



Very Important People

Helping English learners acquire work skills and a new language

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A Place to Call Home

“I couldn’t speak one sentence in English before I took this class,” said Susan Ma, an English learner receiving aid. “When I went to talk, nothing came out. My English is a lot better now. It was hard, but I think when you’re in class it should be hard. I really liked class. The students all helped each other. The teacher taught us well and I really wanted to learn. I even got a prize for the most attendance.”

Ma was a participant in HSA’s Vocational English-as-a-Second-Language Immersion Program, known as VIP. Her CalWORKs worker referred her to the program. “There was a big difference with VIP,” said Ma. “I took regular ESL for one year, and the teacher seldom asked me any questions. There were a lot of students, so the teacher couldn’t talk to all of us. At VIP, the teacher was really nice. Every day she would ask some questions at the beginning of class. They were simple questions like ‘Where did you go yesterday?’ or ‘What do you do after class?’ It helps us think how to say more in English.”

Ma came to the United States eight years ago, and lives in a Tenderloin apartment with her husband and two young sons. She speaks Cantonese and Mandarin, in addition to her new English skills. In China, she had owned her own corner grocery store, but after arriving in the United States she spent five years working as a seamstress. When she became unemployed, she turned to the CalWORKs program. She has graduated from VIP and now has a position in a Head Start program where she works as a center aide, preparing food in the kitchen and occasionally helping with the children. She is currently taking child development classes and hopes to become a teacher’s assistant next.



Susan Ma in her home.

As the holiday season has concluded, I am reminded again of the extraordinary efforts that our staff make for those in need—not only through their daily work, but outside their official roles as well. Once again, over the holidays families received gifts of household items, clothing, and toys through the annual holiday party and toy giveaway. HSA staff continued to be generous in donations as well, contributing over \$80,000 to the Combined Charities campaign.



Trent Rhorer

January marks the beginning of the 2007 State legislative season where we hope to continue the momentum we started last year when we benefited from an unprecedented increase in funding for the CalWORKs and Child Welfare Services programs—totaling more than \$200 million statewide!

Here at HSA, we're also pleased to announce the arrival of Debby Jeter, the new Deputy Director for the Family & Children's Services Division. Debby served as Deputy Director for the San Luis Obispo Department of Social Services for nine years and brings a wealth of experience to her new position. I want to give a special thanks to HSA's Chief of Staff, Steve Arcelona, who the Human Services Commission recognized as the 2006 Manager of the Year for his excellence in serving as Acting Director of the division for most of the past year.

I would also like to acknowledge San Francisco 49ers quarterback Alex Smith for launching his foundation to support foster youth. We are thrilled to partner with him in this endeavor and wish his foundation (and the 49ers!) all the best.

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Making Connections

Program wraps services around foster youth

A new program in Family and Children's Services is poised to leverage flexible funding and a wide range of services into increased stability for children in the child welfare system. Called Connections, this wraparound program takes advantage of a change in California law that allows counties to use foster care funding in a variety of ways to meet the individual needs of each child in the system. It is the latest innovation in an overall system improvement plan.

"The goal of wraparound services through the Connections program is to establish permanency for children who are currently in foster care settings," said Liz Crudo, Redesign Coordinator for Family and Children's Services. "We've been given a rare opportunity as a county to use state dollars flexibly. In particular, we can take state funding that would previously have gone to paying for group home placement for a child and use it to support that child being in a less restrictive, more home-like setting—or even return him or her to the care of a relative."

Connections is focusing first on foster youth who are living in the highest levels of group home care. These are facilities that resemble dormitories more than homes, with staff members who provide round-the-clock supervision and services. The foster youth in these programs generally have bounced from placement to placement due to issues such as behavioral problems or mental illness, and have been unable to either successfully reunite with their parents, be connected with other relative caregivers, or live in family-style foster care. Connections aims to change that.

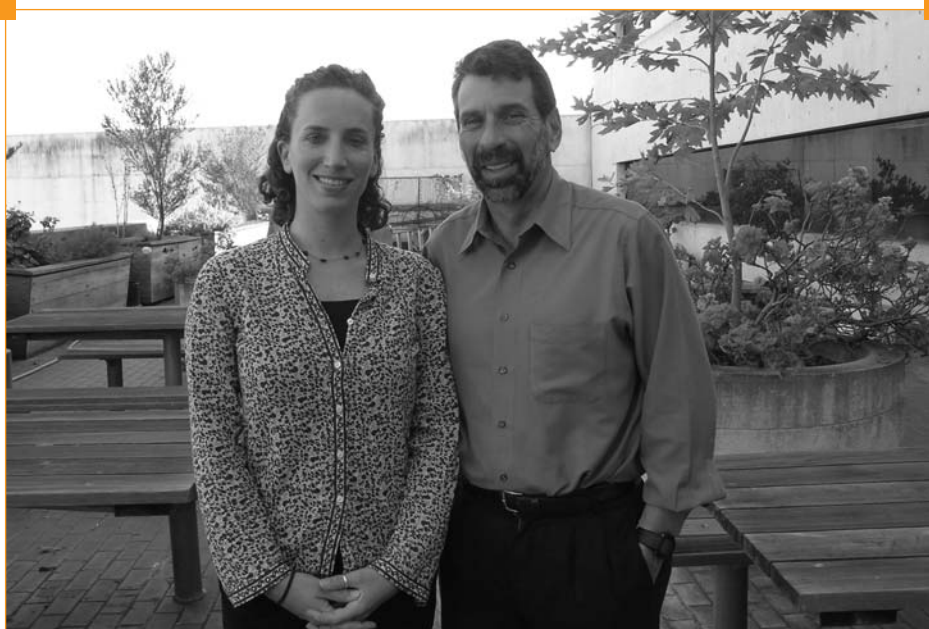
"We're going to provide an intense array of wraparound services and support and do whatever it takes to maintain these youth in their own homes and commu-

nities," said Crudo. "With the flexible funding, we can make our services very individualized and specific. Previously, we could only use this funding to pay for their stay at group homes. Now we can use the funding to put together a team for each youth who can support them in succeeding through case plans, team decision making and services."

Seneca Center for Children and Families, a nonprofit agency with extensive experience providing wraparound services, received a two-year contract to run the program, which began September 1st. "We're going to be working primarily with youth ages 12 to 17 years old who have struggled with placement stability," said Ken Berrick, CEO of Seneca Center. "In most cases, they're having behavioral problems and have had multiple placements. Everyone's in agreement that that's not a good situation, so our goal is to build a support system that allows for stability as we transition them towards a permanent family. Residential treatment should be a temporary step for kids in crisis—we want these kids to move beyond that to permanent homes."

A total of approximately 60 youth annually will be referred to the program from Family and Children's Services, and also from Community Behavioral Health, the Juvenile Probation Department, and the San Francisco Unified School District, which are partners in the project. Participants will receive an average of 18 months of services, and be gradually transitioned to community services to maintain their stability. "We are all looking at these kids as members of an extended family that can say 'what do we need to do in order to make sure that this child is healthy and thriving?'" said Berrick.

The underlying philosophy of Connections is that living in a family-like



Julie Hess and Ken Berrick of Seneca Center for Children and Families.

setting is preferable to living in group care, and that it is less expensive and more successful to use funding flexibly than to use it only on high-level group care. All services center on the child and family, and are provided via a culturally competent, strength-based approach.

The situations for each youth are complex, making individualized plans a crucial element for success. “In the case of the youth in the child welfare system, the biological families are not always involved,” said Julie Hess, Seneca Center’s Program Director. “They may have substance abuse issues, may be incarcerated, may be mentally ill, or may be overwhelmed by the system. Youth referred by the probation or mental health systems are more likely to have families who are involved, but who don’t know what to do about their children’s behaviors. Our focus with all the parents is to work with them on parenting, how to structure their home environment so that there’s the highest chance of success, helping them heal fragmented relationships, and giving them the tools to cope.” When youth can’t return to their parents, staff conduct extended searches for other family members who can take them into their homes.

The services provided are as unique as the youth and families who receive them. “We have one-on-one behavioral interventions with the kids,” said Hess. “We link them to after-school tutoring resources. We help families find safe housing where their children can rejoin them. We connect them to martial arts classes, singing lessons, performance groups, summer camps and team sports to help them engage in their communities and keep them out of trouble in their free time. We’ve even flown family members in from out of state for visits. It all comes down to unconditional care, meaning that children and families come to us with a lot of needs and challenges, and we’re not going to give up on them.”

Although Seneca Center is carrying out the contract for Connections, a total of 32 agencies are involved in providing services. “I’m very, very impressed to see San Francisco’s various systems that typically serve youth in a silo system working together across disciplines,” said Hess. “And I’m so glad to be working with this group of youth. The resiliency of kids and families is inspirational, and helping people access their strengths and maximize their potential is hugely rewarding.”

David Stein is a Care Coordinator for

Connections, having worked on a similar project for Seneca Center in Alameda for three years. “I worked with one youth, Kevin,* who was living in a foster home, and our goal was to help him maintain his placement,” said Stein. “I’d visit Kevin once a week and sit down with him and his foster parents to find out how he was doing in school, at home and in his community. Kevin also had a support counselor who saw him weekly.”

Kevin wanted to get a job but was too young, so staff decided to think outside the box. Since Kevin was interested in animals, Stein found a pet store that would allow him to work onsite if he was supervised by an adult. Kevin’s support counselor helped him clean the cages and work with the animals, and Connections paid his wages. “Having a job and getting paid really motivated him,” said Stein. “And it filled his time, which can be important in keeping kids out of trouble.”

It was all in a day’s work for the Connections staff. “The program’s ideal is to get in there and do whatever it takes for these kids,” he said. “We’ve accompanied kids while they’re training and volunteering at animal shelters, driven parents to see their children in group homes, encouraged them to take their GED, gotten them into karate lessons and swimming lessons, and gotten gym memberships. One youth wanted to work on a community radio project that was far from his foster home, so I took BART with him the first few times until he was comfortable making the trip himself. It’s a little bit like being a parent.”

Like a parent, Stein gets to see the youth he works with achieve success. “I got a message on my answering machine the other day from one of the kids I used to work with,” he said. “He wanted me to know that he’d graduated from high school, he’s got his own apartment now, and he has a job. That was a pretty big success. That was good to hear.”

*Name has been changed.

“In class, we practiced interviews,” said Ma. “It was very good for us. It made us more confident to find a job and talk to new people. And we each had jobs to do in class, like answering the phone or taking attendance. Every week we changed teams. It was good.”

Lynn Levey, VIP Coordinator, has been with the program since it was a pilot project in 2000. “VIP started in response to welfare reform legislation,” she said. “Suddenly our CalWORKs participants could only have five total years of time on welfare, and no more than two years consecutively, and that wasn’t working very well for our limited English speakers. They were improving very slowly in regular ESL classes, so we started VIP. Our goal was to use an immersion model to also provide general, vocational, job search and pre-employment skills training, as well as an introduction to work culture in this country. The idea was to help them be successful in not only English, but in their job search and at work once they were employed.”

The small class size, intensive model and case management help students stay on track, and the program is very successful. Students attend classes five days per week, for either four or six hours per day. The semester completion rate is over 90 percent.

“We want to use the classroom to simulate the workplace as much as possible,” said Levey, “so we have a very strict attendance policy. Students call in if they’re going to be late or absent, and they fill out request forms if they know of a scheduling conflict in advance. Students also divide into teams to handle different classroom chores. This gives them a chance to develop the soft skills they need to be successful at work—team work, taking initiative, problem solving, punctuality, etc. They have performance reviews twice each semester, similar to performance reviews at work. This gives them the opportunity to talk individually with their teacher and discuss their progress, focusing on soft skills.”

The program is a team effort itself. City College of San Francisco provides instruction, curriculum development and teachers. Nonprofit partners Arriba Juntos and Catholic Charities provide case management and classroom space. HSA’s Workforce Development Division provides funding, including underwriting Levey’s coordination efforts, and CalWORKs and PAES workers make referrals to the program. Students speak languages that include Spanish, Vietnamese, Cantonese, Cambodian, Laotian, Mandarin, Russian, Mongolian, Farsi, Arabic and Serbo-Croatian. Students stay with their classmates as they progress through the five levels of the program.

The small class sizes and case management help head off problems early. One student was attending VIP and a regular ESL class and was on the verge of dropping out of regular ESL when a case manager intervened. “Her teacher complained that she was refusing to sign up on the attendance sheet,” Levey said. “The student was crying and didn’t want to go back to the class. The case manager met with her and it turned out the student

We want to use the classroom to simulate the workplace as much as possible

Lynn Levey



From left, Lynn Levey and Anna-Lisa Helmy at the Arriba Juntos computer lab where VIP students develop computer skills.

just needed glasses—she couldn’t read the sheet to fill it out.”

Anna-Lisa Helmy, VIP Coordinator for City College, has taught for six years in VIP and coordinated for two years. “Our students come from a wide variety of educational backgrounds,” she said. “We have people who are university educated and some who have never been to school at all. About half of our students are single parents who are trying to learn English and find a job, and even if they’re motivated it’s hard for them to do their homework late at night. But our classes only have 16 to 20 students, so it’s a small group, and we see them every day. People feel more relaxed, more comfortable. People get to know each other. It helps them progress in the language more quickly.”

In addition to intensive class work, homework, computer lab, and practice interview sessions, students go on field trips to locations such as job fairs and work sites. “They vote on the type of workplace to visit,” Helmy said. “Often we go to the post office, supermarkets, hotels, places like that. We’ll take a tour and the students have a chance to ask questions about the site.”

Helmy chose her position with VIP because it would allow her to work more closely with students. “I went into ESL work for the contact with students,” she said. “I’m like a peer to them. I’m a parent and I live in San Francisco too, so I can really pass on a lot of valuable information. I know what they’re dealing with every day, and I can help out. Some of the students have children in the same school as my children. I really get to see progress in this program. I like seeing the success.”

A Job of Her Own

Former CalWORKs participant now helps others

“I woke up one morning and felt that my life needed to change,” said Kimbra Whitaker. “One month later I was in San Francisco.” Whitaker was 25 years old at the time, a single parent of a one-year-old daughter, and her job at a Connecticut construction company was beginning to look like a dead end.

“I had been at my job for nearly three years doing the accounting and acting as the receptionist,” she said. “Raise time kept coming up, but my paycheck looked the same. I had lived in the Bay Area as a child, and it seemed to me that San Francisco would offer me broader opportunities. I gave my two weeks notice, and two weeks after that I was on a plane to California.”

Whitaker hoped to re-establish a connection with her father upon her arrival but was disappointed. But her godfather, a key figure from her childhood, stood by her. “My godfather let me stay with him,” she said, “and when I was having trouble finding work he suggested I find out about public assistance.”

Whitaker was pregnant with her second child when she connected with Workforce Development’s Job Readiness Training Program. “I hooked up with a wonderful woman right away,” she said. “Of all the things she said, the main thing I remember was when she told me ‘I was sitting where you are not too long ago.’ From then on, I was a sponge. I wanted to learn everything I could and more. The course really inspired me. I really paid attention to all the advice I got.” She exited the program with a résumé, cover letter, business cards, and a lot of information about career networking.

Geoffrea Simpson, a CalWORKs Social Worker, was one of the staff who worked with Whitaker. “I assisted Kimbra when she needed help obtaining clothing,” she said. “At that time she was accessing CalWORKs, food stamps and Medi-Cal. She had gone through our orientation program and on to the Job Readiness component. She followed through on everything—she was the perfect, model participant.”

As Whitaker went through the Job Readiness Training program, she let her workers know where she thought the program could improve. “They kept telling me ‘Well, then you should apply to work for HSA, you’re completely qualified,’” she said. “So I applied in September of 2005 to take the exam. I took it in January, the week before my second child was born. After her birth, I sat back and watched the announcements roll into my mailbox. I found I could pick and choose where I wanted to go. When an offer to work for HSA in CalWORKs came in, I just couldn’t refuse. I had wanted to stay home a little longer with my daughter, but this seemed meant to be.”

Whitaker took a position as a Senior Clerk with CalWORKs, and now works with some of the same staff who assisted her when she was receiving aid. “I get a lot of satisfaction out of my job,” she said. “My goal is to motivate others who have been through what I’ve been through. It doesn’t stop with my job—that’s part of my life, period. When I was on aid, I felt as though I was stereotyped by people. With this job, I want to prove that just because I needed a grant, that didn’t mean I didn’t want to do anything with my life, or that I was lazy. I just needed it to get by right then. I want things out of life. I’m very passionate about what I do and HSA is full of opportunities. I’m looking forward to longevity with the department and keeping my options open as to where my career will take me.”

Whitaker recently had an opportunity to address a graduating class of Job Readiness participants. “I told them that I’m a product of the same program and that they can be like me,” she said. “I almost broke down crying because I’d been there once too. I know how exciting it is to acquire all these new skills. You want to wow the world with what you’ve learned.”

My goal is to motivate others who have been through what I’ve been through. It doesn’t stop with my job—that’s part of my life, period.

Kimbra Whitaker



Office of Civil Rights

Protecting the rights of staff and clients

The civil rights of HSA employees and clients are protected every day by a dedicated two-person team. They staff the Office of Civil Rights, a little-known program which investigates client and staff complaints of discrimination and promotes a positive workplace for everyone.

“Employers are required by city, state and federal laws to protect the civil rights of employees,” explained Magaly Fernandez, Civil Rights Officer. “Large county agencies such as HSA are required to have stand-alone offices to afford employees and clients an avenue to voice their complaints. Beyond that, I see our office as a resource to provide services in a proactive way. We educate staff on both employee and client rights to avoid discrimination or civil rights complaints. We want to help create an environment that is free from any type of discrimination or harassment so workers can come in and focus on their work, and clients can easily access services, programs and benefits.”

Fernandez and colleague Jane Kinzler, a Program Support Analyst, investigate approximately 50 complaints per year from clients and employees. It’s a relatively low number, given that HSA now boasts nearly 1,800 staff members. “I attribute it to the fact that our employees are really committed to providing professional customer service,” said Fernandez. “When we do need to conduct an investigation, we meet with the complainant to get their perspective and make sure we understand the situation. Then we meet with the individual they are making allegations against for their perspective. We ask for any documentation or witnesses that could substantiate their allegations,

and then ask witnesses what they may have overheard. We even make site visits to see where the incident occurred if it’s going to shed light on the situation.” Complaints from staff may be related to issues such as perceived discrimination or sexual harassment; clients may be concerned that they were denied benefits due to their race.

“Much of what we address doesn’t end up rising to the level of a civil rights complaint,” said Kinzler. “We do come across a lot of miscommunication between co-workers, or situations in which a client is confused about benefits. Often we conduct an informal mediation process to create a safe environment where the different perceptions can be shared so everyone can come to an understanding. We encourage people to speak directly to their co-workers when appropriate and can even help them practice bringing up their concern in a non-confrontational way. We’re really playing a role in opening up lines of communication and understanding. It’s a wonderful opportunity to help promote a positive work environment.”

In addition to investigating complaints, Fernandez and Kinzler are responsible for a host of services for staff and clients. They provide new employees with training on civil rights and prevention of sexual harassment, and are available to present on related topics to HSA programs and to partnering community-based agencies. They produce HSA’s annual diversity conference, organize the annual employee recognition celebration, and provide staff support to the Equal Opportunity Advisory Committee. And they attend frequent trainings to keep up-to-date on changes to civil rights laws.

Fernandez and Kinzler also assist HSA programs in obtaining translations of key publications for clients. City, state and federal laws require that clients with limited English proficiency be given equal access to services as a protected right under national origin—meaning that materials must be available in their native language. Most HSA documents are translated into at least the “threshold” languages of Chinese, Spanish, Vietnamese and Russian, depending on the composition of each program’s clients. The office provides professional interpreters as needed for meetings with clients as well. “During periods of stress, people feel most comfortable speaking their mother tongue,” said Kinzler. “Being able to provide them access to services in that language is really crucial.”

“It can be a stressful job,” said Fernandez, “especially when we’re addressing complaints. But when we’re able to help an employee or client resolve an issue, I think we’ve really helped the whole agency.”



From left, Jane Kinzler and Magaly Fernandez of the Office of Civil Rights.

Close as Kin

Program helps relative caregivers succeed

Tragedy has struck twice in Aisha's life,* but both times her family and community have come to her aid. Aisha's biological mother was unable to care for her, so she was raised from birth by her grandmother, Ida Watson. "Ida was the only mother Aisha ever knew," said Pamela Connie, Long-Term Placement Kinship Supervisor for HSA's Kinship Program located in Bayview-Hunters Point. "When Ida's daughter couldn't take care of Aisha, Ida adopted Aisha and raised her as her own. Aisha thought of her biological mother as an aunt. The Kinship program offered Ida support and assistance in raising her."

Aisha was just four years old when Ida died suddenly of a heart attack while they were home together. "There was no warning," said Connie. "Ida wasn't in poor health, and she was just in her early fifties." Kinship staff and Ida's two other adult daughters immediately rallied. One of them, Maleya, stepped forward to become her new mother and has begun the process of becoming Aisha's legal guardian and eventually will adopt her. Aisha has been able to stay in her preschool and her home, and has begun grief counseling services.

"All the Kinship payments and support immediately moved over to Maleya," said Connie. "We even helped Maleya plan and pay for funeral services. There was as little disruption in Aisha's life as possible, and Maleya receives financial assistance with child care and therapy. Aisha can live with a relative she already knows and loves and focus on getting over this traumatic experience without having the rest of her life turn upside down as well."

HSA's Long Term Placement Kinship program helps relative caregivers like Ida and Maleya provide stable, loving homes for their young relatives who can no longer be cared for by their own parents. "These are close relatives or extended family members who have come forward and decided to take care of a child within their family for the long term," said Connie. "The majority of the caregivers we work with are grandmothers, but we also see aunts, uncles, cousins. The children are able to maintain connections with their own family, and be with people they already know and love. And Kinship provides caregivers with a subsidy payment that matches the basic foster care rate, based upon age."

In addition to the Bayview-Hunters Point office, Kinship also has offices at 170 Otis Street and in the Mission District. Participating families receive services such as child care and mental health services, support groups and respite care, tutoring, therapy for developmental delays, and even funding to help pay for summer camp, proms, school pictures, and other milestones



Pamela Connie at the Kinship playroom.

of childhood. And a recent change in state law created the new Kinship Guardianship Assistance Payment (Kin-GAP), which provides families with additional grants for special needs beyond the basic foster care rate.

Shirley Evans has been involved with Kinship for nearly 13 years now. Two years after she retired, Evans got a call from her brother, asking if she could take in his newborn daughter Rashada. "We've had her ever since," said Evans. "She was family. It wasn't anything I thought about in advance. It was one of those things that was laid at my door, and I had to make a decision in a day's time."

Evans found her biggest challenge to be refocusing her life around a small child. "My youngest was 13 at the time," she said. "My oldest was out of the house with children of her own. I had gone back to working part time, and my husband and I had started traveling. It was a change."

Evans didn't know anything about the services that were available for Rashada until she contacted Kinship. "I literally didn't know what to do," she said. "But I had the best social worker, and she taught me a lot. She and the others just wrapped their arms around me and I ended up with everything I needed. Now I find myself helping other people in my situation. You need a supportive social worker who is willing to go that extra step for the benefit of the family and their client. And you also need to talk with others in the same situation. I'm a resource for other parents now."

**Names have been changed.*

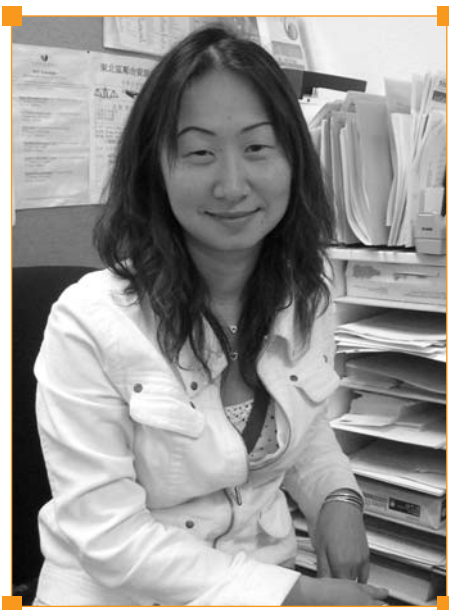
A World of Resources

Centers connect clients to an abundance of assistance

San Francisco seniors and people with disabilities have a huge number of community resources available to them—but surveys have indicated that those in need are not always aware of all their options. In 1993, a county task force created a plan to establish 10 resource centers over six years to better connect local resources with the clients seeking them.

Since then, these Resource Centers for Seniors and Adults with Disabilities have helped tens of thousands of seniors aged 55 years and older and adults with disabilities get the help they need. The resource centers are funded by general San Francisco County funds through DAAS's Office on Aging, and are run by three lead agencies: Self-Help for the Elderly, the Institute on Aging, and Network for Elders.

“The Task Force recommended that we have these centers as a way to make it easier for older people to access services in their own neighborhoods,” said Betsy Eddy, the Program Analyst with the Office on the Aging who is the liaison for the centers. “At least 18,000 people receive information from these centers every year, and the centers provide assistance in 13 languages. They're a place where people can turn to when they're in need.”



Traci Dobronravova is the Director of Social Services for Self-Help for the Elderly, one of the lead agencies. Self-Help for the Elderly is a natural match for the contract, as the agency already provides programs along a wellness continuum, ranging from employment training to social activities for those clients who are more independent to in-home assistance and residential board and care to those who are more frail.

“We oversee four of the resource centers,” said Dobronravova. “The resource centers are drop-in points where any senior or adult with disabilities can call or come in with a question about available services. In addition to connecting them with resources in the community through referrals, we also provide a lot of translation, help people fill out forms, or advocate for them. They may want to know how to get home-delivered meals, or want to apply for In-Home Support Services. We've gotten calls from people who have just gotten out of the hospital and need help to live at home. Our services are very easy to access—there is almost no intake process, and although services are targeted to low-income people, there are no income guidelines.”

We have a lot of monolingual clients who don't understand even basic correspondence that they receive, such as a jury summons.

Betty Chau

Self-Help for the Elderly's resource centers are located in Chinatown, the Central City, the Inner Sunset, and the Outer Sunset. Many clients have limited English skills. “We're connecting people with needed services,” said Dobronravova. “This is assistance that is going to help them stay at home and be independent. Everyone who does this kind of work does so because they're helping a population that needs help, and because they can see the results every day and know what they're doing is actually improving someone's life.”

Dobronravova's staff have seen a wide variety of cases come through their doors. One woman had asked her daughter to manage her finances during an illness five years previously, and after her recovery found she no longer had access to her finances at all. “She was ready to take charge of her money again, but didn't know what was going on,” said Dobronravova. “Our staff contacted Social Security and found that her check was being deposited into an account with only the daughter's name on it. It was reported to Adult Protective Services, and eventually the client was able to live independently as she desired.”

The official name of the Chinatown center is the Northeast Resource Center for Seniors & Adults with Disabilities, and it's a location as busy as its name. “One of the most important services we offer is helping people who need assistance with translation,” said Betty Chau, the center's Program Coordinator. “We have a lot of monolingual Chinese-speaking clients



Sometimes our clients are very upset, but most of the time when they leave this office, they're smiling.

Eileen Fan

who don't understand even basic correspondence that they receive, such as a jury summons. They bring it here, and we help them understand what they need to do."

In addition to translation, assistance with forms is a crucial service at all the resource centers. Staff assist clients with paperwork that can include Medi-Cal forms and documents from Social Security, applications for the HEAP Home Energy Assistance Program for PG&E rebates, and the state Homeowner and Renter Assistance programs. This year's Medicare Part D drug plan changes required staff to spend hundreds of hours explaining the new system to clients and helping them evaluate the plans.

Chau works directly with clients as well as supervising the center, and frequently acts as an advocate. She's called phone companies to request an explanation of fee increases and spoken with the Centers for Medicare/Medicaid Services to ask about benefits. "One man called twice after I solved his problem to say 'thank you for helping me with my Medicare Part D,'" she said. "I get a lot of satisfaction out of my job because I'm able to assist people through things like that."

Across town, Ritchel Estrada is the Program Coordinator at the Outer Sunset Resource Center. It's a smaller office on a quiet street, but there's still a steady

stream of clients coming in the door. "We see a lot of walk-ins," Estrada said. "We're located right where people live." The center's client base includes many monolingual Chinese speakers, but also a large number of Russian speakers referred by the nearby Jewish Family and Children's Services.

The quiet neighborhood is a great contrast to some of the desperate stories that Estrada has heard. One of her clients, "Mary," called because she was behind on her PG&E bill. As Estrada asked more questions, she learned that Mary's income had declined dramatically the previous year upon the death of her son. She was now trying to support an adult daughter with disabilities on her own. Estrada helped the client negotiate with PG&E and connected her with the Salvation Army's REACH program for a grant. "I think every senior should be looked after the same way you would treat your own grandparents," said Estrada. "Most of our clients are isolated and they need a helping hand."

Eileen Fan, an Information and Assistance Specialist, sits near the front door and is the first to greet clients as they arrive at the center. "Everybody comes into this office with long, sad faces," she said. "Sometimes our clients are very upset, but most of the time when they leave this office, they're smiling."

Fan is fluent in English, Cantonese and Mandarin, and also understands Shang-

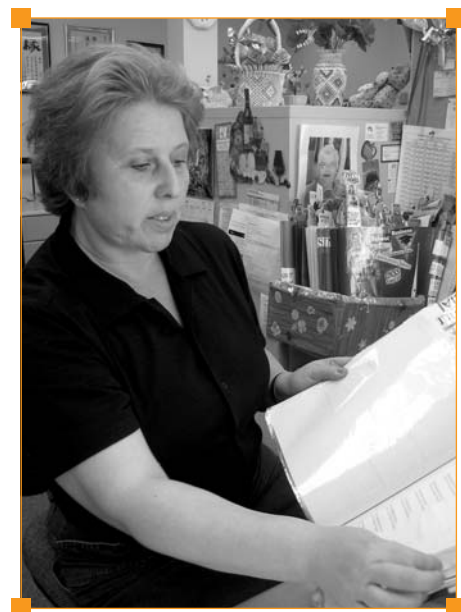
I'm not just answering questions. I'm maintaining relationships.

Polina Khersonskiy

hainese and Toisanese. She can tell story after story about clients who came in desperate for assistance, and were connected successfully with food stamps, mental health services, dental clinics, citizenship and naturalization services, and employment programs.

Sitting just a few feet away from Fan, Polina Khersonskiy, also an Information and Assistance Specialist, works with Russian-speaking clients. "I am from Kazakstan, where I had a background in education," Khersonskiy said. "When I work with my clients now, I believe that if someone asks me something even once, it is likely to be important again, so I record what I found in my information binders. I have created a little library specifically for the Russian community."

Khersonskiy's information binders encompass everything her Russian-speaking clients could need: applications for various rebate programs, affordable housing opportunities, employment training, paratransit programs, educational opportunities and much more. Each month, she and her colleagues from the 10 Resource Centers compile a list of available affordable housing units which she sends to more than 100 people on her email list. "I'm not just answering questions," she said, putting away her binders. "I'm maintaining relationships."



A Place to Call Home

Emancipating foster youth step into independence

The transition to adulthood can be a rocky one for many young people, but it is typically even harder for those who are emancipating from the foster care system. Their eighteenth birthday, instead of being a cause for celebration, in general is the day on which they will age out of the system and potentially be without a home.

Nationally, statistics show a grim level of correlation between a history of foster care and homelessness. But in San Francisco, the HSA Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP) is working hard to make certain that the children in our foster care system will transition to successful adults with jobs and homes of their own.

ILSP has long been offering foster youth a series of programs and activities to help them prepare for the transition to independence. Participating youth learn how to balance a checkbook and open a bank account, develop shopping and cooking skills, and go on outings that include social events and trips to college campuses.

For the last three years, a key part of the success of San Francisco foster youth has been the Transitional Housing Placement Plus Program, called THP+. Arlene Hylton, Program Coordinator for ILSP, had been supporting the idea of transitional housing for foster youth for years. The idea became a reality when state Senator Carole Migden sponsored a series of bills to provide financial support for transitional housing for foster youth.

“This is something we were advocating for,” said Hylton. “San Francisco is unique in being the only county in California that was using money from the general fund to help emancipating foster youth get into housing.” This fiscal year, San Francisco is contributing \$500,000 to add to the state’s \$1 million.

THP+ serves youth from ages 18 to 24. The program began with space for 31 youth, but that has already increased to 41, and staff hope the numbers will continue to rise. Some youth live alone in studio apartments, while others share two-bedroom units. One-bedroom units are reserved for parenting youth. “It’s been great so far,” Hylton said. “This really provides stability for them when they emancipate, especially those who are going to college. They’ve had no prior experience of paying rent, handling money or managing bills. This gives them a chance to learn, make mistakes, and have support while they’re doing it.”

ILSP screens emancipating youth for THP+ and refers them to Larkin Street Youth Services, the nonprofit agency which provides THP+ services under its LEASE program (Larkin Extended Aftercare for Supported Emancipation). “We work



Eliza Gibson, Chief of Programs for Larkin Street Youth Services.

with ILSP very closely,” said Eliza Gibson, Chief of Programs for Larkin Street. “When youth come into our program they already have a transitional plan that they’ve worked out with ILSP. The plan outlines educational, employment, life skills and other goals.”

Participants must contribute 30 percent of their income to rent. “They need to be working at least part time,” said Gibson. “If they’re in school, that’s great, and we really encourage them. But they do need to be able to contribute towards their rent. That rent money is deposited into an interest-earning savings account and given back to them when they exit the program. They can also take over the lease of their apartments at that time if they’re in good standing with their landlord.”

What makes LEASE a success is intensive case management. To stay in the program, youth must meet regularly with a case manager and participate in employment and educational programs. “Sometimes youth meet with their case managers five days per week, sometimes less, depending on their needs,” said Gibson. “They focus on developing the specific life skills they need. They’re learning the things that adults take for granted—how to manage a house, interact with property managers, address conflict. Sometimes it’s basics like what dish towels are for or remembering to throw away the garbage.”

All this learning is normal for young adults as they begin to live independently, Gibson stressed, but these youth don't have families to fall back on if they get into trouble. "There's less of a safety net, so the consequences of poor decision-making are much larger," she said. "If you're living at home with mom and dad and you don't throw out your garbage, they're going to get upset. But if you have your own apartment, no one else is going to do it for you, and over time if you don't throw out the garbage properly, it could put your housing in jeopardy."

LEASE participants, as well as all Larkin Street clients, also have access to Hire Up, the agency's full-service education and employment center. Center staff, including an employment specialist, work with them on issues such as GED attainment, enrolling in college, building study skills, and obtaining aid for tuition and books. There are also life skills groups, individual and group counseling sessions, community meetings and outings, and participants regularly receive gift cards to grocery stores. "We really see a lot of successes," said Gibson. "Our goal for them is that they get the support and develop the skills they need to reach their fullest potential and live happy, healthy, independent lives."

Ivan Hernandez recently joined Larkin Street as a case manager for the LEASE program. "My caseload is fifteen," he said. "In my last job in another state, it was twenty-five to thirty, which really limits the amount of service you can provide. I get face-to-face contact with the youth at least twice a week, go into their homes, and teach them life skills. I can be there for them. They get a lot of personalized attention."

Hernandez has seen one of his clients obtain a full-time job with benefits at another nonprofit agency, despite limited English skills. "He's a driver and makes \$1700 a month," said Hernandez. "He pays \$800 per month rent for his studio apartment, so we've got him on a savings plan for part of what's left. And of course, he'll be getting the rent money back at the end of the program. I went with him to the bank to open his accounts and taught him how to write his rent checks. I'm so proud of him for doing so well."

Some of Hernandez's other clients have obtained jobs as bank tellers; one is supporting himself through an IT position while he goes to college full-time to study computer programming. "You have got to keep reminding them that you're proud of them and that they're doing well," Hernandez said. "I praise them every day. But I'm also very strict when they're not doing well. I'll call them and say 'You've got to change your strategy and be more responsible.' In real life, they'd get consequences, so that's what I'm doing. It's really challenging sometimes and very time-consuming, but also rewarding."

Nineteen-year-old Angelique McGuire is one of Hernandez's clients. She had been in the foster care system since birth, but recently moved into a studio apartment in San Francisco and took her first steps towards independence. ILSP provided

funding for move-in items such as furniture and gift cards to Target for small household appliances, bedding and cooking utensils.

Having her own apartment was a big adjustment for McGuire. "Getting my apartment was really exciting," said McGuire. "But the first day I moved in, I was scared because it was a new neighborhood. My cousin slept in my apartment with me that night, and I called my grandmother numerous times. But within about three weeks I was settled in. I've gotten used to it. Now it's just home."

McGuire had utilized the services of ILSP during her high school years, and the program staff were there for her when she was ready to make the move to independence. "They helped me out during high school with prom and graduation," said McGuire. "I went to different life skills classes where I learned to cook, balance a checkbook and set up a bank account. I went on different ILSP outings, too."

The biggest challenge for McGuire was budgeting. "Now that I live by myself, I have a cable bill, phone bill. I used to have a mentality that I couldn't do without anything, but now that I'm on my own I have to do without a whole lot because I can't pay for it. Before, I used to like having things handed to me. It's different when you have to work for them. It makes you appreciate everything more. In the long run, that will pay off."

McGuire is studying health sciences at City College of San Francisco and working two part-time jobs. "It's hard," she said. "I'm always on the go. But I love having my privacy. When I'm out working or going to school, that's everyone else's time. But when I go home and it's just me and I have my privacy, that's my time. And that feels good."



Ivan Hernandez, LEASE program Case Manager.

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Making a Winning Team

San Francisco 49er starts foundation to assist foster youth

When Alex Smith was 20 years old, he was drafted for the position of quarterback by the San Francisco 49ers and his dream of playing professional football came true. Through his new foundation, he's hoping to bring profound changes in the lives of foster youth as well—and perhaps help them make their own dreams come true.

Alex Smith became interested in foster youth when he visited San Pasqual Academy, a residential high school for foster teens in Southern California. "Alex had heard about their football team playing against an elite school, and decided to get the team new gear," said Abbey Smith, Alex's sister and the Executive Director of the newly launched Alex Smith Foundation. "The kids were great. His visit made him realize that he wouldn't be where he is today without his family, and how much harder it would be for these foster youth to be successful without that support. It was an eye-opening experience, especially since he wasn't much older than they were."

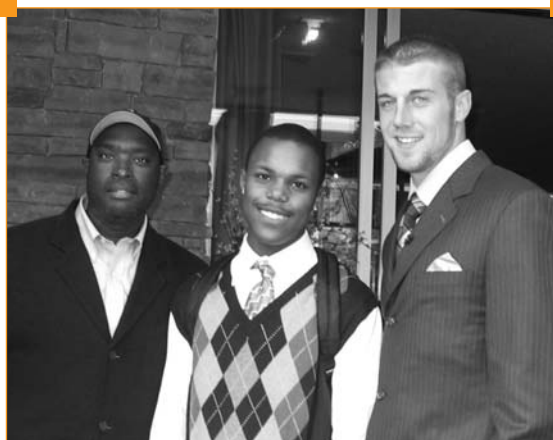
HSA has provided technical support to the foundation as Abbey Smith has developed grant guidelines. "HSA has been extremely helpful," she said. "They've provided a solid backbone of information and resources. They introduced us to the Independent Living Skills Program, where we participated in a round table with staff and representatives of other foundations to learn what the needs are." The

assistance has gone both ways: the foundation has provided gift cards to emancipating foster youth and Alex Smith regularly hosts teens at 49ers home games and also meets with them individually.

The foundation held its kick-off event this June in San Francisco, with Mayor Gavin Newsom and HSA representatives in attendance. Author Antwone Fisher, the former foster youth whose story has been made famous by the movie that bears his name, spoke at the event. "It was a great success because there was a lot of media coverage," said Abbey Smith. "We put out the statistics about foster youth and what they need. We want to spread the word."

The foundation's mission is to provide foster youth with the tools needed to transition to successful adulthood. The agency will make grants to nonprofit agencies serving teen foster youth primarily in San Francisco and Santa Clara counties, eventually branching out to San Diego. The first grant was for \$10,000 to a nonprofit in the Sacramento area that assists foster youth who are transitioning out of the system.

"Alex believes he's so lucky," said Smith, "and yes, he's achieved things through hard work, but he really feels that without his family's support he wouldn't be anywhere. He wants these kids to have a chance to be successful too. He's in a position now to help open doors for them."



From left, Antwone Fisher, Jason Quinn, and Alex Smith at the foundation kick-off event.