

# Youth in Transition

A Community Initiative in Forsyth County, North Carolina

**AN EVALUATION**



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# Executive Summary

Youth in Transition: A Community Initiative in Forsyth County was established in 2010 after the Forsyth County Department of Social Services (DSS) reached out to community leaders to partner in improving outcomes for youth aging out of the public foster care system and other former foster youth. Technical assistance is provided by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, a prominent foundation working on behalf of youth aging out of care, and private funding has been provided by two local foundations.

YIT aims to promote successful transitions to adulthood for current and former foster youth ages 14 to 25 by building capacity among youth and increasing access to education, employment and other opportunities with the help of community partners who serve as mentors and “door openers.” It also aims to bring private sector support to supplement the work of DSS for youth still in care. Long-term policy change is another focus. YIT is not a service provider, although it does provide financial literacy training and limited case management.



**YOUTH IN TRANSITION**  
*a community initiative in Forsyth County*

Youth engagement is a major component of YIT. Youth helped develop the initiative and continue to shape its focus and activities.

Participants take part in a range of activities. All may serve on a youth advocacy board and attend monthly educational sessions. They may be paired with a volunteer mentor. They can also receive limited case management support. Youth who complete a multi-session financial literacy class become eligible for a matching grant program in which participants are matched dollar for dollar, up to \$3000, for a vehicle, housing deposit, or other qualifying expenditure. They are also enrolled in the Opportunity Passport Program, a national program of the Jim Casey Initiative in which they are tracked through semiannual surveys.

Youth in YIT report satisfaction with the initiative, particularly the matching grant program, the LYFE Board, and the supportiveness of YIT staff.

YIT has a close partnership with DSS in that all YIT participants have been in DSS foster care and many continue to receive DSS services and financial support. DSS social workers and administration were key players in the formation of YIT and continue to sit on the board and committees. However, this partnership is complicated by confidentiality requirements, which hinder the sharing of information by DSS staff; differences in organizational culture; and resistance by DSS frontline social workers.

YIT has many strengths, including a strong board, a number of community partners, and two sources of private funding. Recommendations include establishing an information sharing and communication protocol between DSS and YIT, establishing a practice model and menu of services, reviewing and refining the role of the Community Partnership Board, and broadening the range of community partnerships to include the public school system, large healthcare providers, and law enforcement. Partnerships should be sought as well with individuals and small businesses who could commit to helping one or two youth.

After the practice model is established and refined, the Community Partnership Board will need to explore paths toward long-term sustainability.

# Introduction

Youth in foster care face numerous challenges, and upon leaving foster care they often have poor outcomes. Former foster youth, when compared to the national average, are far less likely to go to college, own a home, or have steady employment, and far more likely to be involved with the criminal justice system, suffer from mental illness, or be homeless.

Recent legislation has attempted to address these longstanding problems. Recognizing these problems, the federal government has passed several significant pieces of legislation to help foster youth. The 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act aimed to move children in foster care more quickly to permanent homes by shortening the time frame for a child's first permanency hearing, offering financial incentives to increase adoptions, and setting new requirements for states to petition to terminate parental rights. The 1999 Foster Care Independence Act revised funding to states and expanded opportunities for independent living programs providing education, training, and employment services, and financial support for foster youth to prepare for living on their own, and allowed funds to be used to pay for room and board for former foster youth age 18 to 21. The 2008 Fostering Connections Act allowed states to provide foster care supports and services to young people up to age 21, increased federal reimbursement and expanded allowable costs for independent living training, and improved oversight of educational progress and health care needs of children while in care.



Despite these policy changes, problems persist. The numbers are startling. According to data from the Midwest Study<sup>1</sup> conducted by the Chapin Hall policy center at the University of Chicago, nearly 60% of youth who aged out of foster care at 18 had been convicted of a crime by age 23 or 24, and 80% had been arrested. Nearly 25% had experienced homelessness. Only 6% had a degree from a two- or four-year college or university. Less than half were employed.

Forsyth County, North Carolina, a metropolitan county in central North Carolina, was seeing similar poor outcomes among their former foster youth. Forsyth County (population: 358,137 in 2012) is part of the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina and is home to Winston-Salem. Historically a hub of tobacco manufacturing and hosiery—R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company and Hanes started here—Winston-Salem has in recent years become better known for medical research and the performing arts.

Forsyth County has relatively few foster youth, far fewer per capita than most North Carolina counties, and only a dozen or two age out per year. Given this relatively small number of youth, certainly a resource-rich county like Forsyth could wrap its arms around these young people and help them successfully launch into adulthood. It was this thinking that led to the creation of the Youth in Transition initiative (YIT).

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<sup>1</sup> Courtney, M.E., Dworsky, A., Lee, J.S., and Rapp, M. (2010). Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at ages 23 and 24. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children.

## Background and context

The seeds for YIT were germinated in 2008, when Forsyth County Department of Social Services (DSS) Director Joe Raymond and others asked The Winston-Salem Foundation, a respected community convener, to establish a work group and develop a community plan to ensure that all young people in Forsyth County leaving foster care can make a successful transition to adulthood.



That task force was convened in January 2009. Through a series of meetings and retreats, a community initiative—Youth in Transition: A Community Initiative in Forsyth County—was established in 2010. Goodwill Industries was named as the lead agency, and the Kate B Reynolds Charitable Trust and the Duke Endowment provided substantial funding. Technical support has been provided by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, a national foundation that supports programs for youth transitioning out of foster care. Staff were hired starting in 2011, and activities and services for youth began later that year.

## Partners

**Forsyth DSS** is the public social services agency serving all of Forsyth County. The agency provides comprehensive services for adults, children, and families, including child welfare, Medicaid, Food and Nutrition Services (food stamps), Work First (North Carolina’s version of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF), adult care services, and many other assistance and entitlement programs. Services for children and youth in foster care fall under the Family and Children’s Services Division, whose stated mission is to encourage and provide for the safety, well-being, and permanence of children by supporting and enhancing family systems. Forsyth DSS, like all county DSSs in North Carolina, is independently run, though subject to state policies and regulations.

The DSS director sits on YIT’s Community Partnership Board, and several child welfare program directors, supervisors, and frontline social workers sit on committees.

**The Winston-Salem Foundation** is a community foundation comprised of more than 1,300 funds created by charitable individuals and organizations. Established in 1919, the foundation had \$308 million in assets and distributed \$20.2 million to charitable causes in 2012. Besides helping individuals distribute money, the foundation serves as a community catalyst, bringing together diverse services and groups to address a variety of social issues.

The Winston-Salem Foundation is the convener for YIT. The Foundation’s president sits on YIT’s Community Partnership Board, and from 2011 to 2013, its Vice President for Community Investment was Board Chair.

**Goodwill Industries of Northwest North Carolina** is a private, nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide all people with access to meaningful employment. Goodwill offers workforce development programs which are supported largely through sales of donated goods in its thrift stores. In 2012, Goodwill provided workforce development services for 44,352 people and placed 6,747 individuals into competitive employment. Founded in 1926 by a Winston-Salem church to provide employment for the disabled, the organization now serves 31 counties in the North Carolina mountains and Piedmont and is part of the Goodwill Industries International network.

Goodwill’s President/CEO sits on YIT’s Community Partnership Board. Goodwill is the lead organization of YIT, and all YIT funding goes through Goodwill. YIT staff are considered Goodwill employees.

The [Kate B Reynolds Charitable Trust](#) is dedicated to improving health and quality of life for the poor in North Carolina. Established in 1947 by a prominent tobacco family in Winston-Salem, the trust directs one quarter of its distributions toward basic life needs and solutions to improve quality of life for the financially needy in Forsyth County. (Other distributions are directed throughout the state of North Carolina.) With assets of \$550 million, it distributed more than \$23 million in the year ending August 2012.

In April 2011, the trust awarded a 3-year grant totaling \$486,565 to fund matching grants for youth in YIT with individual development accounts. The director of the Trust's Poor and Needy Division sits on YIT's Community Partnership Board.

The [Duke Endowment](#) has worked to help people and strengthen communities in North Carolina and South Carolina by nurturing children, promoting health, educating minds and enriching spirits since 1924. In 2012, they distributed \$12.5 million.

In 2011, The Duke Endowment awarded a 2-year grant of \$594,793 to the Winston-Salem Foundation to support YIT.

The [Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative](#) is a national foundation whose mission is to ensure that young people—primarily those between ages 14 and 25—make successful transitions from foster care to adulthood. They do this by working nationally, in states, and locally to improve policies and practices, promote youth engagement, apply evaluation and research, and create community partnerships. Created in 2001, the Initiative works with public and private partners at 15 sites nationwide.

The Initiative provides technical assistance for YIT, but no funding. YIT is the only Jim Casey Initiative site in North Carolina.

Youth representation is a core principle of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, and YIT has incorporated that value by ensuring that current and/or former foster youth are included in all phases of the project. Three youth sat on the task force that established YIT, and youth continue to sit on the Community Partnership Board and its subcommittees. Youth also lead the LYFE Board (Leading Youth for Empowerment), an advocacy board that helps shape YIT's goals and direction. A fuller description of the LYFE Board is found later in this report.

[Financial Pathways of the Piedmont](#) is an independent nonprofit founded in Forsyth County in 1972. It provides a variety of consumer financial services including consumer credit counseling, financial education, credit review, homebuyer classes, and bankruptcy counseling.

FPP staff teach the 8- to 10-week financial literacy class required for youth who wish to take part in YIT's Individual Development Account Program that provides matching funds for savings to support education, housing, transportation and other necessities.

## Initiative description

### Entry criteria and referrals

YIT is open to youth ages 14 to 25 who were in public foster care in North Carolina at age 13 or later and now live in Forsyth County. Youth must complete an orientation and demonstrate progress toward goals established jointly by youth and YIT staff in order to be eligible for certain

services, such as matching funds; however, even those with minimal engagement generally remain eligible for basic case management and support from YIT staff until they turn 26.

Most youth are referred by DSS, but youth may self-refer or be referred by a cooperating agency.

## How the initiative works

### Entry.

Entry criteria have changed over time. When YIT began providing services in 2011, entry was available to all who had been in public foster care in Forsyth County at age 13 or later. Demand for program entry was immediate and overwhelming, and soon outstripped YIT staff capacity. In 2012, entry was limited to those who completed a multi-session financial literacy class and subsequently completed a baseline survey administered by the Jim Casey Initiative. Completion of this survey, the Opportunity Passport Participant Survey or OPPS, qualifies youth for a number of benefits and services, including access to a matching grant program.

In November 2013, program membership was expanded to those who attended an orientation and demonstrated a commitment to the program. As before, only youth who complete the financial literacy class become eligible for matching funds, but all youth who complete orientation are eligible for other services and activities, including mentoring, referrals, and participation on the LYFE Board, a youth-run advocacy board.

### Activities and services.

Participants are eligible for a wide variety of activities and services, including:

- **Financial literacy class.** Youth receive<sup>2</sup> an 8- to 10-week financial literacy class taught by an experienced financial educator from partner agency Financial Pathways of the Piedmont. The curriculum, titled “Keys to Your Financial Future,” was designed by the Jim Casey Initiative and specifically targets youth with foster care experience. Revised and expanded in July 2013, it contains 3 modules covering basic financial concepts—asset-building, credit, and money management—plus additional modules about housing, transportation, education and training, and saving and investing. The comprehensive curriculum includes a 368-page student manual.

The class generally meets one evening per week for 2 hours at Goodwill, although a condensed summer session was held in 2013. It consists of lecture and hands-on activities, including group and computer-based work.

Youth receive \$240 for completing<sup>3</sup> the financial literacy class.

- **Opportunity Passport Participant Survey.** Youth who have completed the financial literacy class are invited to take the Opportunity Passport Participant Survey, a 46-question, computer-based survey administered by the Jim Casey Initiative. The survey contains questions about education, employment, government assistance, housing, personal and community engagement, physical and mental health and access to care. Participants are encouraged to take follow-up surveys each April and October until they turn 26. Youth



<sup>2</sup> Until November 2013, youth who entered the program were immediately enrolled in a multi-week financial literacy class developed by the Jim Casey Initiative. Beginning in November 2013, youth may delay that class for several months but are still expected to take it within a year of program entry.

<sup>3</sup> Students may miss up to two classes.

receive \$40 for each completed survey. The Jim Casey Initiative maintains a database containing OPPS data from all Jim Casey Initiative sites nationwide.

- **Matching funds.** Youth who have completed the financial literacy class and taken the baseline Opportunity Passport Participant Survey are eligible for matching funds<sup>4</sup> of up to \$3,000. Match funds may be used for approved purposes including housing, transportation, education, medical expenses, and paying off debt in order to raise a credit rating. Other types of expenses are reviewed on an individual basis. Applications must be approved by a youth advisor, and funds are sent directly to a landlord, car dealer, or educational institution.
- **LYFE Board.** All participants are invited to join the LYFE Board (Leading Youth for Empowerment), a youth governing board that meets regularly to learn leadership skills and advocate for policy changes related to foster youth and foster care. Youth set the agenda for LYFE Board meetings and lead the meetings with occasional direction from a YIT staff member. LYFE Board members can sign up to be youth representatives on YIT committees and sub-committees. They also select topics and help organize workshops for YIT participants. Past workshops have included time management, dressing for success, and interviewing skills.

The youth also organize ad hoc activities. For example, the board volunteered at the Making a Difference Day national day of service in October 2013. Board members designed a T-shirt to wear at community events.

The board also receives funding and has a say in the budget. In 2013, after purchasing a laptop, printer, and video camera (for use in filming interviews to tell their story for advocacy purposes), board members had a surplus of \$8000. They decided to create an emergency fund for distribution to YIT members with unanticipated expenses, and wrote a detailed policy and application process.

Youth receive a stipend of \$10 per hour for attending LYFE Board meetings.



- **Assessment.** YIT is working closely with DSS to develop tools to assess independent living skills, mental health, and career readiness and vocational interest.
  - *Independent living.* A key mission of YIT is to help youth prepare for successful adulthood. Former foster youth often face more challenges than their peers due to the instability they have faced and the frequent absence of a stable adult. Foster youth, particularly those who live in group settings, often lack the opportunity to learn life skills such as driving, cooking, budgeting, and housekeeping that are critical to independence. They may also fail to receive guidance and encouragement to apply for college or vocational training, seek appropriate medical care, and avoid high-risk behaviors and unplanned parenthood.

To address these gaps, Congress in 1999 passed the Foster Care Independence Act, which established block grants to help states build and conduct independent

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<sup>4</sup> Participant-contributed funds are matched on a 1:1 basis.

living programs for youth. North Carolina's foster care independent living program is called LINKS<sup>5</sup>. The LINKS programs serves all youth in foster care between ages 16 and 18 years; in many counties, including Forsyth, youth ages 13 to 15 are also served. LINKS also serves youth ages 18 to 21 who are participating in a Contractual Agreement for Residential Services (CARS)<sup>6</sup> agreement with their county DSS. It also serves youth who aged out of DSS foster care until they turn 21. Most counties, including Forsyth, hold monthly LINKS meetings that typically include a lecture or hands-on training about a specific life skill.

DSS has long conducted assessments of youth's skills beginning at age 16 and created individualized transitional living plans for youth aging out. To bolster these efforts, YIT purchased a specialized life skills assessment tool, the Daniel Memorial Independent Living Skills Assessment, for use with all youth entering the program. This 1- to 3-hour computer-based assessment allows youth and their social workers learn strengths and gaps in youth's skills and knowledge so they can prioritize learning. YIT shared the tool with DSS, who now assesses all youth who enter care beginning at age 13.

- *Mental health.* Foster youth are at elevated risk for depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other conditions. At the same time, many foster youth do not seek mental health treatment, either due to barriers such as cost and transportation or because of stigma associated with mental illness and mental health care. To address this problem, YIT is working with community partners to create or adapt an assessment tool to gauge the mental health of foster youth. YIT participants would be assessed soon after entry. The tool would also be used by DSS: youth would be assessed when they enter foster care and periodically thereafter.
- *Career readiness and vocational interests.* YIT also plans to begin assessment of participants to determine career readiness and identify vocational interests. These plans were still under development as of March 2014.
- **Mentors.** YIT participants may request an adult mentor. These volunteer mentors are expected to meet with youth one hour per week for at least a year and serve as an encouraging, dependable, and consistent friend—as “resource brokers, not resource providers,” according to the mentor handbook developed by YIT staff. Mentors receive specialized, ongoing training and support. They must pass a background check and meet other requirements of Goodwill volunteers. YIT staff began training mentors in May 2013, and by March 2014, 10 youth had been matched.



<sup>5</sup> LINKS is not an acronym but is drawn from the purpose of the Chafee Act to build a network of connections with family, friends, mentors, the community, employment, and education.

<sup>6</sup> Counties have the option of offering CARS agreements (Contractual Agreements for Residential Care) to youth who age out of care or who were discharged and are now young adults. These agreements allow for state contribution to the cost of a licensed foster home while the youth continues his/her education.

- **Housing support.** YIT participants who lack housing receive help on a case-by-case basis. However, no designated housing is yet available, and no funding is available for housing expenses. (Participants may use matching funds for housing deposits and move-in expenses but cannot receive matching funds for ongoing expenses such as rent and utilities.) YIT staff are still working to piece together resources and write policies regarding service provision. A small network of community members has stepped up to help out. For example, a downtown church gave YIT free use of a one bedroom missionary cottage on church property. A local property management company accepts referrals of YIT participants who might otherwise be turned down for housing.

Former foster youth may also be eligible for Family Unification Program (FUP) vouchers. The federally funded vouchers are distributed by DSS, and housing is handled by the Housing Authority of Winston-Salem. The demand for vouchers far outstrips the need however, and most vouchers go to other targeted populations such as foster families and others in the child welfare system at risk of losing housing.

Additional housing resources will open in 2014:

- A residential and business complex 4 miles out of town will be converted to a supportive housing complex for three target populations, including former foster youth. The first units should be available in late 2014.
- A county-owned group home, now vacant, will be turned into transitional housing for 5 male YIT participants ages 18 to 25. Rent will be on a sliding scale, and expected length of stay is 12 to 18 months. A live-in housing counselor trained to care for foster youth will be onsite overnight and on evenings and weekends.



**Employment support.** While there is no comprehensive network of employers who specifically recruit and hire YIT participants, YIT staff and committees have established relationships with a number of local businesses who are willing to employ current and former foster youth. A local landscaping service has signed on as an official YIT employment partner and hired at least one YIT participant. Other businesses have not established formal agreements but have informally agreed to grant interviews to YIT participants looking for jobs. In still other cases, YIT has been able to take advantage of existing community ties with DSS. For example, a local fast food franchisee has for years hired DSS foster youth. Now YIT can join that partnership.

YIT staff have also developed relationships with alternative employment programs such as [YouthBuild Winston-Salem](#), which provides education and training for youth who dropped out of high school, and [Northwest Piedmont Service Corps](#), a work experience and leadership program.

**Educational support.** Educational success is a key target outcome for DSS and YIT. To that end, YIT is partnering with Wake Forest School of Medicine's [Maya Angelou Center for Health Equity](#) to implement the Post-Secondary Success (PSS) for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care Initiative, funded by the Annie E Casey Foundation. Work began in December 2013. The initiative will develop a Forsyth County-specific information tool to link youth and service providers to existing resources and navigate the college application process. It will also create a "bridge program" to help prepare former foster youth entering college for the academic and social challenges they will face and explore college major and career options.

While the PSS Initiative is a work in progress, other supports are already available for YIT participants, particularly those under age 21. Youth in NC DSS foster care on or after their 17th birthday, or who were adopted from NC DSS at or after age 16, can receive up to 4 years of federally funded Educational Training Vouchers (ETVs), each worth up to \$5,000, to apply toward college. In addition, youth who age out of NC DSS foster care, or who were adopted from NC DSS foster care at age 12 or later, are eligible for NC Reach, which pays for attendance at any of North Carolina's public universities or community colleges. Also, youth in public foster care in Forsyth County at age 18 can sign a Contractual Agreement for Residency Services<sup>7</sup>, commonly known as a CARS agreement, which provides a foster home for youth enrolled in college or vocational school.



For YIT participants ineligible for DSS support, YIT currently provides limited assistance on a case-by-case basis, such as linking youth interested in college to a potential mentor at the local community college.

## Structure of YIT

YIT has an executive board, 5 committees and 2 subcommittees, and 4 paid staff.

### Executive board

The Community Partnership Board is YIT's executive board. The board is charged with guiding the mission and setting the direction of YIT as well as ensuring sustainability. Members include executives from YIT's convening agency, funders, and DSS, as well as community partner United Way and service providers such as The Children's Home.

### Committees

Each committee contains one or more representatives from YIT and DSS. Most also have a youth representative.

**Practice Model Committee.** The Practice Model Committee is charged with establishing a standard operating procedure for YIT and, to a lesser extent, for DSS leaders and staff who work with foster children and their families. For YIT, this procedure includes portals of entry, referral processes, services provided, and other policies. Some initiatives started with YIT participants may be "backed in" to DSS procedures so that in the future, youth in foster care can receive these services and activities while in DSS custody.

The Practice Model Committee has 2 subcommittees:

- *Housing Subcommittee.* Led by a county housing official, this committee has focused on targeting specific individuals, agencies and businesses to support YIT participants. The committee has also worked with county officials and community leaders to establish two

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<sup>7</sup> Counties are not required to offer CARS agreements.

major housing resources for YIT participants to open in late 2014: a group home for 5 men ages 18 to 25 and a large supportive housing complex for former foster youth, homeless families, and adults with autism.

- *Mental Health Subcommittee.* This committee consists of representatives from local providers of mental health and children's services. Formed in the summer of 2013, this group has discussed assessment tools, information-sharing procedures, and how to help former foster youth feel comfortable seeking mental health services.

**Policy Matrix Committee.** Advocacy and policy change is a key focus of the Jim Casey Initiative. All of the Initiative's work is grounded in 7 policy areas related to permanency, education, economic stability, safe housing, and self-advocacy. The Initiative has established data indicators to measure progress in each area. To this end, the Initiative produces a comprehensive policy matrix for each of the sites it supports. The policy matrix serves as a tool for understanding the status of the Initiative's policy goals at each site. Sites use their matrix as a tool to identify gaps, build policy agendas, and educate decision-makers. The Policy Matrix Committee is tasked with gathering data and subsequently selecting policy issues on which to focus. For example, educational stability is one of the Initiative's 7 policy goals. In Forsyth County, this stability is threatened by state and local policies surrounding enrollment across district lines. The Policy Matrix Committee discussed policy barriers that currently prevent foster youth from staying in their home school in the event of a placement change, then brainstormed strategies to remove these barriers. In 2014, the Committee will conduct similar work for all 18 policy goals in the matrix.

**Youth Engagement Committee.** This committee, composed of youth advocates from community action agencies and behavioral health agencies, is charged with supporting YIT participants, particularly the LYFE Board. Members guide the focus and work of the LYFE Board and recruit community members to make presentations or provide ongoing support. For example, the Youth Engagement Committee has helped organize workshops on legal rights, public speaking, conflict resolution, and professional dress. The committee has also created a partnership in which law students at nearby Wake Forest University are available to help youth navigate legal issues.

**Communication and Public Will Committee.** Chaired by a community volunteer who maintains a public relations consulting firm, this committee sets and maintains the public image of YIT. Through the work of this committee, YIT has been featured on the local evening news in October 2013 and was the subject of a front-page feature in the local daily newspaper in December 2013.



**Evaluation Committee.** Established in April 2012, an Evaluation Committee, with technical assistance from the Jim Casey Initiative, developed a comprehensive evaluation framework that laid out research questions and outputs and outcomes to be tracked. Evaluation was outsourced to an external evaluator, the Jordan Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Social Work, in January 2013.

## Staff

YIT staff include a lead coordinator, 2 youth advisors, and a youth support specialist.

**Lead Coordinator.** While the Community Partnership Board guides the mission and sets the direction of YIT, the Lead Coordinator handles many day-to-day tasks of running the initiative. The Lead Coordinator serves as liaison between YIT and the Community Partnership Board; attends and writes minutes for all committee meetings; and coordinates communication among staff, board and committee members, and community partners. He is also the public face of YIT and engages with the community and media. As Lead Coordinator Alex Hudson put it, “I connect the vision and execution of the work.”



**Youth Advisors.** Youth Advisors are front-line staff and work directly with youth, usually one-on-one. Their role is more of a coach than a case manager or service provider. However, when a youth is in need, a Youth Advisor may provide transportation, help a youth obtain clothing for a job interview, or accompany a youth to court. When appropriate, Youth Advisors work with DSS to obtain services or funding.

A Youth Advisor also leads the Youth Engagement Committee and the LYFE Board.

In March 2014, YIT had two Youth Advisors, a male and a female. Youth are typically assigned a Youth Advisor based on gender—most females are assigned to the female advisor, for example—but may work with either or both.

**Youth Support Specialist.** In 2012 and 2013, YIT had a part-time IDA and Outcomes Specialist who tracked IDA matching fund expenditures, tallied monthly program statistics, handled check requests, and performed general clerical duties. This position was expanded and renamed in early 2014. The Youth Support Specialist performs all duties listed above, and also coordinates and documents communication with participants, maintains case files, and serves as a backup for the Youth Advisors.

## Participants

YIT had 50 participants as of October 2013 who had taken the Opportunity Passport Participant Survey at least once, according to data compiled by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. The typical participant was a 21-year-old African American female. A majority of participants have graduated high school and many are pursuing or have completed a two- or four-year college degree. About half of participants are employed. Demographic, education, and employment characteristics for these youth, plus characteristics of other groups discussed in this section, are in **Table 1**.

**TABLE 1: Demographic, education, and employment characteristics of foster youth and others in Forsyth County**

	YIT participants <sup>§</sup> (n=50)		Forsyth County foster youth aging out <sup>†</sup> (n=109)		Forsyth County general population, ages 18-24*		Forsyth County general population, ages 16-24*	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent <sup>±</sup>	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
<b>Gender</b>								
Male	21	42%	66	61%	16571	47%	21626	48%
Female	29	58%	43	39%	18660	53%	23409	52%
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>								
African American	46	92%	76	70%	11948	34%		
White	3	6%	28	26%	19755	56%		
Other (includes more than one race)	1	2%	5	5%	3525	10%		
High school diploma or GED	35	70%			28502	81%		
Median age at first entry into care (years) <sup>‡</sup>			13 to 17					
Median length of time in care (years)			4+					
Employed	17	34%					18,750	42%
Received earnings in 1st year after age out			39 of 85	46%				
Received earnings in 2nd year after age out			34 of 70	49%				

§ Source: Opportunity Passport Participant Survey data compiled by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative

† Youth aging out July 2006 to June 2013. Source: North Carolina's Service Information System (SIS)

± Due to rounding, percentages may not add up to 100%

\* Source: 2008-2012 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates

‡ Age at entry is reported by age range: 0-5 years, 6-12 years, and 13-17 years

To compare YIT participants to the population of young adults in Forsyth County with foster care experience, we compiled information<sup>8</sup> on individuals who aged out of foster care in Forsyth County between July 2006 and June 2013. While these two populations are not identical—youth need not have aged out of care to be eligible for YIT; they need only to have been in care at age 13 or later—they nonetheless share enough similarities to allow comparison. Compared to age-out youth, YIT participants are more likely to be female. Nearly 3 in 5 YIT participants (58%) are female,

<sup>8</sup> This information is based on data extracted from North Carolina's Service Information System (SIS) in January 2014. These extracts are used to construct and maintain a longitudinal file that tracks the experiences of children and youth who have been involved in the child welfare system in North Carolina.

compared to only 42% of the age-out group. The two groups also differ by race. African Americans are vastly overrepresented in the foster care population nationwide, and this trend is also true in Forsyth County, where 70% of youth in the age-out group are African American despite the fact that African Americans comprise only 34% of the county's population of 18- to 24-year olds<sup>9</sup>. African Americans are even more overrepresented among YIT participants: 92% of participants identified as African American, according to youth survey data compiled by the Jim Casey Initiative.

YIT participants also differ from the general population in employment status. Just over 1 in 3 (34%) of YIT participants reported having a paying job (other than LYFE Board membership) at the time of their most recent Opportunity Passport Participant Survey. These numbers are somewhat lower than those for Forsyth County who aged out of care. According to data compiled from DSS records and Employment Security Commission reports, a little less than half (46%) of foster youth who aged out between July 2006 and June 2013 had employment earnings in the first year after age-out (a proxy for employment), and 49% had earnings in the second year after age-out. These numbers are even higher than those for the general population. According to Census data, 42% of all youth in Forsyth ages 16 to 24 are employed. However, the general youth employment rate rises when teenagers are removed from the mix: the employment rate for county residents ages 20 to 24 is 57%.

### Youth reaction to initiative

We interviewed 11 of the 50 youth<sup>10</sup> participating in YIT as of October 2013 to gauge their reaction to the initiative and solicit suggestions for improvement. Interviews were 1-hour, semi-structured individual interviews at a site chosen by the respondent. The youth interviewed are similar in age to the general pool of program participants; however, those interviewed were more likely to be female, to have earned a high school diploma or GED, and be employed. Detailed information about the two groups is in **Table 2**.

Most youth interviews were conducted in July and August 2013, when several key components of YIT were still being developed. Due to the timing of these interviews, our report contains feedback only on selected aspects of the program. Nonetheless, the youths' comments provide a good illustration of what the program means to them.

**Youth praised the professionalism and responsiveness of YIT staff...** All youth interviewed spoke highly of one or both youth advisors, using words such as kind, genuine, and caring.

Advisors have helped youth in ways large and small. For example, when a participant discovered an overdraft on her bank account, she called a youth advisor who helped her determine the cause of the overdraft (new fees) and helped her make changes to avoid future overdrafts. When another participant needed last-minute help to move into a new apartment, a youth advisor stepped in. When a youth had fallen out of touch with YIT staff, a youth advisor called or stopped by to check in.

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<sup>9</sup> Data is from the 2008-2012 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. County-level race data are available for age groups but not by individual year of age; thus we cannot report data for the YIT age group of 18 to 25.

<sup>10</sup> We also interviewed 3 former participants who helped establish YIT. Their demographic characteristics are not included in Table 2.

**TABLE 2: Demographic, education, and employment characteristics of YIT participants and participants interviewed**

	YIT participants <sup>§</sup> (n=50)		Participants interviewed* (n=11)	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	21	42%	3	27%
Female	29	58%	8	73%
Age in years (mean)	21	--	21.1	--
Age in years (median)	20.5	--	21	--
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>				
African American	46	92%	10	91%
White	3	6%	0	0%
Other (includes more than one race)	1	2%	1	9%
Median age at first entry into care (years)			12	
Median length of time in care (years)			4+	
High school diploma or GED	35	70%	10	91%
Employed	17	34%	7	64%

§ Source: Opportunity Passport Participant Survey data compiled by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative

\*Three former participants were interviewed but are not included in these tabulations.

Youth advisors’ work extends far beyond providing services. Youth see them as coaches who provide the tools and scaffolding youth need to build a successful future. One youth put it this way: “They really want us all to succeed. And they always meet us halfway.” Said another: “As a participant, it falls on you. You have to be motivated. I wasn’t motivated early in my life, but I’ve been motivated for the entire two years I’ve been involved in YIT.”

**...while maintaining close contact with DSS staff, sometimes even after leaving the DSS caseload.** Many YIT participants are under age 21 and remain eligible for DSS funding and services, either through LINKS or by CARS agreement. Not surprisingly, many of these youth relied on DSS staff for services and emotional support, even if active in YIT. Said one, “When I need something, I talk to my foster mom or social worker. I talk to YIT some—but I have other people I can turn to.” Another said, “I can really talk with my social worker. She really cares about me.”

Some older youth said they kept in touch with their social workers years after aging out. One said that her DSS social worker had come to her wedding. Given that a social worker may be the single constant in a youth's life, it is not surprising that youth become attached to them but is still a testament to social workers' dedication and professionalism.

**Youth are unclear about YIT's mission and activities but are pleased nonetheless.** Several youth said they weren't sure exactly what YIT was or what its mission was. This information is available on the initiative's website and brochure, but this information may not be filtering down to participants, even active ones. Said one LYFE Board member, "I'm not exactly sure what YIT does, what services they offer. What is the mission statement? I know they help a lot; I'm just not sure how."

Despite this lack of clarity, youth cited many positive aspects of YIT, described below.

**The financial literacy class is tedious but highly informative and has led to changes in behavior.** All youth who were interviewed had been required to take the financial literacy class in order to gain entry into YIT. (New policies have relaxed this requirement.)

Several said they learned a lot in the class and provided specific examples of concepts learned, such as compounding interest, the difference between a debit and credit card, and the difference between a bank and a credit union. They also identified specific skills they had learned in the class,



most commonly budgeting. Said one, "The thing I gained was being able to budget—really budget, not just wonder where the money went."

The class also helped participants establish priorities and realize that they didn't have to spend money just because they had it. As one participant put it: "I learned to appreciate my money and to conserve it. Because you never know what will happen 10 years from now or 2 days from now—and you might really need that money. Since I took the class, I've noticed that some people just spend, spend, spend. Maybe they will still have money left over, I don't know. But I'm thinking, 'You don't need all that.'"

Another participant said the class had helped her adjust to the responsibilities of adulthood and living within her means, which often involve difficult tradeoffs. "I used to have a really nice phone; I have a crummy phone now. I don't do my nails or get my hair done so much. I haven't had any new

shoes for a while. But the rent is paid."

Many participants said they had changed their behavior as a result of the class, such as paying bills before spending money on new clothes or other luxuries. One participant put it this way: "I used to spend money more on wants than needs. I'd get that new thing instead of paying my phone bill. I wanted new clothes more than paying bills. Later I realized that I could save so much money if I just paid the rent, the phone bill, etc., on time, then save up for the things I really wanted."

While the class may have been helpful, many participants continue to struggle with finances simply because they have little income and, typically, no family to fall back on. "It's hard to save when you are on a fixed income," said one participant. "I have gotten better at making bills Number 1, then everything else. But stuff comes up. Like I have to pay a speeding ticket that will cost [several hundred dollars]. Life happens sometimes."

While many youth found it hard to sit through a 2-hour class, even one with group and hands-on activities, most said they wouldn't change anything about the class. However, staff and stakeholders who observed the class said that more than a few students slept or "zoned out" during class. New YIT admission policies may resolve this problem. Now that the class is no

longer a prerequisite for participation in YIT, youth who choose to enroll will presumably be more interested in the material.

**LYFE Board offers youth a voice and a platform for advocacy, but progress is slow.** Nearly all of the 11 youth interviewed were active on the LYFE Board, and many expressed great enthusiasm for the board's work.

The board offers youth a chance to learn about self-advocacy and talk about ways to change policies and systems to help future foster youth. Several board members said they want to spread awareness about foster youth, the problems that lead youth into foster care, and the challenges faced by youth aging out. They also want to advocate for major policy changes, such as raising the foster care age to 21 and allowing former foster youth to automatically keep Medicaid until age 25.<sup>11</sup>

The board also allows youth to learn about community organizing. They have shared ideas about how to get the word out, including social media or holding a cookout in a neighborhood where many former foster youth live.

For others, the board serves as a place to learn life skills such as effective communication and teamwork. One participant said that because of YIT, she is able to be “more open and comfortable communicating” and “build bonds.”

Despite their enthusiasm, several youth were disappointed at what they perceived as the board's lack of direction and progress. “It seems like every time I go to a meeting, the very same thing is going on. It's all just discussions, or planning to have discussions,” said one participant. “Nothing happens.”



**Matching funds are highly popular.** Youth gave high marks to YIT's matching funds program, though many who were interviewed had not yet used the funds. Youth who had received the funds had used them to buy a car or scooter or pay a security deposit for an apartment. Several youth expressed excitement about the matching fund program, including one who said, “When I first heard about the match program, I couldn't believe it. It's such a great opportunity!”

**Youth want mentors.** Interviews with youth were held while the volunteer mentor program was still being developed. Only one of 11 youth interviewed had met with his assigned mentor. Nonetheless, many youth like the idea of a volunteer mentors.

Other youth said they received informal mentoring from the youth advisors. However, as the program grows, the youth advisors may become too busy to be effective in this way. Volunteer mentors could fill that void.

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<sup>11</sup> North Carolina, like most states, ends foster care at 18 unless youth sign a CARS agreement. All youth who age out of public foster care in North Carolina are automatically eligible for Medicaid but must sign up on their own.

## Discussion

YIT participants are truly youth in transition—transition from childhood to adulthood, from DSS custody to independence, and often, from student to workforce member. The youth are not the only ones in transition, however.

The creation of YIT has forced a transition for DSS, too. It has changed DSS's role in the lives of foster youth and former foster youth. Before YIT, foster youth were largely seen as a DSS issue, but YIT has changed that. "These were seen as DSS's kids," said one stakeholder. "But the issue is bigger than that. These aren't DSS's children, they're the community's children." Now that the community—i.e., YIT—has begun to partner with DSS to help these children move successfully toward adulthood, DSS (or at least its foster care division) is having to change their practices, protocols, and to some extent its entire organizational culture. This organizational change needs to happen at all levels of DSS, from top administration to frontline workers.

Organizational changes are needed at YIT, too. YIT would do well to develop a greater understanding of the foster care system and the factors that bring youth into care. They could also make more sustained efforts to reach out to youth on a systematic basis, particularly those who fail to respond to calls.

Change is needed on both sides, but DSS must take the lead in creating change, because they hold more power in the partnership. Specifically, DSS holds the keys to information about youth, knowledge about the foster care system, and government funding. First, because youth in DSS care are a vulnerable population protected by a variety of federal and state statutes, confidentiality laws prevent free sharing of information about youth between DSS and YIT staff. This holds true even for youth who have reached the age of majority. Because all youth who come to YIT have had experience with DSS, DSS has access to case records and other information about YIT participants. However, YIT cannot obtain this information easily, if at all, even though this information could help YIT staff better help youth and thereby improve youth's opportunities and outcomes. DSS also makes referrals to YIT. While youth may self-refer or be referred by another agency, most are not. Therefore, for practical purposes, DSS is the gateway to YIT.

Second, DSS by definition has a high level of expertise about the foster care system and the laws and regulations surrounding foster youth. YIT staff have expertise in other areas, such as capacity-building and linking youth with community resources, but have a less intimate understanding of the foster care system and related policies and laws, though that is beginning to change.

Finally, DSS controls access to government funding for independent living programs and education and housing vouchers.

There are a number of reasons why DSS frontline staff might resist change. A primary reason for this resistance may be that the differences between YIT and DSS in organizational culture and mission are so vast. DSS is an enormous, multilayer public agency bound by strict policies and protocols. Its mission is to protect children and serve as substitute parents. Work is, by definition, crisis-driven, and chronic understaffing leaves little room for big-picture planning. In contrast, YIT is a small nonprofit initiative with four staff members and thus little hierarchy. Its mission is to build capacity in youth as they become adults. Goals include community engagement and long-term policy change.

Another reason for this resistance may be that DSS frontline staff were not invited to the table until YIT was largely formed and thus had little opportunity to shape the initiative. The seeds for YIT were planted by DSS top administration and a few staff. Only after community partners had been engaged and the Jim Casey Initiative brought on board did DSS frontline staff become involved—even though it is the frontline staff who arguably would be most affected by the initiative in their day-to-day work. It would follow that some frontline staff might have been hesitant to buy in to the initiative.

A third reason for this resistance may be that frontline staff had an inaccurate understanding of what YIT would be and do. Several DSS workers interviewed said they thought that YIT would “simply be a continuation of DSS,” presumably with the same services offered. Youth advisors, on the other hand, were focusing their efforts on capacity building and policy change, thought they later realized that crisis management would be a key part of their job, at least for some youth.

Another reason that DSS frontline staff might resist working with YIT is that they may not want YIT’s help or feel they need it. After all, they have been working on this issue for many years with little or no outside support. Alternately, they may not want others to get the credit for any success the youth might achieve. Or they may believe the community blames them for youth’s poor outcomes that have led to the need for YIT.

While it may be difficult for DSS and YIT to change their organizational culture, it is imperative that change occur if YIT is to continue. This is because without DSS’s partnership, YIT itself will be greatly weakened and its sustainability threatened.

Despite the friction between DSS and YIT staff, the YIT initiative has been successful in a number of ways and has many strengths.

## Successes

**YIT has increased community awareness about foster youth aging out.** YIT has increased public awareness and discussion about foster youth. This is in part thanks to community collaboration. DSS policy does not allow extensive media contact, but YIT does not have these restrictions. Community partnerships have also created opportunities for publicity. For example, shortly after the Winston-Salem Foundation became convener of YIT, it invited YIT to speak at its annual community breakfast attended by hundreds of well-connected community members. YIT has also been featured in newspaper articles and on the local evening news. Through these efforts, YIT has expanded community ownership by making former foster youth “a community issue, not just a DSS issue,” in the words of one stakeholder.

**YIT has significantly improved the lives of some youth.** YIT participants have received more than \$20,000 in matching funds. As of January 2014, 12 participants had received matching funds for housing, transportation, education, or other needs. Youth used funds to purchase a car or scooter, pay a security deposit for an apartment, and in one case to pay off old bills to repair credit. These fund matches allowed participants to get or keep a job or obtain a safe place to live. For several youth, YIT has been nothing short of transformative. Here is one of their stories:

## YIT: One youth's story

*Bethany's\* mother threw her out of the house at age 16. She lived in three different group homes before she finished high school. When she left foster care shortly after finishing high school, she literally had nowhere to go. "I started couch surfing as soon as I left care," she said. Sometimes she ended up sleeping on a porch or under a bridge.*

*She joined YIT in 2012 and quickly became involved with the LYFE Board; now she is board president. She has traveled to three national meetings with the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative.*

*A few months after she joined YIT, she joined an alternative jobs program, where she earned certification in construction. She particularly enjoys bricklaying. She also enrolled at the*

*Forsyth Technical Community College. She's taking general requirements now but hopes to become an auto mechanic.*

*Despite these activities, she still didn't have a home. Then a local church offered to let YIT use a small house on its property, rent-free. Bethany has been living there since February 2013. "YIT turned my life around," she said. "When they got involved, everything started changing."*

*Bethany is passionate about YIT because she wants to make a difference for the next generation of foster youth. "The reason I'm on the LYFE board is not for me but so others who come after me won't have to go through what I did."*

\* Not her real name

**Youth have received comprehensive financial education and opened bank accounts.** Nearly all of the 50 YIT participants as of October 2013 have received an 8- to 10-week financial literacy class<sup>12</sup>, and at least 22 of them have a checking or savings account, some of which were opened after youth completed the financial literacy class.

**Community partnerships have been established or strengthened.** While DSS has many long-established relationships with community and government partners, YIT has created the opportunity to establish new partnerships or greatly strengthen old ones. These partners include Goodwill, Financial Pathways of the Piedmont, United Way of Forsyth County, Winston-Salem Foundation, and many more. As YIT expands its work in areas such as education and mental health, additional partnerships will be established.

**Regional and national partnerships have been established.** YIT has created partnerships with the Duke Endowment and the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative.

### Strengths

**YIT receives ongoing technical assistance from the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative.** Professionals from the Jim Casey Initiative and subcontractor Metis Associates, an evaluation firm, regularly collaborate with YIT staff. YIT is a Jim Casey Initiative program and YIT staff and youth attend an annual summer conference in St. Louis and a fall Convening. Metis created the policy matrix with which YIT will analyze and prioritize policy issues that affect foster care and foster youth in Forsyth County and throughout North Carolina.

<sup>12</sup> A few early participants did not take the financial literacy class. New incoming members are not required to take the class right away but are expected to do so within 6 to 12 months of enrollment.

**Community Partnership Board members are influential in the community, powerful within their agencies, and highly invested in the initiative.** Board members are high-ranking members of their respective organizations who hold the authority needed to commit time and resources. When a decision is made in a meeting, board members do not need to go back to their agencies to seek approval because the board members themselves are authorized to grant this approval. In addition, board members show good attendance at meetings and have remain invested more than two years into the initiative. Finally, board members are well-connected in the community.

Because board members have many already-established relationships with influential individuals and organizations in the community, YIT is at the table with other agencies and is able to take advantage of opportunities in a timely way. For example, these relationships were likely instrumental in making former foster youth one of the target populations for The Commons, a supportive housing project under development.

**Youth have been at the table from Day One.** Sometimes an initiative is designed without input from those whom it will serve, or input is sought only after the initiative is well under way. This was not the case with YIT. Former foster youth served on the original community task force helped shape YIT into its present form. One of the youth involved early described it this way: “We [former foster youth] were like equal partners at the table. They sought our advice ... as to what foster youth want to see done with foster care.” When it was time to hire YIT staff, youth had a say in hiring decisions.

This focus on youth representation continues. Youth travel side by side with staff and board members to national conferences and planning events. Youth sit on the Community Partnership Board and YIT subcommittees. And the LYFE Board continues to advocate for policy change and work to help peers in need.



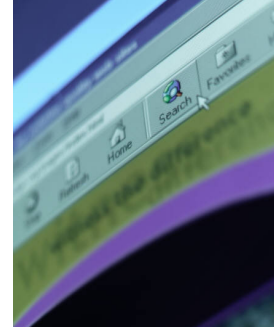
**YIT staff have diverse backgrounds and bring new skills and perspectives.** YIT staff have little child welfare experience but bring to YIT a wide variety of skills and experiences. One YIT staff member once taught classes in a prison before founding a mentoring program that engaged at-risk youth through sports and

visits from professional athletes. Another was a case manager for individuals with autism. The lead coordinator used to be a youth minister.

This lack of child welfare experience in some ways has been a hindrance, as YIT staff had to quickly learn the complex structures and policies of the public child welfare system and may, despite this learning, still be perceived as outsiders. On balance, however, their diverse backgrounds bring a wealth of skills and relationships to YIT. For example, the founder of the mentoring program brings entrepreneurial experience and expertise in program building, and the youth minister brings excellent relational skills and a knack for relating easily with both children and adults. Even more important, coming from outside of the child welfare system allows YIT staff to have a fresh perspective on foster care and foster youth. Said one, “I started with a clean slate—so I didn’t have to disconnect from what I thought I already knew.”

All YIT staff have lived in Winston-Salem for many years and thus are familiar with the community and its resources.

**YIT has established a reliable and easy-to-navigate recordkeeping system.** When YIT first began, records were kept in several databases that did not interface. Information about youth who had passed the financial literacy class was stored in the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative database. However, many youth receiving services were not yet in the Initiative's database, and that database does not track services provided. YIT staff tracked some services on the Goodwill database, but that, too, was inadequate. Many records were kept on paper. In late 2013, YIT's parent organization, Goodwill Industries, adopted a new service-tracking database, which has greatly facilitated recordkeeping and sharing. The adoption of this new database is particularly helpful in light of recent revisions in YIT entry criteria that allow youth to delay taking the financial literacy class and thereby delay entering the Jim Casey Initiative database.



**Two local foundations are on board with financial and technical support.** Winston-Salem is struggling economically, as are many cities through the region, but financial resources still exist. Two local foundations, Kate B Reynolds Charitable Trust and The Winston-Salem Foundation, are providing long-term financial and technical support and have had high-ranking officials sitting on the Community Partnership Board.

In order to move forward, YIT must address several significant challenges and areas of need.

## Challenges and areas of need

**Communication and information sharing between DSS and YIT is inconsistent and limited.**

These communication difficulties are partially due to strict confidentiality policies required of DSS social workers and partly due to differences in workplace culture and philosophy. There may also be turf issues on the part of frontline social workers.

This lack of information-sharing begins when at the time a youth enters the program and continues throughout the participation period, and it impacts DSS, YIT, and youth in a number of ways. First, DSS provides YIT little or no background information about new participants. As a result, YIT staff must obtain that information from the participants themselves, which is labor-intensive and time-consuming, or not receive it at all. This lack of information can lead to delays in services and potentially risky situations. At a minimum, it eliminates an opportunity to help participants: "You can't address the problem if you don't know there's a problem," said one stakeholder. Second, DSS and YIT staff fail to consistently share updates and developments about youth. This may lead to unnecessary duplication of effort and services or, even worse, failure to intervene in a crisis.

**Front-line DSS staff and YIT youth aren't sure what YIT is or does.** YIT was intended to be not a program or service provider but instead a community initiative. As one Community Partnership Board member put it: "There already exist resources and programs and services within the community that are for everyone. All we're doing is trying to facilitate easy access to those things."

Despite these initial intentions of being a facilitator, not a provider, of services, YIT has in fact provided at least some goods and services almost since its inception. For example, youth receive financial literacy training and attend presentations planned by YIT. The LYFE Board youth leadership council is coordinated by YIT and a YIT youth advisor attends all meetings. YIT

provides bus passes for participants who demonstrate need. Youth advisors provide referrals and coordinate services but also provide direct services at times.

This confusion about what YIT is and does may have been caused by the desire, during YIT's development, to help youth as soon and as much as possible. YIT's creation was shaped and powered largely by DSS and people familiar with DSS, which focuses on crisis services more than long-term planning. And many of the youth involved early on had urgent needs. With no established service model or service menu, and youth expecting and needing the services they had long received from DSS, it is not surprising that YIT began providing DSS-type services. But YIT lacks the capacity and funding of DSS and is unable to provide the scope of services youth might have come to expect.

Another issue is that DSS social workers are the ones who refer youth to YIT. These social workers are used to their service model and may have difficulty articulating the community initiative model that YIT was designed to be. Even if the social workers are able to articulate the YIT model, youth may be unable to fully understand it.

**The role and duties of the Community Partnership Board seem unclear.** A key goal of the Community Partnership Board is to ensure YIT's sustainability through fund-raising, and these efforts have been successful to date. However, the board is also charged with setting the direction of the initiative, establishing benchmarks, and monitoring progress toward these benchmarks—and in these areas, the board is falling short. Direction and progress are rarely discussed in board meetings; instead, board meetings consist mostly of a series of reports from staff, youth, and subcommittees.

This lack of a clear definition regarding the board's role is frustrating to some stakeholders. Said one: "We don't have total clarity about what we want board to accomplish. We don't have a strategic set of actions and milestones in place that we are organizing our board meetings around, to see if we're meeting benchmarks and goals. I think that is to our detriment. And that is part of the reason why we're drifting a little."

Part of the problem may be the composition of the board. The board is made up largely of high-powered individuals from a few influential human services and philanthropic agencies and organizations: DSS, The Children's Home (a local service provider), Goodwill, and two local foundations. Most of these individuals are at the helm of their respective organizations and can thus commit money and resources without having to go back and ask permission. This allows the board to quickly make decisions and nimbly move forward. However, many of these individuals are so high-powered that they may not have enough time and energy to focus on moving YIT forward. These individuals are able to set aside one hour per month to attend a board meeting, but little more.



**No tangible practice model or framework has been provided for YIT to follow.** While the Jim Casey Initiative has provided technical assistance in a number of areas, officials there have provided little in the way of a tangible practice model or framework model for YIT to replicate. This lack has become frustrating for staff and stakeholders, according to interviews. Said one, "I understand that [the Jim Casey Initiative] wants us to come up with our own solutions. But when we're saying that we're several years in and still struggling with some foundational things, can't they please give us some help and guidance?"

The lack of direction from the Jim Casey Initiative means that establishing a model falls to the Community Partnership Board and YIT and DSS staff.

**Racial diversity is low.** Racial minorities are overrepresented among YIT participants, and almost no Caucasians are participating. According to county statistics, 25% of youth who age out of foster care each year are White. However, most of these youth are not participating in YIT; only 8% of YIT participants are White or mixed race, according to OPPS data.

This lack of racial diversity may be caused in part by differences in the racial and ethnic characteristics of YIT and DSS. Most Forsyth DSS social workers working with foster youth are African American, as are 75% of youth in care there. On the other hand, three of the four YIT staff members are White, as are all but two of the Community Partnership Board members not affiliated with DSS.

Regardless of its cause, this low racial diversity is troubling. By having only minority youth in YIT, Caucasian youth who visit the program may not feel that there is a place for them, which could lead them to opt out of joining. In addition, African Americans and other racial minorities may come to see foster care as something that happens only to African Americans, which is inaccurate and potentially damaging. Said one stakeholder, “If you have all the [YIT] participants of one race, it gives even the young people a perception that may not be correct—that only African Americans are in foster care.”

In the long run, if this lack of racial diversity among YIT participants continues, it could erode community support, as community members and organizations may be hesitant to support a program that seems to serve only racial minorities.

**Youth not affiliated with DSS are not entering the program.** Hypothetically, any agency or individual can refer a youth to YIT; self-referrals are also possible. However, because public awareness of YIT is limited, most referrals come from DSS. As a result, youth not currently involved in DSS may not be targeted for services.

**Communication and information sharing between YIT staff and subcommittee members is infrequent.** Several subcommittee members complained that they didn’t know basic information about the population and about developments within the initiative and stated that they felt “out of the loop.” Momentum may be lost with community members due to poor planning. YIT had a big media splash in 2011 but then no action was taken. Community members may have initially wanted to join in but subsequently lost interest when no opportunities for involvement were forthcoming.

**YIT is reliant on grant funding.** Today’s uncertain economy has created an increasingly competitive funding situation for community initiatives such as YIT. Particularly difficult to obtain is funding for ongoing expenses, as funders often expect initiatives to become self-sustaining after startup funding is exhausted.

## Recommendations

**Standard operating procedures and a system of care must be established.** YIT is a community initiative, not a service provider. Nonetheless, a system of care, complete with established (and preferably evidence-based) policies and procedures, must be established and plainly communicated to YIT, DSS, and participants. This system should be fairly simple and easy to

understand while allowing flexibility should special circumstances arise. Such a system will streamline procedures and allow YIT to serve more youth.

**A communication protocol for DSS and YIT staff must be established.** Confidentiality is a valid concern. However, YIT staff need to know basic information about youth, such as transition plans, and DSS staff deserve to know what is happening with youth who are or were in their care.



Perhaps youth over 18 could sign a waiver allowing DSS to share limited case record information with YIT and YIT to share updates with DSS. One recent improvement is that YIT will be invited to attend monthly Child and Family team meetings held monthly for individual youth, as well as transition meetings held when youth are about to age out of DSS care. More improvement is needed however, because basic communication often is simply not happening. For example, a youth advisor had been sending text message updates to DSS staff members' on

state-issued cell phones for many months before being told that DSS cell phones do not accept text messages. This cannot be allowed to continue.

DSS and YIT need to establish a mutually agreed upon plan that includes frequency on communication, mode of communication (e.g., email or phone), and a list of situations that call for communication.

**The Community Partnership Board must reassess and refine its role to ensure YIT's continued success.** The Community Partnership Board has been enormously successful in creating and nurturing the YIT initiative to its current state. That said, to ensure YIT's continued success, the board must reexamine itself and its role. A recent change in leadership—the board's longtime chair stepped down in January 2014—presents an excellent opportunity for this self-examination. As the board determines what it wants from their next chair, it should also assess its role in the vision and day-to-day operation of YIT. Currently, the board is largely monitoring YIT's progress on goals established long ago. This must change. The board must become more directive, articulating its vision, goals, and timetables to meet these goals. It must serve as a rudder to keep YIT on track so that it can accomplish its mission of helping former foster youth toward a better future.

**Hire more case managers, perhaps including peer support staff.** If YIT sticks to its current model of service, an additional youth advisor will be needed. As current participants age out, one or more could be hired as peer support staff.

**Increase ownership and cooperation among YIT and DSS frontline staff.** DSS has been working on this problem. A facilitated retreat was held with DSS and YIT staff in December 2013, and future events are planned.

**Maintain the revised YIT entrance policy that removes the requirement to take the financial literacy class right away.** The class is currently provided by Financial Pathways of the Piedmont, a local nonprofit agency that provides consumer education and financial and housing guidance. The 10-week class is based on a curriculum developed by Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative developed specifically for foster youth aging out. Topics include money management, credit and

credit scores, and planning and paying for housing and transportation. For more than a year, completion of the class was required for youth to be on the Youth Leadership Board or take part in other YIT activities. The class is intensive and requires attention and dedication. However, many youth just entering YIT are struggling with basic issues of survival and safety and have little energy left over for classroom learning. These youth were nonetheless directed to the financial literacy class. Some students dropped out of the class while others attended but did not fully engage.

In November 2013, YIT changed its entrance criteria, allowing youth to postpone the financial literacy class until they are ready. This change allows youth in crisis to get their most pressing needs addressed before enrolling in the class. Under the new policy, youth will be able to focus more energy on the class, thereby increasing their likelihood of learning the material and changing their behavior. The classroom atmosphere will likely improve as well because participants will be there because they want to be there, not because they have to.

**Consider minor changes to the financial literacy class to increase youth engagement.** Many youth new to YIT have little or no income and may be in financial crisis. The financial literacy curriculum does not address this reality. In addition, the class is taught by an individual outside



the foster care system. While this instructor is highly credentialed with many years of experience teaching students of all ages, she has limited experience teaching young adults with the complex challenges faced by most former foster youth. As a result, youth may perceive that this instructor doesn't understand their challenges and perspectives. To address these issues, YIT or the Jim Casey Initiative should consider adding material

that acknowledges and validates the financial challenges faced by youth and offers insight into overcoming crisis-driven beliefs, attitudes and behaviors around money. YIT should also consider hiring a former foster youth to co-teach the class or simply attend each session and assist when necessary. A youth advisor could also fill this role.

**More portals of entry are needed.** Currently, all youth enter YIT through DSS; consequently, eligible youth not in touch with DSS are not being served. YIT and DSS should redouble their efforts to communicate with others agencies and organizations, including housing agencies, homeless shelters, churches, schools, and medical and behavioral health providers, and ask them to refer YIT youth. Other departments of DSS, such as Adult Services and Economic Services, could also serve as portals.

**Broaden the range of community partnerships.** While YIT has many strong community partnerships, additional partnerships are needed to ensure youth success in key outcome areas such as education, healthcare access, and successful employment. YIT staff and Community Partnership Board members should establish formal partnerships with the public school system and local 2- and 4-year colleges. A partnership with one or both of the local hospital systems should also be a priority. YIT may also wish to establish a formal relationship with local law enforcement. Such a relationship would serve the dual purpose of educating law enforcement about foster youth and the challenges they face as well as helping youth see law enforcement as a partner, not an adversary.

**Partner with reentry programs to help participants with a criminal record.** Despite the supports provided by DSS and YIT, YIT participants with a criminal record face numerous barriers, particularly in finding a job. Criminal records are heartbreakingly common among former foster youth, one in four of whom will be involved in the justice system within two years of aging out.<sup>13</sup> Challenges resulting from a criminal record are not unique to former foster youth, and a number of organizations are addressing this problem. A number of nonprofit and faith-based reentry programs serve Forsyth County, including Project Reentry and the Salvation Army. These organizations could offer crucial support and employment assistance for YIT participants with criminal records.

Rely (at least partly) on individuals, not systems, for supportive partnerships. While it is important to have the support of large public systems (e.g., mental health, schools) and agencies (e.g., United Way), YIT should not forget about individual partnerships. These can come in handy at times when it's hard to cut through red tape and when changes in government leadership lead to shifting priorities and funding cuts. Too, individual partnerships can be a catalyst for larger partnerships.

Individuals, particularly those with high community standing, may be able to influence other individuals and, eventually, large organizations—particularly if partnerships are successful. YIT is already using this model with a few local business partners, including a landscaping company, a used car dealership, and a residential property manager. One stakeholder recommended that this arrangement be taken a step further: “Ask a local medical provider to commit to serving one or two or five former foster youth. Ask a local property manager to commit to serving one or two youth. Individuals can make this happen.”

## Path to the future

**After a practice model and service menu are established, move toward long-term sustainability.** The Community Partnership Board needs to take the lead in exploring paths toward sustainability for YIT, including public funding from the General Assembly and/or local governments and private funding from individuals and foundations. Future funding should not be sought, however, until a practice model and service menu have been firmly established and can be articulated.

## Conclusion

The YIT initiative has made a promising start. With increased communication and cooperation between DSS and YIT staff and with increased vision, guidance, and direction from the Community Partnership Board and the Jim Casey Initiative, YIT will continue to grow into a successful and sustainable initiative that can truly change lives and shape policy for foster youth, both now and for many years to come.

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<sup>13</sup> Courtney, M.E., Dworsky, A., Terao, S., Bost, N., Cusick, G.R., Keller, T., and Havlicek, J. (2005). Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at age 19. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children.

