

The V.I.T.A.L. Overview

Introduction

According to the National Foster Youth Institute, approximately 23,000 young adults in the United States exit foster care without achieving permanency each year. 20% of these youth become instantly homeless and less than 3% go on to earn a college degree at any point in their lives. Only one out of two foster youth who age out of the system will have some form of gainful employment by the age of 24. Youth who leave foster care without achieving permanency are at increased risk for several adverse adult outcomes, including homelessness, high unemployment, lower educational attainment, incarceration, and early or unintended pregnancies. If youth exiting foster care without permanency had the same outcomes as youth who didn't age out of the child welfare system, there would be 4 billion dollars of total annual savings (The Economic Potential of Successful Transitions from Foster Care to Adulthood, Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2019). Connecticut-specific data from the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) indicates that 17% of experience homelessness, 11% experience incarceration, and 18% receive a substance abuse referral by age 21.

In order to change these outcomes and ensure lifelong wellbeing and success for young adults, the Transitional Supports and Success (TSS) Division began work with several partners to shape a new approach for Transitional Age Youth (TAY, young persons 16 years- 23 years). The work began at the end of August, 2020. The purpose was to establish a consistent and recognizable approach to adolescent practice that would improve outcomes. The shared focus of the team was driven to ensure that all youth, have relationships, supports, and opportunities to thrive as they launch into adulthood.

Over several months, stakeholder feedback was incorporated into a framework that embeds shared values and aspirations into the work with TAY. The approach is abbreviated V.I.T.A.L. (Voice and Choice, Innovative, Thorough and Accountable, Authentic Youth Engagement, Life Launch). Our work focused on impacting four broad areas cited as barriers to successful transitions of youth out of care: Lack of supportive relationships, educational challenges, housing instability, and economic challenges (i.e., employment, financial capability). Policy revisions focused on removing barriers that prevent the most vulnerable cohorts of young adults from achieving success. New policy adjustments accounted for the inevitability that all youth at one point or another make big mistakes and that systems and policies will protect them when those mistakes happen. A new practice guide sharpened focus on increasing tangible competencies as well as soft skills young adults need to thrive as adults. The framework was influenced by more than three decades of psychology research that shows that a focus on process instead of intelligence or ability is essential to lifelong success. Four specific areas of practice were bolstered: Improving functional assessments of TAY, integrating that assessment into case planning, enhancing coaching, and improving living arrangement

planning. Capturing youth voice in individual case planning and to fuel Department efforts was the bedrock of V.I.T.A.L.

To inform this process the TSS Division collected feedback through surveys, 15 sets of staff stakeholder interviews, youth advisory board interviews, an electronic mailbox, and young adult alumni conversations. Approach development was also discussed within a standing group of adolescent program supervisors and through a four-month fiscal taskforce. A structured review of all young adults in private foster care (n=102) and in congregate care (n=101) provided context as did phone contact with youth who exited the Department between January 1, 2020-March 1, 2020 (n=35). A data snapshot of approximately 900 youth in DCF care provided an important baseline.

The result is a supportive system that is youth directed, focused on permanency, informed by brain development research, and advances inclusion and equity. Through the V.I.T.A.L approach, youth walk towards becoming civically engaged, having a career, maintaining connections to others, and becoming lifelong learners. Support and planning efforts are organized across four case management stages: Engagement and Assessment, Youth Driven Transition Preparation, Launch, and Re-entry.

Questions, suggestion, and conversation about V.I.T.A.L. can be directed to Linda Dixon, Administrator, Transitional Supports and Success (linda.dixon@ct.gov and 860-550-6383).

Values

To help all young adults activate their potential, DCF staff are committed to, and guided by, the following values:

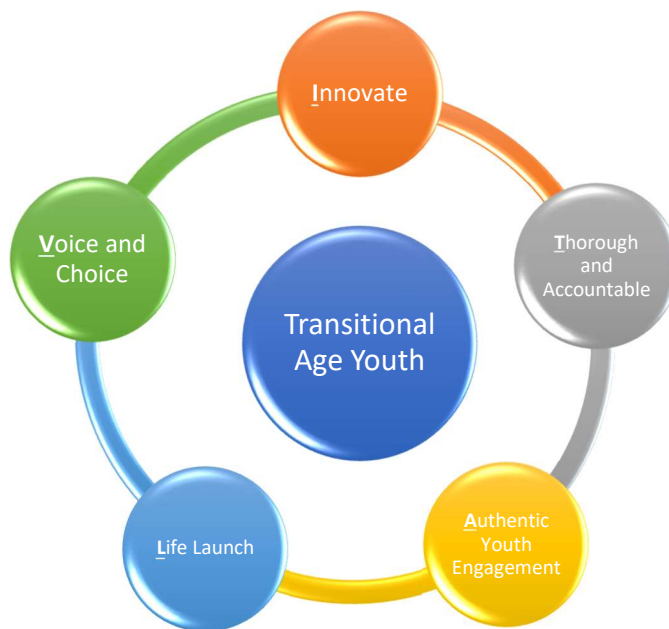
Voice and Choice: Individuals most impacted by a system are the drivers of change and transformation. Youth voice and choice must be encouraged at individual, policy, and system levels.

Innovate: With creative work and flexible planning young adults pursue their life dreams.

Thorough and Accountable: We strive to be fiscally responsible, agile, and committed to quality. We maximize the use of resources and data to evaluate performance to make informed decisions and improve results.

Authentic Youth Engagement: We attempt to decrease disconnection by authentically engaging with youth. We partner with youth to create possibilities and carry hope.

Life Launch: We focus on helping youth develop mastery in the concrete skills and "soft skills" associated with adult success. We help launch youth *towards* opportunities.



The V.I.T.A.L. approach to serving a TAY population is a specialized skill set embedded within the larger DCF context. Team members are also committed to upholding the overarching agency values of safety, permanency, well-being, racial justice, and workforce development. All team members provide steadfast support to the Department's mission to partner with communities and families to raise resilient children who thrive.

Essential Practice Principles

The TSS team worked in earnest to incorporate suggestions from staff and youth into the essential practice principles. The principles are also influenced by the framework of positive youth development. By applying them to individual case management and system planning, Department staff can capitalize protective factors and strengths. Further information on how to apply the principles are offered throughout V.I.T.A.L. materials.

Shared Power: In many ways, power differentials are inherent in child welfare systems. We acknowledge when those differentials exist, and strive to reduce them.

Trauma Responsive: Adolescents in DCF care have lived through multiple traumas. Recognizing the history of trauma and how it impacts behavior, thoughts, relationships, is critical. We also strive to eliminate unintentional system-induced trauma. Examples of system-induced traumas may stem from multiple moves, unplanned changes, and lost relationships.

Anti-Racist: We must become aware of the role unconscious and implicit bias play in our decisions and actions and understand that experiences with racism and internalized oppression may negatively influence the way young people of color view themselves. We must recognize the inequities that exist in our system and work to eliminate them. We are aware of the importance of equal access to opportunities throughout adolescent development.

Relationships: All young adults are entitled to enduring relationships that provide stability, belonging, and a sense of self that connects youth to the past, present and future. Communities, families, and social networks are critically important for young adults.

Belonging: All youth deserve an opportunity to feel a sense of belonging somewhere and with others. To be part of a group, to contribute to a purpose or cause, and to make a difference. .

Safety and Security: Since risk increases in adolescence, youth safety is paramount. Safety issues of a central concern to adolescents in the child welfare system relate to maintaining health and well-being, preventing homelessness, community violence, and avoiding victimization in relationships (e.g., Keller et al., 2007). Behavioral health and substance misuse needs typically emerge in adolescence as well and should be addressed.

Urgency: The lifelong cost of foster youth disproportionate academic failures, unplanned pregnancy, and justice involvement result in \$300,000 per youth over a lifetime. Child welfare must operate with a sense of urgency when serving this population.

Self-Confidence: It is crucial for team members to help all youth build a sense of self-worth and confidence.

Core Practices

The following practices and skills are instrumental in the implementation of the V.I.T.A.L. approach and are applied at all levels of the DCF system. Team members are encouraged to consider how these core practices are brought to life in every element of work with TAY.

Engage and Exchange Information: Our team members effectively join with young adults and families to establish common goals concerning well-being. We build rapport and share power by engaging authentically. We seek information from young people, their loved ones, and other stakeholders. We activate youth goals, relationships, and strengths through a coordinated team approach. We understand a young person's dreams for the future. We strive to ensure that young adults have an equal or more say in decisions that impact their lives. We develop customized youth profiles that are updated and attentive to detail.

Assess and Understand Strengths: We assess relationships, competencies, treatment needs and parenting capacity. We assess safety in relationships and understand youth's ability for self-care. We develop an understanding of the young adult's self-image and the youth's involvement in community activities.

Fortify and Support: Our teams make consistent and intentional efforts to support youth in achieving their potential. We provide conditions for safety, permanency, and we help establish well-being. We activate plans that strengthen concrete skills and soft skills that youth need to succeed in adulthood. We invest in healthy relationships and connections. We leverage diversionary systems to prevent young adults from entering the justice system. We make concerted efforts to give young people growth opportunities to take risks, accept responsibilities, and make decisions.

Reflect and Adjust: In order to provide the highest quality service we capitalize on available peer reviews, coaching, and office expertise to build skills in engaging young adults. We examine all decision points (on a case basis, at an office level, a regional level, and a state level) with an equity lens. We adjust plans and expectations to reflect growth. We attend to youth satisfaction reviews and adjust practice accordingly to provide excellent service. We seize every opportunity to advocate for fairness and justice for young adults.

The V.I.T.A.L. approach core practices are further articulated with a series of competencies which are demonstrated through knowledge and skill. Coaches are encouraged to reflect upon team members levels of skill mastery (i.e., Foundational, Rising, and Secure). The following operational definitions are offered for these three levels:

Foundational: The team member is at an early stage of core practice and skill acquisition. The team member is supported in learning the skills. The team member has an opportunity to develop skills. Coaching agendas may target specific skills for development. The skills are demonstrated and actively coached by team leaders.

Rising: The team member occasionally applies the practices and skills independently. Coaching agendas focus on generalizing skills. The team member demonstrates increasing understanding of the practices. Skills are demonstrated and coached by team leaders.

Secure: The team member consistently applies skills independently to a wide range of settings and aspires to apply knowledge and understanding. There is a range of evidence that shows a deeper understanding of concepts and that skills are sustained over time.

Resources

Administration for Children and Families. (August, 2019). Information Memorandum: Engaging, empowering, and utilizing family and youth voice in all aspects of child welfare to drive case planning and system improvement. www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/im1903.pdf/

Administration for Children and Families. NYTD Services and Outcomes. Retrieved February, 2021 from: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/report/nytd-services-and-outcomes-reports/>

Courtney, M. Network on Transitions to Adulthood Policy Brief: Youth Aging Out of Foster Care. MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy. April 2005. <http://www.transad.pop.upenn.edu/downloads/courtney--foster%20care.pdf>

Dweck, C.S. (2015). The Secret to Raising Smart Kids. Scientific American. 23 5s, 76-83. Retrieved at <https://scientificamerican.com/>

Jim Casey Youth Opportunities. (2012). Issue Brief #3: Authentic Youth Engagement: Youth-adult partnerships www.aecf.org/resources/authentic-youth-engagement/

Keller, T., Cusick, G.R., Courtney, M.E. (2007). Approaching the Transition to Adulthood: Distinctive profiles of adolescents aging out of the child welfare system. Social Services Review September 1; 81(3): 453-484.

National Foster Youth Initiative. (2017). Useful aging out of foster care statistics. www.nfyi.org/51-useful-aging-out-of-foster-care-statistics-social-race-media/

The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2015). Race Equity and Inclusion Action Guide. <https://www.aecf.org/resources/race-equity-and-inclusion-action-guide/>

The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2017). The road to adulthood: Aligning child welfare practice with adolescent brain development. www.aecf.org/resources/the-road-to-adulthood/