

Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast
What Does an Effective Support System Look Like? TRANSCRIPT

Presenters: Female Narrator; Jessica Boyd, Child Welfare Information Gateway; Patty Cala, Alternative Family Services; Marsha Lewis-Akyeem, Alternative Family Services

[00:00:00]: [Music Introduction]

FEMALE NARRATOR [00:00:02]: This is the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast, a place for those who care about strengthening families and protecting children. You'll hear about the innovations, emerging trends and success stories across child welfare direct from those striving to make a difference. This is your place for new ideas and information to support your work to improve the lives of children, youth, and families.

JESSICA BOYD [00:00:31]: Welcome to the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. I'm Jessica Boyd and so happy to have you back with us. Today we will be speaking with Marsha Lewis-Akyeem and Patty Cala from Alternative Family Services based in the Bay Area in California. AFS supports families, children and youth in foster, adoptive and extended family settings. The AFS clinical model focuses on a highly individualized social support model with a goal of safety, stability, and well-being. We will be hearing today about building effective support systems, including identifying supportive adults, developing skills, and preparing for successful transitions. Their experiences and stories are truly informative and inspirational.

[00:01:23]: So let's jump right in. Patty and Marsha, welcome to the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. We're pleased to have you with us. Independent living and aging out of foster care. So looking back, how have you seen independent living programs or transition programs evolve over the past few decades?

PATTY CALA [00:01:41]: I've been in my current position for almost 30 years, so I've been able to see a lot of changes. When I first started, young people aged out at 18 or 19, depending on if they could graduate from high-school by their 19th birthday. And so back then, there, we saw a lot more young people leave foster care without a high school diploma. Once foster care, and so we worked really hard to make sure that kids could graduate during that time. The independent living program stopped six months after a young person aged out, which seemed a little crazy since kids still needed help after, at such a young age. In the year 2000, the independent living program grew to look over kids until they were 21. So that gave us a little more time to, to be a safety net for those young people. Then in 2012, AB12 came into existence, in California, at least, where young people could choose to stay in foster care until their 21st birthday. And that gave a lot more time, more young people were able to graduate from high school. And along the way, housing became more in the spotlight. And so there were more housing options for young people. So that's been all really good things over the years that I've seen.

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JESSICA BOYD [00:03:20]: Why have you chosen to focus so much on engagement and relationships and your programs?

PATTY CALA [00:03:26]: So we created a program called the life-long connections program. And it's a term that was created at the state level where the idea was that every young person aging out of foster care would have at least one caring adult in their life that they could count on. And in my opinion, I had, when I first started, I didn't really understand that concept and that concept wasn't even really created back then. Sort of sounds like the Stone Age, 30 years ago. But I had a, I'll give an example why we started to focus on it. And this was probably somewhere around 18 or so years ago. I had a young man who was, had been on my caseload when I first started. And now he was older. He was in his late 20s. And he called me at 01:00 in the morning, and back then, it was pagers and so I didn't, I gave kids my home phone number and so he had my home phone number. And he called me because he was stuck in San Francisco and couldn't get, his ride had left and he couldn't get home from San Francisco and wondered if I would come and pick him up. Well, at that time I had an infant at home and I lived about 40 min away from San Francisco. And I couldn't pick him up. And I'm like, hey, just take the bus and then you're going to have to walk or something to get from central San Rafael home. But I felt really bad about that and that was really hard to say no to a kid who was stuck somewhere in the middle of the night.

[00:05:22]: That kinda started myself and my supervisor at the time to be thinking about, because we realized that was a failure on my part to, to actually help this young person. And so out of that came this idea of we needed to really figure out how to help young people create a support system for themselves. And so over the years it's really developed and we actually have curriculum for it where it started out sort of like, hey, you know, who, who can you, who can help you when you, when you leave. And it was really kind of casual. But we realized it had to be much more vetted. We had to really make sure who the, who were these people that were willing to help the young person. So it was, it was kind of a make or break that we just know that young people can't make it on their own with no support. So out of that, we really focused and our focus, our lens in working with the kid is always about who's got your back.

MARSHA LEWIS-AKYEEM [00:06:38]: Just to add to what Patty shared. There's just so much going on with well-being, health and connection and belonging that there's a direct correlation with physical health and emotional health when people have a sense of belonging and have people they can lean on in their life. It's really the human condition, being able to have those connections and our children are no different. They need to be able to figure out how do you create those natural supports within your network to be able to learn and grow and get your needs met. And there's been studies about health. Well, one of the major components of long health, people being healthy is connection. It's also exercise and what you've taken in your body, but also connection, human connection. So that's really the basis of being sure that we're doing right by our kids when they leave the system, that they're equipped to be able to have

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those social networks. Because no one can do it on your own. You gotta have someone that you call on, you lean on. You ask opinions, questions. You have that, that connection, that belonging.

JESSICA BOYD [00:07:50]: What are some of the misconceptions about support systems that youth and co-workers have.

PATTY CALA [00:07:55]: I think the main one and I'm training a new staff personnel, so I've had to think about this a lot. A young person might come on our caseload at 16 and we're asking them, Okay, who's got your back? Who can you borrow money from? Whose couch can you sleep on? Who are you going to spend the holidays with? Who can come and pick you up in the middle of the night when you miss the bus or your friends leave you in San Francisco. And this was how it started out. And we would have this list of these people's names and their phone numbers. We never contacted the people and we never went back to look at that list. And what we realized later on is, those people aren't even around anymore. Maybe it was my boyfriend will come pick me up or I can go stay with my grandma. Well, boyfriend doesn't exist anymore. Grandma passed away. Now what? All these people on the list were either not in their life anymore or unable to help it for whatever reason. And so the kid thinks one and done and so does the worker. And it's not. You have to keep looking at that list and making sure that those people are still around, still available, still part of the young person's life.

[00:09:25]: And so kids might say, we've already done this. I don't, I don't need to do it again. And then we need to explain to them why we're re-looking at it. And they also don't always want us to call the person, to call grandma and say, because I made this mistake, it was just like I'm gonna go live with my grandma after I leave foster care. And it was like, great, you can go live with your grandma. And, kid aged out of foster care. And then I'm getting this call like, Oh my God, there's, this kid has nowhere to be. The grandma lived in a section eight apartment and she couldn't have her grandson come and live with her. And so again, that's the workers fault for not talking to Grandma. Grandma would have said, I can't, he can come and stay with me for a short period of time, but he can't live with me.

[00:10:20]: And so I think sometimes the stumbling blocks are kids don't want you in their business that closely. And workers feel a little bit like, oh, it's intrusive, I shouldn't be calling grandma and asking, can this kid live with them. But it's really important because otherwise, things that maybe everybody is counting on the worker, the kid, everyone is unrealistic.

MARSHA LEWIS-AKYEEM [00:10:48]: I think it's important what Patty alluded to be sure that we're really being mindful of what the youth wants and what they need and empowering them to kinda take action in terms of what it is that they want or need. I think oftentimes with our children and our youth that we're working with, they sometimes have a misconception that maybe people don't really want to connect with them, don't want to have a relationship with

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them. So really working with all those underlying messages and issues that may be coming up for them to get them to a place where they're open to engaging and really exploring relationships with others. So there's, there's lots of trauma things that can get in the way. So it's important to work on those foundational issues. But I love what Patty said and really exploring with our youth who is it that you love? Who could you love? Who is a possibility and who loves you? And really walking through those different possibilities to explore natural supports and who they have in their community.

[00:11:50]: Sometimes it's people they don't really think about. Maybe it's a teacher or someone in their congregation. But really talking that through exploring that is so, so important. And then I think that you also asked what's important for caseworkers. I think what's important for caseworkers is that they are, in fact, open to certain possibilities and allowing the youth to take the lead and exploring what's right for them and not jumping to conclusions or assumptions. And knowing that people change and grow. So a family member or a person that they weren't in their lives ten years ago may not present to be the same person that they are today. People do change and they grow. A lot of times what we're learning is that youth will leave the system and go back to family members that they know anyway. So I'm not sure how useful it is to really get to a place where you're speaking negatively about these people when they're going to end up reunifying, are connecting or associating anyway. So really being mindful about our ideas, how we're thinking about things. Are we putting people in categories? And are we limiting this youth's possibilities in the future.

PATTY CALA [00:13:13]: One of the other things to look at is we're also teaching the young person how to build, to locate these people because they may not know anybody. So we're, we're looking at finding, building, and maintaining these relationships. And it's through, we have suggested activities that young people can do. We have this monthly calendar where it's kind of like send a text to your go-to person. Send a thank you note for something that they've done for you. If you're in school, send them like a little text about your favorite class that you're, that you're taking. And so what we're also finding, having done this for several years, is that what we're teaching them about this life-long connections project translates over into other relationships. So it translates into their personal relationships. How do they, how do they interact with their peers? How do they interact with other adults? How are they interacting with their co-workers and their landlords and their bosses? And all of the skills that we're teaching them translate over into other relationships.

[00:14:36] And, in the beginning, we're just trying to teach them why is it important? So if you go over to your, to your aunties house and they invite you for dinner, you might not have money or the resources to bring a food item to dinner, but you certainly can do the dishes. You can offer to take the garbage out. You can clear the table after dinner. And it's things that, these are things that are often taught in families of origin, but if a young person is moved from home to home, that might have gotten lost. Or if they're new to the system, they came from a

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family that didn't know how to do that or didn't value that. And so, it's just ways of teaching young people how to have a more reciprocal, a more adult-like relationship where there's give-and-take on both sides and not just take on their side.

MARSHA LEWIS-AKYEEM [00:15:39]: To add to what you were speaking to, as well. I think another misconception can be that because a youth has a behavior that might be worrisome or concerning, that other people wouldn't be open to connecting or relating or creating a relationship and that necessary, that's not necessarily true. I'll never forget the story, and it has really shaped the way I thought about what happens with some of our kids in the system, I'll never forget this. Years ago I ran a level 14 residential program and there was a kiddo, this was many years ago, this is a good 10, 11 years ago, there was a kiddo that was consistently unsafe and physically assaultive, right? Assault to the extent that we would often have to keep them safe and be sure that he's not hurting other youth. And it was day after day that we would see this happen with this, this young man. This young man would be wailing out his aunt's name. I'll never forget this. And I finally said to the team, you know, what is he expressing? This is expressing a need and it was to connect with his aunt and no one was listening to this kid who was clearly expressing something.

[00:16:53]: And, many, many months later, long story short after child and family team meetings, empowering the kid to express needs, talking through issues with the county worker, even with the supervisor when no one seemed to be open to this kiddo going to the aunt, once we finally landed on the plan for this kiddo to go to the aunt, suddenly all these behaviors went away. So behaviors are an expression of needs. So saying, because the kid is behaving this way, nobody will want this kid when in fact, it's the need for connection and belonging that can then mitigate and deal with those expressions and behavior that really have just changed the way I look at things and how I lead.

JESSICA BOYD [00:17:33]: You've developed a curriculum on building a support system for both young people and caseworkers. What are the key components for youth that you hope that they take away and apply?

PATTY CALA [00:17:45]: So, I talked a little bit about the curriculum and kind of how we work with both the young people and training caseworkers. So, we have a curriculum and PowerPoint, mainly for the caseworkers to how do you deal or work with the young person to help them find, build, and maintain relationships. And so like I said, we use different monthly ideas, calendars for what you can do that helps the young person have a kind of a fun and easy way to connect with their, with their go-to person or go-to people. Because sometimes it's a list of five people. Maybe it's one person. And we have lists of names, so maybe it's I can stay with my grandma. I can borrow money from my foster mom. I have a teacher who I call for emotional support, and I have a best friend who I also like, do fun things and talk to.

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[00:19:02] And so checking back in, are these still people that you care about or are still in your life? Checking in with the people, the adults, the go-to people on the child's list. And it looks really different. I work with teenagers and young adults. And so the list and how they're interacting with the people looks really different than if you're working with a younger client. But for my program, we're doing a whole lot of how do you interact with adults in the world in a way that is teaching them kind of adult ways of being. So it's, again, it's not that same old thing of I'm the, I'm the child and you're taking care of me because as they get older, they're having adult interactions where this is your boss. Your boss isn't there to make sure that you eat lunch or take a break. That's an adult thing that you need to take care of for yourself. And so it's not, it's not your bosses responsibility for you to get to work on time. So what we're trying to teach you are the kind of skills that young people need in order to be successful in the world within a relational setting.

[00:20:38] The curriculum talks to both the caseworker or foster parent or adult, and to the young person and how they are going to learn these skills. And we tried to make it fun and interesting and teen friendly. So there's a lot of funny things. There's a lot of tech stuff that's involved, texting and sending a picture, or a selfie. Not a picture that tells how old I am. Like send a selfie with your whatever you're doing at the moment or something. So, and kids have really responded to it. We have a young man who was in our housing program and he was, he was a little bit of an odd duck, although a really sweet young man. But when he came into our housing program, after aging out of foster care, he had never worked before. He had never lived on his own. His mother was, had a lot of health issues and was also a hoarder. So she, he grew up in a super unusual kind of family where you don't know how to clean your house, you don't know how to live a more mainstream lifestyle.

[00:22:05] He was in an apartment and he would do stuff like he would, he was a smoker and so we would just like, flick his cigarette butts out his front door. And he shared a landing with another apartment. And a young couple lived in that apartment. And, you know, at some point they had to go over and say, Hey, could you stop flicking those cigarettes? Because they're like landing right in our front door, right at our front door. And, you know, at first he was kinda mad, but they were just so nice that they ended up being friends with him. And they didn't know it, but it was early on in our process of teaching kids these skills. And we were having a big holiday event where we asked the young people to invite their go-to people to invite their, their lifelong connection. And this young man invited this couple across from, across the hall. And during the dinner, I was doing a little speech and I said, Okay, I want, I want the young person to turn to the people that you invited and tell them why you invited them and how important they are in your life. And those people had no idea why they were there. They just thought, Oh yeah, he invited us to this fun, it was, it was a dinner cruise on the San Francisco Bay.

[00:23:37] So they were like, excellent, I get to go on a cruise. And they were just so touched

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that he felt like that about them. And they said, Oh my gosh, we love him, we feel like that about him. And suddenly it was like he had somewhere to go for Thanksgiving. They eventually moved, but I still keep in touch with this young man, he's still friends with them after all these years, and that was probably eight or nine years ago. And so it's those kind of intense connections with strangers that could have gone a really ugly way. And what it turned into is a lifelong connection and people who, who saw beyond his kind of like oddness and annoying behaviors and loved him for like the wonderful person that he, that we knew who he was. But if you're just seeing this guy who's flicking cigarette butts at your door, then he's just kind of an annoyance. So that was, that kind of is a perfect showcase of what this program can do and has done.

JESSICA BOYD [00:24:58]: Why did you feel caseworkers needed training and training specifically for them?

PATTY CALA [00:25:02]: So again, it sort of came out of trial and error where like I said, you know, I, when I was a caseworker, I didn't even think that kids needed that. And then it was, okay, so we have these little lines where you fill in somebody's name and those were the five people and we never looked at it again. And then it was like, holy cow, this needs to be something that's much more solid in how this is being done. And so this was something that my supervisor and I had talked about over the years. And then we just were like, well, we should just create a curriculum for this, we need to create a training. And so he, I wasn't very good at PowerPoint stuff and so he created the PowerPoint and there's, not that long, maybe a 20 page manual for how workers work with young people to help them build and maintain these types of relationships, both from a young age and up through young adults. And so it just came out of a trial and error and knowing that this was the number one thing that I've seen makes a difference for kids either doing well or not.

[00:26:39]: Because it can't be me that they're calling for the, till they're in their 40s or I have to leave at some point. I can't, I can't work forever. And so who can they call instead of me? It never should be me. It should always be somebody who, who are really going to be there for them for the rest of their lives or until they have created a different kind of family for themselves. And so it was, it was kind of out of necessity and to give some guidance because I think people didn't really understand what we were talking about. We were talking about it a lot. And I don't think people really understood the, kind of the super necessity of it. And then how do you go about doing it? So there's a lot of, this is exactly how to do it. Or here's some just, you can either take it as do this literally, have a kid take a selfie and send it to their, to their go-to person, or just have the kid come up with an idea.

[00:27:48] Like we had kids come up with ideas like they're like, I don't, I don't really want to, like one of them, we had a bunch of, like greeting cards that they could write and the kid was like, I don't want to send a card. Can I just, you know, my grandma really likes candy, can I, can I

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give her some candy? And we're like brilliant, of course you can and we'll buy it for you to give to her. And so we, she didn't live around here, so we had to send it to her, but it was lovely and she was so touched by it. So that was a way that the kid came up with a different way of connecting with his grandma, which, perfect. I couldn't have asked for anything better than that.

MARSHA LEWIS-AKYEEM [00:28:34]: So, just to add to what Patty said, like leaning on the kids way and the kids plan in terms of what makes sense and how they reach out to that connection of that person in their life. And also teaching repair. I love that too. Teaching kids that relationships also about repair. How do you, how do you relate and also prepare for something that's misunderstood or damaged.

JESSICA BOYD [00:28:57]: You mentioned the couple that lived next door and the grandmother that received candy. What are other reactions you're seeing from those who youth may ask or indicate as a supportive adult?

PATTY CALA [00:29:29]: Sometimes it takes sitting down with a person like, wait, what am I expected to do? And we tried to never have it be like it's a burden. It's more like usually the person that the young person has identified as somebody that they know. It's not, it's not often a perfect stranger like the neighbors across the way. And so then it's just explaining to them, hey, Max mentioned that you were his favorite teacher when he was in high school. And he just wanted to see if you'd be willing to connect with him and just be somebody who would be a support in his life. And sometimes those are just emotional support, people who, who will turn into somebody that the kid gets invited to Thanksgiving. So even though those people might not, we've identified a teacher, so it's not like a teacher, you're gonna go live with them necessarily, or even a neighbor. It's not, you know, I don't think any of us expected those neighbors to be as, as pivotal in that young man's life as they ended up being. But what it taught him is, how can I, how can I build relationships with people? And so in talking to, to the new people, we were able to say, hey grandma, I know you haven't talked to this kid for a while - and the kid is right there, the young person is right there - just saying, hey, I want to connect with you again and I remember - and we're teaching them how to do this - I remember you used to make some chicken soup that I really loved and I always remembered it. And we might be saying, Hey grandma, can you teach Max how to make that chicken soup? And then it's like this thing that they can do together. So they're building the relationship. He's learning how to make chicken soup. And she's feeling really like, oh, that's so sweet. He really, I love that chicken soup and he really wanted to learn to make it.

[00:31:27] I'm trying to think of other, those are my two best stories. But we've had many kids who that was their experience that people that they didn't think were going to turn into something bigger. I had a young person who was in a receiving home when he first went into care. And this was a couple that would take in sort of emergency placements. So they weren't

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there for very long with this family. Then family, they got older and they retired and they moved to Arizona. And so I forget how he was able to find them, but he was able to find those people and to share his experience of just feeling accepted and loved and like taken care of during a really scary time in his life when clearly being removed from your home, even if it's horrible, is a traumatic experience. And so those people having such a lovely, caring and loving attitude towards him made a huge difference. And he, he did end up going and visiting them. He used his own money and he went, I think it was Arizona to visit them. And they were just so happy about that.

[00:33:00] And so it was kind of a win for everybody. He reconnected with these people that he had such a great experience with. They got the feeling of, all that work that I did as an emergency home really made a difference in this kid's life. And they got to see what a terrific young person he turned into, you know, and he used his own money to travel and visit them. So that was a, that was a, that was a good story. I had sort of forgotten about that one. So that one was good.

MARSHA LEWIS-AKYEEM [00:33:38]: And also Patty has got the best stories, but on top of her beautiful store that she actually has these amazing outcomes where anywhere from 92% to 100% of the kids that we've served in our transitional housing plus program have achieved some sort of consistent connection for permanency, which is huge. And I just want to acknowledge that because again, the outcomes for kids doing well in the future when that happens is significant.

PATTY CALA [00:34:07]: It's pretty rare. I mean, thank you, Marsha. It's pretty rare that a young person can't or won't identify someone. But we do get that every once in a while. And we had a young man not that long ago who we worked with him for two-plus years and tried to get him to. Nobody, there was no one he had lived with his, when he was removed from his home, he lived with his uncle and cousin and he worked with them and they seemed like decent people. And we said, well, they're, they could be your go-to person, people, you know, you could you could have Thanksgiving with them. You could, you know, build a relationship with them. And he was just so hurt and cut off that we, as hard as we tried even after he moved from our housing program, he just was not in any place to trust people. And he trusted us. He would, you know, we were, while he was in the program, he would call us and he would ask for help. And the only thing I can, I've lost track of him after, I think it's been about six or seven years. So, I'm not quite sure where he is or what's happened, happened with him. But what you hope is that all those seeds that were planted in the work that we did with him somehow gave him just a little teeny bit of hope that there are people out there that he can trust and that that will, he can build on that to change and create a support system for himself. That's what I hope. Unless he reaches out, I won't, I won't know. So, I'll let you know if I hear from him.

JESSICA BOYD [00:36:16]: That is a difficult situation. When creating a support system, what

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kind of information do you feel it's helpful to share to, with perspective supportive adults so they understand exactly what is being asked of them?

PATTY CALA [00:36:32]: So I think the main thing is to sort of normalize it. Like we're not, we're not asking them to do anything above and beyond are difficult. It's just will you be willing to have a relationship, to be open to a relationship with this young person. And sometimes, so we don't say, hey, grandma, you willing to let you know, Joey, stay on your couch for a month? We don't, we don't usually say that because it's everybody's a little bit like, well, I don't know. So, we don't usually approach it that way. We approach it in a more normal way, which is Joey is, misses you and would like to have a closer relationship with you. Are you open to that? Here are some ideas, like maybe you guys could go out to, maybe Joey, you could go to Joey's new apartment and see it. Maybe you guys could just talk on the phone once a week. So that's the starting place of what kind of a relationship might you have with Joey?

[00:37:46] And then out of that, we're working with Joey to move it further along. So maybe it's, you know, maybe Joey's away at college and the dorms close over Christmas. And so if, if Joey's made that connection with grandma, maybe grandma, if he says, Hey grandma, the dorms close at Christmas, I've been doing really well. Would it be okay if I came and stayed with you? I can, I can help out with some chores. I don't have a whole lot of money because I'm still in school, but I can help out with chores. And we can help with that kind of ask. And so it's really just about relationship building. It's not really about putting any one on the spot of, hey, can you loan Joey some money? Because everybody is just gonna be like, wait, I'm not that, I don't even remember who Joey is or, you know, I don't know him that well. And so, it's really, at its simplest purest form, it's just building relationships and teaching the young people how to do that. And usually if it's coming from, I miss you grandma or I remember your delicious chicken soup. It's, unless you're kind of a hard-hearted person, it's hard for somebody to say, I don't want to do that, that's ridiculous. Don't ever call me again.

[00:39:25] Sometimes that could happen. I haven't had that happen. But if it did, that's a learning experience as well. How do you deal with rejection? It doesn't mean you're a bad person. It more says something about the person that's saying no as opposed to you. Or maybe you need to do some repair in your relationship. Maybe, maybe the last time grandma saw you, you were screaming and yelling because you were triggered about something. Maybe you need to fix that. We can talk about how to do that. And so it's really all about relationships and how to build relationships and have people care about you enough to help.

JESSICA BOYD [00:40:16]: Speaking of relationships, how does having a supportive adult impact other relationships youth may have?

PATTY CALA [00:40:23]: I think I talked about how it transfers over to other relationships in young people's lives. Because it's really they've, as is normal for children, they're in a

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dependent relationship, somebody's feeding them, buying their clothes, making their bed, or waking them up or whatever. And then at some point you're being asked, here's - okay, it's not an alarm clock anymore - here's how to fix it on your phone where you can wake yourself up. Here's how to use your snooze alarm. It's better to be early than late. It's teaching all those kind of skills.

MARSHA LEWIS-AKYEEM [00:41:08]: I just want to add to what you're speaking to, Patty. I think the one thing, when, when our youth are connected to adults, they tend to start to see possibilities that they may not have seen before. Because adults, if there's a connection and relationship, they believe in them. And having someone believe in you as a person, whether you're a youth or an adult, is powerful, it's a powerful thing. And so then they start to see things that they don't, they previously didn't see as possibilities. And then there's an investment from that adult to then help teach them and coach them and maybe give them ideas of how they could build in certain areas that they may be interested in, whether it's education or exploring employment. So that's the investment I think that happens with that adult or several adults that create more possibilities for that youth. It's a sense of community. It's community, it's belonging, it's all the things that you get when there's connection.

PATTY CALA [00:42:10]: I mean, any relational skills are gonna be, and if they really take them to heart and learn them, will transfer over to romantic relationships, work relationships, roommate situations, driving down the highway being a courteous driver, just sort of being a responsible adult. And so it starts with learning those skills of what's, what's a good relationship, what does it look like and what skills you need in order to have them. And so the same thing that we're teaching them about, finding, building, and maintaining these life-long connections, it transfers over to every aspect in their life, to all the relationships.

MARSHA LEWIS-AKYEEM [00:43:11]: I remember this, this particular example of this, this kiddo who had an adult in their life and he was really struggling with math. And the adult wasn't going to be able to help because the math was advanced. But what the adult did was encourage this kiddo to explore who was good, create a relationship with someone in the class that was good, started practicing and learning and kind of getting kind of impromptu tutoring from this other child in the classroom. And then the next thing you know, he was able to pass that class. So that's, that's a skill to be able to do that and that's how that adult helped that child navigate through a need.

PATTY CALA [00:43:59]: I think I talked about that young man who flicked his cigarette butts to the neighbors. And he came from a hoarder family of a mom who wasn't, who's quite ill and actually passed away while, while we still were involved with him and we had gotten him his second job. His first job was working at a movie theater. And the first thing he said was when he was still in training and you're just in training for like three hours. And he was like, Oh my God, this has taken up so much in my life, it's ridiculous. So we were like, well, that's actually

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gonna be a lot bigger once you have a full schedule. Anyway, that young person had a good personality but real rough, like just didn't know how to interact with other people. And eventually using the skills that he learned, he became a manager at Trader Joe's.

[00:45:05] And so, Trader Joe's is a wonderful place to work. They take on people as their family. And during his time at Trader Joe's, he wasn't a manager yet, his skate, the only way he got around was with a skateboard and somebody had stolen it. They all got together and bought him a new skateboard. And then during that time also his, his mom had passed away and they did an incredible job. They surrounded him with love and food and help to, to get through that hard time. And I know that the skills that he learned from this project helped with that because otherwise he would have not been able to keep those relationships with his co-workers to where they wanted to hang out with him or those neighbors across the way who were just annoyed with him at first. It really changed his life in a lot of ways. I mean, I don't think it's just this program or this life-long connections project. It was the whole experience I think that he had with the independent living program, with our housing program, with our aftercare services, and with this, with this particular program.

JESSICA BOYD [00:46:31]: Speaking of skills and being a responsible adult, let's discuss independent living in housing. Housing is an issue everywhere, but how are you able to support transitional housing in the Bay Area?

PATTY CALA [00:46:44]: The Bay Area is crazy expensive. And so two years ago, the housing for young people who have aged out of foster care or who are no longer in foster care, between 18-24, there was a supplement for counties that were more expensive and it was based on the HUD housing base and how much it just costs within communities. My program is based out of Marin County, which is one of the three highest housing costs in the state. So it's Marin, it's San Francisco, and it's Santa Clara. And so, all three of the, many counties across the state, the base rate for transitional housing got a supplement based on how much it costs within that county to house. In Marin, a studio apartment is about \$2,000. And so if we want to keep our young people in our community, we have to figure out some way to make our housing more affordable. And so we weren't really able to house kids. We kept losing money in our housing program, it didn't really stop us, but it did stop other, some other counties because it was just, it was too expensive. You couldn't, you couldn't have your apartments and cover all your costs of case management and other support services.

[00:48:34] So that supplement with, that came through in the last two years really helped a lot. And that's true for the housing for non minor dependents for the younger people who are, the younger youth who are staying in foster care who are between 18-21. Those rates were were bumped up for counties that had that were more expensive. And so those those two things have allowed us to be able to keep young people in the community that they are familiar with. Because that was always our main concern that a young person grew up in foster care or were

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in their bio homes and then ended up in foster care in a particular community. But because the community was so expensive, you had to say, sorry, I know you just aged out, but now you need to move to Fresno because you can't afford to live in Marin. And that for probably half of my career, that's the party line that I had to give. And it was so tragic because it was just if somebody told me at 18, I had to leave this place that I was familiar, all my friends are here, my family, whether I liked them or not were here. All the services I know, my high school, everything was here, but now I have to move to someplace where I don't know anybody or, or I'm not familiar.

[00:50:08] And so, having housing options for these young people is really important. The other thing that also is still being worked on because there's still some kinks which is Section eight housing for young people coming out of foster care. And the, each county can get up to 25 vouchers that are good for three years. The problem is within that program, there's not an extra set aside for case management. And so the housing authorities are a little frightened to take on young people because they're a bit of a tricky bunch. They have parties and they're really loud and they're not necessarily the, who you want for a neighbor in your apartment complex. So, the case management piece is really important. So we're working on that. We're working on hoping to get more funding so that, so that there can be a set aside for a case management position that just deals with young people in foster care. So, still working on that, we have at this point right now we have seven youth who are in that three-year voucher period. We could use more. So we're hoping that that gets taken care of. We figure out how to work with that problem of not having case-management.

[00:51:52] The other thing that is, there's a pilot program for guaranteed income. They are, California is doing, I think a two-year pilot project for guaranteed income where they would have a certain amount of young people and give them a \$1,000 a month on top of whatever they're making, either in school or work. In my county in Marin, our deputy director went and was able to get \$150,000 in order to do our own just in case we're not part of that pilot project. And we didn't want to wait around until that maybe is put into a permanent program. And so, we're working with the county to have this program in Marin. So it will serve 11 young people for a year with case-management, a \$1,000 a month to help them out. And that will really help them be able to stay within the community that they're used to.

JESSICA BOYD [00:53:13]: AFS also implements a 90 day training for young people before they enter the transitional housing program. What are the key skills young people need to successfully transition into independent living?

PATTY CALA [00:53:27]: Relationships is probably the number one because they are leaving a foster home where they're being taken care of and they're moving into a housing program. So you're not only teaching them how do you get along with your roommates, with your landlord, with other adults in the world. They're also needing to learn budgeting skills, time

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management, all those types of skills that everyone needs in order to make it out in the world without a parent or a parent figure walking you through that on a daily basis. So that three-month period before they're going to move into the housing program. There's a lot of work on how are you budgeting your money, how are you, how will you pay your bills? You know, oftentimes they don't even know how much things cost or how they're going to pay for them. At their house, it's just magic that they have cable and HBO and their phones hook up to the Wi-Fi. But when you're in your own apartment, who's paying for those things? You know, who's grocery shopping? Who's, how do you grocery shop? How, do you know how to cook?

[00:54:56] So it's all those kind of things. So there's curriculum that we're working off of to help teach those skills. And the foster parent or the resource parent is often a big part of that. Because if we're trying to teach a young person how to cook, they need to be doing that at their resource home and using the kitchen and having their family be willing to eat whatever food they've decided to make. And then how do you clean up afterwards? Because it's not just making the food, it's you have to clean up afterwards. And so how do you make those enchiladas and not have a three-hour clean up afterwards. So, it's all those kind of skills. Cleaning the toilet. If the toilets overflowing, how do you turn the water off? It's, it's things that I don't even know how I learned it, but you need to teach them that or otherwise, it's a problem later on.

JESSICA BOYD [00:56:04]: Patty, Marsha, Thank you so much for joining us today. I enjoyed learning more about the work that you all do for children and families, especially the touching stories and tips from youth. To learn more about AFS or find resources to support youth transitioning out of foster care, visit childwelfare.gov. And of course, thanks to all of you for joining us here on the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. I'm Jessica Boyd. Have a great day.

FEMALE NARRATOR [00:56:36]: Thanks for joining us for this edition of the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. Child Welfare Information Gateway is available at childwelfare.gov and is a service of the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families. The views and opinions expressed on this podcast do not necessarily reflect on those of Information Gateway, or the Children's Bureau.

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