August 2018

Bay Area Housing Crisis:
Foster Youth On The Brink

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It is no surprise that the Bay Area's booming economy and the subsequent demand for housing have resulted in housing costs that many of our local families simply cannot afford. The housing crisis has had an impact on every segment of our community, but none has been more affected than those whose housing and financial situations are already precarious. Among those on the brink are our local foster youth, foster families and the organizations dedicated to serving them.

The unprecedented housing crisis – compounded with recent reforms to California's child welfare system – is leaving many youth with few options for finding safe, stable places to call "home". Though well intentioned, the child welfare system reforms are having serious unintended consequences. These include the closure of smaller foster service agencies that are essential to serving culturally diverse populations and significantly increased stress placed on young people who are already struggling to find housing they can afford.

This report sounds an alarm on the issues surrounding housing insecurity for Bay Area foster youth. It also highlights solutions offered by local agencies that are working aggressively to provide stable housing to our most vulnerable youth.

We hope you'll join us in embracing this report's recommendations for how to increase the options available for these young people, as well as for making investments in transitional and permanent housing that will improve foster youths' chances for long-term success.

André V. Chapman, M.A.

Founder and CEO
Unity Care

Gina Dalma

Vice President of Government Relations
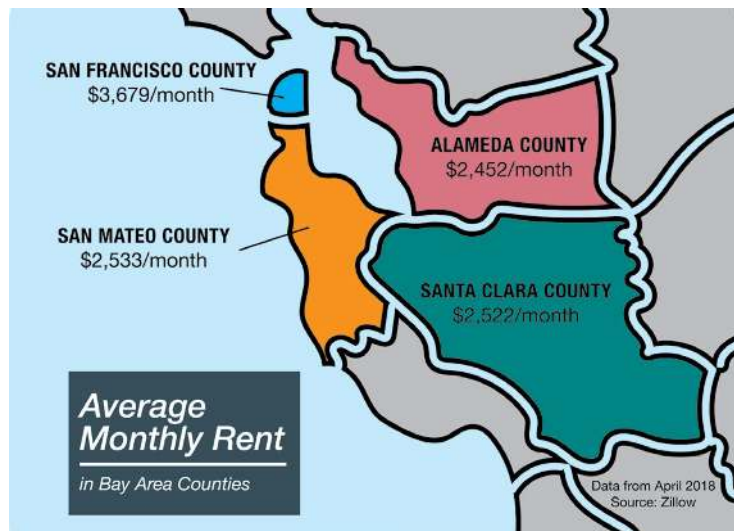Silicon Valley Community Foundation

Introduction

Silicon Valley and the Bay Area's tech boom continue to fuel economic expansion and innovation in our state and country, but as the job market has grown, housing availability has not kept pace.

From 2010 to 2017, Silicon Valley added 297,000 new jobs, but built only 49,600 new housing units, according to Joint Venture Silicon Valley. The specialized nature and high salaries associated with many of the jobs coming to the region have also compounded existing income inequalities.[1]

Between scarcity and a competitive market, housing costs have steadily crept up across the region in recent years. To sustainably afford a Bay Area apartment, renters would have to earn at least four times the state minimum wage.[2]

This shortage of affordable housing presents a significant challenge to the youth and families involved in the child welfare system, and ongoing statewide foster care reforms are making it harder than ever for these vulnerable children and teens to find a stable home.

"When we needed a new Bay Bridge, we built the new bridge but we kept the old bridge functioning until the new bridge was up and running. And then we dismantled the old bridge," said Jill Jacobs, executive director of Family Builders, an Oakland-based foster family agency. "We didn't do that in child welfare."

SAN FRANCISCO COUNTY
$3,679/month

ALAMEDA COUNTY
$2,452/month

SAN MATEO COUNTY
$2,533/month

SANTA CLARA COUNTY
$2,522/month

Average Monthly Rent
in Bay Area Counties

Data from April 2018
Source: Zillow

The Continuum of Care Reform, the most significant of these reforms, calls for sweeping changes to California's child welfare system, largely by reducing the reliance on congregate care — or nonfamily foster placement settings where multiple youths live together supervised by shift staff — except to provide intensive, short-term mental health treatment. While direct service providers generally applaud the law's goal of getting every foster youth into a permanent, loving family, they say the current approach threatens to spur a rise in youth homelessness — especially in the country's most costly region to live in.

This report will provide background and recommendations around this issue, including the following:

- A breakdown of Continuum of Care Reform

- Affordable housing shortages in Bay Area communities

- Challenges to foster family recruitment

- A background on congregate care in California and efforts to reduce its use

- Concerns about increasing youth homelessness

- Roadblocks to implementing the reforms

- Innovative transitional housing options and permanency strategies

Foster Care + The Housing Crisis

The disproportionately poor outcomes faced by foster youth are well-established. They graduate from high school and earn college degrees at a rate far lower than their non-systems-involved peers, and they are far more likely to become incarcerated, underemployed or homeless.[3]

Studies indicate that 18 to 20 percent of former foster youth reported being homeless at least one night within the first year of aging out of care.[4] By age 24, nearly 40 percent will struggle with homelessness.[5] Researchers acknowledge that while startling, these figures may be an underrepresentation, as unstable housing can influence a potential respondent's ability to be reached for or participate in such a study.

Even more prevalent than outright homelessness is housing instability. Common iterations of housing instability include having difficulty paying rent, spending more than 50 percent of income on housing, moving frequently, and living in crowded situations with friends, relatives or even strangers.[6]

These conditions can affect the mental and physical health of former foster youth, and hinder their ability to successfully pursue higher education, hold a job, or meet their other basic needs — and the continued instability mirrors what so many experience while in care, making it feel like an unbreakable cycle.

While sobering, this landscape is unsurprising given the odds we expect foster youth to overcome. When foster youth turn 18 — or 21 if they've opted into extended foster care — they are immediately cut off from all benefits. They're expected to be able to house, feed and care for themselves, all while going to school or working, or both.

Across the country, 20,000 kids age out of foster care each year, many with no savings account or safety net to see them successfully through to adult independence.[7]

Photo: Elijah Nouveledge

Now compare that reality to the post-high school years of non-systems-involved youth. The millennial generation is living with their parents at a higher rate and for longer stints than ever before. More than 30 percent of people in the Bay Area who are 18–34 years of age live with their parents.[8] Young people with supportive families often have help paying for college, health care and basic needs. One analysis estimates that, whether living at home or independently, the average millennial receives $38,000 in financial support from their parents after turning 18.[9]

There is some support available to foster youth transitioning into adulthood.

The federal Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA) of 1999 established the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program to provide services and financial support to former foster youth ages 18–21. FCIA doubled federal funding toward independent living services and gave states more flexibility in how they could spend those funds, though the amount that could go toward housing was capped at 30 percent.

In 2010, California made foster care benefits available to youth up to age 21. Assembly bill 12, the California Fostering Connections to Success Act, also created two additional placement types that can serve as alternatives to congregate care. Supervised Independent Living Programs (SILP) are placement options where foster youth ages

18–21 can live in an independent apartment, shared home, or college dorm and receive their foster care benefits directly. The Transitional Housing Placement-Plus Foster Care (THP+FC) program is a placement option where youth in extended care can live with a foster family or in a "single-site" housing setting with live-in supervision.

Former or aging-out foster youth ages 18–24 are eligible for Housing Choice Vouchers from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development under the Family Unification Program if they are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. However, this support, while a significant improvement over prior policy, falls short when there isn't sufficient housing to meet the demand, as is the case throughout the Bay Area. Recent analysis shows that in Santa Clara County, where the median monthly rent is $2,850, 60,000 more affordable rental homes are needed to meet current demand.[10]

At the same time, though, Low-Income Housing Tax Credit housing production in Santa Clara County declined 33 percent in 2017, in anticipation of the recent federal tax reform, according to the California Housing Partnership Corporation. Homelessness is unsurprisingly on the rise, jumping 12 percent, CHPC data show.[11,12] Similar figures are reflected throughout Bay Area counties.

The shortage of affordable housing also creates barriers to foster family eligibility, providers say. Fostering requires providing a bedroom, and with rents on the rise, increasingly fewer families and individuals can afford to have homes with spare bedrooms. The average two-bedroom rental in Santa Clara County costs over $3,000 per month, according to Zillow, and rents jump by around $400 for each additional bedroom. The statewide monthly rate paid to foster parents — from $923 to $1,235 per child — is not sufficient to cover the region's exorbitant housing costs in addition to the rest of the expenses to support the kids in their care.

Continuum Of Care Reform

Intersecting with the region's housing crisis and existing impact on the child welfare system is a new set of laws that many placement providers worry will strain the system to a breaking point and result in more homeless foster youth.

In 2015, sweeping reforms to the state's foster care system were signed into law. The major goals of Assembly bill 403, the Continuum of Care Reform (CCR), are to reduce reliance on congregate care, replacing it with the increased use of home-based family care, and to decrease the length of time to achieve permanency, through reunification, guardianship or adoption.

CCR, penned by Assembly member Mark Stone (D-29), revised the foster family approval process and redesignated all the various types of home-based family care (county foster families, foster family agency families and kinship caregivers) as "resource families." All resource families would be subject to the same licensing standards and rate of pay. When they entered the system, they would be approved upfront to serve at any point in the placement continuum, from short-term emergency placements to adoption.

One of the linchpins of the law is reducing reliance on congregate care. Under CCR, group homes, which house anywhere from six to more than 60 youth in a community-style setting staffed by a rotating crew of shift workers, must transition to either short-term residential treatment programs or transitional housing placements for youth preparing to age out of the system.

Proponents of the law argue that children fare better when raised in families rather than congregate care settings. There is significant research to support that. A 2014 study of California public schools indicated that foster youth living in group homes were among the least likely to graduate high school.[13] A 2008 study indicated that group home placement significantly increased the likelihood of arrest.[14] For younger children especially, extended stays in group homes deter their ability to form lasting relationships with significant adults.

Children in Foster Care, by Type of Placement: 1998 to 2015

California
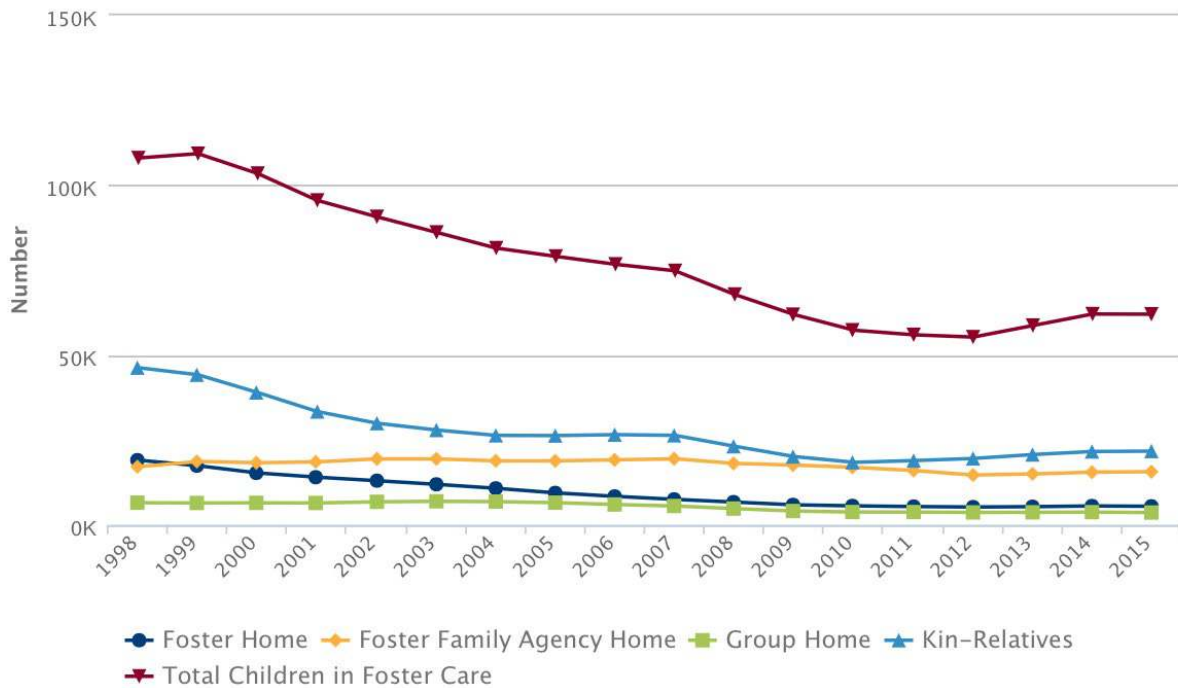
CCR does not call for the elimination of all congregate care. Recognizing the significant rate of trauma among youth in the system and the acute mental health needs faced by many, the reform calls for Short-Term Residential Therapeutic Program (STRTP) facilities to replace the existing group home model.

In the traditional model, group homes are classified according to the level of care and supervision, mental health treatment, and social work activities their residents required. On a scale of 1–14, the midlevel placements often serve youth who exhibit behaviors that require more supervision and structure than many foster homes can provide. Placement levels 12–14 are required to provide psychiatric services.

STRTP placement would be reserved for foster youth with severe mental, emotional, or behavior disorders and the need for intensive treatment — essentially replacing level 12–14 group homes. The stays are limited to six months, after which youth are to be stepped down into resource families or reunified with their families of origin. The law allows for 30 days of aftercare services for youth who move out. If social workers or placement providers believe their youths need more time in treatment, they must get approval every six months from the county child welfare deputy director, probation chief or assistant chief.

Counties are also required under the new law to close children's shelters, which historically served as temporary housing while social workers found the best home for an incoming foster youth or one moving placements. Under CCR, these shelters are replaced with receiving and intake centers with a 24-hour limit on youth stays.

To make up for the beds being phased out along with nontreatment congregate care, CCR calls for increased recruitment of resource families, both those related to kids in care and those from the community. The state set aside $104.16 million to aid counties in recruiting and retaining foster families, allocated based on how many out-of-care children reside in each county. Foster Parent Recruitment, Retention, and Support (FPRRS)

funds go to county child welfare departments and probation departments responsible for placing dual-status foster youth. Administrators can either use the funds in-house or contract with a private agency to perform recruitment and retention services. Under CCR, child welfare agencies are required to document individualized recruitment efforts for each youth. The reform also equalized pay and access to services between kin and nonkin caregivers, in the hopes of encouraging more relatives to take kids in.

Reform Shortfalls

Across the child welfare spectrum, providers generally agree that CCR is well-intentioned and holds promising goals, but the way it is being implemented is leaving a glut of youth with nowhere to go and little certainty for their futures.

Placement Options for Foster Youth

Congregate Care

Background

Before CCR, group home reform had been a concern for state legislators for years. In 1998, the state legislature passed Senate bill 933, the Reexamination of the Role of Group Care, which resulted in recommendations that mirror many of the changes put into place by CCR, including a new licensing and rate structure and an accreditation requirement. Wraparound services, which provide home-based treatment and support in an effort to reduce higher-level placements, have been gaining steam statewide since the 1990s. A 2007 law instituted the Residentially Based Services pilot project, which was similar to the eventual STRTP model.

In 2010, Assembly bill 1612 placed a moratorium on licensing new group homes or expanding existing homes while policymakers considered reform options. The number of California kids in out-of-home care had been drastically declining for years, and lawmakers said they wanted to reshape the system to make the best use of funding for the reduced population now being served. A 2013 law placed time limits on the length of group home stays for kids under 12.

More recently, a series of exposés on California group homes framing them as hotbeds of abuse, crime, and drug use brought public opinion into the mix. Historically, mainstream media latch on to only the most horrific occurrences in foster care. This shapes a skewed public perception of a system the majority of Americans have no firsthand experience with. It also, very often drives policy change. While the ideas behind CCR have been discussed for decades, this recent media and public scrutiny likely gave lawmakers a sense of urgency to effect change. Congregate care, for better or worse, became somewhat of a scapegoat in that reform process.

Potential Consequences of Reducing Placement Options

Many providers worry that reducing congregate care and limiting it to those with the most intensive mental health needs fail to take into account the individualized needs of the tens of thousands of children and teens served by the child welfare system. They agree that a family for every foster youth is a noble goal, but unrealistic.

"The kids that are left have significant levels of trauma. Oftentimes you don't have the foster parents that are adequately equipped to meet the needs of these kids,"

André Chapman, founder and CEO of Unity Care, a nonprofit serving foster youth and families through numerous community, mental health and housing programs.

Not only does the state lack the resource families needed to fill the gap that will be left by the elimination of nontreatment congregate care, but there also are certain populations of foster youth who will struggle to succeed in a traditional foster home.

Patrice Davis has run level-9 group homes for boys in Santa Clara County for nearly 20 years. While her residents don't quite need the 24/7 access to psychiatric care provided at higher-level homes, their behaviors — e.g., running away, abusing substances and committing crimes — necessitate a structured and supervised setting.

> *"If I do something wrong, I could get level-dropped and I'd get less money,"* Jackson said.
> *"And I'm trying to level up; I'm not trying to level down."*

Photo: Sara Tiano

Jackson's room at the group home is decorated with pictures of his family and his favorite basketball players.

Prospective foster and adoptive parents overwhelmingly seek younger kids. After age 9, foster youth are less likely to be adopted and have a harder time finding placements. Older teens make up the vast majority of foster youth living in group homes. They have either languished in out-of-home care for years or exhibit behaviors that jeopardize their candidacy for home-based care — or both. For these older teens, stepping down into a resource family would be difficult, if it's even an option.

According to Davis and group home case manager Stacey Murillo, news of the changing group home status has reached their young residents, leaving many worried about their future. Several have run away or stated plans to do so if they have to live with a resource family.

Jackson, 13, is among those threatening to run away. He said he's seen fellow foster youth step down to resource families only to be returned to the group home after a few months. Until he can reunify with his mother, Jackson said, he prefers the stability of the group home over the uncertainty of a resource family that could change its mind.

The group home, Jackson explained, provides structure with its levels-based system, which also determines his allowance and weekend outings. For example, youth can level up by setting and meeting goals or improving their behavior. Breaking rules will cause them to level down.

When he entered the system, Jackson was using drugs, stealing cars, and getting into fights at school. He was even picked up by the police. After moving into the group home and transferring to a new school, Jackson has done a 180, staff said.

"I have not gotten one phone call from San Jose PD, not one phone call from the teacher because of his behavior — he does his homework," said Murillo.

But Davis' homes and others like it are facing imminent closure or status change under CCR, and foster youth such as Jackson face a worrisome future.

Davis also worries that closing all nontreatment group homes will strain a system ill-prepared to place foster youth in a home within the 24-hour deadline.

"My concern is there's no gap. What's going to fill in?" she asks.

This scenario is already playing out in Santa Clara County, according to Davis and Murillo. The local Receiving, Assessment and Intake Center, operated by the county's Department of Children and Family Services, is overflowing with youth in need of placement. They are staying for weeks at a time in a facility designed for daylong stints.

"If you're going to put these kids in a foster home, these kids are going to run," Davis said.

"They're going to be on the street, they're going to commit crime, they're going to be homeless — when they had a chance to be in a group home and do what they need to do."

The changes required by CCR will force smaller group homes to close, but perhaps they're better suited to serve this youth population. With few kids and a small staff, a group home can promote the feeling of family more than an institution would.

Photos: Elijah Nouvelage

In Patrice Davis' group homes, boys eat meals, watch TV and play video games together. They also observe a daily study hour.

Transitional Housing Programs

For the older youth who make up the majority of California's group home population, both Davis and Unity Care's Chapman suggested that transitional living programs would present a more desirable placement option than stepping down to a resource family.

Transitional housing programs provide transition-aged youth with stable housing during the crucial early adulthood years, allowing them to focus on establishing the skills, resources, and routines they'll need to live independently.

Types of Transitional Housing Programs

Three types of transitional housing programs serve foster youth and recent alumni aged 16–24:

- **Transitional Housing Placement Program (THPP)**
  Housing option for foster youth aged 16–18, either alone in an approved setting, or in a single-family dwelling with roommates and staff living on-site.

- **Transitional Housing Placement-Plus Foster Care (THP+FC)**
  THP+FC is available to nonminor dependents aged 18–21 who chose to extend their foster care benefits under AB 12. Participants can live with a host family, in a "single-site" apartment, condominium, or single-family home with a staff member living on-site, or in an independently leased apartment with rent subsidized by foster care benefits.

- **Transitional Housing Program-Plus (THP-Plus)**
  THP-Plus serves foster care alumni between 18 and 24 years of age. Participants receive support to rent an apartment or live in a dorm, or they can live with a host family known to them.

Despite provisions of financial housing assistance (e.g., extended foster care benefits through age 21), the lack of local, affordable housing can prevent foster youth from accessing such support. A major study of aging-out foster youth suggested that extended foster care did not prevent homelessness, it just delayed the onset. Researchers compared youth who aged out at 18 in Wisconsin and Iowa with youth who aged out at 21 in Illinois, where extended foster care was available. The Illinois youth had a lower rate of homelessness before age 21, but by age 24, the rates for both cohorts were nearly identical.

Access to transitional housing programs can mean the difference between homelessness and stability.

Unity Care offers a range of transitional housing programs, including options tailored for individual needs such as Berrios'. According to Chapman, the CEO, the goal is to afford foster youth the same safety net

Karla Berrios entered foster care at 13, and set out on her own at 18. Before long, she was living in a tent, caring for one baby and pregnant with another. Terrified that her kids would be removed if their living situation were discovered, she felt hopeless. After a failed suicide attempt, Berrios reached out to her social worker, who was able to get her and her children into a transitional housing program through Unity Care.

> *"You have one more chance. You're going to go into this program; they'll help you. You won't be alone,"*

Berrios recalls her social worker telling her.

These days, Berrios is a calm and sunny 21-year-old. She has a case manager to help keep her on track and she receives a monthly stipend for rent. She and her two toddlers live with her brother.

At her lowest point, Karla Berrios was living in a tent with her infant son, and pregnant with her daughter. Now in transitional housing through Unity Care, this former foster youth and her children are finally experiencing stability.

and gradual transition their non-systems-involved peers enjoy.

Chapman described a "normal maturity life cycle" from 18–24: The first year or two are spent in the college dorms with a live-in resident adviser. That's followed by a home shared with roommates, then independent living or living with a partner.

"Our goal is to give our youth that same pathway, that same journey," he said. To this end Unity Care developed Project Safe Haven with a five-year continuum of care.

Project Safe Haven participants typically start in a congregate care setting, living in a single-family home with other youth and a live-in staff member. Next, they move into Transitional Housing Placement-Plus Foster Care, which is also a group home setting, but with increased independence and a staff member on site (much like a college dorm). At this point, youth can also choose to live with a host family. The final stage is Transitional Housing Program-Plus, which is independent living in an apartment subsidized by Unity Care.

"The challenge that we all have is how do we ensure there is enough resources and housing options for these youth," Chapman said. Unity Care is currently working to increase the transitional and permanent housing in the region, by securing affordable housing options for an additional 150 youth.

In San Jose, Unity Care has partnered with MidPen Housing on a pilot program to better serve these youth. MidPen, which owns and manages over 100 affordable housing communities across Northern California, set aside 10 units in one of its family properties for Unity Care's Project Safe Haven program. MidPen also agreed to subsidize the below-market-rate apartments for a period of five years, allowing youth to rent an apartment for $550 in a county where the average rent for a one-bedroom is nearly $2,500.

Photos: Elijah Nouvelage

In partnership with Unity Care, MidPen Housing set aside 10 units in one of its San Jose properties for former foster youth.

During those five years, the youth must focus on school and work as they prepare for independence. When the five years are up, they have the option to take over the lease. Since it is an affordable housing unit, the rent will still be far below market rate.

The SILP and THP-Plus programs offer similar housing support, but SILP is available only up to age 21, while THP-Plus has a two-year limit.

"While the programs are helpful, two years are not enough in the nation's most expensive housing market," said Beth Fraker, MidPen's director of communications who helped bring about the partnership with Unity Care.

MidPen, which has a wait list of up to 10 years at some of its properties, aims to strengthen communities through high-quality affordable housing and robust on-site services. It's currently discussing options to renew and replicate the pilot program with Unity Care, which ends this year.

Fraker, who was adopted as an infant herself, said the high rate of homelessness among former foster youth is spurring leadership across the state to effect change. San Mateo County recently announced funding for the construction of permanent affordable units for this population.

"These young people have such tremendous hope and potential, and if we can invest in them on the front end, before they become chronically homeless, in the end it saves the public money and you're completely changing the trajectory of a young person's life," Fraker said.

Photos: Elijah Nouvelage

| *"I have to be my own foundation, and when I don't have that I feel really unstable."*

Elizabeth Cartagena learned early to create a haven within herself. After entering foster care at age 7, she moved through many different homes and living situations, some of them less than ideal. Unable to control her physical home, Cartagena turned to creating a spiritual home, a haven, within herself.

Since joining Unity Care's transitional housing program, Cartagena no longer worries about not having a roof over her head. Her apartment, provided through the Unity Care–MidPen partnership, is sunny and welcoming, where she's able to focus on her health and education as she works toward independence.

The support and services offered by Unity Care allow foster youth the necessary space to process their past and prepare for their future, a process prolonged by years of trauma, she explained.

| *"Now [that] we're stable, why are we having so much instability inside?" she asks. "It's because we're finally feeling safe enough to not be in survival mode."*

> *"We're busy dismantling the system, and we haven't really shored up new resources for those kids,"*

said Jill Jacobs, executive director of Family Builders, an Oakland-based foster family agency.

Both Jacobs and Davis, the group home provider, point to a mismatch between the kids in need of resource families as they are forced out of group homes and the new resource families CCR calls for.

> *"When they talk about the recruitment of new families, the new families are signed up for the babies, the little ones," Davis said. "So when they talk about the numbers, what numbers are we really talking about that serve this population?"*

> *"The magical thinking," Jacobs said, referring to the disconnect in the Legislature, "is going to leave some kids out in the cold. I don't know where they're going to be."*

> *"It's a deeper commitment than people think,"*

said Barbel Osburg of Alternative Family Services, a foster family agency serving San Mateo, San Francisco, Alameda and Santa Clara counties, among other parts of the state.

Osburg said recruitment of new families has always been challenging, especially those that can work with teenagers — and CCR brings about changes that both help and hurt this process.

Resource Family Recruitment

The idea behind CCR was to replace group home beds with space in resource families, but providers in the Bay Area say that recruitment of resource families is falling short.

Intensive Services Foster Care (ISFC) placements are designed to help fill this need, but it is difficult to recruit families that are able to provide this level of care, especially when the limit is two youths per household.

The new resource family approval process allows for more innovative placement options — what was once a definitive "no" is now a conversation. Restrictions have been eased on room sharing, making fostering more feasible for Bay Area residents living in small homes.

The new rate structures under CCR are based on a child's need level rather than age, meaning rate cuts for some families fostering teens, and further exacerbating the difficulty of recruitment.

"I just don't think there is a home for every youth that's in a group home," Osburg said.

Family Finding and Permanency

Family finding is the practice of intensively searching for and engaging family members and other adults who have a significant relationship with youth in care.

Extended family can aid the reunification process and provide parents with support. Family finding also identifies alternative permanent placement options if reunification does not occur. Long-term relationships with caring adults can also provide youth with emotional support and stability during and after the transition to adulthood.

Federal law requires child welfare agencies to notify basic family members when a child enters foster care, but efforts to find and engage extended family vary by state and county.

In California, social workers have 30 days to find and contact a youth's relations "to the fifth degree" — that means parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces, great-grandparents, great-aunts and -uncles, first cousins, great-great-grandparents, great-great-aunts and -uncles, first cousins once removed, and

great-great-great grandparents. However, with crippling caseloads, social workers have extremely limited time for family finding.

Private foster family agencies, however, can devote more staff to this practice. At Family Builders, Jacobs has three full-time staffers for family finding for San Francisco foster youth (the county contracts with the agency to provide resource family recruitment and approval).

Evaluations of family finding programs have yielded relatively inconclusive results, though several studies found a positive impact on placement stability and reunification.

Jacobs believes family finding is crucial for older foster youth leaving group homes. "When you have a 6-foot-2 teenage football player with stubble on his face, people aren't lining up to adopt that kiddo," she explained. "But the people that know that child and love that child, those are the people that are going to take that child and be committed to them. We have to find those folks."

But despite the recruitment potential of family finding and permanency being a priority for CCR, both were left out of the mix when it came to funding.

"It's how we get kids out of care and into permanent families, and it's not in CCR. It's just not there," Jacobs said.

Breeaunna Lynn, 20, gregarious and confident, had struggled in home-based placements — an experience common among LGBTQ youth in foster care. Even in progressive California, one foster family she stayed with as a teen tried to "pray the gay away" on her behalf.

Lynn finally got into a loving, supportive placement, but the agency working with her dropped her from the system at 18. She opted into extended foster care, but then found herself bouncing around and crashing with friends. Fortunately, she had developed a relationship with a mentor, who took her in for a few months while her social worker found a permanent housing solution.

Now Lynn lives in a one-bedroom apartment provided through the Unity Care–MidPen partnership. She also works several jobs while studying to become an anesthesiologist

"I have a place to just call home for myself," she said. "Now I stress not about where I'm going to be sleeping, but normal stuff like finals."

Photos: Elijah Nouvelage

After aging out of foster care, Breeaunna Lynn was without a home. Now, thanks to a partnership between Unity Care and MidPen Housing, she enjoys the security of living in her own apartment.

Lynn's relationship with her mentor continues to thrive as well.

Unity Care's Chapman says having stable housing enables youth to organically nurture these important connections, rather than feeling pressured to leverage them into a place to stay.

Roadblocks to CCR Implementation

A major concern shared by group homes and foster family agencies is difficulty securing contracts with county mental health services. Providers in Alameda and Santa Clara counties report that small agencies are finding themselves denied the contracts they need to make the changes required by CCR.

Under the new law, Short-Term Residential Therapeutic Program facilities must be certified by the county mental health department to provide direct mental health services. Also, foster family agencies must have either mental health certification from the state or a plan to provide clients with access to mental health services through a partner agency.

For group homes like the ones Davis runs, this means they cannot transition to a residential treatment facility. Davis said Santa Clara County gave out only four mental health contracts, and they went to the larger providers. She now has to come up with and implement a program model that doesn't require a mental health contract, leaving the future of her homes and the boys who live there in limbo.

For Family Builders, the small foster family agency based in Oakland, its lack of infrastructure to run Medicaid billing disqualified it from obtaining a contract. To operate in the reformed system, it had to partner with Unity Care, a much larger agency, to share its access to mental health services. Still, this pass-through option poses challenges to Family Builders' timely provision of services.

Even Stone, the legislator behind CCR, acknowledges that getting mental health departments to buy in has been one of the biggest challenges of implementing the reforms.

"It's not where I would like it to be, at this point," Stone said in a February 2018 interview. "It's been difficult to get the Department of Health Care Services, who are used to delivering services in a very different model. They're not used to doing mental health services upfront. They're not used to engaging at this point, and we're pushing them to do that."

Providers, especially the smaller private agencies, are also struggling with what they call near-constant updates and changes to the system. New legislation each year results in tweaks to CCR, and the California Department of Social Services regularly announces new changes and requirements.

"I need a full-time person to keep up with the state requirements right now," Jacobs said. The new state mandates, she says, often duplicate requirements agencies already met to obtain the national accreditation required by CCR.

> ### 'I was teetering on the edge of homelessness.'
>
> Brenda Jacobs 24, was two weeks from starting a public health master's program at Johns Hopkins University when she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder.
>
> In an instant, her life turned upside down. An African-American and a former foster youth, she had already beaten the odds, earning a bachelor's degree from Stanford (fewer than 1 in 10 former foster youth graduate from college).
>
> After she was diagnosed, she spent several months in the hospital. With no safety net, she didn't know where she would go once she was released.
>
> But then she found Unity Care's Project Safe Haven. While most transitional housing programs cap eligibility at 21 for former foster youth, Unity Care offers options up to age 24.
>
> Through Project Safe Haven, Jacobs shares an apartment with another former foster youth and sees a case manager and a therapist regularly. She's eager to return to her "real life" and is getting ready to start reapplying to graduate programs.

Compounding agencies' struggle to meet CCR requirements is arbitrary access to funding. Though CCR encourages county agencies to partner with community-based organizations on recruitment and service needs, what counties are willing to fund varies.

For example, the county of San Francisco contracts with Oakland-based Family Builders for family finding for its foster youth. In Alameda County, that service is done in-house by social workers.

Recommendations

Community

The shortage of affordable housing in the Bay Area places considerable stress on every facet of the child welfare system, from resource family recruitment to supporting foster youth as they age out of care. The development of new affordable housing must be a priority in all counties, as it is critical to the welfare of youth in need as well as all low-income residents in the Bay Area.

Housing developers can partner with community-based service providers to provide more housing options for transition-aged foster youth across the Bay Area, as the Unity Care–MidPen partnership has done in San Jose.

Likewise, owners of multi-unit housing complexes can set aside affordable units for independent living programs like Project Safe Haven. Managers of affordable housing communities can make foster youth a priority population with preferential access to the low-cost units.

For community members without direct lines to creating housing options, Unity Care offers a number of avenues to get involved as it embarks on a $13 million campaign to increase the number of housing options available to foster youth across several Bay Area counties.

Supporting local foster service agencies preserves their ability to inform the policies affecting foster youth.

> *"Everyone can have an impact on the housing side," Unity Care's Chapman says. "That's where people can say, 'I can put some skin in the game, and I can absolutely do something to reduce youth homelessness."*

Lawmakers

State lawmakers could address regional housing crises by using state funds to supplement federal housing vouchers in areas with disproportionately high costs of living such as the Bay Area. In addition to easing the strain of aging-out foster youth, providing low-income families in the region with additional housing support could spur an increase in families eligible to serve as foster parents as well as prevent unnecessary entries into foster care.

When it comes to congregate care, lawmakers should avoid acting rashly, making sweeping changes to a system based on a handful of scandals. Focus should be given to realistic individualized needs assessment and taking into account the desires of the youth affected by the decisions. Providers and foster youth alike agree that a range of options is necessary to best meet the needs of each child — including some nontreatment congregate care options. The answer, they say, isn't eliminating this level of care — rather, it's shrinking this part of the system and bringing it under closer oversight.

Before reducing the capacity of group homes, county administrators must be sure they have sufficient resource families — and the right kind of resource families — to fill the gap, something that so far has not been achieved.

The state Department of Social Services and county administrators need to work together to engage county mental health departments to enhance and streamline their participation in the process. Lack of buy-in from mental health departments is preventing key private providers from making the changes required by CCR, and will force their closure if not addressed. And, perhaps, they should consider slowing down the rapid timeline they're pursuing for implementation.

It is not too often that the children and youth in the state's care enjoy so much dedicated and centralized attention from lawmakers and providers at every level. To that end, CCR provides a historic chance for meaningful, positive reform. But pursuing these changes without first ensuring the necessary infrastructure is in place could mean CCR winds up doing more harm than good.

ENDNOTES

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