

HRTM 202

Research Methods in Recreation & Tourism

Final Research Proposal and Presentation

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Introduction

The Bill Wilson Center & Community Solutions Transitional Housing Program (THP) in San Jose serves homeless young adults ages 18-24. THP consists of two programs:

- single adults
- parenting adults (with a maximum of two children)

The goal of THP is to assist these young adults to become self-sufficient productive adults in the community.

The Independent Living Skills Program (ILP) teaches youth in foster care the skills they need to become self-sufficient. Youth who are raised in group homes or foster care “age out” of the system at 18 regardless of whether they have a job, money, or the skills needed to be independent. Many end up on the streets and homeless. ILP focuses on teaching job skills (resume writing, job searching, interviewing), household management (budgeting, shopping, cleaning), and interpersonal skills.

According to research conducted by Professor Mark Courtney of the University of Washington, youth who left foster care by age 18 were nearly three times more likely than their peers to be out of work and school. They were twice as likely to be unable to pay their rent and were four times as likely to be evicted. Nearly half of the young women had been pregnant at least once by age 19. Significant numbers of foster children who “aged out” of the system were incarcerated or homeless at some point.

The Philosophy and Objective

THP serves homeless young adults ages 18-24 in a minimally supervised 12-month program with 6 months of aftercare support services. The program is voluntary and clients stay in the program dependent upon their willingness to abide by the program rules and expectations.

THP believes that clients are best served by providing a supportive environment where expectations are clear and consistent. Staff is available to guide and suggest strategies, but the consequences are built into the program to provide “real world” experiences. The objective is to maintain a supportive environment with external controls, which decrease in scope as clients maximize their readiness for independent living. In other words, THP is designed to compensate for disrupted family supports, teaching young adults skills for independent living.

Problem

There is no system responsible for helping these young adults who have “aged out” of foster care and are entitled to “independent living” services. A gap in evaluative measures exists in the follow-up statistics after services have ended. A valid study of their life success has not been measured to evaluate the long term efficacy of the THP services at Bill Wilson Center. It has been suggested by BWC management themselves that they would like to know whether additional support systems may or may not be essential to their clients’ successes in life. An assessment of services by the Bill Wilson Center is needed for program evaluation of service outcomes.

The research seeks to determine how well the program has helped clients achieve optimum success in life and what kinds of additional support may have been implemented. The research will determine to what extent clients have needed these supports in addition to THP. The extent of provider training, fidelity to the program design, and program duration are just some of the components of implementation that may affect service outcomes.

Purpose Of Study

This study is intended for applied science with the purpose of assisting an agency in its evaluative efficacy of services. The data will be analyzed to ascertain if additional support systems are necessary for clients to succeed in life. The definition of support systems used in this study reference existing family support or equivalent substitutes.

Study Objectives

The Bill Wilson Transitional Housing Program uses several foundational guidelines within its system. These programs appear effective for current clients but there is little data on whether the clients need additional support to succeed. It would be useful for BWC to know if their clients thrive at a higher level of life success with additional established long term support systems in order to update their program.

Support may take a variety of forms such as peer groups, relatives, church groups or reunification with healthy family members. It is important to track these clients to determine if THP is adequate by itself or if further support is essential as a lasting foundation for a successful life.

Fortunately, the majority of youth are embedded in networks – families, friends, and communities – that provide guidance, support, and help, both financial and otherwise when

they face the crises that are an inevitable part of transition. These support networks enable them to access programs, including higher education, and services that promote their development. They convey cultural expectations, as well. In contrast, most disconnected youth have extremely limited support systems, including family support, to help them through the difficult transition to adulthood. Society provides them little in the way of resources to help them reconnect. Three programs used by BWC are:

- The Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment (ACLSA) and Life Skills Guidebook Manual
- Connected By 25
- John Burton Foundation for Children Without Homes

As part of the services offered at the Bill Wilson Center THP, Independent Life Skills Training is incorporated into the on-going curriculum. This model is supported by the Casey Family Programs. From 1994 through 2000, a tool was developed for use by the child welfare field to assess life skills. Readiness to live on one's own is a life-long process. Four levels of the ACLSA were created for youth ages 8-10 (I), 11-14 (II), 15-18 (III), and 19 and older (IV).

Connected By 25 is an agency with the philosophy that most youth who do not connect to a support system by age 25 begin the process of disconnection which may have begun much earlier, usually before age 19. In our society, almost all youth require support until they have connected successfully with the labor force, which generally does not occur until their mid-

twenties. Most young adults experience detours on the road to economic independence, including periods of unemployment and periodic interruptions in their education.

It is estimated that around five percent of the overall youth population is disconnected at age 25. This percentage is more than double for minority males, especially African-American males. Our society is unlikely to ever achieve racial equality if it abandons this group.

The John Burton Foundation for Children Without Homes has launched the THP-Plus Statewide Implementation Project to help foster youth make a safe, successful transition. The Project seeks to reduce homelessness among former foster youth by expanding access to the Transitional Housing Placement Plus Program (THP-Plus). THP-Plus is administered by the California Department of Social Services and has been found to help foster youth achieve stable housing, living wage employment and higher education. The Project will expand participation in this important program by providing training and technical assistance to counties and advocating for expanded public funding.

Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment, Connected by 25 and the John Burton Foundation for Children Without Homes do not specifically evaluate life success of foster children after they have aged out of the system. Nor does it track foster children with and without support systems and later success in life.

Hypothesis: To find out if Independent Living Skills training by Bill Wilson Center and its Transitional Housing Program are adequate for living successfully, or are clients who have additional established support skills at greater advantage. To find out some of the variables driving this research:

- Define “successful living” as distinct from Independent Living Skills
- Define what is meant by “support system” by client.
- Determine degree of importance of support in client’s life.
- Determine constraints on developing and sustaining life long committed support.
- What was learned from BWC-THP that changed the clients perceptions and life.

Related Research and Literature Review

Life skills programs generally analyze changes in skills levels, attitudes and beliefs, as well as changes in behavioral outcomes. These can be self- assessed and also assessed by program providers and parents. The Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) (Gresham and Elliot, 1990) is one of many different rating systems that have been used to assess students’ social skills, including cooperation, assertion, empathy, and self-control.

Social and emotional adjustment can be measured through many different scales including the Survey of Adaptational Tasks of Middle School (Elias et al, 1992). This survey asks teachers, parents and students about adjustment in middle school (generally ages 10-14 in the United States). Other scales include the Self-Perception Profile for Children, which measures children’s perceptions of personal competency (Harter, 1985). More research that measures skills, competency, adjustment and other key components of success life skills is needed for foster children who are aged out of the foster care system.

A few instruments have been well researched (e.g., the Scales of Independent Behavior, Bruininks et al., 1984; the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales, Sparrow et al., 1984), but

these were designed for use primarily by youth with developmental disabilities. Youth who show no apparent delays may show scores at the top end of the range, and additional gains they make may not be measurable. Furthermore, the assessments designed for child welfare audiences were usually targeted for youth ages 16-19, and gathered information from either foster parents or youth, but not both.

Research Methods

This is an Evaluative Study, using qualitative interviews with structured open and closed questions.

Former foster children ages 18 and older who have left the Bill Wilson Center THP will be sent letters requesting their participation in a survey questionnaire. For those that have phones, follow up reminders will be given.

Locating Respondents

To locate past clients, the THP-Plus Participant Tracking System will be used with the help of the director of THP. THP-Plus Participant Tracking System is a Internet-based database that can be used by certified THP-Plus providers and county THP-Plus representatives to collect essential information about foster children and young adults who have been in the foster care system.

The THP-Plus Participant Tracking System is a structured and stable means of gathering data regarding participants in THP-Plus programs statewide. Its primary purpose is to facilitate timely and consistent evaluations of program effectiveness. Counties and providers want to be able to measure the impact of THP-Plus, and program regulations also require reporting on participant outcomes.

However, very few counties and providers have comprehensive systems that can track this information. Using the THP-Plus Participant Tracking System, counties and programs can work together towards continuous program improvement, as well as document their successes as reflected in improvements in participants' lives. The specific data elements tracked by the system were selected in consultation with counties and providers that have implemented THP-Plus, and dovetail with other data-collection requirements and efforts related to former foster youth.

The system tracks data about individual THP-Plus participants, with the ability to aggregate data for reports at the program, county and statewide levels. Information tracked includes:

- Basic participant demographics, such as age and race/ethnicity;
- Type of THP-Plus model, such as scattered-site or single-site;
- Basic participant outcomes in the areas of housing, employment and income, education and training, and assets.

Information is collected about THP-Plus participants at program enrollment, then updated quarterly, at program exit and at six- and twelve-month follow-ups. This process allows measurement of young people's progress from program entrance to exit and beyond, while also providing "snapshot" information about all participants in the program during any given quarter.

The system will facilitate reporting on participant and program outcomes, and data can be used at the local level to monitor and improve THP-Plus programs, with no direct costs for participating counties and providers. There is no fee for using the system, which is being

developed and will initially be maintained by the John Burton Foundation. The system also incorporates safeguards to protect the minimal personal and identifying information necessary to track individual participants over time, as well as features to maintain the system information in a streamlined, well-organized database.

After reaching the clients, they will be offered clothing store coupons, entertainment vouchers and food vouchers donated by local businesses. If a volunteer program is in place to help in a charitable fund-raising drive, there could be a variety of options offered. Even a trip to Las Vegas or Disneyland could be a possibility in the form of a raffle.

The sample size of interviewees will be approximately 20. They will be asked to come to the Bill Wilson Center to be interviewed. A tape recorder will be used so that the information can be collected and coded.

The interviewer would need to be a trained BWC volunteer who is sensitive to the clients and the subject matter. The ability to ask questions in a non-judgmental and non-prejudiced way is essential to develop a rapport and sense of relaxed safety with the respondents. When open-ended questions are being asked, it is necessary to be quiet and not to hurry the respondent, allowing more information to follow. Empathetic attitudes without condescension or reactive emotions are more effective.

Assessment Questions

The survey questionnaire will have 8-10 questions that are open-ended and closed-ended. All the interviews will be tape-recorded in addition to written answers. Important subtleties that cannot be accurately depicted on paper can be documented and transcribed. A sample of some questions include:

1. Tell me about your current life and how THP has influenced you?
 - a. Tell me how?
2. Do you feel you currently have support from other people or groups in your life?
 - a. If yes, please explain.
3. Do you think having support is important?
 - a. If yes, why?
 - b. If no, why?
4. Do you think the THP was sufficient in preparing you for a successful life?
5. Do you think you still need more support?
6. Do you know how to get the support you need?

After the questionnaires have been gathered, the respondents will be put into two categories:

- Group 1. Healthy External Support Systems
 - Parents or other relatives
 - BWC
 - Other services
 - Friends

- Group 2. Unhealthy or no External Support Systems

After reading the completed questionnaires, themes will emerge which will dictate the coding categories from the data.

Quality of the Data:

A digital tape recorder connected to the computer will be transcribed word for word to ensure accuracy.

References

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