



HEY TOOL

Clarifying the Child Welfare Worker's Role

HEY's Recommendations to Dispel Confusion

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Clarifying the Child Welfare Worker's Role: HEY's Recommendations to Dispel Confusion

Many misconceptions exist about the differing roles various people play in a foster youth's life, leading to costly confusion and inefficiency in the dependency system. In particular, Honoring Emancipated Youth (HEY) unearthed mixed definitions of the Child Welfare Worker's role during its 2008-2009 study examining the process of youth's transition from foster care to independence in San Francisco County. In an effort to help streamline the system to provide best outcomes for both youth and workers, HEY offers the following analysis and recommendations for improvement.

HEY's study, the Emancipation Research Project (ERP), consisted of 30 in-depth interviews with professionals and youth involved in the county's dependency system. HEY interviewed 5-7 people from the following groups: (1) emancipating or emancipated foster youth, (2) child dependency attorneys, (3) Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs), and (4) Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP) workers.

First, HEY compiled and summarized common misconceptions each group had about the role of the Child Welfare Worker (CWW). It then researched the official role of the CWW by speaking with workers themselves, their management, and the Human Services Agency (HSA), which oversees them. In addition, it reviewed official policy and manuals. HEY then developed responses to clarify the CWW's role and rectify incorrect or misleading assumptions.

Emancipated and Emancipating Foster Youth: Misconceptions about CWW's Role

Misconception

Youth reported that they prefer their CWW to act more like a mentor, and believe personal service creates better results. They said they

- get upset when a CWW does not call back right away;
- prefer personal attention and connections;
- often identify their CWW as their "permanent connection" post-emancipation.



Reality

The relationship of the CWW and the youth is regulated by official standards; personal or permanent relationships are not mandated.

The official role of the CWW is to advocate for the safety, permanency, and well-being of youth, but also balance costs to San Francisco County—while keeping the stated interests of the youth in mind. Some CWWs are available to have more personal relationships with some of the youth on their caseloads; unfortunately, they often do not have the capacity or assigned role to act as a mentor or permanent connection.

Child Dependency Attorneys: Lack of Policy Understanding

Misconception

Attorneys expressed a range of understanding of the CWW's role, but in general, lacked information about the laws that regulate CWW actions and roles. They reported

- lacking knowledge of policies regarding amount and regularity of social worker-attorney correspondence;
- lacking clear delineations of roles and why overlap sometimes occurs;
- confusion about why a CWW was reassigned.

Reality

Lack of understanding is attributed to difficulty in finding San Francisco protocols.

HEY was unable to confidently identify specific requirements outlining attorney–CWW communication in San Francisco. It attributes this to the fact that protocols change often within counties. According to conversations with attorneys and CWWs, communication was highly valued and respected, but standards to manage it were unclear. HEY believes it is extremely important for the front-line workers to be educated on these requirements in order to avoid complications in case management and court hearings.

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs): Differences in Roles of CWW vs. CASA

Misconception

CASAs often assumed that CWWs were too busy or overloaded to give youth deserved attention. They reported they

- felt the CWW should be more responsive;
- often assumed that CWWs did not provide personal attention to their assigned youth;
- respected CWWs but thought they were too busy.

Reality

The relationship of the CWW and the youth is regulated by official standards; CWWs focus mainly on the safety, permanency, and well-being of a youth.

HEY attributes these misperceptions of the CWW's role to the difference between a CASA, who has one youth, and a CWW, who has 25-35 cases, and is mandated to focus on specific issues in a youth's life. Also, CASAs are charged with always advocating for the youth's best interests, regardless of what the youth wants. CWWs attempt to balance older youth's desires, and must also consider costs to the agency. Regardless of role assignment, some youth have more personal relationships with their CWW, and some with their CASA.



Youth prefer personal attention and care from their workers.

Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP) Workers: Lack of Communication Protocols

Misconception

ILSP workers felt like CWWs relied too heavily on them, and did not provide full information on changes in a youth's case plan. They said that they

- felt disconnected from the actions a CWW took on their shared cases;
- saw duplicative planning work for youth still in care;
- felt they did the work a CWW was too busy to do.

Reality

CWWs need ILSP workers to complete many of the tasks associated with a youth becoming independent; for this to happen, communications protocols need to be redesigned.

Currently there is a disconnect between the plans of CWWs and plans of ILSP workers. CWWs rely heavily on ILSP workers to help youth complete tasks to prepare for independence, but ILSP workers feel cut off from the CWW's master plan for the youth. HEY recommends the renovation of communication protocols as well as a restructuring of ILSP responsibilities to combat this confusion.

The Whole Stakeholder Community

After identifying these basic misconceptions and formulating recommendations, HEY met with the leadership of Child Welfare Services to present the findings. The administration was extremely responsive and willing to incorporate HEY's proposal into their strategic plans.

HEY next developed commonalities within groups, and compiled these misunderstandings into general themes. HEY then met with the San Francisco Human Services Agency (HSA) to present its findings, and offer recommendations to clarify and improve communication between groups. This HEY Tool is a compilation of misconceptions about the role of the CWW, and is meant for community education and improved understanding.

Current and Former Foster Youth and Professionals Thought ...	<i>HEY Recommends</i>
Many people sympathized with the hard work of CWWs and saw them as a positive influence in a youth's life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>HSA continue to support CWWs to be the best they can be by increasing access to stress relief and rejuvenating activities for CWWs, as it would also benefit the entire network of emancipation professionals.</i>
Youth placed out of county got less attention from their CWW	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>HSA and the CWWs clarify the rules around reassignment of CWWs and policies for working with out-of-county youth to the emancipation community, and to the youth themselves.</i> • <i>HSA examine their current policies and actual practice of CWWs with youth placed out of county to ensure they are receiving adequate support.</i>
Caseworkers had high caseloads and were overburdened.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>HSA provide accurate estimates of CWWs' caseloads, and explain that comparatively, San Francisco CWWs do NOT have high caseloads.</i>
That there was no clear reason as to why a worker was reassigned and that workers were inconsistent in a youth's life.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>HSA reexamine their policies and then clarify to youth and the public why youth are reassigned.</i> • <i>HSA consider providing options for youth to be reassigned to a CWW or remain with the original.</i> • <i>More support for HSA's current efforts to reduce reassignments, and more communication of this strategy to the community.</i>