

# Youth Voice as a Strategy for Systems Change:

An Evaluation of the Zellerbach Family Foundation  
Youth Voice Initiative  
December 2011



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### INTRODUCTION

Since 2006, the Zellerbach Family Foundation has supported Bay Area-based organizations that are using a “youth voice” strategy — building the capacity for youth to advocate effectively for changes needed in the systems that directly affect their lives.

Zellerbach funds eight organizations through its youth voice initiative. These organizations engage youth with mental health needs, current and former foster youth, homeless youth, and incarcerated and formerly incarcerated youth. Many of these youth have faced multiple life challenges and have interacted with more than one public agency.

This retrospective evaluation explores *youth voice* as a strategy, and examines changes in policies, practices, and systems resulting from authentic youth engagement.

### FINDINGS

***Youth voice organizations are engaged in:***

**Youth development.** Youth voice organizations are strongly committed to youth development, including political education and training in educating policy makers, writing and story-telling strategies, and professional skills training, among others.

**Building awareness and understanding.**

Through disseminating data and resources, delivering trainings and presentations, serving in an advisory capacity and partnering role with practitioners and policy makers, and communicating with policy makers, youth voice organizations are changing the way policy makers and practitioners think about the needs and strengths of youth.

***As a result, youth voice organizations are:***

**Changing institutional culture and practices,** including having former foster youth train child welfare workers, dedicating seats for youth members on a county advisory board to ensure that youth issues are addressed from a youth lens, and bringing new values into providing mental health care.

**Contributing to the creation of new policies that better serve youth,** including laws requiring a systematic response to youth homelessness, increasing support of transition age foster youth, and protecting the health of incarcerated pregnant women.

**Helping to shape policy implementation,** including supporting the rights of incarcerated young parents to see their children, ensuring that disabled foster youth are assessed for benefits before emancipation from the child welfare system, and looking for specific traits in potential new employees that will ensure a focus on listening to and serving youth.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Youth voice organizational leaders, agency administrators, and other key stakeholders have several suggestions for how youth voice can be strengthened by public, non-profit, and philanthropic partners. Key among these are:

- ▶ ***Youth voice organizations should:*** place youth and their personal and professional development at the center of their work.
- ▶ ***Funders should:*** talk to youth voice organizations about their work and impact and advocate on their behalf with other funders.

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## INTRODUCTION

Countless young people from early adolescence to age 24 in the San Francisco Bay Area and society at large face challenges in achieving stable family lives, educational and employment goals, and even meeting basic needs, like housing and food. For example:

- ▶ 200,000 children under the age of 18 in California have a parent who is incarcerated.<sup>i</sup>
- ▶ Approximately 250 young women under probationary supervision in San Francisco are pregnant or parenting.<sup>ii</sup>
- ▶ 200,000 youth between the ages of 12 and 17 in California are homeless, and 89 percent of these were forced from their homes.<sup>iii</sup>
- ▶ 70,000 youth are in foster care in California,<sup>iv</sup> and 8,000 transition-age foster youth are in San Francisco, facing homelessness, underemployment, and/or isolation from positive communities and opportunities.<sup>v</sup>

While there are various agencies, organizations, and policies designed to address the needs of young people, the impacts of these efforts fall along a broad spectrum, from being generally positive to working counter to what would be helpful to the young people who most need support. Moreover, at times, youth needs are not seen, or for various other reasons, are left unmet.

The Zellerbach Family Foundation has long been committed to helping to “improve the management, practice, and accountability of public systems serving vulnerable children and families,”<sup>vi</sup> with a primary focus on the practices and policies of public mental health and child welfare systems. Over the past five years, Zellerbach has engaged in a strategy of supporting Bay Area-based organizations that are building the capacity for youth to advocate effectively for changes needed in the systems that directly affect their lives. Currently, there are eight organizations funded by Zellerbach who are engaged in this “youth voice” initiative.

At this time, the Foundation would like to know what kind of impact the youth-centered efforts of the Zellerbach youth voice group are having on systems and the young people they serve. The Foundation contracted with the evaluation firm of Korwin Consulting to conduct an evaluation, which draws on key informant interviews with Zellerbach youth voice group staff and leadership, youth-serving agency representatives, and various forms of documentation of the activities and accomplishments of the organizations. *(Please see Appendix for a full description of the evaluation methods.)*

## YOUTH VOICE

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### What is Youth Voice?

The term “youth voice” in this report describes a strategy in which young people are authentically engaged in working toward changing the systems that directly affect their lives. Instead of simply inviting a young person to speak to a group of practitioners or policy makers, or giving youth a role in a pre-determined agenda for communicating with people responsible for implementing policies and practices, the “youth voice” strategy puts youth at the center of articulating priorities and determining the best ways to get those priorities addressed.

## Why promote Youth Voice?

In the mid-1980s, as part of its efforts to improve mental health care for children and youth, the federal government began supporting programs that engaged young people and their families in all planning and services related to their care.<sup>vii</sup> Over the next two and a half decades, with growing evidence that this kind of engagement improved treatment outcomes,<sup>viii</sup> federal policies tying funding to family inclusion in planning, and support of family advocacy organizations, continued to shift power for care and infrastructure development to the consumers of the systems designed to serve them. The movement toward accepting the partnership of *youth* in decisions and systems that impact their lives — often referred to as “youth voice” — grew from and builds upon the now-established and respected norm of family voice in the juvenile mental health system.<sup>ix</sup> Those who see its benefits are bringing this authentic engagement strategy into change efforts in a variety of youth-serving systems.

## THE ZELLERBACH YOUTH VOICE ORGANIZATIONS

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The Zellerbach youth voice group consists of organizations serving youth with mental health needs, current and former foster youth, homeless youth, incarcerated and formerly incarcerated youth, and often youth facing two or more of these or other interconnected challenges. Almost all of the organizations think of their work as being based in “youth voice.” Two report youth voice as part of a larger strategy of youth engagement that includes leadership, empowerment, and personal development. One cautions that there are times when youth voice is not the most appropriate strategy — such as when advocacy organizations “deal with esoteric policy issues” — so it is important to value non-youth voice work, too.

Besides sharing a commitment to the authentic inclusion of youth in any organization that works with and for youth, all share an understanding that mental health needs cross all of their issue areas. These organizational leaders point out that it is critical to address mental health issues and support emotional well-being among youth who are or have been homeless, in foster care, in the mental health system, in the juvenile probation system, or interact with any facet of the child welfare system.\*

### *Is youth voice important for improving systems?*

“Absolutely. Every single policy change monumental in changing child foster care in California has resulted from young people that have to live under the constraints of the system.”

– Jennifer Rodriguez, Attorney,  
Youth Law Center

“Sure. Let’s go to the users and see how we can improve things.”

– William Siffermann, Chief Probation Officer,  
San Francisco Juvenile Probation Department

“I think that the folks who’ve actually experienced the system help us really fill in a qualitative aspect of our analysis that we wouldn’t get with just data and research.”

– Greg Rose, Deputy Director,  
California Department of Social Services

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\* The youth voice organizations engage in activities in order to promote systems change. These include educating administrators and policy makers about youth issues and priorities, recommending or supporting policies that would benefit youth, and speaking up against policies that are detrimental. Collectively, these fall under the broad heading of “advocacy.” However, no Zellerbach funds may be used to lobby for a specific piece of legislation.

Below is a list of the eight Zellerbach youth voice organizations, along with a brief description of their work. *(To learn more, please visit their websites listed in the Appendix of this report.)*

## ZELLERBACH YOUTH VOICE ORGANIZATIONS

- ▶ **Alameda County Foster Youth Alliance (Foster Youth Alliance):** A coalition of youth, service providers, and community organizations in Alameda County to promote systems that serve transition age foster youth.
- ▶ **California Council on Youth Relations (CCYR):** A speakers' bureau of young people who use media and public speaking to educate policy makers and practitioners about the needs of youth who are or have been homeless, in foster care, or involved with the mental health or juvenile justice systems. A project of New America Media.
- ▶ **California Youth Connection (CYC):** Trains current and former foster youth to advocate with legislators and agency heads for laws and practices that will improve the child welfare system.
- ▶ **Center for Young Women's Development (CYWD):** Led by and for young women who have been in the juvenile probation system, homeless, and/or part of the street economy in leadership and professional skills, community organizing, and advocacy for systems change.
- ▶ **Transitional Age Youth (TAYSF):** Focuses on research, education, and advocacy to improve systems for youth and young adults, ages 16–24 that need coordinated services in order to enjoy a healthy transition into adulthood. Became a Zellerbach youth voice organization when **Honoring Emancipated Youth (HEY)** merged with it in 2010.
- ▶ **Project WHAT!:** Led by youth who currently have and formerly had a parent incarcerated, Project WHAT! raises awareness about children with incarcerated parents with the long-term goal of improving services and policies that affect these children.
- ▶ **Youth in Mind:** Led by and for youth who have been involved with the California mental health care system, conducting trainings and advocacy for systems change.
- ▶ **Y.O.U.T.H. Training Project:** Led by and for current and former foster youth, trains child welfare practitioners on the needs and strengths of foster youth so better practices can be put into place.

While all Zellerbach youth voice organizations are based in the San Francisco Bay Area, a number of them are also involved in improving conditions for young people in communities throughout the state. For instance, **Youth in Mind**, the **Y.O.U.T.H. Training Project**, and **CYC** are co-leaders of the **Humboldt County Transition Age Youth Collaboration (HCTAYC)**; applying the capacity they incubated in the Bay Area as leaders in improving the child welfare and mental health systems to change practices and policies in Humboldt County.

*The following sections focus on activities and impacts of the Zellerbach youth voice organizations over the past five years. They are meant to be representative, rather than comprehensive, painting a picture of the youth voice movement through these groups' work.*

## YOUTH DEVELOPMENT: LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR YOUTH VOICE

*“The Y.O.U.T.H. Training Project provides and supports opportunities for me to build long-lasting relationships with positive individuals, and assists me in my pursuit of education, advocacy, empowerment, and personal growth.”*

– A youth participant in a retreat focusing on mental and physical wellness

Each of the youth voice organizations shares a commitment to supporting the personal development of youth who are or may someday be engaged in contributing to changes in youth-focused systems and practices. Below are youth development strategies they use:

Youth Development Focus	CCYR	CYC	CYWD	FYA	PW	TAYSF	YIM	YTP
Political education, organizing, and educating policy makers (8)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Writing and story-telling strategies, including relevant technology skills (5)	X	X			X		X	X
Communication and public speaking (5)	X	X	X		X	X		X
Professional skills training (5)	X	X	X		X		X	X
Teamwork and leadership skills (4)		X	X		X		X	X
Workshops on mental health and overall well-being (4)	X	X	X					X
Access or referrals to mental health provider and other community resources	X			X	X		X	
Case-management-style supervision and support of youth leaders (3)			X		X			X
Life skills training, such as parenting or financial literacy (2)	X		X		X			

The organizations have built the personal capacity of hundreds of youth because they believe:

- ▶ Youth need support in achieving stable lives before they can speak powerfully about and organize effectively for youth needs.
- ▶ Teaching youth to advocate for themselves builds capacity to change lives and systems around them.
- ▶ It is important to help youth reflect on their experiences and build communication skills so they can articulate issues and recommendations.
- ▶ “Survival skills” developed to endure traumatic experiences in their lives can be channeled to create positive systems change.
- ▶ Investment in youth development shows youth that they are valued as individuals and not simply useful for an organization’s own agenda.
- ▶ An organization benefits from having youth on staff who are self-aware, have tools for maintaining stability in their lives, and have a range of professional skills and strengths.

**As a result of youth development, youth gain in one or more of the following ways:**

- Self-esteem, confidence, self-efficacy, independence, maturity, stability, and sense of wellness.
- Power for positive influence.
- Feeling connected to others.
- Comfort in presenting opinions or training curricula.
- Story-telling skills that change adults’ attitudes.
- Technical skills applicable to advocacy and other work.
- Ability to forge relationships with other agencies and organizations.

As a result of youth development, staff and youth say that youth receive critically-needed support, organizations see greater commitment and capacity among youth leaders, and agendas for advocacy better reflect the priorities and solutions of youth.

## THE IMPACT OF AUTHENTIC YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

*“I’ve seen a greater awareness of youth issues by legislators. And in state and county leadership, there’s a better awareness of the need to understand and engage a youth voice and a youth perspective.”*

– Diane Boyer, Senior Policy Analyst, California County Welfare Directors Association

Authentic youth engagement has led to changes in understanding and practices of policy makers and professionals who work in the systems charged with the care of youth. Through a variety of strategies, youth voice organizations work — sometimes in collaboration and other times independently — to build understanding and awareness among policy makers, practitioners in systems that impact youth, the youth themselves, and the public at large.

### BUILDING UNDERSTANDING AND AWARENESS

Through youths’ leadership and authentic engagement, youth voice organizations have worked over the past five years to **build the understanding and awareness of practitioners, agency leaders, and policy makers** in some of the following ways:

#### DISSEMINATING DATA AND RESOURCES

- ▶ **Project WHAT!** has distributed its DVD, *A Sentence Apart*, about the experiences of families of incarcerated parents, to community leaders and other stakeholders.
- ▶ The **Center for Young Women’s Development (CYWD)** produced and disseminated the *Young Mothers Bill of Rights* (which articulates the human rights of incarcerated pregnant and parenting young women) to social workers, community leaders, and juvenile detention administration and staff.
- ▶ **Y.O.U.T.H. Training Project** youth trainers provided access to digital stories and best practice handout sheets with tips and lessons, providing child welfare and other county staff throughout the state a perspective on the challenges of foster youth and resources to share with colleagues and clients.
- ▶ The **California Council on Youth Relations (CCYR)** and the *California Research Bureau* co-produced a DVD outlining the 10 core recommendations of youth speakers on mental health services delivery, prevention, and intervention. The DVD was distributed to presentation attendees, all state legislators, and to front-line managers as a training tool for case managers, therapists, and probation officers.
- ▶ The **California Youth Connection (CYC)** produces an annual Policy Report with youth member recommendations on policy priorities to address the foster youth experience. It disseminates these reports to lawmakers, key child welfare system stakeholders, and others.
- ▶ The **Project WHAT! Resource Guide for Teens with a Parent in Prison or Jail (2008)**, the **Transitional Age Youth (TAYSF) Emancipation Research Project: 2007-2009 Compilation of Findings**, and **CCYR Voices from the Street** research report all were developed with extensive youth leadership and input and have been made available to numerous stakeholders and training audiences.

## DELIVERING TRAININGS, PRESENTATIONS, AND CONFERENCES

- ▶ **Youth in Mind** holds regular educational events — including an annual leadership academy in conjunction with the California Mental Health Advocates for Children and Youth — where young mental health consumers develop and deliver presentations to other youth consumers, providers, community-based organizations, and policy makers. It also participates in statewide and regional conferences and summits, where it presents service learning classes around the needs of young mental health consumers.
- ▶ **Project WHAT!** has delivered trainings addressing the needs of children of incarcerated parents for public officials, agency leaders, social workers, educators, probation officers, attorneys, doctors, foster parents, and CASA volunteers in several California counties and other states. In addition, since the passage of SB 118 (Liu 2009), requiring identification of and services for children in the welfare system who have an incarcerated parent, Project WHAT! trains social workers in the San Francisco Bay Area on the cultural competence needed for implementation of the law.
- ▶ **CYC, Y.O.U.T.H. Training Project, and Youth in Mind** — as co-creators of HCTAYC, a public sector initiative designed to strengthen Humboldt County child welfare, public health, juvenile justice and other youth-serving systems' practices — have developed curricula, delivered trainings to front-line and leadership staff throughout Humboldt County, and spoken by invitation to the California Child Welfare Directors Association, the California Department of Social Services, Children and Family Services Division, and other agencies.
- ▶ The **CCYR** speakers' bureau has made presentations to mental health practitioners on mental health needs of youth and has made recommendations related to youth homelessness to state and local policy makers through the *California Homeless Youth Project*.
- ▶ **CYWD** held an annual conference for social workers and community leaders focusing on how to use supportive policies, such as the *Young Mothers' Bill of Rights*, to advocate for children and youth. In addition, **CYWD** youth leaders regularly present at conferences, facilitate workshops, and sit on panels in California — and occasionally other states — to discuss the *Youth Mothers' Bill of Rights* and other policies that can be implemented and used to advocate for children and youth.
- ▶ Child welfare sector supervisors, managers, and front-line workers have participated in **Y.O.U.T.H. Training Project** regional trainings about the experiences, needs, and strengths of foster youth.
- ▶ At the **CYC** Annual Policy Conference, current and former foster youth present recommendations to policy makers, community leaders, and other stakeholders. In addition, youth with CYC speak to new university graduates entering the child welfare field.
- ▶ A series of policy maker seminars in Sacramento by **CCYR** on the *Voices from the Street* research report educated policy makers about youth homelessness in order to inspire awareness and advocacy on behalf of homeless youth throughout the state. In addition, CCYR has been asked by the *San Francisco Probation Department* to teach young men in the Log Cabin Ranch facility media skills so that they can develop digital records of their ideas, which will inform the department's upcoming reform of its rehabilitation system for youth.

## COMMUNICATING WITH POLICY MAKERS

- ▶ The **Foster Youth Alliance** advocated about the importance of protecting transitional housing funding, in spite of the governor's proposed 2011 cuts. The organization meets with lawmakers to provide a foster youth perspective on current and pending policy.
- ▶ Youth leaders with **CYC** speak to legislators annually through their Day at the Capitol about issues and policy recommendations impacting foster youth.
- ▶ **CYWD** staff and young women clients trained in advocacy met with legislators in Sacramento to speak against the shackling of pregnant incarcerated women, as well as other matters being considered by lawmakers that would impact women who have been incarcerated and/or have felony records.
- ▶ **Project WHAT!** met with legislators to support a food and nutrition bill that would allow people with felony drug convictions to receive food stamps. Youth also testified at the Assembly Public Safety committee hearing to oppose a bill that sought to ban parents with certain criminal offenses from volunteering at their child's school. The bill was successfully defeated.

## SERVING IN AN ADVISORY CAPACITY AND PARTNERING ROLE

- ▶ Youth trainers with the **Y.O.U.T.H. Training Project** sit on the *California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC) Statewide Training and Education Committee*, giving input on the importance of youth voice, youth accessibility, and curricula. Youth trainers also sit at statewide meetings on TDM (team decision-making for foster care).
- ▶ The **Foster Youth Alliance** regularly consults with the Youth Board of the *Alameda County Social Services Agency* on foster youth experiences and needs.
- ▶ Youth leaders with **CYWD** are in discussion with *San Francisco Juvenile Probation Department* staff about the development of a space for children to visit their parents in detention.
- ▶ **TAYSF** regularly reviews and advises city departments on youth-related programming and practice. The organization was invited to collaborate with the *San Francisco Foster Youth Services Program*, a *San Francisco Unified School District* program that provides trainings to onsite school counselors to develop a mentoring program for foster youth students. TAYSF is working with *San Francisco's Child Welfare Department* to redesign the Independent Living Skills Program, and the TAYSF Young Adult Advocates serve as voting members on the *San Francisco Youth Council*.
- ▶ **Youth in Mind** youth members are seated on one national and several statewide advisory boards addressing mental health; child welfare; permanency; and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) youth in the juvenile justice system. Board members have been recognized at the national and state level for their advocacy of foster youth and mental health consumers.

## SERVING IN AN ADVISORY CAPACITY AND PARTNERING ROLE (continued)

- ▶ **CYC** youth leaders regularly participate in activities of the *Assembly Select Committee on Foster Care* and other state and local bodies charged with making child welfare improvements. CYC youth participated in an advisory group on issues related to LGBTQ youth at the *California Department of Social Services, Children and Family Services Division (DSS-CFSD)*. In addition, communication by CYC and other youth to the *DSS-CFSD* about problems with group homes prompted a report, in progress, about positive and negative qualities in group homes throughout the state, which will be used by the Department to review and possibly revise the way group homes operate in California.
- ▶ **HCTAYC** coordinates efforts with multiple systems in Humboldt County, serving as a new model of bridging child welfare, public health, mental health, and juvenile justice to improve outcomes for youth. HCTAYC Youth Advisory Board members participate regularly in meetings and workgroups throughout Humboldt County, as well as sit on the county's Mental Health Board, bringing the perspective of youth to these forums.
- ▶ **Project WHAT!** regularly participates in the Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership in San Francisco and Alameda County, a coalition of social services providers, representatives of government bodies, advocates, and others concerned about children of incarcerated parents and their families.

## GROWING EVIDENCE OF UNDERSTANDING AND AWARENESS

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Through the efforts described above, youth voice organizations are contributing to ***changing institutional culture and practices, shaping policy implementation, and creating new policies*** related to the systems that affect youth in and beyond San Francisco. Information about these changes is found in Zellerbach youth voice organizations' independent evaluations which include post-training surveys and training participant interviews, as well as interviews with department administrators and other stakeholders, and interviews and a focus group with Zellerbach youth voice organizational leaders. *(For ease of reading, organizations contributing to the below changes are not specified.)*

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### CHANGING PRACTICES

#### Changing Institutional Culture

- ▶ Child welfare workers in San Francisco say they are more likely than ever before to listen to what youth have to say about their current and future needs. Administrators understand the difference between inviting a young person to talk to a group as part of an adult-generated agenda versus cultivating youth to be trainers of their staff and co-developers of content. They have shifted from “tokenizing” transition age foster youth to treating them as professionals.
- ▶ Practices and the culture inside San Francisco jails have changed to support incarcerated parents' access to visits with their children in child-friendly environments.
- ▶ The rights of young parents in San Francisco juvenile facilities are formally recognized for the first time, as they are supported in contacting and receiving visits with their children.
- ▶ Mental health practitioners in various counties have changed the way they approach youth clients, including incorporating more personal warmth (as opposed to a clinical demeanor) and being more open to therapeutic approaches beyond talk therapy.
- ▶ Child welfare staff in Humboldt County (where three Zellerbach youth voice organizations co-lead a collaborative) now regularly invite youth participation at meetings and on committees and are beginning to apply youth-centered practices, such as arranging transportation and meals to facilitate greater participation. County staff members frequently act upon youth participants' suggestions.
- ▶ It is much more common for youth in Orange County to be active participants in planning for transitions in care or for a new level of independence as adults.\*
- ▶ There is a new departmental goal in Fresno County of involving every client in the development of a plan for independent living and adequate support upon emancipation.

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\* As with youth voice work in Humboldt County, the work in Orange County is led by a Zellerbach youth voice organization that is based in the San Francisco Bay Area and extends its youth development, capacity building, and influence to other regions in the state.

## Changing Institutional Practices

- ▶ In Alameda County, members of the Youth Advocate Program, a youth-adult board, are present at *all* county meetings related to child welfare. Meanwhile, Team Decision Making, which engages multiple stakeholders in major decisions affecting foster youth, has become standard practice in the county.
- ▶ Improvements have been made in the appearance and youth experience at San Francisco County's intake shelter for foster youth.
- ▶ There have been improvements at the Humboldt County Children's Center and Sempervirens Psychiatric Health Facility and Counseling Center, such as developing a survey for youth to give feedback on services received there and creating a more positive environment that is responsive to youth needs.
- ▶ The juvenile court in Siskiyou County now mandates use of a youth-created log sheet for attorneys to document the communication they have with their foster youth clients prior to court hearings in order to ensure a process of accountability.

"We were looking at how we recruit and retain foster parents. Transition age youth (TAY) learned about the meeting and wanted more slots for TAY there. They said, 'We're not represented enough.' That is the norm now. TAY are finding out about things and are saying, 'We want to come to this.' We're thinking about things and figuring out if TAY have been invited. It's definitely different from last year."

*– Barbara LaHaie,  
Assistant Director of Programs,  
Humboldt County Department of  
Health and Human Services*

"The overall feel or tone of the managers that I engage with has changed. There is a more active and excited, and generally speaking, more alive response to HCTAYC activities. Managers are realizing that this is an ongoing effort and there is a lot of benefit to its working. That's significant. There has been a real shift.

*– Phil Crandall,  
Health and Human Services Director,  
Humboldt County Department of  
Health and Human Services*

## Shaping Policy Implementation

- ▶ Youth are collecting input from other youth across the state to see how they would like **AB 12** to be implemented. (AB 12 extends foster care to age 21, among other provisions.) They are sharing their findings with the *California Department of Social Services (DSS-CFSD)*, which is charged with developing instructions for how the counties should implement AB 12.
- ▶ Youth input to the *DSS-CFSD* led to better implementation of **AB 1331**, which is meant to ensure that disabled foster youth receive benefits after emancipation. *DSS-CFSD* arranged with the Social Security Administration for foster youth to be screened for disabilities at age 16 so that, if approved, they would be immediately eligible for benefits upon emancipation.
- ▶ A San Francisco Juvenile Hall Leadership Workgroup of community leaders, young mothers, system staff, and city department heads meets regularly regarding the successful implementation of the *Incarcerated Young Mothers' Bill of Rights (YMBOR)*.
- ▶ A weekly check-in with incarcerated pregnant and parenting young women strengthens implementation of policies by ensuring that they know their rights under the **YMBOR and AB 2070**, a bill which allows for extended time before parental rights are terminated and expands reunification services for families after a parent's incarceration.
- ▶ Youth leaders in Santa Clara gathered recommendations about how the juvenile justice system could better meet the needs of foster youth and presented them to policy makers. The recommendations are intended to improve implementation of **AB 129**, which establishes protocols to serve youth who have cases in both a county probation department and county welfare services.

"Youth voice has changed the way we're looking at new applicants for staff positions. I don't want the law enforcement, criminal justice cop wannabes in my department. I want people who are grounded in social service, community based work, and more inclined to embrace the tenets of social work than the punitive aspects of public safety."

– William Siffermann,  
Chief Probation Officer,  
San Francisco Juvenile Probation  
Department

"Amazed by the personal stories of the young adults (children of incarcerated parents) involved in Project WHAT!, I was inspired to explore the possibilities of improving the two visiting rooms at California State Prison–Solano. I'm thrilled by the interest around the community and at our institution to improve the areas to make them more conducive to family interaction and more child-friendly. A working committee has been put together to accomplish this large goal, and I'm so glad [Project WHAT!] has agreed to be a part of the team."

– 2009 Project WHAT! training  
participant

## CHANGING POLICIES

The development of departmental and legislative policies that address the needs and reflect the priorities of youth voice organizations is also evidence of the influence of their work.\*

### FOSTER YOUTH AND TRANSITION AGE YOUTH (CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM)

#### *Local Level*

- ▶ Increased housing opportunities for transition age youth in San Francisco.
- ▶ Increased hiring of former foster youth in Alameda County.
- ▶ Mandated emancipation planning conferences in Alameda County.

#### *State Level*

- ▶ **AB 12** (Bass/Beall, 2010), the *California Fostering Connections to Success Act*, revises and expands federal programs and funding for foster youth up to the age of 21.
- ▶ **AB 1393** (Skinner, 2009) established a priority at California state community colleges and public universities to provide on-campus housing for current and former foster youth.
- ▶ **AB 3051** (Jones, 2008) ensures that a youth is informed of, able to attend, and allowed to participate in any juvenile court hearing related to guardianship.
- ▶ Proposed budget cuts to the Child Welfare budget reversed in 2009 after bi-partisan protest.
- ▶ **AB 2489** (Leno, 2006) established the Guardian Scholars Program to support transition age youth and former foster youth in post-secondary education and training.

#### *Federal Level*

- ▶ The American Bar Association has adopted **AB 490**, a bill passed in California (Steinberg, 2003) to ensure that foster youth have a meaningful opportunity for educational success, as a national model for other states.

### YOUTH WHO ARE — OR WHOSE PARENTS ARE — INCARCERATED (JUVENILE/CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM)

#### *Local Level*

- ▶ Antidiscrimination policy for LGBTQ youth in SF schools and juvenile detention centers.

#### *State Level*

- ▶ **SB 118** (Liu, 2009) includes provisions for identifying whether children in the welfare system have an incarcerated parent and providing appropriate services.
- ▶ **SCR 20** (Liu, 2009) encourages state agencies and departments to consider the San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Bill of Rights when developing policies and protocols that could impact children of incarcerated parents.

#### *Federal Level*

- ▶ The federal *Adoption and Safe Families Act* was extended in California from six months to 24 months before termination of parenting rights when a child is in foster care, which provides incarcerated mothers more time to reunify with a child.

\* As explained earlier, no Zellerbach funds are used to support lobbying for a specific piece of legislation.

In addition, youth voice efforts were instrumental in the defeat of a proposal requiring parental notification for a minor to obtain an abortion, and in the progress of several bills pending in the state legislature addressing youth homelessness, the shackling of pregnant incarcerated women, and public benefits for the formerly incarcerated.

## PENDING STATE BILLS

- ▶ **SB 123** (Liu, 2011), the *California Runaway, Homeless, and Exploited Youth Act*, is pending a vote in the Senate Appropriations Committee. If passed, it will signal a commitment to ending youth homelessness, requiring the state to develop a statewide, coordinated plan for runaway, homeless, and exploited youth. *Prior to the involvement of youth voice organizations focusing on homeless youth, advocates of SB 123 only considered foster youth as eligible for and deserving of comprehensive state support.*
- ▶ **SB 119** (Lowenthal, 2011), the *California Community Care Facilities Act*, brings emergency youth shelters in alignment with federal licensing requirements, ensuring that they are eligible for federal funding. The bill is currently in the Assembly Human Services Committee.
- ▶ **AB 1111** (Fletcher, 2011) passed the Assembly and is pending a Senate vote. If passed, the bill will prohibit wage garnishment of youth for citations related to homelessness until they turn 25 or find stable housing.
- ▶ **AB 568** (Skinner, 2011) is pending a vote in the Senate Appropriations Committee. If passed, it will limit shackling of pregnant incarcerated women.
- ▶ **AB 828** (Swanson, 2011), if passed, will ensure that individuals with a felony record are eligible for cash aid under the Food Stamp Program. The bill is currently in the Senate Human Services Committee.

## IMPACT OF CHANGES IN PRACTICES AND POLICIES

Changes in institutional culture and practices within the systems that impact youth lead to improved outcomes for youth speakers, trainers, and representatives of youth voice organizations, as they gain confidence, a sense of agency, and sometimes professional pathways by being valued for their insight, expertise, and partnership. These changes also lead to improved outcomes for youth whose lives are touched by various systems, as administrators and other practitioners implement strategies and deliver services that better reflect their needs and build on their strengths.

“A former foster youth spoke at a DSS-CFSD meeting about how his birth certificate still said ‘baby boy’ instead of a first name. This prompted the agency director to help him and his twin sister change their birth certificates and begin an investigation of how many foster youth are in the same situation. Eventually, this increased awareness may lead the department to advocate for a policy to address this statewide.”

– Greg Rose, Deputy Director,  
Children and Family Services Division, California  
Department of Social Services

## WHAT WOULD BEST SUPPORT YOUTH VOICE EFFORTS?

Zellerbach youth voice organizational leaders, administrators in county and state agencies, and other stakeholders reflected on what would further support and deepen the effectiveness of the youth voice strategy. *They suggest that:*

### YOUTH VOICE ORGANIZATIONS SHOULD:

- ▶ **Keep youth at the center of the organization at all times.**
  - Build an organizational infrastructure that incorporates youth input in all aspects of its work and operations.
  - Use or create staff positions for youth to become permanent employees.
  - Organizational change should come from and, at the very least, seriously engage youth.
  - Talk to youth affiliated with the organization to evaluate how they feel about their work and what they think needs to change.
  - Emphasize the use of strategies that support youth engagement, like social media tools.
  - Integrate regular feedback from youth when implementing a strategy and be open to shifting plans if youth voice leads the organization to reevaluate its goals.
- ▶ **Provide youth with meaningful and appropriate support.**
  - Organizations need to be aware of the changing needs of transition age youth, including identifying opportunities for continued, if different, engagement in systems change work.
  - Take time necessary to inform and engage youth so that they can be successful at voicing their opinion and advocating.
  - Give youth a stipend or salary, transportation money, and other incentives so they know they are valued and, for some, so they choose engagement in youth voice over the street economy.
  - Provide youth with benefits and educate them about how to activate and access their benefits and the history of the worker-led movement that resulted in workplace benefits.
  - Help youth to identify and plan to achieve work and educational goals.
- ▶ **Train administrators and others where youth will be presenting or partnering.**
  - Provide training on how to listen to youth, treat them as equal partners in the work, and speak to them in ways they understand.
  - Convey the importance of having youth there as an authentic part of the process of setting practices and policies, and of finding meeting times and methods that work for youth to participate.

“One of the proudest moments for me is when I participate in Day at the Capitol. When the legislators and legislative staff meet us, we change their view of us.”

– Feven Seyoum,  
Youth Co-Chair, CYC

▶ **Train youth.**

- Public speaking.
- Leadership.
- Training facilitation.
- The difference between telling a personal story and being an advocate.
- Basic empowerment training so youth understand that they can make a difference in the systems that affect their lives.
- Basic analysis of policies or budgets.
- Personal hygiene and how to present oneself professionally.
- Self-care and wellness, including appropriate boundaries between work and personal life.
- Meeting etiquette.
- How to listen to adults and treat them as equal partners in the work.
- The way bureaucracies work (e.g., the difference between a meeting and working group, and the kind of authority the people they talk to do or don't have).
- Hands-on training so they can apply their skills in real-life situations.

“Your whole organization needs to understand what it means to have young people working side by side with them. I would say ‘don’t do it unless you’re really committed to making that organizational structural shift that needs to take place to support young people.’ One way to look at it is that you are taking on more responsibility. On the other hand, I want to say to *be prepared for magic*. Be prepared for really innovative, unusual, untraditional, interactive programming that will come from young people.”

– Jamie Lee Evans  
Director, Y.O.U.T.H. Training Project

▶ **Provide opportunities for youth and adults to learn from each other**

- Include youth and adults on a panel or training team together.
  - Institute a structured shadow program, where youth can see how adult staff members do their jobs.
  - Model professional behavior, healthy boundaries, and self-care for youth.
  - Consider ways to provide a career ladder for youth who come into the organization, from skills training to employment to succession planning for organizational leadership.
- ▶ **Keep a focus on youth voice at the local level as well as the state level**, since youth live at the local level.
- ▶ **Tell policy makers and administrators about successes in the system, or in spite of the system**, so that they hear about positive outcomes of their work and potential solutions in addition to hearing about the challenges.
- ▶ **Screen youth**, since some will be better spokespersons for youth concerns than others.

## ADVICE FOR PHILANTHROPY

- ▶ **Remember that you are investing in long-term, broad-based change.** Youth development and training are critical to the success of youth voice efforts. In addition, youth bring all that they learn at one organization with them when they move on to others, so the impact of any funding will be multiplied across the field.
- ▶ **Be informed and patient** about what it takes to engage adolescents in authentic ways. Youth voice leaders note that their organizations have matured and grown in reach and effectiveness over the past five years, benefitting from Zellerbach’s multi-year funding.
- ▶ **Inform funding colleagues and government-based funders about the reasons to invest in youth voice.** For instance, sponsor a convening for philanthropic peers and leaders of departments of mental health and other state and county agencies to learn about the impact of youth voice and the importance of multiple funding streams for youth voice organizations. Invite youth voice organizations to speak about their work, priorities, impact, and needs.
- ▶ **Fund youth voice projects within any organization that serves youth**, whether or not it identifies primarily as a youth voice organization, to encourage the engagement of whatever youth constituency an organization seeks to serve. Youth voice leaders see great value in funding activities that have a youth voice component, even if the activity is not primarily a youth voice event (e.g., a staff-led convening), allowing an organization to incorporate youth voice into its work as much as possible.
- ▶ **Be flexible with funding requirements.** Let organizations determine what makes sense for them and the youth they are engaging. Work with them to set realistic goals and outcomes. Also, keep in mind that they may have little capacity for a complex and demanding grant application process.
- ▶ **Fund statewide programs** so there’s a larger pool of youth to draw from for the work.
- ▶ **Invest strategically in research, training, and technical assistance.**
- ▶ **Also invest in:** Wellness programming and/or having a mental health clinician on staff • Money in the budget for wages and stipends, childcare, or other support the youth need in order to get and stay engaged • Training to help youth and administrators work together • Mentoring, coaching, and leadership development • Program evaluation.
- ▶ **Be realistic about the amount of funding and staff time necessary to make youth engagement meaningful.**

## CONCLUSION

The Zellerbach youth voice group is made up of organizations serving youth facing challenges including homelessness, incarceration, transitioning out of foster care, mental health needs, and other issues. By reaching multiple populations, usually at the intersection of two or more of these challenges, youth voice organizations cast a wide net and have changed the lives of thousands of young people. The multi-year commitment of at least one funder has made a difference to these groups, enabling them to develop and refine youth development strategies that support authentic youth engagement in systems change.

# APPENDIX

## METHODS

### Key Informant Interviews:

- ▶ Telephone interviews were conducted with 13 youth and adult leaders and staff of Zellerbach youth voice organizations between March and May, 2011 about their work, their impact, the role of youth voice in their organization, and recommendations for strengthening youth voice strategies.
- ▶ Three individuals in administrative positions with state or county agencies, and one from a nonprofit organization were interviewed by telephone in May 2011 about their experiences with youth voice, their impressions of its impact on the policies and systems with which they work, and recommendations for strengthening youth voice strategies.

### Focus Group:

- ▶ Eleven leaders and staff members of Zellerbach youth voice organizations participated in a focus group on June 14, 2011, where they reviewed preliminary evaluation findings and provided further insight into their work and recommendations.

### Document and Website Review:

- ▶ Multiple documents discussing the activities and accomplishments of the Zellerbach youth voice organizations provided details about their strategies, activities, and accomplishments. These included grant proposals and reports submitted to the Zellerbach Family Foundation and other funders, evaluation reports, meeting agendas, brochures, research reports, and program description documents. The evaluation team also visited each organization's website in order to review further information and documentation posted there.

### Policy Research:

- ▶ Laws referred to in key informant interviews and the focus group were researched primarily using the bill search function of the Official California Legislative Information Website (<http://leginfo.ca.gov/>).

### Literature Review:

- ▶ A review of the literature was conducted using published hard copies of evaluation journals and online article and book sources.

*The word cloud on report cover was created from portions of this report, using Tagxedo (<http://www.tagxedo.com>).*

## LEARNING MORE ABOUT THE ZELLERBACH YOUTH VOICE ORGANIZATIONS

To find out more about the Zellerbach Youth Voice Organizations, please visit them at the links below:

- ▶ **Alameda County Foster Youth Alliance:** <http://fosteryouthalliance.org/>
- ▶ **California Council on Youth Relations (CCYR):**  
[http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view\\_custom.html?custom\\_page\\_id=307](http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_custom.html?custom_page_id=307)
- ▶ **California Youth Connection (CYC):** <http://www.calyouthconn.org/>
- ▶ **Center for Young Women’s Development (CYWD):** <http://www.cywd.org/>
- ▶ **Transitional Age Youth (TAYSF):** <http://www.taysf.org/>
- ▶ **Project WHAT!:** <http://www.communityworkswest.org/index.php/project-what>
- ▶ **Youth in Mind:** <http://www.yimcal.org/index.php>
- ▶ **Y.O.U.T.H. Training Project:** <http://youthtrainingproject.org/>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> CDCR Secretary Matthew Cate at <http://sfcipp.typepad.com/san-francisco-children-of-incarcerated-parents-partnership-blog/san-franciscocalifornia-resource/>

<sup>ii</sup> Center for Young Women’s Development (various documents).

<sup>iii</sup> California Youth Connection at <http://www.calyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Legislative-Fact-Sheet-California-Runaway-and-Homeless-Youth-Act.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> Children’s Bureau, Administration for Children and Families (2010). *Child Welfare Outcomes Report Data, 2006-2009*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. See: <http://cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov/data> and <http://cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov/data/downloads/pdfs/california.pdf>.

<sup>v</sup> TAYSF (various documents).

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.zellerbachfamilyfoundation.org/humanservice.html>

<sup>vii</sup> B. Friesen, N. Koroloff, J. Walker, and H. Briggs (2011). *Family and Youth Voice in Systems of Care: The Evolution of Influence*. *Best Practices in Mental Health*, 7 (1), 1-25. Available online at: [www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/pdf/pbBestPractices1.pdf](http://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/pdf/pbBestPractices1.pdf).

<sup>viii</sup> See, among others: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children’s Bureau (2011). *Improving Child Welfare Outcomes through Systems of Care: New Roles for Families in Child Welfare*, Slide 10 (PowerPoint presentation on 2/16/2011). Available: [http://www.brevardfp.org/docs/Wraparound\\_Conference\\_Fam\\_Engagement\\_FINAL\\_without\\_notes.pdf](http://www.brevardfp.org/docs/Wraparound_Conference_Fam_Engagement_FINAL_without_notes.pdf), slide 10; and P. Fraenkel (2006). *Engaging Families as Experts: Collaborative Family Program Development*. *Family Process*, 45 (2), 259. Available online at: [http://www.familyprocess.org/Data/featured\\_articles/59\\_fraenkel.pdf](http://www.familyprocess.org/Data/featured_articles/59_fraenkel.pdf).

<sup>ix</sup> B. Friesen, et al. (2011), pp. 13, 16.