Plus. Of the 136 young people who answered all sections of the survey, more than 84 percent rated the safety, quality, and location of their THP-Plus housing as "excellent" or "good." Of the supportive services that were rated, all received "excellent" or "good" ratings from over 80 percent of respondents. In terms of total satisfaction with THP-Plus, 93 percent of respondents rated the program overall as "excellent" or "good."²¹

Contracted nonprofit providers were also surveyed to identify implementation successes and challenges. Best practices reported by THP-Plus providers included one-on-one case management with small caseloads; coordination with Independent Living Programs and other community-based resources; service customization for special populations such as young parents or individuals with substance abuse issues; proactive approaches to minimizing roommate conflicts, such as limiting the number of participants sharing a housing unit to no more than two; and learning from more experienced providers. Challenges included structuring programs to respect participants' rights and responsibilities as legal adults, housing management issues, including relationships with landlords and compliance with fair housing statutes, and assisting THP-Plus participants to secure afford-

¹⁹ See SARA KIMBERLIN, THP-PLUS ANNUAL REPORT: FISCAL YEAR 2006-07 23 (THP-Plus Statewide Implementation Project 2007), available at <http://www.thpplus.org/THP-PlusAnnualReport.pdf>.

²⁰ See COURTNEY ET AL., *supra* note 3.

²¹ See KIMBERLIN, *supra* note 19, at 6.

able permanent housing after completion of the program.²²

Implementing counties also identified a number of best practices and outstanding challenges in the administration of local THP-Plus programs. County administrators found that technical assistance publications and templates - including a detailed step-by-step guide to planning, applying for, and contracting out THP-Plus programs - were helpful guidelines for new local programs. Other best practices included soliciting widespread community involvement in the initial planning process; streamlining the contracted provider certification process; modifying fee-for-service rates for populations requiring more intensive services, such as young parents; and funding a variety of THP-Plus service models at the local level, to accommodate the diverse needs of former foster youth. Continuing challenges in program administration included regional coordination of county-based THP-Plus programs, identifying best practices for program evaluation, and monitoring contracted THP-Plus providers. State-level budget uncertainty also created significant implementation challenges. THP-Plus is now funded through an annual General Fund appropriation, and California's state budgeting process is often significantly delayed, resulting in late determination of the total THP-Plus program budget allocation. Subsequently delayed notification of funding allocations for individual counties makes local budgeting and program planning challenging.²³

As more counties have begun implementing THP-Plus, some additional regulatory questions and challenges have been identified. The initial THP-Plus regulations were modeled on those for the Transitional Housing Placement Program (THPP), an independent living placement option for minors in foster care. Some of the language and restrictions carried over from the THPP regulations into the THP-Plus regulations are inappropriate for THP-Plus. Such regulations need to be revised because THP-Plus participants are independent legal adults rather than minors and dependents of the court. Developing an appropriate formula for calculating allowable THP-Plus fee-for-service rates

²² See generally KIMBERLIN, *supra* note 19 (describing the many challenges recently emancipated youth face in terms of housing, notwithstanding the THP-Plus program).

²³ See KIMBERLIN, *supra* note 19, at 25 (explaining that many counties were forced to delay implementation of their housing programs due to cash-flow problems, but indicating that more predictable funding allocations would help resolve this problem).

has also been challenging. Other issues still to be clarified in regulations or through legislative action include the content and format of program evaluation data required to be reported, and clarification of eligibility criteria for young adult participants and for host families.

CONCLUSION

Projected to serve over 1,200 former foster youth in fiscal year 2007/08, with evidence of high participant satisfaction and positive program outcomes, California's THP-Plus program is making a significant difference in the lives of hundreds of former foster youth across the state. As Frank Motto, a THP-Plus county representative, commented: "Before, youth would leave the foster care system and that would be it – they'd end up on the street or who knows where. Now we have the type of program that can help them be successful."²⁴

Challenges still remain in fine-tuning THP-Plus program regulations, promoting best practices in implementation, and establishing robust evaluation processes. Additionally, questions arise about how THP-Plus coincides with legislative proposals currently in Congress to expand federal funding for foster care services to age 21. Nonetheless, California's THP-Plus program has rapidly grown to serve a significant proportion of the state's former foster youth transitioning to adulthood and has sustained significant political and financial support even within a difficult state budget climate. Thus, this program may be a productive model for exploration by other jurisdictions seeking effective and sustainable strategies for improving the adult outcomes of former foster youth.

²⁴ See KIMBERLIN, *supra* note 19, at 29.

