

Center for
Strategic
Partnerships



fostertogether
NETWORK

ANNUAL REPORT

2024

THANK YOU | GRACIAS | MERCI | 감사합니다 | DANK JE | DANKJE | MAHALO | ありがとう | GRAZIE | OBRIGADO | 谢谢 | ASANTE | SALAMAT

BOHNETT FOUNDATION

HILTON FOUNDATION

RALPH M. PARSONS FOUNDATION

PRITZKER FOSTER CARE INITIATIVE

SPECIALTY FOUNDATION

A CULTURE of COLLAB



It is with great pride and a deep sense of commitment that we present the Center for Strategic Partnership's Foster Together Network's (FTN) Annual Report for 2023-2024.

As we continue to grow our understanding of how best to serve our youth, the heart of our success lies in our collaborative model - leveraging deep, strategic partnership among diverse groups. With the continuing addition of youth with lived experience, we continue to create innovative solutions to existing challenges and identify new opportunities for impact (such as the State's Reform Rate Increases announced in 2024.)

Last year, we celebrated five years of growth; this year, we emphasized *focus, refinement, and follow through*. Our mentorship initiative marked three huge successes this year: successfully worked with partners to launch the Youth Nexus, investment of over \$14 MM by Department of Mental Health (DMH) and \$3.3 MM by Department of Youth Development (DYD) in mentorship related programs, and active partnership with the Department of Children & Family Services (DCFS) and DYD to improve access for system-involved youth. We made new strides in staving off LGBTQ+ TAY homelessness by launching a new model to increase care volume and quality for LGBTQ+ community. Our Courageous Conversations/Courageous Actions equity work continues to thrive as our training and coaching models have been rolled out within DCFS. We concurrently have begun turning our attention to a more holistic reunification approach, improving the viability of foster family agencies to financially and clinically support DCFS' evolving continuum of care needs.

The progress we've achieved this year would not have been possible without the unwavering support and dedication of our partners and donors (including backbone funders Specialty Foundation, Hilton Foundation, and Ralph M. Parsons Foundation, and individual project funders as detailed herein). Together, we are making a tangible difference in the lives of foster youth, creating a future where every child has the opportunity to thrive.

We invite you to read this report and celebrate with us the milestones we've achieved. We look forward to your continued support as we build on these successes and strive for even greater impact in years to come.

Warm regards,

The Center for Strategic Partnership's Foster Together Network Team



Joining the FTN Backbone Team has been a transformative journey for me as a former foster youth and a budding Children's Social Worker. My experience in the foster care system was a tapestry of challenges and triumphs, and being part of a team that understands and shares this unique narrative has been incredibly empowering. Here, I've found a community that not only acknowledges my past but celebrates my resilience.

Every meeting, every discussion, and every project is a testament to our collective strength. We amplify the voices of those who have often felt unheard, ensuring that the stories of foster youth and foster families are not just told, but cherished and valued. This organization has given me a platform to speak my truth and, more importantly, it has given me the confidence to hone my skills as I develop my career in the child welfare system.

Together, we create a symphony of experiences, advocating for change and fostering a sense of belonging. This is more than just an organization to me; it's truly a family that understands the depths of my journey and stands beside me as we pave the way for a brighter future for all foster youth and families.

A l i c i a S m i t h , M S W
FTN Social Impact Coordinator
DCFS Children's Social Worker
Former Foster Youth

COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS COURAGEOUS ACTIONS



This year, in our quest to strengthen equitable care for Black youth, the Foster Together Network focused on integrating the tools launched previously with FFA and community partners within DCFS policy -- launching Training Modules and Coaching Sessions for Social Workers, Supervisors, and other DCFS staff.

One of the standout initiatives, "The Intersection of Hair Care, Self-Esteem, and Trauma for Black Foster Youth," addresses critical aspects of cultural sensitivity and self-esteem, reinforcing the importance of personalized care. The favorably-received initiative began in January 2024 and has already been completed by 163 CSWs and 199 SCSWs. To further enhance our sessions, future plans for the program will refine training modules based on feedback and look towards expanding the number of experienced social work professionals. FTN & DCFS also are continuing to partner with community partners to share developed equity resources across our collective networks (i.e., Fostering Unity, California Alliance of Caregivers, KIDSAVE).

The Intersection of Hair Care, Self-Esteem, and Trauma for Black Foster Youth

Training launched January 2024; available for all Children's Social Workers and Supervisors

- 2 Modules:

**SOCIAL WORKERS - 6HR TRAINING
OVER 800 CSWS TRAINED**

**SUPERVISORS - 3HR TRAINING
OVER 400 SUPERVISORS TRAINED**



We also opened Phase II of the Courageous Actions work - examining data and collaborating around opportunities to reduce disparities in reunification rates (see Courageous Reunification section).

KIMALA D. LEWIS
RACIAL EQUITY PROGRAM MANAGER
OFFICE OF EQUITY, DCFS

What has been the best medicine for me and being a part of this group is the consistency. The follow-through, the consistency, the attention to details - you have all these multiple players with their calendars and the way they will find a way to bring everyone. And if I'm distracted with other things, they continue to engage me. When that email pops up, I feel committed to the process of making sure that I do my part.

I think that has been to me the best, best medicine for me.



DAYNA FREIER
DEPUTY DIRECTOR
FOSTERING UNITY

Fostering UNITY is proud to collaborate with the Foster Together Network (FTN) to reimagine the child welfare system and improve outcomes for children and youth experiencing foster care. We believe every child deserves an inclusive, affirming, and supportive family that fosters growth, learning, and healing. Fostering UNITY's mission aligns seamlessly with FTN, providing immediate support and advocacy to relative and non-relative resource families through family-strengthening programs, community partnerships, and caregiver support. We prioritize preventative steps towards placement stability to enhance outcomes for children and youth in the child welfare system.

COURAGEOUS REUNIFICATION




This year, FTN has begun turning our collective brain towards reunification. FTN is continually refining our understanding of how best to honor bonds between youth and their biological parents, how best to support biological parents in regaining custody, including the impact of cultural competency:

- Facilitating inquiry with DCFS and partner leadership around greatest challenges to supporting parents in reunifying that resulted in the identification of technology, Medi-Cal billing, and community-based organizational (CBO) partners as leading opportunities
- Bridging DCFS with peer departments and community partners to define technological needs, clarify options for acquiring technology, and surface synergy between this work and other CBO partnerships
- Supporting Casey Family Programs as it developed a demonstration project to integrate CBO partnership, cultural brokers, and improved caregiver partnership into reunification efforts
- Making sure new reunification efforts are looked at through an equity-driven data lens: using data on disparities to drive next steps and integrating how lack of cultural understanding may impede teamwork among parents, social workers, and caregivers to reunify
- Fundraising to bring in Medi-Cal expertise to assist the Department in maximizing opportunities for Medi-Cal to pay for court-ordered or self-identified parent services.

This evolving process holds tremendous promise for creating more effective and equitable reunification strategies.

Partner Spotlight: A NEW BEGINNING



Casey Family Programs, in conjunction with 3FN, Strength Based Community Change (SBCC), DCFS and Parents in Partnership, has created a new model working towards supporting safe, equitable, and timely permanence and reunification for bio parents by strengthening their engagement of community resources and strengthening partnerships between bio parents and resource parents.

EVERY YOUTH DESERVES A HOME



In 2023, FTN responded to a call from DCFS Director Brandon Nichols, launching a mission to enhance caregiving support for LGBTQ+ youth, who often face homelessness or prolonged institutional care due to a lack of nurturing homes.

Since then, our progress has been filled with partnership and guidance from our community partners (*Allies for Every Child, Association of Community Human Services Agencies (ACHSA), Raise A Child, LA LGBT Center, Fostering Unity, The Help Group, and Penny Lane*), the DCFS Office of Equity (*big shout-out to Jamie Estrada, Jessica Brown, and Alexis Glenn*), and philanthropic leaders (*Pritzker Foundation, Hilton Foundation*).

We are so grateful and proud to welcome the David Bohnett Foundation as a funder for UCLA consultant Dr. Elizabeth Ollen, who will carry out important work as the facilitator for the "Reflective Dialogues" model the partners co-developed. This capacity-building effort will improve the availability of affirming care and increase permanency for LGBTQ+ foster youth, thereby reducing homelessness and fostering positive outcomes. *Reflective Dialogues* will be carried out from July - December 2024 with the following aims:

- Develop and pilot a manualized program for current and prospective resource parents/caregivers, which:
 - (1) creates community and support among parents/caregivers,
 - (2) creates a safe space for identifying and exploring areas of concern or challenges for parents/caregivers in supporting LGBTQ youth, and
 - (3) provides concrete skills and information on parenting LGBTQ+ youth in foster care.
- Through this program, increase confidence, willingness, understanding and capacity of current and prospective caregivers to support LGBTQ+ youth.
- Create a sustaining program through a "train the trainer" model to ensure ongoing support of future cohorts of resource parents.

YOUTH MENTORSHIP



Our mentorship initiative celebrated three big wins this year: successfully working with partners to launch the Youth Nexus, investment of over \$14 MM by Department of Mental Health and \$3.3 MM by Department of Youth Development (DYD) in mentorship related programs, and active partnership with the Department of Children & Family Services and DYD to improve access for system-involved youth.

Mentorship Youth Initiative **L.A. COUNTY YOUTH MENTORING NEXUS**

Following through on the recommendations of the prior year's strategic planning, FTN was honored this year to launch a Youth Mentorship Nexus with start-up funding for its lead agencies from the Hilton Foundation.

Powered by a dynamic partnership among Alliance for Children's Rights (ACR), California Mentoring Partnership (CMP), and Be A Mentor (BAM), the Nexus brings together a wealth of expertise in mentorship best practices, organizational development, and youth mobilization, with the goal of ensuring that every transitional-age youth has a robust network of trustworthy peers to support them in their careers and personal development.

"Mentoring Nexus Visionaries" -- 15 youth leaders with lived experience in child welfare -- are the partnership's heart, guiding efforts to build a youth-centered network of mentorship programs across Los Angeles County that fosters mutual support among agencies, spreads proven practices, and increases youth access to successful mentorship.

In this first year, 31 organizations have embraced this Nexus vision and mission, creating a vibrant, supportive community where system-impacted youth can thrive. An active work group bridging DCFS with mentorship provider agencies has already kicked off with the mission to improve access to mentorship programs for DCFS youth.

2024 COUNTY LEADERSHIP CONVENING

In March 2024, the Center for Strategic Partnership's Foster Together Network team and the Department of Youth Development (DYD) hosted the "LA County Youth Mentorship Convening." This inspiring event united 18 county departments, creating a vibrant platform for sharing ideas and sparking collaborations on youth mentorship initiatives. The convening marked a pivotal moment in our Mentorship Initiative, as it opened new doors for innovative partnerships and strengthened the County's commitment to empowering LA County's youth through mentorship.

We are eager to build on this momentum to grow County investment in mentorship programs in 2025!



As someone with lived experience, I have fully appreciated and leaned into the opportunities that Foster Together Network (FTN) have provided me by allowing me to actively contribute to their work. It has been such an honor to have this outlet to give back to my community and to take part in building out and institutionalizing initiatives that will improve the lives of other folx in the foster youth community. Being able to share my voice and have it respected and honored have been such an amazing blessing.

I knew there was power in my testimony and I knew that there were a lot of things that I would change from my experience in care, but I did not have a place to convert that energy into making change until I became part of FTN's community.

Thank you to Dr. Ortiz and the team for providing such a safe, respectful, open, and honorable space for folx like me. I am proud of the work that we are all doing together and grateful to have my voice and experience at the center of the work, leading the way for change.

MIKE GREY, MASTER OF EDUCATION
DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS, RISE FREE
MENTORSHIP ADVISORY BOARD & FORMER FOSTER YOUTH

Through the collective brain model, I've learned the importance of listening and adapting. Every conversation, every shared story adds a new layer of understanding that enhances our ability to support foster youth.

JOELETT ARRINGTON
MENTORSHIP ADVISORY BOARD
FORMER FOSTER YOUTH



ANDRYA MARKHAM - MOGUEL
DIVISION CHIEF
DEPARTMENT OF CHILD & FAMILY SERVICES

My involvement was a start of something that I knew would be special because it was very different. It was partnership with our department, other county departments were present, community, faith-based was there - it was true partnership. We've always talked about data-driven decision-making and as a result of the FTN work, now we're able to better forecast our resources, and look at our data to see where the needs are. FTN really kind of helped pushed us - I have a dashboard that I can go to, and I have ad hoc reports that I can pull and really kind of understand the trends among our FFA agencies. These accesses allowed us to take a step back and really drill down and look at the individual needs and to identify where we need to partner more, to understand our population that we are serving.

I don't even know that we have really come to an understanding of what a great benefit it will be for our department to have leaned into this partnership.



FFA CRISIS RESPONSE



To say that this has been a challenging year for Foster Family Agencies (FFAs) in LA is a monumental understatement. FFAs are facing crippling financial and organizational strain due to insurance challenges, long-standing rate stagnation, inflation, and major decreases in the foster care population -- in 2023 several foster family agencies shuttered their doors.

There is potential hope on the horizon with anticipated State-level rate reform, but with many details to be defined and a short-term crisis in the interim, more FFAs may be forced to close putting our youth (particularly those with complex care needs) at an even greater risk of losing crucial services.

To address these short-term and long-term challenges, FTN is kicking off partnerships with DCFS, ACHSA, Office of Child Protection (OCP), CA Alliance of Caregivers, and Foster Family Agencies to support FFA ability to sustainably provide for foster youth. Specific activities will include:

- Analysis of data to pinpoint short-term and long-term priority needs
- Collaboration with DCFS, OCP, DMH, FFAs and others to address short-term crises (insurance, etc.), and clarify the long-term vision for FFA roles in the DCFS care continuum, given future rate reform, and clarify the future capacity, partnership, and financial support that will be needed to fulfill those roles
- Exploration of potential funding sources and Innovative Models to improve support for youth currently in FFA care with complex needs and youth stepping down from higher levels of care.
- Facilitation, planning and implementation support for short- and long-term changes needed to improve FFA financial viability and effectiveness in meeting the needs of DCFS youth
- Culture shift and narrative change regarding DCFS-FFA relationships
- Exploration regarding short-term and long-term financial support opportunities, including assessment of relative care or other family support contracts as options for diversifying FFA roles and finances.

The Foster Together Network is a collaboration that embodies the belief "Better Together." While I personally believe we are all better together, FTN achieves this each and every day as we all have space to be creative and inventive for LA County foster youth. Working with FTN, I get to see the impacts, I get to feel the difference, I get to enjoy the outcomes for kids and families.

K Y M R E N N E R
DEPUTY DIRECTOR
LA COUNTY DCFS
RCAB-RFA,COURT & ADOPTIONS BUREAU