Mentors for Adolescents in Foster Care

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ABSTRACT: Significant numbers of adolescents in foster placement plan to live independently following discharge. Mentoring is increasingly being used as a support service to assist older foster youths to make the transition to adult living. A survey of 29 child welfare programs indicate that a variety of mentoring models are in use. The main models are transitional Life Skills Mentors, Cultural-Empowerment Mentors, and Corporate-Business Mentors. Mentoring connects foster wards with a cross-section of community citizens who provide a bridge to higher education and employment, and serve as a resource for transitional problem-solving. Information is needed on the impacts of mentor-mentee matches and efforts to sustain mentor-mentee relationships.

Mentoring is increasingly being used as an intervention for youth considered to be at-risk, vulnerable, or likely to be unprepared for effective adult living. Youths identified as headed for problematic and/or unfavorable life outcomes include delinquents, homeless and jobless youth, pregnant and parenting teens, and school dropouts. The adolescent risk groups cited are not mutually exclusive. Much overlapping exists across subgroups. Within the past few years the child welfare field has recognized that adolescents in placement rep-
resent a significant risk-group. A high percentage of children in out-of-home placement are between the ages of 13 and 18 years. The Child Welfare League of America points out that, “Adolescents constitute a major segment of the population served by the child welfare system. In 1989, over one-third in out-of-home care were teens” (DeWoody, Ceja, & Sylvester, 1993, p. 1).

For most adolescents in care, the accepted permanency options of adoption or family reunification are not realistic. Rather than return to their families, increasing numbers of older foster wards plan to live independently following discharge. The movement toward independent living requires support systems that will help youths to attain self-sufficiency. The task of helping large numbers of emancipated foster wards to make a successful transition to adult living is a difficult undertaking. Most foster youths lack ongoing support from their own families.

In accordance with CWLA’s standards for Independent Living Services, the child welfare field is in the process of developing aftercare services for youths who are attempting to move from a dependency oriented placement system to independent living. Aftercare services may include financial assistance, transitional subsidies, employment counseling, housing assistance, emergency shelter, information and referral with regard to community resources, and advocacy to involve community institutions in assisting youths in moving toward self-sufficiency (Irvine, 1988). Mentoring is one of the services that is now emerging to assist foster adolescents in making a transition to early adulthood.

**Mentoring: A Role Perspective**

*Webster’s II New Riverside University Dictionary* (1984) defines a mentor as a “wise and trusted teacher or counselor.” A mentor makes a conscious effort to guide and influence, and serves as a teacher, advisor, and sponsor. Mentors attempt to help their mentees to develop a sense of competence, to increase skill levels, and to improve performance. The mentoring formula typically includes the following elements: a) a one-to-one relationship between a pair of unrelated individuals, b) an age difference in which the mentor is the older more experienced person, and c) a relationship that is developmental in nature, with focus on enhancing the character and competence of the mentee (Freedman, 1993).