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THRIVING TOGETHER: JOB SKILLS TRAINING IN PENNSYLVANIA ANIMAL SHELTERS FOR YOUTH AGING OUT OF FOSTER CARE: A FORMATIVE EVALUATION OF THE HAND2PAW PROGRAM & TOOLKIT DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Youth aging out of foster care need access to programs that teach translatable job skills. Traditional programs are reported to be ineffective for youth, as they focus on hard job skill development and neglect to focus on developing the whole-person (Edelstein & Lowstein, 2014). If youth lack self-esteem and self-efficacy, they are less likely to perform job duties such as being on time, following directions, trying unknown tasks, and other skills necessary for job retention (Edelstein & Lowenstein, 2014). Programs involving animals have been increasingly utilized in settings that work with people who have experienced adversity and have proven to enhance social/emotional development. Hand2Paw, a Philadelphia non-profit, which provides job skills training to youth through working with shelter animals, identified two community needs: job skills training for youth, and positive training programs for shelter animals. Studies have suggested that at-risk youth are averse to programming that feels paternalistic (Brown & Wilderson, 2010), therefore Hand2Paw utilizes an empowerment approach and encourages youth to become providers of a community service rather than receivers of a service. The following dissertation first seeks to explore the attitudes and beliefs of older foster youth toward participation in the Hand2Paw program. This study utilized structured, qualitative interviews with 7 program graduates and subsequently analyzed findings. Main themes identified included increased self-esteem and feelings of empowerment, development of boundaries, increased patience, empathy, communication skills, introspective skills, and a sense of belonging. Using results from the qualitative study, this dissertation also includes a structured toolkit for programs like Hand2Paw, which outlines group and individual activities embedded in an animal assisted setting, designed to increase job readiness for at-risk youth.

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Dissertation

Degree Name

Doctor of Social Work (DSW)

First Advisor

Dr. Johanna K.P. Greeson

Second Advisor

Dr. Page Buck, LSW

Keywords

Animal assisted intervention, job skills, youth, aging out, foster care, self-esteem, self-efficacy, shelter animals

Subject Categories

Social and Behavioral Sciences | Social Work

THRIVING TOGETHER: JOB SKILLS TRAINING IN PENNSYLVANIA ANIMAL
SHELTERS FOR YOUTH AGING OUT OF FOSTER CARE: A FORMATIVE
EVALUATION OF THE HAND2PAW PROGRAM & TOOLKIT DEVELOPMENT

Alexis Walsh, MSW, LSW

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in

Social Work

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

In

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Degree of Doctor of Social Work

July 7, 2020

Dr. Johanna K.P. Greeson
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to every animal who has lost his or her life in a shelter. You are loved, respected, and remembered. My hope is to spread the message that shelter animals who have experienced trauma and loss are just as deserving of a loving home as any other pet; they need patience and guidance to understand the expectations that were never taught to them. Just as any human, our history is reflected through our actions. If we can find the courage to embrace our inner compassion, we can make the world a better place, one step at a time. *Pixie and Lova – I hope you are running free.*

This dissertation is also dedicated to youth who have had to face adversity. I hope you know that your experience makes you beautiful and that you are loved. You have the power to change the world and the gift of experience to guide you on that journey.

May we have the courage as a society to accept the trauma inflicted on fellow humans and animals, and be compassionate enough to encourage second chances and take the time to reflect on how each of our actions impacts the world and those who have suffered.

“Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambitions inspired, and success achieved”
– *Hellen Keller*

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To Tristan, my baby boy, who inspires me to keep fighting to make the world a better place. Your smile lights up my soul and reminds me of all that is good.

I'd also like to express thanks to my parents, Patricia and Lawrence Noccolino. The countless nights of dinnertime thought-provoking conversations always challenged me to critically think as I got older and the questions got harder. Because of your support and nurturing, I've been able to fight through many adverse experiences.

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A special thanks to Penny Ellison and Magdalena Kornacka who have built a beautiful and inspirational program working with youth and shelter animals. Your work has already changed the lives of so many, and I cannot wait to see how many more you'll touch.

ABSTRACT

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Alexis Walsh, MSW, LSW

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Johanna K.P. Greeson

Youth aging out of foster care need access to programs that teach translatable job skills. Traditional programs are reported to be ineffective for youth, as they focus on hard job skill development and neglect to focus on developing the whole-person (Edelstein & Lowstein, 2014). If youth lack self-esteem and self-efficacy, they are less likely to perform job duties such as being on time, following directions, trying unknown tasks, and other skills necessary for job retention (Edelstein & Lowenstein, 2014). Programs involving animals have been increasingly utilized in settings that work with people who have experienced adversity and have proven to enhance social/emotional development. Hand2Paw, a Philadelphia non-profit, which provides job skills training to youth through working with shelter animals, identified two community needs: job skills training for youth, and positive training programs for shelter animals. Studies have suggested that at-risk youth are averse to programming that feels paternalistic (Brown & Wilderson, 2010), therefore Hand2Paw utilizes an empowerment approach and encourages youth to become providers of a community service rather than receivers of a service. The following dissertation first seeks to explore the attitudes and beliefs of older foster youth toward participation in the Hand2Paw program. This study utilized structured, qualitative interviews with 7 program graduates and subsequently analyzed findings. Main themes identified included increased self-esteem and feelings of empowerment, development of boundaries, increased patience, empathy, communication skills, introspective skills, and a sense of belonging. Using results from the qualitative study, this dissertation also includes a structured toolkit for programs like Hand2Paw, which outlines group and individual activities embedded in an animal assisted setting, designed to increase job readiness for at-risk youth.

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Background and Significance

Adolescents account for over one third of the 500,000 youth in the United States' child welfare system (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Older youth ranging from 18 to 21 years who are emancipated face the grueling challenge of navigating life after aging out of care. Often times, the youth are not provided with the supports and skills needed to become successful (Reilly, 2003). As a result, youth who age out of foster care are more likely to experience unstable employment and lower earnings compared to youth who have not resided in the foster care system (Edelstein & Lowenstein, 2014). Youth aging out of care face adverse challenges that impact the quality of their lives. According to Reilly (2003), "many former foster youth live on the streets, lack the money to meet basic living expenses, and fail to maintain regular employment" (p. 742).

The likelihood of trauma for older youth in foster care who are preparing for emancipation from the system is increased, as they are expected to learn to navigate the transition to adulthood without traditional family-based support, which can lead to emotional and behavioral difficulties (Bullis & Davis, 1996). As a result, the youth experience decreased employment prospects and decreased self-esteem, which can result in higher levels of mental health issues, fewer economic assets and aspirations, and feelings of isolation (Cooley, Thompson, & Wojciak, 2016). Building soft job skills, such as emotion regulation, interpersonal skills, and conflict resolution is imperative (Edelstein & Lowenstein, 2014). Without these skills, it is impossible to thrive and grow motivated in a work environment.

Despite the efforts of Supervised Independent Living (SIL) programs and other federally funded job readiness programs, youth who age out still struggle in the employment arena (Edelstein & Lowenstein, 2014). Brown and Wilderson (2010) report that older youth in

independent living programs may also need to develop mentoring programs that empower the youth, as “their experience may make them especially resistant to programming that feels paternalistic” (p. 1471). Research suggests there is a need for innovative programs and approaches to not only provoke interest in older youth in care, but to help them to obtain applicable job skills, which are dependent upon their ability to engage in a program and their attitude towards the program.

One of the SIL programs that is working to tackle issues of job readiness for these youth is the West Chester Valley Youth House (VYH) campus in Pennsylvania, which houses youth in attempt to help them acquire life skills to successfully transition into adulthood. In addition to their mandatory life skills program the youth receive as part of their involvement in the program, groups of youth were offered slots to participate in a paid job skills training at the Brandywine Valley SPCA in West Chester, PA through the Hand2Paw. Hand2Paw houses their programs within an animal shelter in order to help homeless animals while simultaneously working with at-risk youth interns to develop job skills. Hand2Paw’s main location serves youth in Philadelphia through its primary partnership with Pennsylvania SPCA (PSPCA) and Animal Control Care Team (ACCT), which accept youth from various programs, including VYH’s Achieving Independence Center, Covenant House, and other programs that provide wrap-around services. Hand2Paw has also hosted a number of internships for Master of Social Work students from West Chester University in order to create learning opportunities in the animal assisted interventions field for emerging social workers.

Hand2Paw utilizes the natural impact of the Human-Animal Bond (HAB), as a method to increase self-esteem and tackle issues of job readiness (Fine, 2010) for older youth at-risk of aging out of foster care. The program strives to empower young adults to take charge of their

lives, learn real marketable skills, and pursue fulfilling employment through internships working with homeless animals (Hand2Paw, 2017).

While it is hypothesized that the program is achieving its intended goals, there is no current research exploring the youth's attitudes and perceptions towards the Hand2Paw program. According to Hamama et al. (2001), "Using an animal offers nurturance through a presentation of unconditional acceptance and interaction. The experience of a client interacting with an animal can provide knowledge about boundaries and limit setting" (p. 1976). It is reasonable to believe that if self-esteem increases through a relationship with the internship supervisor and interactions with animals, the youth will experience improved levels of motivation and job-related social skills. These outcomes are dependent upon the youth's interpretation and experience within the program.

Given the gap in our knowledge regarding the attitudes and beliefs of older youth in care toward an animal assisted job training program, this research project explored the following research question: What are the attitudes and beliefs of older foster youth toward participation in the Hand2Paw program as a mechanism to increase their self-esteem and job-related social skills?

This dissertation is divided into two parts. Part 1 is a qualitative study that utilized semi-structured interviews with 7 youth graduates of the Hand2Paw program. The interviews explored the attitudes and beliefs of youth participants in the program and what factors they believed made this experience different than others they had been involved in previously. Part 2 of this dissertation includes the development of a preliminary toolkit for working with older youth in care to cultivate self-esteem and self-efficacy in a job skills training setting in an animal shelter. This toolkit is intended to be utilized by staff of the Hand2Paw program and/or similar programs

that work with older youth in foster care and shelter animals. In addition to staff who are employed by Hand2Paw, there are also Master of Social Work interns who are placed within the program as part of their field placement requirements. They are responsible for working with both the youth and animals, while simultaneously developing foundational social work skills required by the MSW program they are enrolled in. This toolkit is intended to serve as a preliminary, structured guide for MSW students to utilize as part of their learning in a human-animal program, focusing on job skill development with older youth in foster care.

Employment and Youth in Foster Care

Foster care was intended to be a temporary intervention to help children and families and then reunite them. The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) reported in 2019 that approximately 17,507 youth were emancipated from the foster care system (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, AFCARS Report, 2019), which represents 7% of the total foster care population that year. Emancipation and/or aging out of foster care occurs when youth reach the legal age of majority, prior to or without ever being reunified, adopted, or achieving other permanent placement options, such as guardianship. When aging out occurs, this means the youth are no longer eligible to receive the support, resources, or programming provided when they were part of the foster care system. Depending upon the State, this can occur between the ages of 18 through 21. Some of these youth remain in contact with their families and have social support, but some do not and are left without support and expected to independently navigate the obstacles of transitioning to adulthood (Greenson, 2010).

As part of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) (P.L. 105-89), policymakers clearly outlined the necessity of a permanent placement for a child that meets their

developmental, educational, and overall needs, but needed to develop a plan for youth who were not reunified or adopted. Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA), was developed for youth of aging out of the foster care system who had not had family reunification, relative placement, adoption, or legal guardianship. APPLA is the last resort for youth whom the system has ruled out all above noted options and is the least desirable outcome. At the bottom line, when a young person has the goal of APPLA, the system is considered to have failed.

Studies have found youth who have aged out of the foster care system are likely to have lower employment rates and lower wages (Courtney & Hook, 2011). A combination of studies from 1999-2008 that examined the linkage of poor employment outcomes utilized data from Unemployment Insurance (UI) records accounting for over 17,203 ($n=17,203$) youth and their employment outcomes (Dworsky, 2005; Goerge et al., 2002; Singer, 2006, Macomber et al., 2008; McMillen & Tucker, 1999). Hook and Courtney (2011) synthesized these studies and report, “former foster youth are less likely to be employed and earn substantially less than the general population of youth and youth from low income families” (p. 1856). This drives researchers to the conclusion that there is a dire need for evaluation of programs that work to help identify: (a) why foster youth are less likely to be successfully employed, and (b) identify effective programming that addresses the underlying issues of employment obstacles.

Current Approaches: Independent Living and Mentor Programs

In 1999 the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act (CFCIP) (Public Law No: 106-169), was passed after it was introduced in the House of Representatives as H.R. 3443 to amend the Social Security Act. This aimed to improve Independent Living Programs for youth ages 16 through 18 leaving foster care, funded by grants allocated to individual States (Goerge

et. al, 2002). CFCIP offers funding assistance to programs that address self-sufficiency development in youth necessary for their transition to adulthood. This included education, employment, housing assistance, mental health support, and financial literacy.

CFCIP still did not address the gap in unemployment for this particular population which led to the formation of the Educational and Training Vouchers Program (ETV) in 2002, which added \$60,000 in federal funding to programs that focused on post-secondary education and job training for youth up to 18. Youth were not eligible past this age to receive funding or services until the passing of the Foster Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (H.R. 6893/P.L. 110-351), enacted in 2008. FCA extended benefits for youth through the age of 21 and extended the age that youth were able to remain eligible for foster care related services and funding.

Part of this included States providing Independent Living Programs (ILP) for youth ages 18-21 years old in addition to educational assistance, self-development, and career development services to substitute for the skills or necessities a family would normally provide for the youth (Goerge et. al, 2002). Greeson and colleagues (2015) found that these programs were not more effective than services as usual with respect to increasing social support for youth participating in independent living programs. The study suggests that further research and modified programming is necessary to address social support for older youth in care and that the ILP model is not achieving intended outcomes.

Another foundational and frequently utilized program model for older youth in care are mentor programs. These programs work to help youth develop self-esteem that they may lack, express feelings and emotions appropriately, and form/maintain healthy relationships with a positive adult role model (Williams, 2011). A form of mentoring known as natural mentoring is

“the presence of a caring, supportive nonparental adult from within the youth’s social network” (noted by Thompson, Greeson, & Brunsink, 2016). A systematic review of natural mentoring literature found that natural mentoring is a promising approach and is associated with improved overall well-being for foster youth (Thompson, Greeson, & Brusink, 2016). While this research suggests that natural mentoring may have more positive effects than ILPs for older youth in care, it is imperative that programs continue to be developed that have innovate approaches to not only cultivate relationships with youth aging out of foster care, but also helping them to build appropriate job skills.

Job Related Social Skills and Self Esteem

Currently, 25 states have extended foster care to the age of 21, including Washington, D.C. States that have expanded foster care eligibility until age 21 require youth: (1) are completing secondary education or programming, (2) enrolled in a program which provides vocational or post-secondary education, (3) participate in a program that removes barriers to employment, (4) are employed for at least 80 hours per month, and/or (5) unable to complete the above mentioned due to a medical condition that hinders participation (Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, P.L. 110-351). Employment programs for this population have been identified as a key element to success in helping youth to have more positive outcomes navigating the transition to adulthood (Hook & Courtney, 2011). Additionally, a study recently conducted by Courtney et. al (2017) suggested that youth reported the ineffectiveness of being unable to receive continued government services upon aging out. Their feedback displays the ineffectiveness of the current structure of the foster care system in relation to aging out of care, despite the age being increased in 50% of States. The study also called for an increase in programming that considered strengths and challenges of older youth in care

(Courtney et. al, 2017). Youth additionally reported optimism for their future and were interested in developing personal goals set for themselves with the proper supports in place.

Soft job skills have been identified through research of current employment programs as paramount. Edelstein and Lowstein (2014) explain, “given the likelihood of a trauma history for youth transitioning out of foster care, emphasizing the development of such skills in employment programs could be especially important, and setting goals for their attainment – instead of a goal of increased wages or hours worked – may be appropriate for some programs” (p. 12). An innovative approach to programming is necessary, according to current research, in order to address interpersonal skills, emotional regulation, self-esteem, and other soft job skills needed for success in the workplace environment.

Programs that focus on developing social skills in foster care youth have proven in many studies to be effective, especially for youth who struggle with low social competence (Williams, 2011). The four categories used to describe the study of social skills according to Williams (2011) are:

“(1) *self-related* – accepting consequences, ethical behavior, expressing feelings, positive attitude towards self, responsible behavior, and self-care; (2) *environmental behaviors* – care for the environment, dealing with emergencies, etc.; (3) *task-related behaviors* – asking and answering questions, following directions, group work, on-task behavior, and quality of work; (4) *interpersonal behaviors* – accepting authority, coping with conflict, gaining attention, greeting others, helping others, positive attitude” (p. 65).

Programs need to work to address these areas with youth who are in foster care, as they are inherently at-risk to struggle with the above noted due to the nature of the trauma they have experienced. They can help youth set goals targeted at the emotional wellbeing of the youth. If the youth are not emotionally stable or struggling with low self-esteem, it is likely they will not be motivated or interested in showing up to a program or job. Even if the youth do show up, they will be less likely to have positive interactions or excel in the workplace without proper social skills.

Connecting Self-Esteem, Social Skills, and Self-Efficacy Theory

According to Bandura (1994), “Perceived self-efficacy is defined as people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave” (p.2). Albert Bandura’s Self-Efficacy Theory is comprised of four parts: Mastery performance, verbal persuasion, vicarious experience, and somatic and emotional states.

Mastery Performance tells us that people will only attempt to do things they reasonably believe they can. For example, if you were asked to climb Mount Everest, but have never climbed even a small mountain, you would not attempt. If you had climbed smaller mountains and been successful, you may be more inclined to attempt to tackle this challenge compared to the person that has no experience. This phase is applicable to youth aging out of foster care when entering the work place; they are often expected to complete tasks that they have not before and may have never been taught in their personal lives, which can leave them feeling defeated before even attempting. In fact, the youth may even see these tasks as threats and lose self-confidence in their ability to face challenges (Bandura, 1994). For instance, training programs, internships, or

professional development workshops are used to help individuals practice and feel more confident/competent when applying their knowledge in their workplace. To strengthen a person's sense of self-efficacy, they must practice and work through obstacles successfully.

Vicarious Experience can be described as watching the success or failure of others, like you, succeed or fail at a task. If you watch someone that you identify with on some level complete a task successfully, you will feel more inclined to try the task yourself, and vice versa. In the early stages of life, children watch their parents, for example, use utensils, talk, etc. and learn to model the behaviors. If youth enrolled in a job skills program watch others successfully watch their peers complete tasks, they will then feel the courage to attempt the given task.

Verbal Persuasion is when others verbally encourage or praise a person after they complete a task successfully. This can help to foster development and inspire youth to want to continue trying to develop and continue working towards their goals.

Somatic and Emotional states are how a person perceives and interprets their emotional and physical reactions in intense moments (Bandura, 1994). According to Bandura (1994), "People who have a high sense of self efficacy are likely to view their state of affective arousal as an energizing facilitator of performance, whereas those who are beset by self-doubts regard their arousal as a debilitator" (p. 3). The four stages can be seen in relation to one another through Figure 1 below.

Figure 1
Stages of Self-Efficacy Development



After understanding the components of Self-Efficacy Theory, we see how self-esteem and social skills are key components to building increased self-esteem in youth seeking job skills training. It is impossible to create higher levels of perceived self-efficacy without creating enhanced social skills as such a large part is observation of others that one can identify with completing a task. Through working with the animals, a safe adult, and a group of peers in which the youth can identify with, Hand2Paw hopes to increase the youth's soft job skills through increasing perceived self-efficacy, self-esteem, and social skills.

Introduction to Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI)

To innovatively address some of the previously noted issues, some programs have begun utilizing Animal Assisted Interactions or therapies as an approach to connect with the youth. An Animal Assisted Activity or Intervention (AAA/AAI) is defined by Fine (2010): “AAA provides opportunities for motivational, educational, recreational, and/or other therapeutic benefits to enhance quality of life. AAAs are delivered in a variety of environments by specially trained professionals, paraprofessionals, and/or volunteers” (p. 34). These interventions are being developed at a rapid pace, especially with younger populations. The animal’s presence can serve as non-judgmental and without bias as is not the case with human-human interactions. According to Kruger and Serpell (2010), “the mere presence of the animal, its spontaneous behaviors, and its availability for interaction may provide opportunities and confer benefits that would be impossible, or much harder, to obtain in their absence” (p. 37). Adding the component of spontaneous interactions with animals in conjunction with a trained professional may increase positive outcomes or make working towards goals more enjoyable.

The only identified study examining youth in foster care and AAIs is a dissertation conducted by a PhD student. Surprise (2013) conducted a quantitative study to determine correlation between prosocial behavior/social competence increases when utilizing animal assisted therapy and therapeutic horticulture (Surprise, 2013). Although the study only included a sample of 10 ($N=10$), the results indicated a relationship between the use of the combined therapies in the promotion of prosocial behavior at a confidence level of .05 (Surprise, 2013). Although there are weaknesses in the study design and the confidence level is not higher, it does indicate that there were changes in behavior of youth when introducing them to AAI.

A research study conducted with 73 incarcerated youth working with shelter dogs proved that AAI suggested that, “Youth participating in the dog training intervention showed through their journal writing greater social-cognitive growth, more attachment, and more positive attitudes toward the animal-assisted intervention compared to youth in the control group” (Syzmanski et. al, 2018). This study adds to the body of evidence showing there is potential for positive outcomes with at-risk youth and animal interventions, most specifically in this case, with shelter animals.

Although AAIs are being utilized across the world, there is not enough known about youths’ perceptions of their experiences in such programs. To begin understanding the changes that occur, it is imperative that we begin to delve into the perceptions and experiences of youth through asking them to share what aspects of AAI programming felt impactful to them. Studies have been conducted within prisons, juvenile facilities, and other settings, but there are no research studies to date examining job skill development, specifically, for youth aging out of foster care working with homeless animals and their experience of participation in such a program.

AAI and Mentoring: Implications of combining AAIs with element of mentoring

Barnow and colleagues (2015) conducted a study examining efficacy of programs for foster youth that impacted future employment in Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago. The study revealed that length of time spent in a program led to increased chances of employment, successful enrollment in a continuing education program, and/or completing a GED program. The study also discussed the statistical significance of increase in all outcomes if youth were enrolled in a job skills preparation program. Similarly, Hand2Paw has analyzed success of future youth and incorporated their feedback into active policy. The result has

extended internships to at least a six month secure placement to increase the likelihood of successful employment subsequent program completion.

DuBois, Holloway, Valentine and Cooper (2002) conducted a meta-analysis of 55 studies of mentor program outcomes. The study found that there were positive outcomes associated with mentor programs, but there is little evidence to suggest it was the program alone and not other services that yielded the positive outcomes. Additionally, the results revealed only modest outcomes. Mentoring programs were consistent with a small effect size (.14 and .18), which contradicts the notion that mentoring incentives alone are effective for this population (DuBois et al, 2002).

According to Edelstein and Lowenstein (2014), “The literature on employment programs specifically for youth in foster care is limited. Only one local program serving youth aging out of foster care has been rigorously evaluated” (p. 9). There is also a lack of research in the field of AAT (Fine, 2010), especially surrounding interventions with youth aging out of foster care. AAI programs are being developed at a rapid pace; much faster than they are being evaluated.

The Hand2Paw program utilizes the natural mentorship approach in an innovate way. The program groups youth together who have similar experiences and can develop and form their own relationships based on shared experiences, while simultaneously developing a mentoring relationship with program staff. Youth model, learn, and grow from one another, while forming elective and meaningful relationships. Youth also develop relationships with animals and are then inserted into the role of caretaker rather than the receiver of care. Coupling the mentoring component of programming with supplementary supports such as animal assisted interventions could increase probability of intended outcomes and help youth develop meaningful relationships and job-related skills necessary for future successes.

Programming that empowers youth to take charge, not only of themselves, but of another living being, can be empowering and serve as a self-determination tool. Hand2Paw, a program run in a Pennsylvania animal shelter, works with youth in independent living programs (ages 18-21) to address job skills from an AAI perspective. Hand2Paw not only offers a mentor, but also provides youth with interactions with shelter animals and can create a secondary connection to empower youth through providing them with an internship where they are charged with caring for shelter animals. Through this responsibility, it is hypothesized that they will gain job related social skills in their guided interaction with the supervisor and increased self-esteem through their internship caring for and training homeless animals. Due to the lack of research in this area, a study of youth's attitudes towards the program is being proposed in order to address the identified gaps in research areas pertaining to the targeted population and intervention.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Human-Animal Bond Theory

The therapeutic benefits have been recognized since the 1800s, when Florence Nightingale, founder of modern nursing, observed that animals reduced anxiety levels in both children and adults living in psychiatric institutions (Ernst, 2014). Nightingale wrote detailed notes of her observations and discussed the extraordinary benefits of animals on human health. Later, Sigmund Freud, began discussing the benefits of animals in therapeutic settings during the 1930s. Freud used his dog, Jofi, during psychotherapy sessions with clients he was struggling with (Eggiman, 2006). According to Ernst (2014), "Freud would use Jofi to facilitate communication with his patients. He found that many patients initially felt more comfortable talking through Jofi, and that this interaction served as a stepping stone in the therapy" (p. 2).

Following Freud's findings, in the 1960s, child psychotherapist, Boris Levinson, accidentally discovered that a nonverbal 9-year-old boy communicated only when his dog, Jingles, was in therapy sessions (Coren, 2013). After his accidental observation, Levinson began intentionally observing the interaction between children and animal in psychotherapy sessions. After presenting his findings, along with Freud's experiences with Jofi, Levinson became known as the "father of Animal Assisted Therapy" after pushing his book, *Pet-Oriented Child Psychotherapy* (Chandler, 2014). AAIs have continued to expand and evolve since. Many programs work with animals to help develop a connection to the population they are trying to engage through that program.

More recently, the American Veterinary Medical Association's Committee on the Human-Animal Bond defines such as, "a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and other animals that is influenced by behaviors that are essential to the health and well-being of both. This includes, but is not limited to, emotional, psychological, and physical interactions of people, other animals, and the environment" (JAVMA, 1998).

Self-efficacy Theory

Self-efficacy theory examines a person's beliefs in his or her ability to develop/execute behaviors needed to achieve goals. The theory considers a person's confidence in their ability to exert control over their own motivations and behavior. This theory is especially critical to examine, especially when looking at youth aging out of foster care and job skill development. If youth do not feel confident in attempting new tasks or their ability, they are less likely to attempt those tasks (Bandura, 1994).

Although studies have suggested that self-efficacy is built through modeled relationships, less is known about the impact that animal assisted programs have on youth's perceptions of their ability to develop skills in this area through an intervention such as Hand2Paw. This study

intends to explore which skills, if any, youth felt they developed and understand which components of the program helped or did not in order to inform future programming and planning.

Given the lack of research examining youths' perceptions of their own self-efficacy and understanding of participation in AAI programs that address job skill development, the following qualitative study is proposed, guided by a single research question: What are the attitudes and beliefs of older foster youth toward participation in the Hand2Paw program as a mechanism to increase their self-esteem and job-related social skills?

Method

Design and Sample

Data in this study was obtained from seven (n=7) interviews with youth who have successfully completed the Hand2Paw program. The only inclusion criteria was that the youth were close to completing or already completed the program. All procedures were approved by the University of Pennsylvania's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Youth ranged from 18 to 25 years old (M= 21.9, SD=2.6). Two participants identify as male and 5 identify as female. All participants reported that they graduated high school. Number of high schools attended ranged from 1-4 (M=2.0, SD= 1.4). Two youth identified as White, 5 identified as African American. Two participants identified as Hispanic or Latino. Time spent in foster care ranged from less than a year to 18 years (M= 6.4, SD=7.1). Youth reported currently living with family (n=1), living with a biological parent (n=1), living independently (n=1), living in a group home (n=1), living with a girlfriend/boyfriend (n=1), living with friends (n=1), and living in Supervised Independent Living (n=1).

Recruitment and Data Collection

Recruitment of participants was done through phone calls, text messages, and emails. The Program Director provided a list of youth who were willing to participate in interviews to the research team. Youth were subsequently contacted and provided an outline of the study and asked if they were interested participating. Data was collected through individual recorded interviews with each of the seven (n=7) youth. Youth who participated in the program at the Brandywine Valley SPCA location were unable to be reached for interviews, therefore, the data

described in this study is exclusively limited to youth who participated in the Philadelphia location.

Interview Process

Interviewer met youth at various agreeable locations to conduct interviews. Interviews were digitally recorded with prior permission from youth. The interview guide was developed and reviewed by authors prior to utilization and developed using an open-ended approach where youth were asked questions that would allow them to respond without guiding or prompting.

Data Analysis Approach

Interviews were transcribed and subsequently checked for accuracy. Grounded theory data analysis approach was utilized with the first step being open coding. Strauss and Corbin (1998) state, “during open coding, data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences. Events, happenings, objects, and actions/interactions that are found to be conceptually similar in nature or related in meaning are grouped under more abstract concepts called categories” (p. 102). During the second stage of data analysis, focused coding was utilized in order to identify which codes were most significant and frequent based on the data derived from the open coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Finally, axial coding was achieved by making connections between focused codes and identified resembling themes.

Results

A review of the interviews revealed that youth felt connected to program staff, which fostered development of increased self-confidence in comparison to other programs they had been involved in. Their experience and connection to the animals also played a vital role in their personal development, as they were able to shift from being the receiver of a service to the expert providing a service to animals in need. The results of the interviews showed a unanimous positive impact from youth perspectives. Six themes were self-identified by the participants: patience, boundaries and empathy development, increased communication skills, increased introspective skills, genuine care from program staff, sense of belonging/community, and empowerment.

Patience

A common theme identified by youth was the amount of patience developed throughout the program. It was noted that the modeling of patience not only with animals in the program, but with youth themselves was a paramount component in allowing them to develop the skill themselves. Youth reported that through watching program staff model patience with a variety of animals with challenging behaviors, they were able to transfer that to their own reactions and model the patience they saw in their future interactions.

One youth stated: “The Program Director did help me develop more skills, like how to be more patient with people and how to say things that might come off wrong if not said the right way”.

A second youth stated, “I developed a lot of patience. We get a lot of different kind of people that come in that we have to talk to. A lot of them are very nice, some are not so nice. Some take frustration out on us for other things that they may be going through, but I just kind of

learned how to let things like roll off of me because just someone's having a bad day doesn't mean I should take what they say to heart"

A third youth learned patience through the challenging task of learning how to read/interpret animal body language which she concluded in her interview took determination and building stamina in the area of patience. The youth stated, "The number one challenge was picking up on their [animal] behavior. Reading their body language was the hardest part for me and sometimes can still be challenging only because a wagging tail doesn't always mean the same thing. Sometimes emotions can display the same thing, but it can mean something totally different".

Increased Boundaries & Empathy Development

Youth reported that before entering the program they had not been exposed to consistent boundaries in a professional or personal setting. Youth reported that they did not have formal training working with animals prior to entering the Hand2Paw program. Through working with the animals, youth reported an increase in empathy and desire to better their communities. Youth also reported that through this process, they were able to develop increase sense of boundaries, not only through guidance of program staff, but also through learning how to work with animals who have experienced trauma.

One youth stated, "I think of how we relate things to animals. Like humans are the same way as animals and when they are shy and stuff, we have to like take our time and go slow. That's the same thing with humans, to come out of your shell you've just got to go slow and take your time and do things little by little"

A second youth stated, “Whenever I see a loose pet or a stray cat or dog I try my best to get them, take them where they need to be. See if they have an owner. Whereas before Hand2Paw, I probably wouldn’t have cared much. I was very ignorant. I wouldn’t have understood the dangers I know now for a stray pet. Now I feel inclined to help”

Another youth reported, “I’d say the biggest thing is not to be scared of animals who are scared. A lot of times when animals are scared, they kind of puff up and make you think, oh I’m scary, when in reality they’re terrified. So instead of approaching them like oh, you’re being bad, you need to listen. It’s more like ‘Hey, that’s okay, have this treat – you’re doing a good job. It is a different way to approach the situation, and because if you’re calm, you can help calm the animal”

Additionally, a youth stated, “The Program Director is amazing because she is very flexible but she does have limits. She gives you room to grow but not like all over the place”.

Communication Skills

Youth reported that as a result of the program, they learned to be more effective communicators, overall. Youth discussed that they felt better able to approach their supervisors when they needed support and to work through a challenge. They also felt that they learned non-verbal communication skills through working with the animals and reading their body language.

One youth stated: “In public and working with people kind of keeps boundaries, so I had to learn more how to communicate with my supervisor and letting management know when today wasn’t a good day, but I was still going to try and give it my best. Just being self-aware.”

A second youth stated: “She [program director] just has a really good way of saying things that could be hard to say to people as well that you might need to bear but other people are like oh, I don’t know how to say that. But she knows how to say it in a way that you don’t feel like you’re being attacked which has influenced me a lot”

A third youth stated, “Stability was a big thing, having a very consistent work schedule where you can kind of see those little issues. It really does pop up. If you’re kind of all over the place, like being a little late or not communicating properly – you can’t make those mistakes over and over again. Stability and communication are such big things because you have to do that when you’re working with animals”.

Introspective Skills

Youth reported that they developed skills and ability to self-reflect and subsequently apply that feedback to future situations. Youth felt that they learned how to accept critical feedback in a way that felt productive rather than punitive.

One youth stated: “What I really enjoyed about Hand2Paw is that the people with Hand2Paw they’re very compassionate. They know how to keep a very professional way about them. They teach you how to separate the difference between personal problems and work issues”.

Another youth stated: “We get a lot of different kind of people that come in that we have to talk to. A lot of them are very nice; some are not so nice. Some take frustration out on us for other things that they may be going through, but I learned to let things roll off of me because someone’s having a bad day doesn’t mean I should take what they say to heart all of the time”

A third youth stated, “It’s hard having to step back and realize that all criticism isn’t an attack, that sometimes it comes from a good place. Like I said, that stability did help and realizing that [program director] and people like them, they’re coming from a great place. Like I knew in my heart of hearts that they’re not being jerks to me and they really want me to learn to improve”

Genuine Care from Program Staff

Youth reported that they felt able to grow through the program due to the safe space created by program staff. Youth reported that although they were in the learning phase, the program staff made them feel like a paramount part of the team.

One youth stated, “They made us feel like coworkers, it was all family there”.

A second youth stated, “The Program Director has definitely made a huge impact because she is like probably the nicest person I’ve ever worked with. Like she put me out of my shell, if that’s a good way to explain it. And the Executive Director, she’s awesome, too – I can be open with her the same way”

A third youth stated, “I’ve been in other programs like this in the past and it was like they were just doing their job”.

Sense of Belonging/Community

Youth reported that being involved with the Hand2Paw program did not feel like program, but rather a family or community. They felt in some cases that the animals fostered the development of that relationships.

One youth reported: “It just felt like I was supposed to be here. I already felt at home”

Another youth stated: “I feel like animals and pets are what drives us to be together. It’s a common interest. Whereas the program staff and I come from three completely different backgrounds and having pets there I felt like created a more comfortable space between me and other people. When you have a pet come in it kind of brings down that barrier and it opens up different conversations”.

A third youth stated, “This one [program] is just full of great people who don’t mind giving their time and energy on you, not necessarily just the animals. And they’re just genuinely fantastic people. A lot of other programs I’ve been in, not necessarily with animals, once again, people are short with you or don’t seem like they really want to be there. But everyone here is kind of ready to help you or do whatever it takes, up and ready to go”

Empowerment and Increased Self-Efficacy

Several of the youth discussed feeling empowered through the program. Rather than receiving a service, they were now the ones delivering a service to animals and people in the community. Through the support of program staff and having a safe space where they felt comfortable communicating their needs, the youth were able to work towards overcoming their own challenges in the workplace and able to shift their focus to helping either the animals or people who entered the store front.

One youth stated: “The fact that we’re learning how to interact with animals and helping them live full lives because just like us, animals can be shy as well and helping them socialize and become adoptable, that’s a big thing”

Another second youth stated, “Working with Hand2Paw tested me in a different way, because again, it goes back to when you are having those days when you don’t want to talk to anybody, you kind of just step out of yourself and realize somebody who walks in that door is going to need help with something with their animals, or they need resources and I signed up to do that”

A third youth stated, “I’ve definitely gotten more confident because I’ve had help and motivation from Hand2Paw and constant pushes to do more stuff”

Outcome Implications

Increased Self-Efficacy

Youth felt a greater sense of ability in themselves to develop skills and solve problems in the future as a result of their work with animals and mentors through Hand2Paw. The emerging themes indicate that youth felt they were provided with mastery, vicarious, modeling, and emotional/physical experiences necessary for developing an increased sense of self-efficacy.

Ability to Connect

The sense of community that the animals created gave youth a common interest and set the foundation for relationship development. The human-animal bond connected youth to program mentors and increased their ability to obtain job readiness skills through foundational connections. These connections allowed for youth to feel safe enough to develop more effective communication skills, increased patience, feel connected/a sense of belonging, and feel empowered not only in their workplace, but in their communities.

Human-Animal Bond and Job Readiness

The results of this study indicate that youth felt a strong connection to program staff and animals. As a result of these connections, youth reported that they experienced an increase in confidence and a subsequent ability to attempt new tasks. Youth felt a connection and desire to help the animals they were working with and as a result were more inclined to show up to the program. This indicates overall that youth feel a sense of increased self-efficacy and motivation when they are the ones delivering a service rather than receiving a service. These results indicate that the human-animal bond can help to facilitate relationships and create a sense of safety for youth to develop human relationships that can foster development in the area of job related skills necessary for future employment.

Discussion

This study gathered qualitative interview data from youth who completed the Hand2Paw program. Hand2Paw works with youth to develop paramount and translatable job skills necessary for navigating the world of employment. The results of this study indicate that youth felt better able to learn in an environment that felt more like a community than a job skills program. Through the transformation of becoming a service provider, youth felt empowered to create real-time change and therefore had a deeper investment in the program and their own success. Through developing connections with the animals, youth felt an increased sense of empowerment and a role-shift where they were evolved from the receiver of a service to the one delivering a service to an animal in need.

Watching other youth that they could relate to is also a paramount component of building self-efficacy. Throughout the program, youth have the opportunity to have program staff model various processes and then they subsequently have opportunities to watch their peers complete these activities and feel more confident tackling the tasks themselves. One of the youth stated, “One of the many things they showed was a hands-on technique, The face you have somebody next to you teaching you exactly what you need to do hands on. They don’t just give you a piece of paper and walk away”. A foundational component of Bandura’s self-efficacy stages of development includes having an expert model the task.

Understanding the complexity of human-animal relationships and how that informs program development is essential to the field of animal assisted interventions. Through assessing the experience of youth, we can increase our understanding of what is effective and what needs to be altered. This study explored how youth felt about themselves and subsequent program

completion. Self-efficacy and self-esteem must be felt and reported by the person themselves and can subsequently inform future research and program development.

Limitations and implications for future research

Limitations of the study include a small sample size. The study had intended to have 10 participants; however, only 7 youth responded and were able to participate in interviews. The same size was likely influenced by several barriers. These include no longer being enrolled in the program and potential lack of transportation. Youth may have also been hesitant to respond to the researcher, a person to whom they had not been connected to within the program. On the other hand, not having a connection to the researcher may have been an asset, if youth were worried about giving feedback about the program. The results and codes were derived through the perspective and interpretation of the researcher, which inherently include researcher bias.

Hand2Paw should continue to build from this dissertation research by including youth in participatory research studies where their experiences are explored through the lens of their personal experience with the program. Ruff & Harrison (2020), conducted a community-based participatory research study exploring perceptions of older youth in foster care. They explored their experience while in foster care, perceptions of barriers to services, and barriers to using and remaining in service programs, in the case the programs were focused on mental health services. Overall, their study reported that youth appreciated being part of the participatory research; that they were hopeful, and had a desire for connection to at least one formal program; and finally, that youth were particularly drawn to informal supports, including relationships with peers during placement changes.

During the Hand2Paw study, one youth reported that she appreciated the space to be able to discuss her experience in the program and that helped with the closure piece of ending the program. This indicates that in the future, youth should be interviewed upon exiting the program in a structured, but open-ended format so that they can share their experiences while the program simultaneously collecting evolving data on how to improve its policies and practices based on youth feedback.

Although the study has a small sample size, it provides essential information related to animal assisted intervention research and attitudes of foster youth involved in this type of program. This study offers research that helps us to better understand the impact of the human-animal bond, mentoring in job skills programs, and the components of the program that may end up proving to be effective in future studies, as reported by youth themselves.

Implications for Practice

This study suggests that animal assisted programming may increase self-esteem and self-efficacy for youth who have experienced adversity, like being in and aging out of foster care. Coupling this type of intervention with the mentoring component provided by staff may increase the probability that youth will experience the anticipated outcomes of the program. For example, youth who do not make an immediate connection with the program mentor or staff have the opportunity to connect with an animal in the program. The common interest of the animal will eventually bring the staff and youth together to collaborate on strategies and skills to help secure a loving home for that animal whether that be through training, working an adoption event, or screening potential adopters for a proper fit. This process will likely help the youth to develop transferable job skills related to relationship development for the purpose of collaborating on a shared task and effective communication strategies, both verbal and non-verbal.

Youth interviews revealed that learning body language in the workplace is imperative and a foundational component to understanding how non-verbal cues can lead to either a positive or negative interaction. Youth reported that they were able to learn body language skills through interacting with the animals, as described in the results section. One youth stated,

“I’d say the biggest thing is not to be scared of animals who are scared. A lot of times when animals are scared, they kind of puff up and make you think, oh I’m scary, when in reality they’re terrified. So instead of approaching them like oh, you’re being bad, you need to listen. It’s more like ‘Hey, that’s okay, have this treat – you’re doing a good job. It is a different way to approach the situation, and because if you’re calm, you can help calm the animal”.

Teaching strategies to help youth actively assess their own body language and behavior is imperative to positive social skill development (Jarolmen, 2018). This can begin with teaching animal behavior and body language to make it feel less personally directed. The lesson can then be applied to human-to-human interactions and assessed further. The prior exposure to animal behavior is likely to increase the youth’s awareness to their own actions and reactions and they are more likely to be receptive to structured feedback in this area.

A sense of community and belonging is also imperative for youth’s sense of security and ability to learn. Without feeling secure, youth will not feel comfortable tackling or attempting new tasks in a job setting. Therefore, creating a space focused on building rapport and relationships will allow for youth to develop skills such as increased ability to feel confident in trying new tasks, ability to connect, address communication obstacles, and develop foundational connections, all necessary for successful accomplishment of a given task. This will also increase the likelihood that they continue to show up to the program rather than avoiding attending.

Developing peer relationships can also foster development in the area of appropriate job social skills and relationships with co-workers. This gives program staff the opportunity to observe and provide structured feedback surrounding boundaries, appropriate workplace conversations, how to build friendships in a place of employment, and how to resolve conflict or disagreements. Creating prior safety and relationships will help the youth to be open to accepting feedback rather than perceiving it to be a criticism and increase the chances they will actively apply the knowledge in future situations.

Throughout the Hand2Paw program, staff model safe animal handling for youth participants in order to ensure both youth and animals remain safe. Shelter animals lack training and require knowledge of safe handling to increase the likelihood that the animal will not bite or scratch. Having a foundational understanding of positive learning theory, animal body language, and safety tools increases the chances that all program participants remain safe. The modeling of safe handling by program staff not only kept youth participants safe, but youth also reported that they were willing to try new tasks after those tasks were modeled first by a trusted adult. During study interviews, youth referred to their lack of experience and hesitancy with trying new tasks in the beginning of the program and through staff and peer modeling, they felt comfortable trying almost any task asked of them. This will be beneficial in their future job placements, as they will have to try new tasks, even when they may be hesitant or unsure if they will be successful.

Incorporating an exit interview as part of both data collection for ongoing evaluation and a closure activity is suggested in this setting as well. Ideally, a person who the youth do not have daily interaction with would complete the interview to ensure the young people feel more open to providing truthful responses and constructive programmatic feedback. Exit interviews also

empower youth to understand that their voice and experience is meaningful and impactful as far as future program policies and structure.

Youth also revealed that there were challenges associated with this type of career path/job skills programming. They were not prepared to deal with the euthanasia, returns of animals, or owner surrenders. Although program staff did address these situations with youth, they would benefit from a formal group or activities surrounding grief and loss of animals.

This study also shows the increased desire for youth to become community change agents and respond when there is an issue in their communities. Results suggest a desire to help animals in need, but there is reason to believe this could transfer to other causes youth may be passionate about. For example, if they feel that their voice and actions are heard through their ability to help animals, they can then observe the immediate outcome? of their action and feel more confident in tackling other community challenges.

In summary, youth participants reported positive experiences regarding their self-esteem and self-efficacy as a result of their participation in the Hand2Paw program. They reported that they experienced an increase in understanding boundaries/empathy, the ability to more effectively communicate, developed the ability to accept structured feedback, felt a strong sense of belonging, and feel empowered to initiate positive change in their communities. The impact of working with shelter animals shifted the perspective for youth and provided them an opportunity to become providers of a service, which felt less paternalistic in nature. Youth also reported feeling increased connection to program staff as a result of their common interest of helping the animals.

APPENDIX

Interview Schedule

1. Please tell me about what job skills you felt you needed to work on before entering the program?

- How did you feel communicating with co-workers before?
- Please talk about your confidence, overall, in previous jobs.
- Can you talk about how you felt before Hand2Paw in communicating with members of the community?
- How do you feel that your work with Hand2Paw helped you with any of these skills?

2. I'd like to hear about your experience as an intern in the Hand2Paw program. Can you talk a little about what you felt was important for you?

- What role do you think the mentors played in your experience throughout the program?
- How was this program different from others you've been involved with in the past?
- How did it feel to go through the program with other youth that may have had some of the same challenges as you?
- In your own words, please describe what aspect(s) of the program were beneficial for you?

3. Next, I'd like to ask if you felt more confident as time went on in the program?

- What skills do you feel that you've gained through the program that would boost your confidence in ability to succeed in a job?
- In your own words, please describe how the program impacted your self-confidence or your ability to feel ready and able to move forward in the job market?
- Can you please explain what you think helped and made this program different from others you may have been involved in?

4. I'd like to ask about the role of the animals in your experience.

- Had you worked with animals before being involved with Hand2Paw?

- What did you learn from the animals that you don't feel you could have learned from other people?
- How do you feel about your role in the community after being involved with this program?
- How do you feel you're able to make a difference in problems you see in the community more than before entering the program?

5. How did training the animals make you feel?

- Did you have previous experience with animals? If so, can you tell me about it?
- What challenges did working with shelter animals present for you?
- How did you feel when working with the animals?
- How did the animals help you to make a connection to program mentors?

6. What advice would you have for incoming interns in the future?

7. In your own words, please describe how the program did or didn't have an impact on you?

That is the end of my questions. Is there anything you would like me to know or would like to add before we end the interview?

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Preliminary Hand2Paw Toolkit: Job skill
development with youth aging out of foster
care and shelter animals

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INTRODUCTION

There has been a steady increase in the utilization of animals in various social services interventions across the United States. Unfortunately, availability of training in this field is geographically disproportionate. Specific geographic areas, including the Greater Philadelphia region, have little to no field placement offerings for social services students interested in pursuing a career in this field. This means that in addition to their academic work, they must volunteer and develop skills outside of their professional time. Additionally, there are minimal internships where youth are able to visualize these services being delivered and practice them while being observed by a trained professional. Being provided the opportunity to improve skills in real time not only increases the chances of safety within the delivery of the intervention, but also increases the likelihood that the service will be delivered with fidelity.

Animal assisted field placements have a unique skill set to offer, but also require increased attention to safety. The intention of this toolkit is to outline hands-on group and individual activity examples that are geared towards working with youth in programs such as Hand2Paw. Not only do AAI programs give youth skills in the animal welfare field, but also help to develop skills related to positive self-development including increased self-esteem, self-efficacy, and appropriate communication skills needed to be successful in cross disciplinary settings. Emotional well-being is paramount to success in the workplace, and attention to both the animal and human is essential to safety and success for both the human and animal involved.

The following toolkit will highlight skills and examples of group and individual activities that can be utilized in such a program as Hand2Paw to encourage development in these areas. The follow examples are objectives that are addressed in such programs and can be replicated in various AAI program settings. The skills outline below are unique to working with shelter animals and not trained therapy animals. Both group and individual activity examples will be outlined in the following sections.

This toolkit was developed to help raise awareness for an increased need for AAI field placements for MSW or other related students. There is an increase in utilization of animal-assisted programs, but not enough opportunities for students to learn the necessary skills in the field. This toolkit will provide a basic framework for students or other related professionals to work with youth aging out of foster care and animals in need of humane and positive training.

“I felt like I could learn if somebody was willing to give me a chance to try and teach myself and to teach me” – Hand2Paw Graduate

QUALIFICATIONS OF THE INTERVENTIONIST

The interventionist guiding these interventions should be trained by the Hand2Paw staff. It takes a multidisciplinary team to make such a program successful. Either a Master of Social Work (MSW) or other mental health-related intern or program staff member are able to replicate these activities in various AAI programs with rescue animals and youth aging out of foster care in collaboration with professional animal trainers.

CONSIDERING TRAUMA IN PROGRAMMING

Hand2Paw considers the background and trauma of youth entering the program and work to infuse trauma-informed related policies and procedures into daily programming to not only help the youth learn the necessary job skills, but to also work towards personal growth. Relationship-focused programmatic policies are utilized to create a program that feels empowering rather than paternalistic for youth. According to Flanagan et. Al (2020), “Relationships represent a fundamental vehicle through which to deliver key social supports to empower youth to manage adversity, express resilience, and leverage career and workforce development (CWD) opportunities” (p. 44).

A systematic review reported that Animal Assisted Interventions implied that AAIs are effective in decreasing symptoms of anxiousness, PTSD, and depression for youth who had experienced child abuse (O’Haire, Guérin, & Kirkham, 2015). Through working with animals, programs can help youth to reduce the previously mentioned feelings in order to focus on skill development necessary for securing and maintaining employment. Without first addressing the underlying stressors, programming is less likely to be effective in meeting its intended goals.

MASLOW AND JOB SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs helps us to understand the foundational needs that must be met before a person is available to develop higher level skills. Many job skill programs have the expectation that youth simply learn to follow workplace directives or show up on time. For many youth who have never had these skills modeled, this is virtually impossible; they need a safe space to make errors and have opportunities to reflect on those with compassion and understanding. For many youth, this takes time and many opportunities for repetition while feeling safe and secure. For these reasons, program time limits should be considered on an individual basis. Some youth develop skills at a faster rate than others. Hand2Paw has extended internships for up to six months based on feedback and observations of intern needs. Adaptation

of program policies that mirror youth need is essential in creating a program that fosters lasting development and successful adoption of skills.

Many programs often do not ask questions related to the physiological needs of participants. For example, if a person has not eaten or had access to food, or did not have a bed to sleep in the night before, their basic physiological needs are not met and therefore they lack feelings of security and will be unable to try new tasks or focus on assigned tasks until their foundational needs are met first.

As each need is secured, a person is able to move to the next phase, as referred to in Figure 1. In order for youth to be available to show up to a program or job placement, they need to have their basic needs met and feel a sense of security through acceptance and relationships with peers and/or other staff. After those needs are met, youth are available to develop meaningful friendships/bonds, learn in a group setting, and experience feelings of accomplishment, respect for themselves, respect for peers, and ability to improve skills/accept structured feedback. At the self-actualization level of development, youth will experience optimal workplace motivation, including ability to solve new problems, ability to master new tasks, and increased self-efficacy (ability to have control over own motivation, behavior, and social environment) (Maslow, 1943).

ADAPTATION OF MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF JOB SKILL DEVELOPMENT IN YOUTH

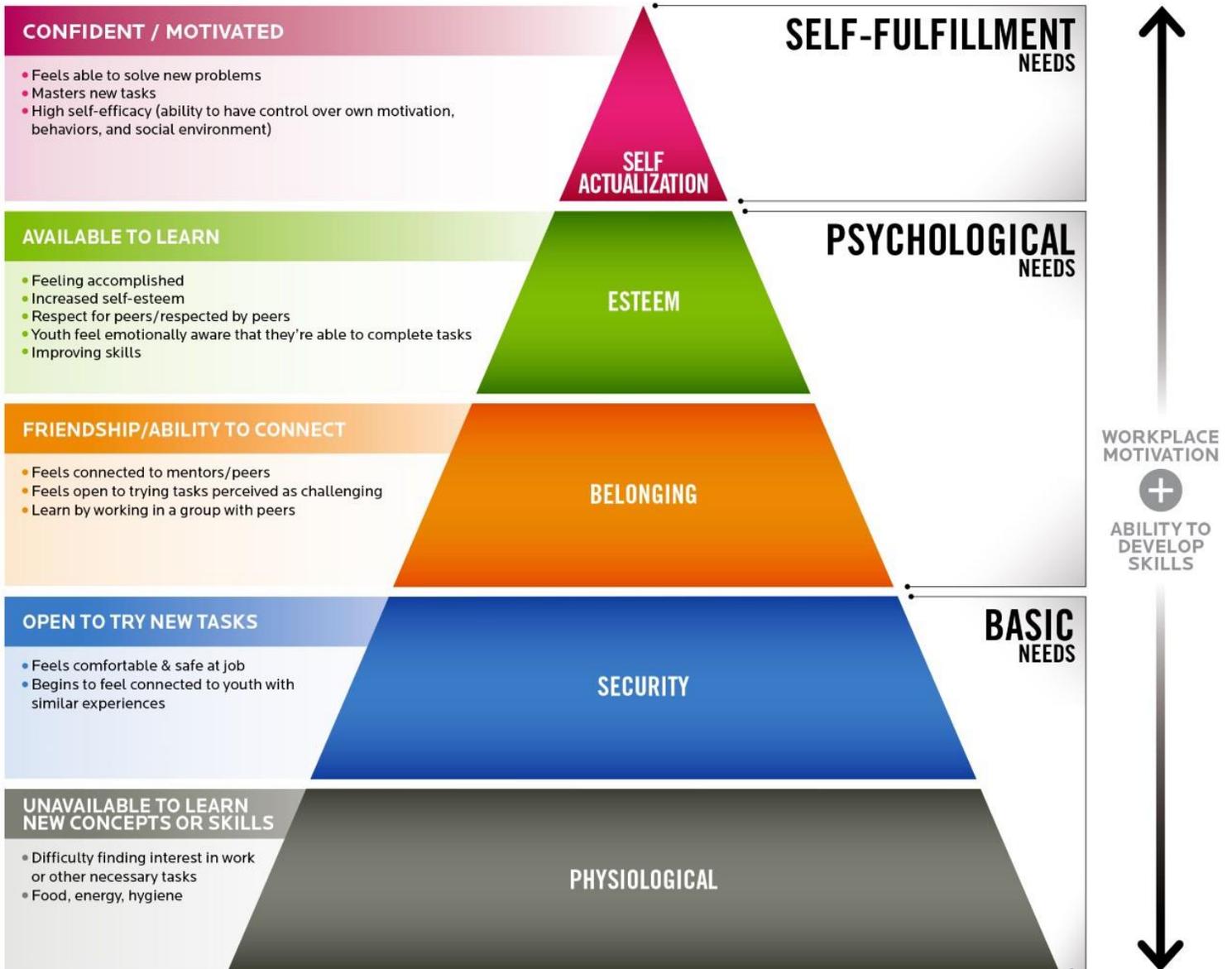


Figure 1
Maslow's Hierarchy of Job Skill Development in Youth
 Image Designed by Kate Hunsinger (2020).

Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370–396. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346>

APPLICATION OF TOOLKIT

The Hand2Paw Program focuses on three aspects of youth experience: self-esteem, self-efficacy, and creating a safe learning environment where youth feel empowered and receive feedback in a supportive environment. Youth will do this through activities outlined in this toolkit. Specifically, they will work with shelter animals to develop relationships that are intended to bridge a relationship between staff and youth.

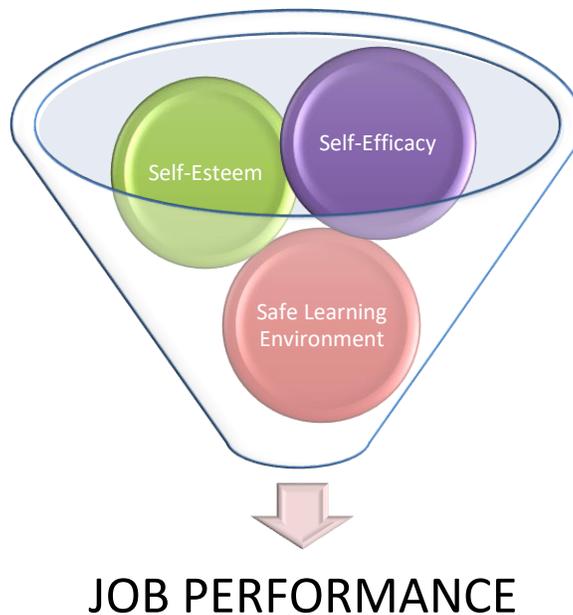
The modules in the toolkit will provide group and individual examples to show how program staff can model this process for youth and help them to develop the appropriate foundational skills needed to learn and apply lessons. There will be discussion questions at the end of each group to help youth express and explore what they learned.

The toolkit is intended to connect youth to their community, co-workers, and program staff through various discussions and individual work that will reinforce the ‘whole-person’ development through working with homeless animals. By considering Maslow’s hierarchy of needs within program implementation, program goals of increasing youth self-efficacy and self-esteem are more likely to be achieved.

After each lesson or group work, youth will complete a focused group, led by facilitated questions. This will help to encourage youth to think about the lessons and increase likelihood of retention of skills.

Figure 1.2

Factors in job performance success



Beginning Phase

Section 1: Building Trust and Connections with Youth Cohort

“When I was in foster care, they used to have dinner time and all that so usually I come home later than dinnertime and all the food would be gone and every time I asked her for food, she gave it to me” – Hand2Paw Graduate

MODULE 1.0

Building Rapport

Objective: One of the most critical times in your intervention will be ability to develop rapport and have the youth feel connected. A sense of belonging and genuine connection will help youth to engage in the program in ways they will not if they feel like they are involved in ‘just another program’ (Williams, 2011). Without feeling safe, secure, and a genuine connection, it makes it difficult for youth to develop new skills or be open to participation. Program staff will focus on building relationships with the youth and creating a space through getting to know youth.

Group Example: Youth will attend a meet-and-greet session at the Hand2Paw headquarters location. Rather than being expected to work the first day, youth will come to the setting for a few hours to socialize with animals and meet fellow cohort members. There will be a light breakfast supplied and youth will participate in a group where they are encouraged to share what they want other members to know about them.

Individual Example: Youth will have individual meetings with the program staff and have the opportunity to share any experience they feel comfortable sharing. Program staff will give each youth the space and opportunity to ask them questions in return. This will serve as a time where youth are able to share information and ask questions that they are uncomfortable doing in the group capacity. Program staff will also ensure that youth know they are able to continue to share information as the time goes on.

Whole-group Facilitation Questions:

Discussion Questions	
○	How do you feel after this exercise?
○	What was challenging about it?
○	What do you look forward to doing during your time with Hand2Paw?
○	What aspect of the program seems most challenging to you?

MODULE 1.1

Following directives in a workplace environment

Objective: Youth that have experienced trauma or adversity inherent with being involved in foster care may struggle with following directions. A foundational skill taught when working with shelter animals is safety. Animals that are in a shelter have been surrendered, abandoned, or surrendered. One of the reasons animals are surrendered can be connected to behavioral concerns that previous owners felt unable to correct (Lambert, et.al, 2015). For this reason, it is imperative that youth involved in a program such as Hand2Paw develop skills and ability to follow directions in order to maintain personal safety, safety of the animal, and safety of others. Youth will identify the importance of following directions in a workplace environment and correlate that with their ability to maintain employment. Youth will also understand how not following directions in a workplace can lead to termination, including being on time and completing necessary tasks.

Group Example: Youth will meet together with program staff and learn shelter rules. This includes a general orientation, but also will require a more detailed and hands-on approach to provide youth with opportunities, as a group, to implement and apply learned rules. Practicing taking dogs out of the kennel, putting on appropriate equipment, and modeling the process of general rules with opportunities for continued practice will help ensure that youth not only hear the rules, but have opportunities to practice while under proper supervision. Opportunities to implement skills are the first step in developing self-efficacy and feelings of being able to appropriately accomplish a task (Edelstein and Lowstein, 2014). Not only will these practice groups and modeling examples help youth to follow shelter safety rules, but will also allow for them to obtain skills for learning ways to follow workplace directives in multidisciplinary work environments.

Individual Example: Youth will work with staff member individually to practice learned methods. Such methods include following building rules. One-to-one time can allow for youth to feel comfortable asking questions and having opportunities to have individualized instruction and attention that will result in a clear understanding of what they need to work on and also to provide positive praise to build self-esteem.

Whole-group Facilitation Questions:

Discussion Questions
○ How do you feel after this exercise?
○ What was challenging about it?
○ What do you feel may be challenging when you do this independently?
○ What can you do if you have questions or find something to be difficult?

MODULE 1.2

Development of Appropriate Boundaries

Objective: Youth will learn the importance of developing appropriate boundaries in the workplace including how to be professional when working with the public, clients, and co-workers. Youth will provide customer service to the public when facilitating adoptions, but will also learn boundaries through working with shelter animals who struggle with behavioral challenges.

Group Example: Youth will work as a group with a dog who struggles with jumping. Youth will stand in a large, spread out space together. The group facilitator will ensure that youth provide ample space in order to avoid making the dog feel overwhelmed or trapped which could lead to an unsafe environment. Youth will then actively work with the trainer to implement a body language exercise that works to address jumping habits in the dog and replace them with a more desirable behavior such as sitting or keeping all four paws on the floor. The youth will learn which behaviors to reward and which to ignore based on positive learning theory (Ryan, 2005).

Individual Example: Youth will work individually with a dog in the kennel that is assessed and deemed safe for them to independently handle. They will work one-to-one with program staff to ensure they are comfortable and confident following kennel procedures. Once the program staff observe and determine that the youth is capable, the youth will work independently with the animals following positive learning theory principals.

Whole-group Facilitation Questions:

Discussion Questions
○ How do you feel after this exercise?
○ What was the most challenging part of this training activity?
○ How can you relate this to your own experience?
○ How can you apply what you've learned to your experiences and interactions with others in your environment?

MODULE 1.3

Verbal Communication Skill Development

Objective: Communication is key to success both inside and outside of the workplace environment. Developing appropriate communication skills will help youth to effectively learn to discuss their needs both to their boss and amongst co-workers. Expressing needs in a way that is effective and clear is paramount to job-readiness success.

Group Example: Youth will complete a mock adoption session. They will have the opportunity to work with a potential adopter (another group member or program staff). They will ask questions regarding the home to ensure they have the appropriate space accommodations. For example, a high energy dog may need to go to a home with a fenced in yard, or to a person who is active daily and can meet the exercise needs of the animal. Youth will also ensure they clearly communicate behavioral and/or medical needs of the animal and screen potential adopters to decrease likelihood that the animal will be returned.

Individual Example: Youth will take turns pairing with another group member to teach them skills to work with an animal they have experience with. This could be a cat or dog. The youth will verbally walk their peer through steps to work with the animal without physically intervening to assist. This will challenge their ability to articulate knowledge they have developed about how to work with a certain animal. They will then have the opportunity to later utilize this with potential adopters from the community.

Whole-group Facilitation Questions:

Discussion Questions
○ How do you feel after this group?
○ What felt challenging for you?
○ What areas do you feel you can improve on?
○ How can program mentors help you to address those challenges?
○ What skills do you feel that you've gotten from this? How will you continue to apply them?

“Back when I was dealing with DHS and being in foster care and a lot of court stuff, she [program director] was always there to talk to me about it – like anything that happened” - Hand2Paw Graduate

MODULE 1.4

Written & Visual Communication Skills

Objective: A key skill to a predominant amount of jobs is ability to clearly communicate through writing. Youth will write a biography about an animal that they have taken the time to get to know. They will also capture an appealing picture of the animal to include with the written biography.

Group Example: Youth will work together as a team, along with program staff, to identify a list of essential information for each biography. This includes, but is not limited to, if the animal is: kid friendly, animal friendly, requires continued medical support, and if they are house trained. As part of this exercise, youth will complete a training session with the shelter photographer to gain exposure into shelter photography and how that impacts the dogs' ability to be adopted. They will subsequently work in teams to handle dogs/photograph them for the shelter's website.

Individual Example: In this biography, they will have the opportunity to utilize creative writing to either write from the animal's perspective or from a staff perspective. They will talk about the animal's positive qualities, known history, and what type of home/family would be best suited for the animal. Youth will also be responsible for taking appealing pictures of the animal to accompany their written piece. Program staff will follow up with youth and provide individual conferencing to help edit and strengthen their written work. Youth will have the opportunity to apply the feedback to their work and will present after changes are reflected.

Whole-group Facilitation Questions:

Discussion Questions	
○	How do you feel after completing this?
○	What parts of this felt challenging?
○	Did you feel a connection to the piece you were writing? Why or why not?
○	How can we continue to work on your written communication skills in a way that interests you in the program?

MODULE 1.5

Self-Reflection Ability

Objective: In order to evolve and change behavior, it is critical to be able to self-reflect and accept structured feedback. Following the ability to accept feedback, it is important to be able to apply that feedback in future situations. Youth will work towards evaluating their performance and barriers to successful accomplishment of a task. This approach helps youth not only develop introspective skills necessary for a workplace, but can improve overall well-being. The examples below should be incorporated throughout the program and can be modeled for youth through the discussion questions at the end of each group.

Group Example: Youth will be observed working with a dog or cat deemed appropriate for their skill level by program staff. They will identify a skill that the animal needs to develop and will subsequently develop a plan for how to help the animal develop that skill. They will model their plan and discuss with staff. Program staff will then explain what was positive about their plan to develop self-esteem, and then will physically model what needs to be strengthened in their plan/technique.

Individual Example: Program staff will work individually with youth and model the same example, just on an individual level. In this capacity, youth will have the opportunity to receive individualized support to help them achieve their goal with the animal. They will also receive feedback from staff to help them improve their technique. It is important that program staff utilize positive encouragement prior to their feedback. For example, “you did a great job developing this plan, but here is what we can do to improve likelihood of outcome”.

Whole-group Facilitation Questions:

Discussion Questions	
○	How do you feel after completing this exercise?
○	What was the biggest challenge for you?
○	Did you feel it was easier to work through a challenge with your peers and program staff?
○	What will you remember most to apply in the future?

MODULE 1.6

Self-Esteem Development

Objective: In order to thrive in a workplace or in any life situation, we need to feel confident and able to complete tasks. Youth will work to increase their self-esteem through continued encouragement from program staff. They will be receiving positive feedback, hands-on modeling, and opportunities for repetition to develop an increased sense of self-esteem.

Group Example: Youth will work as a group to develop a group fundraising project for the Hand2Paw program to support animals in the program. They will work as a team to identify individual strengths and have the opportunity to decide what the project is, how they will plan it, and what the funds will go towards. This will give youth the opportunity to utilize one another's strengths, while simultaneously allowing them to be creative. Seeing the results of their efforts will help to foster self-esteem development and real-life, applicable skills that will build the youths' resumes.

Individual Example: Youth will individually meet with program staff to discuss their participation in the project. If the youth are having difficulty identifying a role or being able to participate without support, program staff will conference with them about it at this time and identify strengths of the youth to continue to encourage/develop their feelings of self-esteem and self-worth in the group that may be difficult for them to identify independently.

Whole-group Facilitation Questions:

Discussion Questions	
○	How do you feel after this?
○	What made you feel most successful?
○	What was most challenging?
Would you like to learn more in this area?	

"I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life for a really long time before coming here [Hand2Paw], but this program just kind of helped me see like how much I really love animals. I actually got a job as a vet assistant" -Hand2Paw Graduate

MODULE 1.7

Self-Efficacy Development

Objective: Increased self-efficacy is developed over time and with multiple opportunities for practice with positive encouragement. While the entire Hand2Paw program focuses on fostering development in this area, there are specific group exercises that can exemplify how the process works. To begin, setting reasonable and attainable goals will help set youth up for successful accomplishment of a task. Having youth be part of their goal-setting can also help the efficacy of program goals and improve confidence (Powers, et.al, 2018).

Group Example: Youth will have the opportunity to take shelter animals off-site to a community event under the supervision of program staff. They will network with the public and have the opportunity to help facilitate an adoption. To follow up after involvement in these events, program staff will provide discussion of what self-efficacy is and the four levels of self-efficacy development and how that connects to the field experience of (1) peer modeling, (2) mentor modeling, (3) feeling accomplished, and (4) receiving positive feedback.

Individual Example: Youth will reflect through a drawing or self-directed written expression what they felt was challenging. They will also be given a four-stage paper model of self-efficacy development and be asked to fill in how they feel they have experienced each component. They will then share this information with program staff and verbalize their experiences.

Whole-group Facilitation Questions:

Discussion Questions	
<input type="radio"/>	How do you feel after this group?
<input type="radio"/>	What is your understanding of self-efficacy after this?
<input type="radio"/>	How will you continue to work on developing these skills?
<input type="radio"/>	What can you do when you feel that you need support?

MODULE 1.8

Advocacy Skills

Objective: Being an active member of a community often includes the need to act when we observe something that does not feel right. Youth will learn to develop skills in both the areas of self-advocacy and community advocacy. Feeling empowered enough and to have a voice in the community for themselves will allow for youth to feel a greater sense of success not only in the program, but in their personal lives.

Group Example: Youth will have the opportunity to work a community shot clinic to provide free and/or low-cost vaccines to animals in the community. They will work together as a team to communicate with residents waiting in line, ensure that pets are maintaining a proper distance, and will draw up the vaccines for veterinarians and vet techs. Youth will have the opportunity to rotate stations throughout the day in order to participate in all aspects of the clinic.

Individual Example: Prior to the event, youth will have the opportunity to work on marketing and networking with community members to make them aware of the upcoming shot clinic. They will develop signs, visit local community businesses, and will develop marketing strategies on social media sites. There should be a group held subsequent the event. There should also be opportunities to conference with youth on an individual basis to follow up on their responses during the group session.

Whole-group Facilitation Questions:

Discussion Questions	
<input type="radio"/>	How do you feel after this event?
<input type="radio"/>	Do you feel that this made a difference in the community served today?
<input type="radio"/>	What stood out to you?
<input type="radio"/>	How do you see yourself advocating for issues you care about in the future?

Middle Phase

Section 2: Preparing Youth to Transition out of the Program

“Being in Hand2Paw made me not be a bystander and not be so involved in my emotions and really just be interactive with other people, so it kind of forced me to look at what resources are available, what I can still do now that I’m not in Hand2Paw. Also, if I come across a cat on the street, I know that I can call the Program Director -Hand2Paw Graduate

MODULE 2.0

Completing Job Applications & Resume Development

Objective: Youth will need to know how to complete job applications for future employment. Part of the application process involves thorough investigation of the open position and assessing whether or not one's skills and experiences are fitting. Determining a fit for the applicant is imperative as well in order to ensure there is a sense of determination and desire to fulfil requirements of the position, if offered.

Group Example: Youth will work as a group with program staff to identify their skill sets. Youth can be paired as partners or this can be done with the entire group. Youth will then look through online job websites or browse local offerings that program staff may have knowledge of. They will work together to complete a mock application as if they were applying for the position. They will then work together to do mock interviews and provide feedback to one another.

Individual Example: Youth will receive individual feedback from program staff based on review of the application. They will make changes to their written documentation and receive verbal feedback of their mock interview with peers. They will also have an individual platform to discuss what was challenging and what they feel they need additional support with.

Whole-group Facilitation Questions:

Discussion Questions
<input type="radio"/> How do you feel after this exercise?
<input type="radio"/> What was the most challenging part for you?
<input type="radio"/> Do you feel confident navigating job searches? If not, what seems challenging?
<input type="radio"/> What do you need to help make this process feel less challenging for you?

MODULE 2.1

Emotional Obstacles of Job Interviews and Preparation

Objective: The emotional process of applying to jobs can be challenging (DuBois et. al, 2002). An interview with no offer can often feel defeating and overwhelming. Hand2Paw will work to preemptively address this topic with youth and prepare them for managing their emotions surrounding the interview and job acceptance process in order to ensure they are adequately prepared for the entire process and feel able to manage their emotions.

Group Example: Youth will work together to share past and current experiences surrounding job searches and interviews. Program staff will guide the conversations and utilize a solutions-focused approach, which will help the youth to focus on how they can change the outcome in the future rather than focus on the problem (Burnell & Chen, 2006). Program staff will encourage youth to provide solutions to others in the group and will use a white board or paper to create a chart with the group; one side will read ‘Problem’ and the other side ‘New Perspective’. The youth will each list a hardship or projected hardship surrounding job attainment and will then work as a group to re-frame their problem into a positive solution or an event that they can learn from. For example, if the youth applied to a job and did not receive an offer, they can be encouraged to talk with the employer to determine how they could strengthen their resume or skills to have a better chance at such a job in the future. This then becomes a positive as the youth has developed communication skills and developed a positive connection with the employer and increased their odds for future connections.

Individual Example: Youth will search for jobs on local internet sites. Youth will also have independent time to follow-up with program staff and have a platform to discuss anything they felt uncomfortable discussing in the group setting.

Whole-group Facilitation Questions:

Discussion Questions
○ How do you feel after this group?
○ What stood out to you the most?
○ How can you utilize this in the future?
○ Was it challenging to re-frame challenges? If so, what was challenging?

SECTION 3: Program Completion & Follow-Up

“I’ve been in many programs like this in my past, and the other programs it was like they were just doing their job” -Hand2Paw Graduate

MODULE 3.0

Emotional Validation

Objective: There should be careful thought and dedication put forth in the planning of an ending phase. Youth have developed trust, relationships, and this will likely experience anxious feelings or feelings of sadness to end this chapter. This includes avoidance, distancing, (Hagner, Cheney, & Malloy, 1999). These experiences should be validated and addressed in the workplace setting. Validation through letting youth know that they are feeling very normal feelings is key in this phase of the program. The emotional process of applying to jobs can be challenging. An interview with no offer can often feel defeating and overwhelming. Hand2Paw will work to preemptively address this topic with youth and prepare them for managing their emotions surrounding the interview and job acceptance process in order to ensure they are adequately prepared for the entire process and feel able to manage their emotions.

Group Example: Youth will work together to share past and current experiences surrounding job searches and interviews. Program staff will guide the conversations and utilize a solutions-focused approach, which will help the youth to focus on how they can change the outcome in the future rather than focus on the problem (Hagner, Cheney, & Malloy, 1999). Program staff will encourage youth to provide solutions to others in the group and will use a white board or paper to create a chart with the group; one side will read ‘Problem’ and the other side ‘New Perspective’. The youth will each list a hardship or projected hardship surrounding job attainment and will then work as a group to re-frame their problem into a positive solution or an event that they can learn from. For example, if the youth applied to a job and did not receive an offer, they can be encouraged to talk with the employer to determine how they could strengthen their resume or skills to have a better chance at such a job in the future.

Individual Example: Youth will search for jobs on local internet sites and conference with program staff to discuss how they plan to communicate if they are feeling overwhelmed or having difficult with the job search.

Whole-group Facilitation Questions:

Discussion Questions	
<input type="radio"/>	How do you feel after this group?
<input type="radio"/>	What stood out to you the most?
<input type="radio"/>	How can you utilize this in the future?
<input type="radio"/>	How can you communicate when you need support in the future?

MODULE 3.1

Follow Up Group Sessions

Objective: An essential component of a successful program is the follow up support received. Hand2Paw graduates have elected to stay involved in the program after their successful completion of the program. Although the program formally ended, there should be formal follow up sessions that meet weekly or bi-weekly to provide youth with a safety net. Through continuing to have a space where they are able to go to discuss job searches, challenges, and other necessary topics, youth will increase the likelihood that they are able to utilize and consistently apply job skills learned throughout their time in the Hand2Paw program.

Group Example: Youth will attend sessions at the Hand2Paw headquarters. Topics will be youth-directed and serve to support challenges they are facing subsequent their completion of the program. Youth will decide on topics at the beginning of the support group session and drive the conversation to mutually decide on which topics are important to their group dynamic.

Individual Example: Program staff will be available to youth to follow-up or check in on an individual basis, should they request that. Program staff will also check in with youth via email and or phone calls monthly to ensure they feel supported and connected to the program.

Whole-group Facilitation Questions:

Discussion Questions	
<input type="radio"/>	How do you feel after this group?
<input type="radio"/>	What stood out to you the most?
<input type="radio"/>	How can this group be more beneficial for you?
<input type="radio"/>	What would improve this group?

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