



## POWERHOUSE: EMPOWERING YOUNG ADULTS AS THEY TRANSITION FROM FOSTER CARE

Powerhouse is a collaborative project of Casey Family Programs, Multnomah County's Independent Living Program, and Oregon's child welfare agency (SCF), with developmental contributions from the Sisters of the Holy Names and the Housing Authority of Portland. The mission of Powerhouse is to provide housing, networks of community support and resources to young adults transitioning from foster care to independent living.

Most young people in foster care leave these settings at age 18 when they are no longer eligible to receive state financial support. Many return to their birth families, others attempt to make it on their own, with little or no support from family, friends or communities. Without housing, the help of supportive adults, education, job readiness and retention skills, they are destined for serious situations—homelessness, poverty, drug and alcohol addiction, untreated mental health disorders, and incarceration. One study showed that 25 to 40 percent of these youth become homeless within 1218 months after being discharged from foster care (*Children's Monitor*, 1999). Many of these individuals need specialized support to deal with emotional or behavioral difficulties. Research indicates that there are a large number of abused or neglected youth who also have mental health problems (Davis & Vander Stoep, 1997).

Prompted by concern, a small group consisting of SCF staff, foster parents, members of faith-based communities and community advocates made a commitment to find support and resources for these young people "aging out" of the foster care system. This group was the visioning force behind Powerhouse. The Powerhouse model uses a holistic approach to address the needs of young people who transition from foster care to independent living. This article presents the history, design, implementation, and evaluation of the program.

### PROGRAM COMPONENTS

Powerhouse seeks to leverage resources as well as identify additional sources of funding by bringing

together agencies already serving this population of young people with the goal of developing a collaborative partnership. Public, private and faith-based organizations provide funding and administration of programs, program guidance, in-kind contributions such as office space, supplies, and administrative services, and vital links for establishing other public/private partnerships in the local community.

Our direct service partners (SCF, CFP, and The Inn) provide assistance with coordination of services that include housing, education, career development and training, employment, health and mental health, and community connections. The Independent Living Program (ILP) provides classes on basic independent living skills, social skills and other areas such as financial aid for college, employment and career development. A Youth Advisory Committee assists with program and policy development.

Powerhouse has developed a housing program to include a continuum of housing options that addresses the individual needs of the young adults served. For example, the program leases a home that accommodates five young adults. This house provides a live-in resource assistant who guides the young adults in independent living skill development. The residents work together to develop rules, balance the internal house budget, and create a sense of community.

Powerhouse also supports young adults in renting rooms in homes, obtaining apartments, and paying application fees, deposits and utility bills. A housing specialist seeks housing options for young adults, ensures their understanding of rental agreements and landlord-tenant laws, and helps locate affordable housing. The housing specialist also works with property managers to develop sustainable relationships within the community for current and future program participants. Eligibility for ongoing financial assistance requires participants to set goals and maintain employment and/or school attendance equivalent to a 40-hour workweek.

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Adult volunteers serve as mentors, trainers, and resource persons and provide a strong, supportive community links. Volunteers commit 8 to 10 hours per month for at least one year. After screening, Powerhouse volunteers receive initial orientation and ongoing training and support in the areas of communication, foster parenting, mentoring, and program policies and procedures. Volunteers are matched with a young adult for mentoring based on similar interests, skills, and needs.

## EVALUATION

The Child Welfare Partnership (CWP), part of the Graduate School of Social Work at Portland State University, evaluates Powerhouse. CWP will assess the impact of the Powerhouse model on outcomes for youth and describe the process of developing, implementing, and sustaining this collaborative effort. Should the program prove effective, evaluation findings may help determine the feasibility of replicating the model in other communities.

The impact evaluation compares the transition outcomes for Powerhouse youth to those for a comparison group of youth receiving typical Independent Living Program services only. Key outcomes include (a) high school or GED completion, (b) participation in postsecondary education or training, (c) stable housing, (d) stable employment, (e) acquisition of life skills, and (f) establishment of social support networks. Intermediate outcomes such as engagement with a pro-social peer group and participation in substance abuse treatment are early indications that participants are progressing toward successful transition to independence.

Powerhouse grew out of a grass roots effort to address the housing and community support needs of young people transitioning from foster care to independent living. It has developed into a collaboration of private and public agencies committed to providing individualized and holistic support for these young people. The Powerhouse program, like the life of any young adult in transition, is a work in progress. Our success will be ultimately measured by the lives of the young adults we serve. One young woman participating in Powerhouse stated, “[Powerhouse] is helping me out a lot with being pregnant and helping me be able to get all of my stuff ready to go out on my own. It’s helping me with that [transition] step.” Another young woman stated, “I hope to graduate from a university. I know that it is hard, but I know that I can do it. Powerhouse is a good help.”

## References

- Davis, M., & Vander Stoep, A. (1996). *The transition to adulthood among adolescents who have serious emotional disturbance: At risk homelessness*. Delmar, NY: National Resource Center on Homelessness and Mental Illness.
- Children’s Monitor. (1999, January 14). *Child Welfare League of America*.

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