

# EMPOWERING OURSELVES



A SUMMARY OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS  
FROM THE 2018 YOUTH LEADERSHIP  
COHORT TO IMPROVE SERVICES FOR  
FOSTER YOUTH IN SONOMA COUNTY



## 2018 Leadership Cohort

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In May 2018, seven youth leaders and two VOICES staff came together to form a six-month policy research program to help create positive changes for the foster youth system in Sonoma County. The Youth Leaders were able to represent a voice for foster youth, through learning their needs and relaying the information to county workers and community partners. The VOICES Youth Leader position offered an excellent opportunity for personal growth and to be a part of systematic change within Sonoma County.

The Youth Leaders committed six months to the program, dedicating 4-8 hours per week including weekly group meetings. Through this time, the Youth Leaders became experts in foster youth services in California and Sonoma County specifically. They accomplished this through interviews with youth, social workers, and other nonprofits in the larger Bay Area. During this time, they also attended local meetings to share a youth perspective as well as gain knowledge about current events and progress in the system.

## The Results

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Through this process, three recommendations were created and perfected until October 2018. On November 8th, 2018, the cohort held a public presentation to reveal the three recommendations and provide background, reasons for the recommendations, personal stories, and hopes to where these recommendations could go. This report serves to document their recommendations, hard work, efforts in the subcommittees, and the further work needed to better support our community.

## BACKGROUND: THE FIRST COHORT



In 2014, VOICES received a three-year grant from the Walter S. Johnson Foundation to convene Sonoma County transition age foster youth as stakeholders and experts to identify and address systemic, county-level barriers facing foster youth in their transition to independence. In January 2015, VOICES convened a cohort of Sonoma County transition age foster youth to identify systemic, county-level barriers facing foster youth in their transition to independence and develop recommendations to address them.

The Youth Cohort met with youth ages 18 to 21 who were receiving AB 12 extended foster care services in Sonoma County. Candidates had to commit up to 12 hours per week, for which they would be paid, for at least a year. With support from VOICES staff, they began learning about the foster care system and AB12, and exploring resources and challenges unique to Sonoma County.

Through their research, the cohort developed and refined four recommendations for transforming outcomes for foster youth in Sonoma County.

### **Recommendation 1:**

Ensure Foster Youth Access, Enroll, and Receive Benefits

### **Recommendation 2:**

Eliminate Homelessness and Housing Instability Among Foster Youth

### **Recommendation 3&4:**

Increase High School Graduation Rates and College Access



# RECOMMENDATION ONE

## Goal:

### **Provide Peer Support for Youth in Systems of Care**

Recommendation One: Implement a peer support program to connect youth in systems of care to direct resources, engage in goal-setting, and increase social support.

## Why it's Needed:

A peer support program allows for mentors to empower themselves as leaders and be able to make a direct difference for current foster youth. Similar life experiences encourage engagement with goal setting and developing achievable action plans. A mentor can help youth feel safe and heard when making major life decisions, such as enrolling in AB12 or finding housing. Instead of having a professional or authority figure trying to guide the youth towards an option, a mentor can support them in making an informed choice. Having a peer that can relate can help remove stigmas and help youth see a future path when life feels unstable.

## Next Steps:

Find a home for the peer support program in a local nonprofit and look into funding options.



# RECOMMENDATION TWO

## Goal:

### **Increase Clarity Around Eligibility For Services**

Recommendation Two: Increase clearly listed eligibility requirements for resources and programs in Sonoma County.

## Why it's Needed:

Many youth and providers are unclear about exact eligibility requirements of youth programs. Typically, websites do not list eligibility and even when calling programs, often a one-on-one meeting is requested to clarify potential eligibility. The need to find information in-person often keeps youth from accessing resources due to time and transportation limitations.

## Next Steps:

Starting with members of the Sonoma County Coalition for Foster Youth, we want to encourage providers to clearly express eligibility in writing and make this readily available to youth in person and online. This will help shed light on what services are unavailable for certain populations of youth and can begin conversations around how to fill these needs.





# RECOMMENDATION THREE

## Goal:

### **Create a Resource Website for Sonoma County Youth**

Recommendation Three: Create a central online location for youth to find resources and have clear information about eligibility for these programs.

## Why it's Needed:

There is not a main online place for youth to get resources and eligibility information. The website will provide a quick, 24/7 way to get help and understand how to access it. It is really difficult to get this information by search engine and individual nonprofit websites. The website will allow youth and providers to access multiple resource options at once and find the best fit. It also can serve as a great closing resource for those closing or aging out of services.

## Next Steps:

Create a plan around who will keep the website maintained and finding funding if needed to support the additional work. The website needs to include more resources from community partners and be publicized to the community and our youth.



# 1. PEER SUPPORT

## Summary of the Peer Support Recommendation

### INTRODUCTION

When reflecting on what cohort members wished was available during our time in care, a common thread was a desire for peer support. This is especially true for youth in foster care as the process can be extremely isolating, however, the more we discussed we realized this was true for youth in all systems of care. We talked about the value of Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) and how they can make such a big difference in youth's lives. CASAs are volunteers who build long-term relationships with youth and represent the children's interests in court. The CASA program fills a need for some youth support within the child welfare system. However, due to CASA's responsibility to report to the court, less life experience in common, and large age gaps, it lacks the peer support element. We further discussed the practicality of a peer-to-peer support system and looked into possible models.



As we brainstormed our ideal peer-to-peer support program were introduced to the West Coast Children's Clinic's Youth Advocate Program (YAP) through Amber Twitchell, Assistant Director of On The Move. We were able to connect with their director, Natalíe Lorraine Ortega, who came to VOICES and we interviewed her about the program. The YAP team consists of Alameda County former foster and probation youth. They attend Child Family Team meetings (child welfare meetings focused on improving child safety, permanency, and well-being with the family) and child welfare committees providing a youth's perspective.

We also spoke with The Alchemy Project at VOICES, which is a comprehensive support program for youth experiencing severe mental health challenges. They remove barriers to young people's participation in mental health services by cultivating hope, relationships, stability and a sense of control over their lives.

Alchemy's peer mentors have direct experience of the mental health system, play a vital role in connecting youth to services, and ensure the program provides a safe, comfortable, and accessible space for youth to access support. The goal of the peer mentor's work includes assisting youth in engaging and accessing appropriate mental health recovery programs, and, as applicable, obtaining a high school diploma or GED, stable housing, a source of income, a job and/or college attendance, supportive permanent relationships, and a plan for utilizing available community resources.

We had familiarity with the Youth Advocate position at VOICES, as more than one of the cohort members were currently working in the position. We examined the job description and discussed what parts could apply to Y2Y. While there are pieces of the Youth Advocate position that reflect peer mentoring, they are based in one location, do not have a caseload of specific youth, and the center is only available to youth 16-24. We also interviewed advocates from On the Move's SPARK Initiative in the Bay Area. SPARK Youth Peer Advocates have recent lived experience in homelessness, foster care, and/or juvenile justice systems in Bay Area counties.

The advocates serve as peer mentors, connecting homeless youth, ages 14-25, to services and forging relationships that create opportunities for stability.

After collecting all of this information and researching the needs specifically for youth in Sonoma County, we created a sample peer mentoring program called Y2Y (Youth to Youth). For the presentation of the recommendations, we showed a sample flyer, job description and spoke about the possibility of integrating with the Y2Y program within VOICES' MyLife program.

## **SUMMARY OF THE Y2Y SUBCOMMITTEE'S EFFORTS**

The Y2Y subcommittee's primary goal was to expand the original cohort recommendation of implementing a peer support program for youth in systems of care. The subcommittee created best practice recommendations for any agency in Sonoma County implementing a peer program for transitional aged youth. We also refined what the ideal Y2Y program could look like, explored possible funding sources and considered ideal outcomes of the program.



Barriers to finding an agency to pick up the program included the desire to keep the recommendation not limited to current foster youth but youth from many systems of care. While Family, Youth and Children's Services and VOICES' MyLife program were interested in potentially piloting a program, there was some concern around Family, Youth and Children's Services holding a sole contract as it would likely not include youth who had exited foster care, chosen out of extended foster care, and youth from other systems of care who needed the peer support.

## **ROLE OF Y2Y PEER MENTOR**

In order to better serve and support youth in our county, Y2Y Peer Mentors would be able to provide peer mentoring and support to build trusting relationships, modeling healthy coping skills, and providing guidance to youth in various systems of care. A Y2Y Peer Mentor would take on the role of not just working on goals with the youth but also being somewhat of a 'sponsor' who spends time fostering a relationship with the youth in order to better guide and support the young person towards creating and reaching their goals. They would provide plenty of active listening and understanding.

A Peer Mentor's role goes beyond providing that of a mentor, as it would also include problem solving; practical advice; advocating for needs; connection to resources; and utilizing a support network.

The program allows for mentors to empower themselves as leaders and be able to make a direct difference for current foster youth and others who have been in systems of care. A mentor can help youth feel safe and heard when making major life decisions, such as the decision to stay in extended foster care or finding supportive housing. Instead of having a professional or authority figure trying to guide the youth towards an option, a Peer Mentor can support them in making informed and independent choices. Similar life experiences encourage engagement with youth-driven goal setting and developing achievable action plans the young person wants to work on. Having a peer that relates can help remove stigmas and help youth see a future path when life feels unstable.

Including a peer as part of the team would increase engagement in services and improving two-way communication lines between youth and service providers.

The Y2Y Peer Mentor would provide culturally relevant peer support and affirming practices. The Y2Y Peer Mentor would be able to empathize with and normalize trauma responses, and can offer insight, education and skills to young people disengaged with professionalized help. They would engage peers in collaborative and caring relationships, personalized peer support, and promote growth and development.

### **DAY-TO-DAY DUTIES**

Peer Mentors would collaborate with the young person, their supervisor, and youth's team to establish goals to work on during one-on-one meetings with youth. In meetings and appointments, Peer Mentors would attend and advocate for youth when needed (such as court hearings, Team meetings, housing appointments, MyLife meetings).

Peer Mentors could link their youth to new resources, services, and supports, provide information about health and wellness, help peers to learn skills to manage crises and create a support network. Youth could receive support in time management and organization including getting reminders about appointments for Peer Mentors, creating and utilizing calendars, and support in prioritizing their needs.

### **TARGET POPULATION**

The age recommendation of the youth supported is 16-24. While a Peer Mentor should be trained in responding to crises, the focus should not be on youth needing the highest level of clinical support. The Peer Mentors are a better fit for youth who want to build positive relationships, increase skills and create change in their lives. Thus it can also be preventative, keeping youth housed, off probation, and cause the youth to need less intensive case management long term.

It is important to the cohort that youth from many systems of care could access peer support. A primary idea would be youth in foster care, but they would also like to expand to those in the mental health system, into juvenile probation, and potentially walk-in referrals if they have been involved in systems of care and not are currently receiving any peer support services. Potentially, funding could come from a variety of sources, including Family, Youth, and Children's Services, Juvenile Probation, Behavioral Health, TAY-related grants and possibly private donors.

## **IDEAL DESCRIPTION OF Y2Y PEER MENTORS**

The age of the Y2Y mentor would be 18-26, attempting to have the mentor be roughly 2-4 years older than the youth they are supporting.

The age of the Y2Y mentor would be 18-26, attempting to have the mentor be roughly 2-4 years older than the youth they are supporting. Ideally, the cohort wanted to pilot the program with a mentor-to-youth ratio to be 1:4 and increasing the caseload as effectiveness is shown. However the subcommittee is unsure if we could find funding for such a small caseload intentionally. The Y2Y Peer Mentor would need to have basic familiarity with Sonoma County systems of care. As transportation is often a barrier for youth, it would be important for the Peer Mentor to have consistent transportation and ability to accompany or drive a young person to meetings. Ideally, youth would be matched with a Y2Y mentor that has had similar life experiences as them (such as prior substance use if in long-term recovery, mental health diagnoses, absence of parental figures, etc). The position is envisioned as being part-time, allowing youth to further their educational and career goals while being available during key meeting times.

It would be important that the Peer Mentors are making above minimum wage and their knowledge, experience, and expertise is considered in deciding an hourly wage.

## **SUPERVISION OF Y2Y PEER MENTORS**

These positions would require extensive support and training. Peer Mentors would need to have a supervisor they regularly checked in with, detailed documentation to reflect their meetings, and engage in a group supervision to provide support for the youth but also for their fellow Y2Y Peer Mentors. The supervisor and peer mentor could use this time to reflect on and evaluate the needs of youth, consider the effectiveness of support strategies, and address triggers that may come up for the Peer Mentor. Individual and group supervision would often address the importance of boundaries, as boundary issues can be seem more ambiguous and complicated in a peer mentor relationship. A supervisor would continue to teach new skills, strategies, and approaches for better and more personalized support.

## **HOST AGENCY**

Any organization creating a peer support program should include skilled staff in areas of clinical supervision, youth-friendly approaches, trauma informed lenses, and high collaboration with other agencies.

## MEASURING THE OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS AND OUTCOMES OF THE PROGRAM

There are evidence-based practices available for measuring outcomes that demonstrate the effectiveness of peer-based programs. One such supporter of peer-based programming is the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), a federal program leading public health efforts in policies, data, and funding to advance behavioral health in the United States. They found that with peer relationships, youth are better able to achieve their goals. For example, they experience an increase in prosocial activities, personal support networks, communication skills, and positive coping skills.

Outcomes can be concrete and observable as well as subjective and self-reported. Options include using known measures such as SAMHSA's recommendation of The Fidelity Assessment Common Ingredients Tool (FACIT) and The Peer Outcomes Protocol (POP). The World Health Organization Quality of Life (WHOQOL) can allow youth to self-report quality of life, emotional distress, self-efficacy, and ability to function in their life roles and at work or school.

Self-reported data can be utilized by regularly collecting pre- and post-surveys from the young people involved. Other ways to look at effectiveness is measuring achievement of goals, such as increasing prosocial activities, communication, positive coping skills, or accessing safe housing. increasing communication skills, and increasing personal support networks. Preventing or reducing the likelihood of contact with the criminal justice system, decreasing or stopping substance use should also be considered.

## MODELS OF PEER WORK

Influences on this exploratory process included looking into the SAMHSA Peer Worker model, The Alchemy Project at VOICES, the Youth Advocate position at VOICES, Court Appointed Special Advocates' CASA/GAL Model, On the Move's SPARK Initiative and the West Coast Children's Clinic's Youth Advocate Program (YAP).



# 2. ELIGIBILITY

## Summary of the Eligibility Recommendation

### INTRODUCTION

The goal of our original recommendation was to increase clearly expressed eligibility requirements for resources and programs in Sonoma County. All programs have a target population however some require youth to meet certain criteria to qualify for services. We felt it was important to study, clarify, and improve the requirements needed to access programs and services in Sonoma County.

Many youth and providers are unclear about exact eligibility requirements of youth programs. It can be very difficult to find resources in general and understand who the programs are meant for. Typically, websites do not list eligibility and even when calling programs, often a one-on-one meeting is requested to clarify potential eligibility. The need to find information in-person often keeps youth from accessing resources due to time and transportation limitations. For example, a program website could say it serves youth ages 14-24 however upon meeting with their staff, their specific career program is only for parenting youth between 18-24.

At times, even when a youth would take multiple bus lines in order to apply for a resource, the right program staff would not be available to meet with them. This creates financial and time burdens for youth. We experienced this personally and found that many Sonoma County youth were struggling with this as well.

By the presentation of the 2018 recommendations, the cohort had created a live website focused on youth resources in Sonoma County. Much of the work around the eligibility recommendation integrated with the website recommendations. A highlight of the website is that it focused not just on linking to other websites, but also listing the qualifications and eligibility for these services.





## **SUMMARY OF THE ELIGIBILITY SUBCOMMITTEE'S EFFORTS**


The recommendation was addressed in three different ways by the Eligibility Subcommittee. The overall goal at the start of the subcommittee was to encourage providers to clearly express eligibility in writing and make this readily available to youth in person and online, starting with organizations in the Sonoma County Coalition for Foster Youth.

The cohort hoped a future recommendation or other organizations could address changing eligibility requirements in Sonoma County or creating additional services so that there is equitable support for all youth in need. The eligibility subcommittee first needed to fully understand what was and was not available.

Barriers to implementing the subcommittee's ideas of creating an eligibility workshop and a SSI specialist role included the lack of engagement in the subcommittee. While the first few meetings had more Coalition members present, often there were three or less people present at the subcommittee meetings. Less members put a lot of responsibility on the chair and it was challenging to explore the possibility of implementing these with only two agencies represented.

## **ACCESS TO UNDERSTANDING ELIGIBILITY**

We recommend that there is clearly stated descriptions of programs on the YouthScoop website and that any baseline criteria or requirements to access the services are listed. It is important that this is updated on a regular basis as requirements often change overtime.



**The relationship building is what makes the difference. My experience of foster care is best represented by the quote 'Many people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen to reply'. I wish there were more people that wanted to understand or even better, can understand because they had been there.'**

**-Youth interviewed by the Leadership Cohort**

We also implore organizations in the Sonoma County Coalition for Foster Youth to regularly communicate changes in order to help us update information on their programs. As of December 2019, there is eligibility listed on each resource. Please refer to the Youth Scoop Subcommittee and the YouthScoop.org website for more information. We would like to see more how-to guides on YouthScoop such as receiving and utilizing housing vouchers and understanding SSI. Guides on what to bring to certain appointments such as CalFRESH or MediCal Appointments (photo ID, proof of income for the last 30 days, knowledge of social security number) would be helpful as well.

It would also be helpful to include information and resources around sustaining your eligibility for programs. An example of this would be how to regain CalFRESH if you did not fill out your quarterly report and the time period in with to fix it without having to reapply for CalFresh. Another example would be how to remain eligible for financial aid and how to go through the appeal process if you lose eligibility.

## **PROVIDING SUPPORT FOR SSI ELIGIBILITY**

A next step for the recommendation projected that updated eligibility information could help shed light on what services are unavailable for certain populations of youth and can begin conversations around how to fill these needs.

We had various community partners including representatives from the North Bay Regional Center and the county's Continuum of Care. Through the eligibility subcommittee meetings, we realized we need a person that can consistently support youth understanding and applying for Social Security Income. Many youth and staff are confused about who qualifies for SSI, what documents are needed, why youth often get rejected on their first few attempts, what the deadlines are and turn around times, and much more.



The subcommittee looked into two different options in having someone specializing in SSI support. The first was attempting to have a behavioral health worker or human resources representative specializing in SSI co-locate at VOICES, SAY or other community TAY program.

Unfortunately, upon looking into this option, it did not sound like there would be a high possibility of this happening due to budgets, scheduling, and staff availability.

Our second option was to recruit a staff or volunteer to get training to understand the SSI process and co-locate at VOICES, SAY and/or other community TAY programs. We were made aware of the SOAR (SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery) online training that consists of 20 hours of free instruction with the goal to increase access SSI for eligible adults and children who are experiencing/at risk of homelessness and have a serious mental illness, medical impairment, and/or a co-occurring substance use disorder. It would be ideal if we could find someone who could already integrate this into their current position or see if there is any possible funding that could possibly support this being added to a position. Currently, we do not have any leads on the possibility of this occurring.

As for next steps, we encourage the Coalition members to go back to their agencies and search for funding or see if this could be added to a current position. We also value the Coalition continuing to discuss this recommendation in order for this to not fade as the need for such a position is so high.

## **INFORMATIONAL AND INTERACTIVE ELIGIBILITY WORKSHOP**

Our subcommittee chair inspired the idea of teaching youth about eligibility in the form of a workshop. We knew even the word ‘eligibility’ could be dry and confusing, so there needed to be something interactive in order to be able to show the importance of knowing about program and having documents that show what you may be eligible for. The idea behind holding a workshop is to create an informational but active, engaging way for youth to better understand the importance of understanding eligibility, keeping track of documents often needing in regards to eligibility, and leaving with a tangible eligibility support. There would be incentives, likely in the form of gift cards, for youth to participate in these workshops.

Our subcommittee chair envisioned the workshop being similar to a life-sized board game that sent youth down different pathways and focuses. Examples include collecting basic documents (social security cards, birth certificate, tax returns, credit scores), what is needed to access transportation (DMV focused, Real ID, permit, and driver's license), documents and steps for accessing education (transcripts, FAFSA, applications), Housing (rental history, credit scores, rental resumes) and (basics of Social Security Income (SSI), how to access behavioral health services in Sonoma County, and how to obtain documentation showing proof of disability). This would allow for youth to be involved in what they are most interested in or needing to learn about currently.

Originally, this was discussed in connection to current foster youth however the group wanted to expand the invitation to all youth in systems of care, including inviting youth in the Independent Living Program, youth living in local group homes, youth living in supportive housing such as the Dream Center, TLC's Transitional Housing Program, and Sanctuary House, and other youth by referral of local agencies.

The ideal target age range would be 17-21 year olds, but allowing 16-24 years old to attend that would like this information as well. We also highlighted the importance of allowing youth to choose into the activities and not forcing them to engage if they are feeling overwhelmed, confused, or uninterested. Ideally, since they will only get the gift card if they participate, that will be enough of an incentive to be involved.

The workshop would start with a binder utilizing organizing tabs that break down needed documents for verifying eligibility. The workshop would be run based on how to get those needed documents, what documents do you need to get the other documents, and how to keep track of all documents. Ideally, it prepares them for what it takes, it isn't as hard to get your birth certification if you know exactly what you need to bring and prepare to be patient as it takes time. Documents to put in the binder include:

- Tax returns
- Birth certificate
- SS card
- Printed free credit report
- High School Transcripts
- List of current medications
- Appointment summaries
- Info about medications and diagnoses
- MediCal Card
- Accessing vouchers
- Rental Resume



Other topics we would want to address is the cost of getting these documents. For instance, getting a birth certificate is going to cost you around \$30 and we are not aware of any discounts or support services that can pay for it. We would recommend making copies of all forms of ID and having extra copies of documents. We would want youth to know how to utilize services such as the 'digital locker' on iFoster's website that allows for HIPPA compliant, safe and secure way to have digital copies of important documents. Youth are welcome to make physical copies for free at VOICES.

When applying for housing or being on a housing waitlist, a consistent address is needed. If you change addresses, you must let housing authority know as soon as possible. VOICES is an option to send mail if there are issues getting mail or remembering to switch it.



We would also want to highlight the importance of clear lines of communication. We suggesting having a gmail account you check regularly if your phone is shut off, potentially getting a google phone number so your number stays the same anytime you change phones and you could access voicemails and texts online without needing your phone.

While the framework for the workshop was created, there were no concrete steps made around who would organize the event, when or where this would take place, or what else is needed to implement such a workshop. The suggestion came up around integrating this into Independent City (an annual Independent Living Program event) however there were concerns around the feasibility, accessibility, and time constraints with the event. Our chair also envisioned there being slightly less youth, more volunteers, and having the workshops at least semi-annually. Next steps for our community include solidifying support to make this event happen.

As this subcommittee merged with the access subcommittee from the first cohort's recommendation, we continued to discuss a recommendation to create a solution for our youth accessing housing and response to the housing crisis in Sonoma County.



We spent time trying to understand the different housing vouchers eligibility and why many of our youth still struggle to find housing despite having a voucher. The subcommittee still recommends a way to connect landlords and youth needing housing. An organization had approached us about potentially launching an app in Sonoma County to do so but the funding was not available. The committee also discussed the need for a type of 'Housing Navigator' or a position that was dedicated to making landlord connections, taking youth through the housing search process in person, and following up with landlord support if needed in order to support youth finding and sustaining housing.

### Sample "How-To" Guide for Housing

SONOMA COUNTY YOUTH RESOURCES: YOUTHSCOOP.ORG



**QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN CHECKING OUT A POTENTIAL LIVING SPACE**

**Rules and Costs:**

- What's your application process and screening criteria?
- When is the unit/room available?
- How many people will be living in the space? How many bathrooms are there?
- What is the security deposit?
- Is there laundry in the unit, on site, or is a laundromat nearby and what are the associated costs?
- What's your pet policy and do you require a pet fee or deposit?
- What's your guest policy?
- What internet services are available and approximately how much will it cost?
- Does the rent include any or all utilities? What is the average cost for utilities?

**Physical Concerns:**

- Do the appliances (heat, AC, stove, refrigeration, oven, dishwasher, garbage disposal) function properly?
- Is there enough storage?
- Are there damages to the walls?
- Do all the locks work properly?
- Do downstairs windows lock?
- Are there any leaks near faucets?
- Is there mold or water damage on the ceilings, walls, or floor?
- Can you fit furniture through the doors or up the stairs around corners?
- Are there smoke and carbon monoxide detectors throughout the apartment?

**Environment:**

- What is the outside noise level?
- Can you hear neighbors? Barking?
- Is it close enough to public transportation?
- Are you near a grocery, market, or corner store?
- What is the parking situation?



**“YouthScoop is something that all Sonoma County youth could use. The website builds awareness, but lists of resources are not enough. We need to make it possible for youth to access more resources”**  
**- VOICES Youth**



# 3. RESOURCE WEBSITE

## Summary of the creation of a youth resource website

### INTRODUCTION

One of the first goals we discussed as a cohort was to get to know the systems of care in Sonoma County and the resources available to young people. We noticed that a lot of young people in Sonoma County, including many of us at times, were running into barriers when trying to access help. Once you find out a resource is available, you then have to determine if you are eligible for it. This is especially difficult when using outdated and often incomplete eligibility guidelines. Many of our young people utilize their phones or computers at VOICES resources in order to find resources. We realized Sonoma County needed one central online place for youth to get reliable information on resources and eligibility.

We started our research for these resources online and then followed up by personally contacting the organizations hosting the resources either by phone or in person. We started with a spreadsheet of 250 youth services in Sonoma County originally created by members of the Access Subcommittee as part of the first cohort's recommendations.

The list of 250 services was split up between the seven cohort members and two facilitators in order to update the information, discover who qualified for the resources, and assess the usefulness of listing the service.

The cohort members learned that getting information about resources and their eligibility requirements proved difficult. Much of the information available online including phone numbers and web addresses was outdated. This made it challenging for us to make sure our site had the most accurate information. We navigated this obstacle by reaching out to our community partners for any updates going on in their organizations and making the effort to meet with different service providers in person. We wanted the website to allow young people and providers to access multiple resource options at once and find the best fit.



It was important that it could be accessed on multiple devices and was easy to navigate. We talked about reaching out to someone with website coding experience as well as utilizing a platform that provides templates. After doing some research, we decided the most user-friendly option was Squarespace. Our original spreadsheet of 250 youth services in Sonoma County was reorganized into five categories: Housing, Health and Wellness, Education, Employment, and Support Services. We contacted the creator of the website for On the Move, VOICES parent organization, and she supported the cohort in uploading the information we collected to the website template. Throughout the six months of the cohort finalizing the recommendation, we went through the process of translating our ideas into a site map, creating a base model for the website, as well as fixing any formatting issues and adding descriptions for each of the sections.

After publishing the final version of the YouthScoop website we presented it to our local community. Young people accessing services and service providers alike were excited to see a website that was not only intuitive and easy to use but also designed by young people with young people in mind.

The YouthScoop Website Subcommittee was formed following the successful launch of YouthScoop.org in order to continue the hard work that went into creating a space that empowers people who are seeking services.

## **SUBCOMMITTEE GOALS**

The YouthScoop Website Subcommittee worked on reviewing the website, creating goals to improve the site, and brainstorming ways to keep the website sustainable. This included adding additional resources and information to the five sections we created. We also later added separate sections with information about local transportation resources and helpful how-to guides. We worked on expanding the website to include more detailed descriptions for each of the categories, subcategories, and resources. We also added hyperlinks to define terms within those descriptions. Another goal discussed in the subcommittee was to find a person who could take on the role of keeping the website accurate and up to date, whether that be hiring someone specifically for the job or adding it to a current employee's job description.



## FURTHER WORK NEEDED

We would like to continue adding to the website and expanding its reach. For example, it would be helpful to expand the employment section as there are limited resources currently listed. A suggestion early on in the subcommittee would be to separate volunteer opportunities into categories such as work experience, community service, and internships however there are not enough resources listed to utilize the categorical system currently. There was considerable interest in increasing the information in the Health and Wellness section.

After publishing the final version of the YouthScoop website we presented it to our local community. Young people accessing services and service providers alike were excited to see a website that was not only intuitive and easy to use but also designed by young people with young people in mind.

An issue that kept presenting itself in the subcommittee meetings was the need for a list of upcoming events and deadlines that young people should know about. We brainstormed many many ways of creating a calendar of events for youth. We considered the idea of having multiple calendars as there are so many different types of events however realized that a color coded calendar would be best.

We looked into utilizing SquareSpace's event features however they were not practical for a multi-use calendar. The calendar feature has been placed on hold for now but we would ideally like to see it hosted on the website.

Adding additional instructional pages (also referred to as one-pagers) to YouthScoop.org would be beneficial to those looking for a simple one-page guide to getting started. We have uploaded a few one-pagers about obtaining a driver's license, signing up for college courses, and looking for housing. It would be great to expand this section to include some of our original ideas such as how to contact MediCal, how to retrieve a birth certificate, and how to apply for CalFresh.



The subcommittee members recently added a transportation section to the five original categories of resources. We were able to to post local transportation options such as Santa Rosa City Bus and Sonoma County Transit. We would like to add more information about what programs may offer free or reduced rides. It would be helpful to have resources for reduced-cost driver's education or ways to get an affordable bike in Sonoma County.

We still need to create a plan around who will keep the website maintained and finding funding if needed to support the additional work. As the website was created using On the Move's funds temporarily, the subcommittee needed to find an agency willing to host and fund the website long term. This did not happen as there was not an agency volunteering to take it on and relevant funding was not found. While we discussed VOICES as a likely option due to their resource focus, there needs to be additional efforts to fund the site and maintenance as its a community resource and would not normally part of VOICES' budget. Until this happens, On the Move has been willing to support the website and it has been updated by VOICES staff.

The main goal we would like to focus on moving forward is to include more resources from community partners and further publicize YouthScoop.org to the community and our youth. The website is not very useful if our community does not know how to access it. We hope to do this by distributing flyers, creating interest among community partners about the website and encouraging community partners to utilize the website while with youth.



Sample instructional one-pager



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# THANK YOU

Thank you to our Sonoma County community that continually comes together in the spirit of collaboration to best support the foster care community.

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A special thank you to all involved in the Sonoma County Foster Youth Coalition, especially those involved in the subcommittees, for your continued support, time and efforts to better serve the youth in our community.