

## **First Place for Youth**

Oakland, California

### **Overview**

First Place for Youth (First Place) is focused on one outcome: helping youth formerly in the foster care system (foster youth) build a foundation from which they are able to successfully transition to responsible adulthood. First Place is a nonprofit organization that serves youth who are preparing to age out of foster care or who have recently aged out of care. At 18, foster youth who were originally removed from their home due to parental abuse or neglect suddenly find themselves without housing, income, education, or adult encouragement.

First Place provides youth with housing, employment, and academic enrichment services that are coupled with intensive emotional support. The proven results of First Place programs have made the agency a national model, not just for providing homes for high-risk youth, but also for helping them live independently and establish a firm foundation from which they can continue to work toward their long-term personal and professional goals.

By helping foster youth with a large number of barriers to housing and stability find and afford their first place to call home through a low-threshold and harm reduction model, First Place frees these youth from worrying about where they will live and allows them to plan for their future. As a result, First Place has excellent outcomes on both housing stability and economic security—84 percent of all program participants remain housed after exiting the program and 77 percent maintain employment with an average wage of almost \$10 per hour. First Place programs have a transformative impact on foster youth, who will experience reduced rates of homelessness, unemployment, crime, unplanned pregnancies, and economic dependency.

### **History**

In 1998, First Place for Youth became the first organization in Northern California to provide affordable, transitional housing and supportive services to former foster youth. The organization serves California youth ages 16 to 24 who are preparing to age out of foster care or who have recently aged out of care.

Once youth age out of foster care there are limited public or community-based services available. Too often, instead of receiving support and guidance during this critical transition, former foster youth are left to fend for themselves. First Place fills that gap and, with the critical resources provided, youth are more likely to avoid homelessness and improve their education, employment, health, and social development.

Today, First Place has expanded to become the largest agency in California providing housing and supportive services to transitioning foster care youth. The program serves approximately 400 youth annually with core services such as housing, employment, and educational services. In 2010, the organization opened an office in Los Angeles which will serve a combined 40 youth with these core services in 2012.

First Place is also active in statewide advocacy to promote better outcomes for youth aging out of foster care. The organization successfully partnered with the John Burton Foundation and others to advocate for the creation of a statewide funding source for transitional housing for youth aging out of care. The Transitional Housing Plus Program (THP+) provides approximately \$35 million annually to support transitional housing programs across California that help former foster youth succeed. First Place is also active in providing technical assistance and training throughout California and nationally to minimize homelessness among former foster youth.

## **Program Description**

### *Targeting and Eligibility*

First Place for Youth targets former foster youth ages 16 to 24. Most youth enter First Place after experiencing homelessness or extreme housing instability following a discharge from foster care. Approximately one-third of the youth who enter the program are pregnant or parenting.

First Place employs a low-barrier, harm reduction program model. Because of this approach, the organization serves many “high risk” youth who may be screened out of other programs. The program does require that youth are physically able to live independently without 24-hour care. The program does not screen out or evict youth because of drug or alcohol use or behavioral issues. It instead works to retain all youth in the program and help them improve their capacity to live independently.

### *Housing*

First Place uses a scattered site transitional housing program model that allows youth to transition-in-place. First Place master leases apartments -- the organization signs the lease with the landlord -- and subleases to youth. When the youth enter the program, they sign a typical California lease with First Place and they have the same tenant rights as they would if they rented from a private landlord. Non-parenting youth typically share a 2-bedroom unit with one roommate; a parent and child are typically housed in a one-bedroom unit. When housing placements are not successful, the program will work with the youth to find a suitable alternative and welcome them back into the program if conditions are met.

Because youth are expected to pay for housing independently when they exit the program, First Place requires that these youth gradually increase the amount they are contributing to rent over time. This provides a real-world incentive for youth to increase their income. In the first 6 months, a youth pays 30 percent of the rental costs; the second 6 months, 40 percent of the rental costs; and, for the second year of the subsidy, the amount of rent paid by the youth gradually increases from 40 percent to 100 percent of the rental costs.

When youth have received the full 24 months of their subsidy, they are provided the opportunity to take over the lease for their apartment from First Place and remain in the same unit. Approximately 25 percent of youth choose to remain in the same apartment. First Place believes it is important that youth retain the power to choose whether or not to move. Those that choose to relocate receive assistance accessing new housing, including help with housing search, access to their credit ratings, a reference from the program, security deposit, etc.

### *Support Services*

**Youth Advocate.** Every youth receives case management services and support from a Youth Advocate. This individual helps the young person connect with needed support services in the community; navigate multiple and complex systems including the courts, and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF); and helps them develop the skills to live independently. The services provided by the Youth Advocate are tailored to the unique needs of each youth.

**Education and Employment Specialist.** Every young person is also assigned an Employment and Educational Specialist (“EE Specialist”). The youth advocate and EE Specialist work as a team. However, the primary focus of the EE Specialist is to help the youth to develop long-term plans and establish gainful employment. The ultimate goal of the EE Specialist is to help youth achieve meaningful employment that provides a living wage and at least two years of post-secondary education. Youth who no longer receive subsidized rent through the program may continue to work with an EE Specialist until their 24<sup>th</sup> birthday.

To help youth achieve their employment goals, EE Specialists develop relationships with local employers such as Chevron, Securitas, and Safeway, to provide meaningful work opportunities for youth. These partnerships have enabled youth to be placed in jobs that have growth potential. The EE Specialists are also available to provide support to youth as they encounter on-the-job challenges.

**Supporting Pregnant and Parenting Youth.** In addition to support from a youth advocate and an EE Specialist, pregnant and parenting youth receive specialized assistance to support their growth as individual youth and as parents. The pregnant and

parenting youth form and moderate their own peer groups to discuss challenges and celebrate successes in parenting.

## **Funding**

First Place is funded by a combination of federal, state, and local funds as well as private donations. Government funding sources include California's Transitional Housing Plus program and the HUD McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Grants Program.

First Place also successfully advocated for, and received funding from, the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP), enacted as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The organization made the case that youth made up 10 percent of the homelessness population in Alameda County and therefore should receive the same proportion of funds to serve youth, to which the County agreed.

First Place and two other youth serving organizations provide HPRP assistance in eight separate locations throughout Alameda County. First Place used HPRP resources to expand the organization's capacity to serve unaccompanied youth in the community, including youth who have never lived in foster care. Each youth served with HPRP rental assistance receives the same level of assistance as youth served in the transitional housing program. First Place uses HPRP to fund rental assistance and some case management, and uses private funding to provide EE and other support services. First Place served 30 youth in the first year of HPRP all of whom are still housed.

## **Outcomes**

First Place for Youth has a wide range of outcomes on a variety of scales. The most important is ongoing housing stability and increased income—84 percent of youth maintain safe permanent housing after exiting the program and 77 percent obtain employment and/or increase their income. Additionally, of the youth in the program who are pregnant and/or parenting, 96 percent retain custody of their children.