SUPPORTING EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF AB12: PROVIDING WEB-BASED TRAUMA INFORMED RESOURCES TO YOUTH SERVICE BUREAU CASE MANAGERS SERVING FORMER FOSTER YOUTH

By

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ABSTRACT

SUPPORTING EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF AB12: PROVIDING WEB-BASED TRAUMA INFORMED RESOURCES TO YOUTH SERVICE BUREAU CASE MANAGERS SERVING FORMER FOSTER YOUTH

Staci Altomare

Youth aging out of foster care are a vulnerable population who often lack the emotional and financial support needed to succeed in the transition to independent adulthood. Assembly Bill 12 (AB 12) was signed into law in September 2010 as a means to improve the outcomes of foster care by providing extended support for youth who qualify under the bill. The Youth Service Bureau is in process of getting licensed as a Transitional Housing Plus Foster Care (THP+FC) Provider. This will allow YSB to receive the funding made available to support AB12 youth in Humboldt County.

The purpose of this project is the creation of a website for case managers working with AB12 youth. The website will help case managers to prepare and engage in the effective implementation of AB12 and the THP+FC program regardless of their educational background, experience with these programs or time working at the Youth Service Bureau. THP+FC programs are geared toward a population that has experienced trauma, the website also provides easily accessed essential information about trauma informed and positive youth development approaches. The website also facilitates the
ability of the Youth Service Bureau and its case managers to document experience and knowledge regarding the implementation of the THP+FC program and to continuously update and improve website content.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I thank my mother, Mary Nattrass, for all of her time, love, patience and support. I would not be where I am today without her. Thank you for being an inspiration and motivation. Thank you for always being there and believing in me. You are a strong, intelligent, compassionate, and spiritual role model. I am grateful and honored to be your daughter. Thank you to all of the amazing professors in the Humboldt State Social Work Department who have supported me with this project. I am forever grateful to my committee for all of their hard work. Thank you Jennifer Maguire for being a great committee chair. Thank you Yvonne Doble for your passion, knowledge and commitment. You have helped keep me on my toes and made sure that I expressed my true self throughout this project. Many thanks to Maura Eastman, my community partner and Director of the Youth Service Bureau. Your input has been invaluable. I think that you are an amazing woman and I have been blessed to be able to work with you. Thank you to all the staff at the Youth Service Bureau. You make a difference every day in the work that you do. Thank you to my family, especially my aunt and uncle, Peggy Burkhardt and Joe Golden, my Papa Bear, Brian Nattrass, my sister, Kristen Gaitan and my partner, Jack Owens. Thank you for all of your support and encouragement. I have to thank all of the youth that have allowed me into their lives. I am amazed everyday by your resilience, creativity, strength and love. I feel blessed to have the opportunity to know so many remarkable beings in this world! Forever Grateful. Forever Blessed.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................................ ii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ............................................................................................... iv

LIST OF TABLES ............................................................................................................ vii

LIST OF FIGURES ......................................................................................................... viii

INTRODUCTION .............................................................................................................. 1

LITERATURE REVIEW ................................................................................................... 5

  The Foster Care Challenge: Preparing Youth for a Successful Transition to Adulthood5

  Assembly Bill 12 (AB12): California Fostering Connections to Success Act
  (Extending Foster Care Benefits) ................................................................................... 8

  The Importance of Trauma-informed Approaches in Supporting Foster Youth .......... 11

METHODS ....................................................................................................................... 14

  Rationale for Choosing a Web-based Approach........................................................... 14

  Technical Approach ...................................................................................................... 15

    Website Design and Structure ................................................................................... 16

    Website Use .............................................................................................................. 17

  Structural and Conceptual Frameworks ........................................................................ 18

  Evaluation Methods ...................................................................................................... 20

RESULTS ......................................................................................................................... 22

DISCUSSION ................................................................................................................... 25

  Limitations .................................................................................................................... 27

  Recommendations and Next Steps ............................................................................... 29

  Conclusions ................................................................................................................... 32
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Phase-in of Assembly Bill 12 ................................................................. 9
Table 2. Evaluation Criteria and Assessment of Completion .................................. 23
Table 3. Recommendations for Future Website Development ............................ 29
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Youth Service Bureau’s THP Plus Foster Care Website Structure.................... 17
Appendix 1: Screenshot of Website.................................................................................. 41
INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the community-based project that I completed in partnership with the Youth Services Bureau of Eureka, California (hereinafter referred to as “YSB”). YSB is a division of the Redwood Community Action Agency (RCAA) that offers a variety of services to teenagers who are homeless, runaways or experiencing other hardships in their lives. YSB has a 24-hour youth shelter, a youth transitional housing program called the Launch Pad, and a street outreach and drop-in center known as The Raven Project. In addition, YSB offers the THP Plus Program for emancipated foster care youth. Plans are currently underway for YSB to offer the THP Plus Foster Care Program that is the focus of this community-based project (Redwood Community Action Agency, 2015).

The purpose of this project is the development of a website for YSB to serve a very specific group: the case managers who support foster care youth who have aged out of the foster care program and who are eligible for or enrolled in THP Plus Foster Care Program. The purpose of the website is to help prepare and engage case managers working in the THP Plus Foster Care program to effectively implement Assembly Bill (AB) 12. The THP Plus Foster Care Program arose from the California Fostering Connections to Success Act which was signed into law on September 30, 2010 through Assembly Bill (AB) 12. This legislation recognizes the importance of family and permanency for youth by extending payment benefits and transitional support services for Adoption Assistance Program (AAP), Kinship Guardianship Payment Assistance
(KinGAP) Program and Foster Care. Effective January 1, 2012, the bill allows eligible 18 year olds in foster care to remain in foster care up to age 19 years. Beginning January 1, 2013 foster youth became able to remain in foster care up to age 20. Beginning January 1, 2014, foster youth up to age 21, contingent upon budget appropriation by the state legislature, were able to remain in foster care. Youth over age 18 in foster care are designated as “non-minor dependents” (California Department of Social Services, 2011).

YSB currently serves youth who have aged out of the foster care system through the THP Plus program. Due to funding made available through Assembly Bill 12 (AB12), YSB intends to increase the services it can offer to youth who elect to remain in, or return to, foster care in accordance with the requirements set out in AB12. This means that case managers will be called upon to not only learn the AB12 requirements but also to support youth effectively in navigating the program.

To provide easy and helpful access to information and resources about AB12, I developed an interactive website (hereinafter referred to as website) that is informed by and designed around Assembly Bill 12 (AB12). Although this tool is focused primarily on the THP Plus Foster Care program, my aim is to develop a website that can ultimately expand beyond the THP Plus Foster Care program into a resource that can serve all YSB Programs and case managers as the information and resources it contains can apply to many of the programs that YSB offers.

YSB’s services are based on a harm-reduction perspective, an approach that is integrated into YSB’s programs and activities. In interactions with youth, case managers at YSB come from a Positive Youth Development (hereinafter referred to as “PYD”)
perspective, an aspect of harm reduction defined as: “an intentional, pro-social approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive, recognizes, utilizes and enhances youth strengths and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities fostering positive relationships and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths” (Positive Youth Development, 2014). In the process of designing and building the website, I have integrated the strengths based perspective of PYD into sections on ways that case managers can help youth in the THP Plus Foster Care program. This perspective will be familiar to YSB case managers even if they have not received formal training in PYD.

In addition to integrating PYD perspectives into the website, I have also included information and resources on trauma-informed care, an approach that is crucial for case managers to understand and use in their support of foster care youth. A trauma-informed perspective recognizes that a youth in the foster care system has likely suffered some level of trauma that can impact his/her development and behavior, which, in turn, can affect his/her readiness and ability to transition to independent adulthood.

As the role of the case manager is to support youth in making this transition it is important for him/her to be trauma-informed. For that reason, trauma-informed care is included as an important element of the website. Existing literature about the foster care challenge, the AB12 response, and the importance of using a trauma-informed approach to support THP Plus Foster Care program youth will be further described below along with an explanation of the methods used to design, and build the website to be a user-
friendly resource for case managers. The section on methods used is followed by a review the results of this project, a discussion of what was learned in the process of undertaking it, and recommendations about how others can build and extend this kind of support to case workers and youth.
LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is organized into three sections. The first section explains the challenges involved in helping foster youth prepare for a successful transition to independent adulthood. The second section describes the response to this challenge that arose through AB12, which is a central organizing principle of the website developed for YSB. Finally, the last section argues why case managers supporting foster care youth need to be trauma-informed in their interactions with the youth they serve.

The Foster Care Challenge: Preparing Youth for a Successful Transition to Adulthood

In 2012, according to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) 23,396 youth aged out of the U.S. foster care system at age 18 without the emotional and financial support necessary to succeed in their transition to independent adulthood (Report 20 (2013). The Alliance for Children’s Rights (2013) reports that in California alone, 4,000 youth age out of the foster care system annually without adequate social support or life skills. The data underscore the challenges faced by this population.

Research by Courtney et al (2010) concludes that: a) on average within four years of “aging out” of the foster care system nearly 40% of foster youth have been homeless or “couch-surfed”; b) almost 60% of young men have been convicted of a crime; c) and,
only 48% were employed. Seventy-five percent of women and 33% of men received government benefits to meet basic needs. Further Courtney et al (2010) finds that fifty percent of all youth who aged out of foster care are involved in substance abuse, and 17% of the females are pregnant. Courtney et al (2010) states that nearly 25% of youth aging out do not have a high school diploma or GED, and a mere 6% finished a two- or four-year degree after aging out of foster care. This is despite the fact that, as one study found, 70% of all youth in foster care have the desire to attend college (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Rapp, 2010).

The foster care experience is diverse. A foster youth may have entered the system as a child or as an adolescent. Although a foster youth may stay with one foster family, most experience multiple placements between foster families, group homes, and residential programs. The quality of services that a youth receives while “in the system” also varies depending on placements, county, and state. Ideally, a foster youth will be prepared to transition to independent living and adulthood after being in the system. In reality, evidence based on outcomes of former foster youth suggests that the majority of foster youth are neither prepared for a successful transition to adulthood nor are there services in place to adequately help them become better prepared (Dworsky, Dillman, Dion, Coffee-Borden and Rosenau, 2012; Courtney, et al, 2010; Alliance for Children’s Rights, 2013).

As Baugh (2008) points out, foster youth constitute a vulnerable and high-risk population. The risk factors and difficulties they experience include early parenthood, involvement in the criminal justice system, unemployment or underemployment,
homelessness, and mental health issues. Former foster youth are less likely to graduate from high school or attend college, and even when they do attend they are less likely to graduate, putting them at a disadvantage when competing for employment. Foster youth have higher rates of health problems, including mental health and substance abuse issues. Aged-out foster youth lack lasting relationships with adults who continue to be supportive throughout the transition to adulthood. Due to multiple placements, foster youth often are not given opportunities to master daily living tasks required for independent living, e.g., budgeting, time management, health, nutrition, hygiene, and conflict resolution (Baugh, 2008; Dworsky, et al, 2012; Courtney, et al, 2010; Alliance for Children’s Rights, 2013).

Research conducted by Daining and DePanfilis (2007) reveals that the difficulties experienced by foster youth in transitioning to adulthood are often trauma-based, stemming from early childhood maltreatment experiences as well as the trauma of being removed from their families and homes and moved through multiple foster placements. Trauma exposure rates among foster youth approach 90% (Courtney et al, 2010). Traumas experienced by these youth may include abuse, neglect, removal from home, multiple placements, disrupted educational continuity due to numerous moves, and loss of important relationships with family and friends (Egan, 2013).

As Grayson (2012) reports in the American Psychological Association Children, Youth and Families (CYF) news, a study by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) determined that nearly half (47.9%) of youth in foster care have significant emotional or behavioral problems. Consequently, youth who have aged out of the foster
care system show high rates of psychiatric disability. A study conducted by the Casey Family Programs and Harvard Medical School shows that over half of foster care alumni had diagnoses compared to 22% of the comparison group. The disproportionate number of diagnoses becomes apparent when looking at Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), where 30% of foster alumni are given this diagnosis. This is about twice the rate of U.S. combat veterans (Grayson, 2012) These statistics tell an alarming story of the challenges faced by foster youth, as well as those faced by a system that strives to help them better prepare for the transition to an independent adulthood. One response to these challenges in the State of California is Assembly Bill 12 (AB12), enacted into law in September 2010, as summarized below.

**Assembly Bill 12 (AB12): California Fostering Connections to Success Act**

*(Extending Foster Care Benefits)*

A thorough analysis of the development, implementation, effectiveness and progress made by AB12 is beyond the scope of this paper. The following is an overview of AB12, as it provides the structure of the website created for the purpose of assisting case managers helping foster youth successfully transition to adulthood.

AB12 was signed into law in September 2010 as a means to improve the outcomes in foster care. The law was implemented in three phases over a three-year period. The following table outlines these phases.
Table 1. Phase-in of Assembly Bill 12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Foster care extended to</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1</td>
<td>January 2012</td>
<td>Age 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2</td>
<td>January 2013</td>
<td>Age 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 3</td>
<td>January 2014</td>
<td>Age 21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Children’s Advocacy Institute, 2013

Currently, AB12 allows youth who are in foster care to stay in foster care after they turn 18, or if they were in care and aged out, to return to care until the age of 21. This option is voluntary, and if a youth leaves foster care at age 18 and changes his/her mind after opting out, s/he can return to care any time before age 21. Youth in care through the child welfare system as well as youth in care through the probation system are included. AB12 may also extend the provisions of the Indian Child Welfare Act otherwise known as ICWA to unmarried dependent youth between ages 18-21. Youth in extended foster care are known as “non-minor dependents” (California Department of Social Services, 2011; Children’s Advocacy Institute, 2013; Children’s Law Center of California, 2015).

Youth who choose to remain in foster care need to meet specific eligibility requirements. They must have a plan with their probation/social worker that meets the criteria of these requirements including one of the following: working towards high school or equivalent program (GED); enrolling in college, community college or vocational program; working at least 80 hours a month; participating in a program designed to promote or remove barriers to employment unless unable to do any of the above due to a medical condition. Youth also have to agree to work with a social worker to develop and implement a transitional living plan that includes living in an eligible
placement. Eligible placements can be a group home, supervised independent living setting (scattered sights), a THP Plus-Foster Care program, or they may remain in an existing placement with a relative, non-related extended family member (NREFM), legal guardian or foster family (California Department of Social Services, 2011).

The architecture of the website is based on resource and supportive-service areas that will help foster care youth meet the AB12 requirements. AB12 stipulates that to be eligible for the THP-PLUS Foster Care program, a youth needs to meet at least one of the following criteria (California Department of Social Services, 2011):

- Be completing high school or an equivalent program
- Be enrolled in college, community college, or vocational education
- Be employed at least 80 hours a month
- Be participating in a program designed to promote, or remove barriers to, employment
- Be unable to do one of the above due to a medical condition

To help easily connect case managers and youth to the resources and support service areas to meet one or more of these criteria, the following domains were created for the website:

- Education, as it is one of the core requirements
- Employment, as it is one of the core requirements
- Housing, as it constitutes an important condition in the transition to independent living
Health (mental and physical), because it is fundamental to well-being in the transition from dependent youth to independent adulthood

Life skills, e.g., money management, to further enable youth in the program to live and thrive on their own

Young parents, as a high percentage of youth in this population are young parents who require resources and support services to help them care for their children as well as themselves

Although the design and construction of the website uses AB12 as its basis, and is designed specifically to assist case managers and youth associated with the THP-Plus Foster Care Program, a program that has yet to be launched within YSB, the service areas that make up the website domains can also apply to other YSB programs to help youth transition to self-sufficiency, such as Launch-Pad Transitional Living Program. By focusing on these resources and support service areas, this website will prove useful to case managers engaged in other YSB programs as well.

The Importance of Trauma-informed Approaches in Supporting Foster Youth

As pointed out in the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative Issues Brief #5 entitled *Trauma-Informed Practice with Young People in Foster Care*, “It is important for people working in youth-serving systems to understand young people’s responses to trauma in order to promote healing and emotional security” (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2012, p. 1). This does not mean that everyone who works with
foster youth must be a trauma specialist, but that they need to become trauma-informed to more effectively support and serve the youth in their care (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities, 2015).

Trauma is not merely the experience of a stressful event, but rather it consists of experiencing, and perceiving, an event as life threatening and overwhelming. Trauma compromises ordinary adaption; it renders the youth helpless and powerless (Herman, 1992). “Complex trauma describes the problem of children’s exposure to multiple or prolonged traumatic events and the impact of this exposure on their development” (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2015, p.5). For a practitioner to be trauma-informed means that s/he is aware not only of the affect that past and recurring trauma can have on a youth’s current behavior, attitudes, and ability to function, but they also understands how the systems that foster youth need to deal with can add to the trauma they experience. (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2015).

Trauma-informed practitioners are sensitive to the dynamics and impact of complex trauma on youth by avoiding unintentionally re-traumatizing them when providing services. As Hummer, Dollard, Robst, and Armstrong (2010) point out, “As children move through the child welfare and juvenile court systems, they often encounter additional stressful, frightening, and emotionally overwhelming experiences through “system-generated trauma” (p. 80). Staff in trauma-informed systems that interact with youth understand, recognize, and respond in a therapeutic way when manifestations of trauma, such as acting out behaviors, arise (Hummer, et al, 2010). When interacting with non-minor foster youth, a trauma-informed case manager is sensitive to the fact that the
youth may have psychological or developmental issues that result from earlier and even on-going trauma, and respond accordingly.

Director of Eureka’s Youth Service Bureau, Maura Eastman, explains the effects of trauma on development:

The foster youth population commonly displays behavioral, emotional, social, and intellectual struggles that are rooted in their histories of repeated trauma. Trauma negatively impacts one’s ability to regulate emotions, problem solve, process information, interact with peers and adults, and creates many other deficits in core areas of development. These deficits are often the cause or a contributor for youth who struggle with meeting the rules and requirements of a residential program. Youth who have experienced extensive trauma and instability have difficulty completing tasks independently, socializing with others, and planning for the future, which often negatively impacts their ability to follow the rules (Eastman, 2014).

Because foster youth have most likely experienced some level of trauma in their lives that may influence their ability to function in relation to meeting the requirements and succeeding in the THP-Plus FC program, case managers who support these youth could benefit from easy-to-access information and resources about trauma and trauma-informed care. For that reason, numerous resources in the website enable case managers who may not have been exposed or trained in this area to increase their knowledge and understanding, and thus enhance their practice. Other areas of knowledge and practice that are crucial to effectively supporting THP-Plus FC foster youth are intended to be added over time.
METHODS

This section reviews the approach to designing and building the website for YSB case managers who will be working with the THP-PLUS Foster Care program once it is launched. This section examines the rationale for choosing a web-based approach; the technical approach used for designing the website; the conceptual frameworks integrated into the website; and the evaluation methods used to assess project completion and success.

Rationale for Choosing a Web-based Approach

The development of a website to help case managers with the anticipated influx of THP-PLUS Foster Care youth emerged from collaboration between community partner Maura Eastman, Director of YSB, and the author. The purpose of the website is to provide case managers with modules of activities that they could undertake with the youth they support. The tool is web-based for several reasons. Today’s technology- and information-rich world is increasingly characterized by connection to information through computers, smart phones, and electronic tablets. Information is increasingly accessed and conveyed online, on the web. A web-based tool can be more interactive and engaging, opening up ideas and resources in unexpected ways. The navigation of a website can often be more user-friendly than using print media, as well as more readily shared among peers. Case managers are busy; they often need fast and easy access to
resources because of the many demands on their time and energy. An interactive website can be developed into a “living” instrument, meaning that it must lend itself to change, updates, edits and collaborative content creation. This enables users of the website to also be its resources co-contributors. Relevant resources identified and included in the website are also web-based, so it is easy to link them to the website. Finally, using a web-based platform enables users to keep the content fresh and current. This helps avoid the challenge that many print media tools have with information being obsolete by the time a document is printed and distributed.

**Technical Approach**

The website design addresses three interrelated components: Its design, user interface and initial content. A web-based format creates a living instrument for learning and action for case managers as they support youth with the requirements of AB12. AB12 is still relatively new and is still evolving. As case managers and others become more familiar with AB12 and work with youth who are impacted by it this expanded experience can be shared and institutionalized through the use of this tool. Although beyond the areas prescribed by AB12 I have chosen which content to include, e.g., information and resources on Positive Youth Development and trauma-informed practice, over time others will contribute content based on their direct experience as case managers working with this program.
Website Design and Structure

The website is designed and built around the requirements for THP Plus Foster Care as specified in AB12. Resources and information that will help case managers provide the supportive services for youth to meet the AB12 requirements constitute the structural framework for the website. The AB12 page on the website provides definitive information about what AB12 is, its goals and benefits, the basic eligibility requirements, foster placement options, and other information intended to help case managers gain a quick overview of the program. The rest of the website is structured around the following resource and supportive service domains:

- Education
- Employment
- Housing
- Health
- Life Skills
- Young Parents

Each domain is organized around a “landing page” that provides a brief overview of the domain subject with a section on how case managers can help in relation to this domain. From each domain landing page, the user can navigate to additional resources both internal and external to the website. These resources span different media including print media (e.g., .pdfs), videos, links to other websites, key forms, and a section on questions and answers related to the domain (i.e.; education, employment). Figure 1 illustrates the structural design of the website. This structure enables easy navigation to the resources, services, and activities case managers will find to support eligible youth to meet the AB12 requirements.
Website Use

The website is designed to be user-friendly to give case managers easy access to information and resources that will help them better serve youth enrolled in the THP Plus Foster Care program. It is organized around resources and supportive service areas based on the requirements of AB12 to help case managers readily find the information they need; the activities with which they can engage youth; and resources that invite them to learn more, dig deeper, and become more effective in their practice.
Structural and Conceptual Frameworks

The structural framework for the design and content of the website is based on AB12. As the legislative action which extends foster care and supports the THP Foster Care program, AB12 information provides the backbone of the website. The resources and supportive service areas related to AB12 constitute the architecture of fundamental information that case managers working with THP Foster care need to understand and use. The website also integrates two conceptual frameworks that are foundational for case managers working with foster care youth who are aging out of the system: Trauma Informed Care, and Positive Youth Development. These conceptual frameworks are explained in depth in the Literature Review.

Positive youth development is a core, underlying framework that informs YSB’s service to youth. PYD emerges from the field of prevention and focuses on problems before they surface in youth. The PYD perspective regards youth as resources, not problems, and emphasizes strategies to help youth develop their own strengths and build resiliency to overcome their challenges (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 1998). In creating this website, it is assumed that YSB case managers are familiar with the PYD approach and use it as a basis of their practice whether or not they are formally trained in that perspective. PYD practices are integrated into the website content and resources.

Trauma-informed care is an approach that is crucial for case managers to understand and use in their support of foster care youth. As case managers may have
limited knowledge and exposure to this approach, the website contains information and resources on the impact of trauma on foster care youth, including links to additional information for case managers who want to learn more about the approach. The website provides information and resources for case managers to become more trauma-informed in their interactions with foster care youth.

Content related to PYD and trauma informed care is integrated throughout the website with a view toward providing concise data to inform case managers as well as to provide links and resources for those who want to develop a more in-depth understanding. For example, from the Education Landing page the user can navigate to specific educational levels, e.g., high school or college. When the user lands on those sub-category pages, they access a brief description of the challenges that foster youth face; for example, that research shows that many foster youth do not graduate or that they have educational gaps because they have moved frequently. The section that follows this brief description of challenges sets out ways that the case manager can use a PYD, strengths-based approach to engage with each youth to collaboratively find solutions that work for him or her, emphasizing that the youth being supported needs to be involved in making his/her choices, figuring out solutions, and given opportunities to do that (see Appendix A for a screenshot of this page).

The structure of the website is a combination of non-editable pages, or pages with limited editing access, and editable pages, intended to be continuously updated and expanded. Examples of editable pages include: Q&A, Forms, and Resources. Pages with information that is not expected to change regularly have restricted access for editing; for
example, the AB12 page is not expected to change daily and will only be editable by the YSB director or another designated site administrator. The site structure will also not be editable except by a designated site administrator. Ultimately YSB will determine how many levels of access for editing are required before the website is launched, at which time the site governance structure will be developed and set.

**Evaluation Methods**

This project is the creation of a website that continuously develops, improves, and evolves as case managers use it and add to it based on their experience and learning. This means that the ultimate success of this website relies not only on how it is designed and structured and the relevance of the initial selection of content and links; it also depends upon the active participation of others to use it and add content and links based on their experience. The open-ended nature of a continuously evolving process presents a challenge for assessing when this project is complete. To address this challenge, factors are delineated by which the extent to which the project completion can be assessed. Using this evaluation approach, the project is considered complete when certain elements are in place. These elements include that the structure and functionality of the website are set up and tested, every editable page has, at a minimum, the structure to edit for the case managers, (for example, the Q&A pages). Every page that can be navigated to has meaningful content, Positive Youth Development perspectives are reflected in the actions recommended for case managers, trauma-informed care information and resources are
integrated at relevant places and there is a link from the homepage connects users with instructions on how to use the website.

In addition to the factors agreed upon between the author and the community partner to assess the completeness of this project, additional success factors are outlined that go beyond the scope of this project. These constitute some of the next steps needed to ensure the success of this endeavor.
RESULTS

The website designed and built is intended for use by case managers who will support youth who need to meet the eligibility requirements of the THP PLUS Foster Care Program as set out in California Assembly Bill 12. The website sets out the AB 12 requirements and is structured around resources, information, and activity that case managers will need when the THP PLUS Foster Care Program is activated at YSB, especially with respect to the following domains: education, employment, housing, health, life skills, and young parents.

YSB operates in a rural area and experiences a high turnover among case managers. The minimum education and experience requirements for case managers at YSB are a Bachelor of Arts in social work, psychology or a related field and/or two years of experience working with children, youth and families in a counseling, crisis intervention or similar capacity. These broad and very basic qualifications mean that case managers may not have been exposed to the approaches that are fundamental to both how YSB operates and to the support services needed by foster youth, specifically, PYD and trauma-informed care. Additionally, youth case managers’ time is devoted to supporting the youth in the programs. By virtue of their work demands, they have limited time to learn about and master new program requirements and the services that support them. With high turnover, a new case manager may be inundated with information and tasks that require them to hit the ground running in order to provide the support that youth need. For these reasons, the website is intended to help busy case managers who may
have limited familiarity with AB 12, PYD or trauma-informed care to access the information they need quickly and easily, and so they can support the youth in their care more effectively.

The following table summarizes the state of completeness of this project at present. The first six criteria are those set out between community partner Maura Eastman and the author as indicators of completeness. The additional four criteria are important for moving the project from conception to action as a useful tool within YSB. These criteria represent the recommended future development of this website and its associated materials.

Table 2. Evaluation Criteria and Assessment of Completion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation Criteria</th>
<th>Completed</th>
<th>Partially complete</th>
<th>Not complete</th>
<th>Ongoing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Structure and functionality are set up and tested</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every editable page has, at a minimum, the structure to edit for the case managers</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every page that can be navigated to has meaningful content</td>
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<tr>
<td>PYD perspectives are reflected in the actions recommended for case managers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trauma-informed care information and resources are integrated at relevant places</td>
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<tr>
<td>A link from the homepage connects users with instructions</td>
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</table>
### Evaluation Criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation Criteria</th>
<th>Completed</th>
<th>Partially compete</th>
<th>Not complete</th>
<th>Ongoing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>on how to use the website</td>
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<tr>
<td>Additional success criteria (beyond the scope of this project):</td>
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<tr>
<td>The website is pilot tested and revised accordingly</td>
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<tr>
<td>The website is ready to launch</td>
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<tr>
<td>Users are being trained in the website</td>
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<tr>
<td>The website is being used as a living, evolving site</td>
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</table>

* The development of meaningful content will be an ongoing activity for those using the website, and even for the purpose of this project it was hard to determine a point upon which to stop as there are so many relevant resources available that could be integrated.

As of the writing of this paper, YSB has not yet started the THP-PLUS Foster Care Program. This website was created to anticipate case manager and youth needs when the program does start. This means that the utility of the website for YSB cannot be assessed until such time as the decision is made to institute the THP-PLUS Foster Care Program or to adapt the website for other YSB programs or purposes.
DISCUSSION

This project addresses three challenges: first, the challenge faced by aging out foster care youth who are not prepared for the transition to independence; second, the challenge faced by YSB as an organization to build the internal capacity to support THP-PLUS Foster Care, a new program that supports AB12 youth; and, third, the challenge faced by case managers, whose task is to master the requirements of a new program and support a population that has likely been subject to recurring trauma, a dynamic that can exacerbate the difficulties foster youth face as they transition to adulthood. A case manager’s time naturally needs to focus on the youth they support. The website developed through this project would improve YSB build case managers’ capacity to support foster youth more effectively by providing easily accessed THP-PLUS Foster Care Program information, links to resources that support foster youth success in the program, and essential information about PYD and trauma-informed approaches.

Youth aging out of foster care are a vulnerable population who often lack the emotional and financial support needed to succeed in the transition to independent adulthood. Assembly Bill 12 (AB 12) was signed into law in September 2010 as a means to improve the outcomes of foster care by providing extended support for youth who qualify under the bill. The AB 12-instituted THP-PLUS Foster Care was modeled after the successful THP-PLUS Program that was set up to help former foster youth make the transition to independence. THP-PLUS Foster Care applies to youth who
choose to participate in extended foster care. To be eligible for AB12 support, a youth needs to meet at least one of the following criteria (California Department of Social Services, 2011)

- Be completing high school or an equivalent program
- Be enrolled in college, community college, or vocational education
- Be employed at least 80 hours a month
- Be participating in a program designed to promote, or remove barriers to, employment
- Be unable to do one of the above due to a medical condition

Using the AB12 requirements to guide the content, the resources in the website are organized into six domains to facilitate case managers’ work with the youth they support. These domains are: Education, Employment, Housing, Health, Life Skills, and Young Parents. Because PYD and trauma-informed care are important approaches for case managers to use when working with foster youth, information and resources on these two practice areas are integrated across the six domains. The website contains additional resources on PYD and trauma-informed practice to help case managers deepen their knowledge about these approaches to help in their day-to-day practice at YSB.

Although case managers are the primary audience and users of the website, the ultimate beneficiaries are the foster care youth that a case manager supports. Better-informed and knowledgeable case managers can more effectively support the youth they serve. Case managers who view youth through PYD and trauma-informed lenses are less likely to see a foster care youth as a problem that needs to be fixed, which is more in line
with the western model of medicine, and more likely to emphasizes a youth’s inherent
capacity for resilience. Another important source of knowledge and information for case
managers is their own lived experience. This website has been developed for YSB case
managers who will work with the THP-PLUS Foster Care Program, a program that has
not yet been instituted at YSB. When the program is instituted and case managers begin
to work with it, this website provides a medium through which they can share what they
learn through their direct experience. In this way the website can become a form of
institutional memory and accumulated experience at YSB that continues and grows even
as case manager staff changes.

Limitations

The open-ended nature of the website is one of its strengths; it also constitutes one
of the limitations of this project. Because it is open-ended, the website can be
continuously improved, updated, and co-created by those who use it, making it a living
and evolving resource. Extensive resources exist that could be of use to case managers
working with foster youth and that could be included in the website. In many cases
information included in the website, e.g., resources on research in brain science, is
constantly evolving and growing. These factors underscore the potential benefits that can
be derived from this website. At the same time, they underscore a core limitation:
insufficient time to include everything that I would like to have developed into the
website.
Given more time, for example, the website could have incorporated the perspectives of the youth being served by it. The lack of youth voice in the website is a limitation in the current project that could become the focus of a future project and/or a next step for YSB. Incorporating this youth voice could be achieved by integrating a participatory action research (PAR) component into the website design and implementation whereby foster youth could view the website, evaluate it from their perspective, and co-contribute to the website by adding content and ideas about how they would improve the website to better serve them. Participatory Action Research (PAR) can be defined as “systematic inquiry, with the collaboration of those affected by the issue being studied, for purposes of education and taking action or effecting change” (Green, et al., 2003). PAR is collaboration between researcher and the affected community. In the case of the website this collaboration would be between case managers and participating youth. PAR differs from traditional approaches to research and program development as it is done with people rather than on people. The purpose of PAR is to create new knowledge or understanding about an issue to bring about change. Community members participate in all facets of the research. They learn as well as share newly created knowledge with those who may benefit from it. PAR is community led and builds the capacity and expertise of the community in which it is involved. To take youth engagement and participation further, the website could include a component that is open to the public where youth could share their experience regarding what has helped them and what could be improved. This could be a place for anonymous feedback from youth who have been through this or other programs in the form of a discussion forum, blog or
other on-line dialogue device. Such feedback could provide important information to case managers on how to better serve foster youth, as well as being a place where youth can share information and ideas with one another. Another way to include more youth voice would be to include the use youth digital stories, This component that was outside the scope of this project and could be the focus of another project and/or a next step for YSB.

Recommendations and Next Steps

This project provides the foundation for building an important resource for case managers who support youth who choose to participate in THP-PLUS Foster Care Program. The following recommendations and next steps outline how YSB can build on this foundation, make full use of this resource, and ensure that it evolves and grows to its potential. These recommendations correspond to three potential phases to take the website from its current foundational form to its institution as an evolving resource within YSB.

Table 3. Recommendations for Future Website Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Foundational content and pilot test</td>
<td>Review foundational content, identify and fill significant gaps</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Design and implement a pilot test of website content and functionality</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Revise website based on pilot test feedback and ready for launch when needed</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Revise “how to use” instructions for the website based on pilot test feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Recommendations</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Institutionalizing use</td>
<td>Develop and conduct training for case managers on the use of the website. Make this part of orientation and job expectations.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Integrate the use, updating and upkeep of the website into case manager job expectations. Possibly rotate the upkeep of the website among case managers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Expand/adapt to other programs</td>
<td>Identify other YSB programs where this website could serve as a valuable resource.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Pilot using the website in these programs to identify gaps and differences.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Develop content/functionality to address those gaps and differences</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Institutionalize the use of the website as outlined</td>
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The first step is for the author and YSB, the community partner, to conduct a review of the foundational content to identify any significant gaps that exist in the foundational content of the website and ensure that this content is added.

Once this foundational content is added, the next step and recommendation is for YSB to pilot test the functionality and content of the website. This can be done by setting up a pilot group made up of a 2-3 case managers, especially those who will or may be tasked with supporting THP-PLUS Foster Care youth. These case managers will be asked to make use of the site as they would to help youth in the THP-PLUS Foster Care Program. The pilot group would be provided basic information about how to use the website and asked to simulate using it as they would when supporting an actual case, explore the resources available through the website, and provide feedback on their experience. In addition, they would be asked to provide suggestions about how to improve the site’s content, user-interface, and functionality.
Based on the feedback from the pilot test, the next step would be to update and revise the website and ready it for launch within YSB when the THP-PLUS Foster Care Program begins as well as to update and revise “how to use” instructions for the website based on pilot test participant input.

Once the website is ready for use, it is important to ensure that case managers are able to learn how to use it as quickly and easily as possible. One way this need is addressed is through a “how to use” link on the homepage of the website that a case manager can use as an easy reference guide. In addition, to institutionalize the use of this resource in serving foster youth, YSB can develop and implement case manager training in the use of the website. This can be done by having someone at YSB who can train all case managers in the use of the website, showing them the basics so they are comfortable with website. To further institutionalize the use of this website into expected practice, training can be integrated into case manager orientation, the case manager’s training packet, and descriptions of job expectations.

To evolve this website into a living resource within YSB, will require ongoing upkeep and updating of the website. This can be managed by making regular maintenance of the website part of a case manager’s expected role and activities. One approach to doing this is to have the responsibility for upkeep and updating the website rotate among case managers each month.

Finally, once the efficacy of this website is demonstrated through its use with the THP-PLUS Foster Care Program, YSB may want to explore how it can be expanded and/or adapted to become a living resource for other YSB programs. A natural place to
start with this exploration is the use of this website in the THP-PLUS and Launch Pad Programs. Once YSB has identified which other programs could benefit from the use of this website, the content and functionality can be tested with case managers from these other programs to identify content and functionality gaps. These gaps can then be filled through further evolution of the website and institutionalized into those programs through training, including the use and upkeep of the website into job expectations, and ensuring regular updating of content and links.

**Conclusions**

Foster youth ageing out of the foster care system at the age of 18 constitute an at-risk, vulnerable population. By virtue of the fact that they have been placed in the foster care system, these youth are likely to have experienced trauma, often recurring trauma that can affect their emotional, psychological, social, intellectual, and brain development. Although they have reached their age of majority, often youth in this population do not yet have the life skills, emotional and financial support, educational background or job preparedness to successfully make the transition into independent adulthood. The challenges faced by this vulnerable population spurred the passage of AB12, which extended foster care support to youth who meet certain eligibility requirements. Funding is provided to agencies, such as YSB, through continued foster care when supporting AB12 youth. This option helps to support foster youth in meeting the requirements and securing the benefits of the THP-PLUS Foster Care Program.
YSB is a division of the Redwood Community Action Agency (RCAA) that offers a variety of services to teenagers who are homeless, runaways or experiencing other hardships in their lives. YSB is in process of getting licensed as a Transitional Housing Plus Foster Care (THP+FC) provider. This will allow YSB to receive the funding made available through supporting AB12 youth in Humboldt County. As a new program, case managers will need to quickly get up to speed on AB12 requirements and the activities, services, and resources through which those requirements can be met. As a program geared toward a population that has experienced trauma that can affect their ability to meet the program requirements, case managers also need to have some basic understanding about trauma-informed care and practice to more effectively support foster youth.

This website addresses this confluence of needs. Developing it required an expanded knowledge base in several areas. First, I had to learn more about the specific needs and challenges of youth ageing out of the foster care system. This exploration exposed me to the importance of trauma-informed care and practice, especially as it pertains to foster youth. The fact that foster youth come from a background of trauma that can have important ramifications on their behavior and readiness to transition to adulthood, coupled with my impression that many case managers have had only limited, if any, exposure to this approach, informed my decision to integrate trauma-informed resources throughout the website. As a result of my research and work on this project, I conclude that the inclusion of trauma-informed approaches into education and training for case managers is essential to help build their capacity to effectively serve this
population. Although this approach may not be part of current case manager’s formal education and training, it is important that they be exposed to these ideas and how they apply to the population they serve.

The second key area of learning resulting from this project is how to take general requirements as laid out in AB12 and organize them into activities, information, and resources that case managers can use to support youth in the THP-PLUS Foster Care Youth Program in a holistic way. Although developing the domains for the website started with the specific AB12 eligibility requirements that focus on education and employment, knowledge about the characteristics, challenges, and life skill needs of the foster youth population being served led to the inclusion of domains on housing, health, life skills, and young parents, all of which are foundational to a successful transition to independent adulthood. One of the reasons why AB12 was instituted is to improve the successful outcomes of the foster care system. To better ensure the successful outcomes of AB12, it is important for case managers to address what youth need from a holistic perspective that takes into account not only the educational and employment requirements of the bill, but also the elements of independent living that support a youth’s successful transition.

Third, developing a viable and useful tool for use at YSB required gaining a deeper appreciation for the resource constraints and capacity building needs of agencies that support youth in programs such as THP-PLUS Foster Care, as well as a greater understanding of the knowledge, skills, and functional experience needed by case managers who support this population. One challenge YSB faces is that in the rural,
transient population of Humboldt County, the minimum requirements to qualify for a case manager’s position call for fairly general educational attainment (Bachelor of Arts in social work, psychology or related field) and/or a relatively diverse range of experience (two years’ experience working with children, youth, and families in a counseling, crisis, intervention or other similar capacity).

Case managers are not required to be familiar with or experienced in Positive Youth Development, albeit as PYD is core to YSB’s approach, one can assume that case managers receive training in it. Nor are case managers required to have knowledge or experience of trauma-informed practice. No doubt making this knowledge and experience a minimum requirement could considerably narrow the field of possible case manager candidates, which could jeopardize the ability of YSB to carry out its program. An alternative to requiring this knowledge and/or experience is to provide on-the-job training and exposure to these approaches and details on how these approaches apply to the work case managers do with youth. The inclusion of these approaches in the website provides a way in which YSB can provide this on-the-job capacity building for case managers who have not had the opportunity to learn about them in other contexts.

Finally, the website is created to be a living resource for YSB, which means that it is never complete, much like Wikipedia. To function successfully as a living resource means that case managers will continue to add to this website indefinitely, as well as edit current information to ensure that it is up to date and accurate. At a minimum, this website can be a valuable resource for case managers who are supporting THP-PLUS Foster Care Program youth by providing a hub of information where they can go to
quickly and easily connect youth with needed links, services, and resources. Ultimately it has the potential to become a model for how to more effectively serve a range of youth populations and a database derived from the lived experience of both youth and case managers.

If the website is to live up to this potential, its use needs to be institutionalized at YSB by integrating it into orientation, training, and ongoing job expectations and requirements. This only makes sense if, as a resource and tool, the website proves to add value to case managers and YSB in providing services to youth. To demonstrate that value the website needs to be used, which at the beginning means that YSB needs to promote, even require, its use by case managers in order to test its efficacy. This is especially important given that the primary responsibility of case managers is to successfully manage their caseloads, and asking them to learn and master something new needs to be viewed and connected to helping them be more effective in achieving that task. The true value and ultimate test of the website depends upon the extent to which it enables YSB case managers to more effectively support THP-PLUS FC youth. From the perspective of this project, however, the eventual utility and value of the website remain beyond the purview of this project, except insofar as the recommendations and next steps set out herein outline future areas of action for YSB, case managers, and others who want to build upon the ideas this project sets forth.
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Appendix 2: Screenshot of Website