



A youth-developed, youth-led emancipation center focused on supporting current and former foster youth transition into healthy adulthood.

VOICES' mission is to empower underserved youth, ages 16-24, by utilizing holistic services throughout their transition from systems of care, while building a loving community and establishing a solid foundation for a healthy future.

At the core of VOICES are youth-led programs designed to address the independent living, housing, education, employment, and wellness needs of transition-age youth. Beginning in 2005, VOICES has provided comprehensive services to over 6,000 young people exiting various systems of care. Over the last ten years, VOICES has successfully founded programs in Napa, Sonoma, Santa Clara and Monterey counties and is working to establish a new center in Solano County in the fall of 2019. Through this expansion work, VOICES has grown from being a service provider and leader in youth-led programming to an important advocacy body that empowers and prepares young people to confront tough policy issues that impact their lives and opportunities.

In Napa and Sonoma, VOICES has created lively, welcoming Centers where youth engage in leadership opportunities and access a comprehensive, trauma-informed service system. VOICES youth leaders partner with adult leaders to create new opportunities for intergenerational learning and to work to support effective policies and strategies to transform services and systems to better meet the needs of foster youth. VOICES' one-of-a-kind Youth-Engagement Model focuses on empowering each youth, integrating resources and services, and working with the entire community to address the barriers that youth face as they leave systems of care. VOICES youth are not only recipients of social services, they are active leaders in supporting their peers, guiding the evolving vision of program delivery at each site, conducting capacity building to enable growing numbers of social service agencies to become "youth-friendly," and advocating to the community at large to listen and respond to youth voice.

The VOICES model is built upon six pillars that result in a unique, highly effective approach to transforming outcomes for transition age youth.

INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING

Young people and older people learning from each other, sharing points of view and wisdom

YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Coaching young people to share power with adult co-leaders, make decisions, run a youth center and serve peer mentors

SYSTEMS CHANGE

Challenging communities to build better and more innovative systems to support youth, caregivers, and professionals

BUILDING COMMUNITY

Creating authentic relationships of support that give youth a place in the community and engage them as leaders outside of the community

UNIQUE CULTURE

Developing a culture that values honest feedback, individuality, and opportunities to learn and grow through challenges and successes

CO-LOCATED STAFF

Creating a highly-functioning developmentally-appropriate service system supported by multi-agency staff teams who are committed to youth-friendly practices

VOICES understands that change for youth takes place over time. Youth tend to remain connected to VOICES for a long period of time; on average, youth remain actively involved at VOICES for two to three years. Those involved in leadership positions often stay involved for as long as four to five years, returning to VOICES to complete college internships and to seek support as young adults.

VOICES was built with, and continues to rely heavily on, an extensive framework of community partnerships for the delivery of responsive programming and services to support youth. VOICES utilizes the comprehensive expertise and resources provided by this network of partner agencies and programs to train internal staff, deliver specialized services, reduce program costs, and avoid duplication of services. VOICES enhances existing, local services for transition-age youth by partnering with key agencies to provide co-located services and comprehensive information and referrals in a trauma-informed setting. Additionally, over 110 volunteers play a critical role in supporting VOICES through mentoring youth, hosting social events, aiding in field trips to colleges and providing emotional support for youth.

VOICES provides comprehensive, youth-led, no-cost services that lead to positive outcomes in the areas of wellness, education, employment, and housing support. Programming, led by teams of youth and adults encompass the following services:

- **Health & Wellness Services**—VOICES works to promote the wellness of youth by providing centralized services and coordinating a seamless referral system. Youth staff provide core programming including trauma education, mental health support, nutrition workshops, fitness activities, and peer coaching. Co-located services such as health clinics and food stamp application support increase the access youth have to health care resources.
- **Employment and Education Services**—VOICES works to support youth in achieving employment and academic success. Employment services include job readiness training, placements, and retention support. Education services include tutoring, admissions and academic counseling, financial aid assistance, financial literacy workshops, and career exploration.



- **Housing Services**—VOICES works to link foster youth to affordable housing resources. VOICES youth staff will support their peers with applications and interview assistance for emergency, transitional, and long-term housing as well as advocate for the best interests of each young person.
- **LIFE Conferences**—VOICES youth and adult coaches support emancipating foster youth through LIFE Conferences. Each youth identify his/her goals and a team of caregivers, systems professionals, and permanent connections to support his/her transition. Youth present their goals, receive support to develop a LIFE Plan, and implement that Plan with the assistance of adult and peer coaches. To reach youth at critical points in their development, VOICES offers LIFE Conferences in a variety of settings, including at Juvenile Hall and in the county jail. This flexibility leads to stronger connections with youth as they move towards independence.

VOICES' work in Napa and Sonoma Counties has proven that opportunities for intergenerational learning and authentic engagement in leadership opportunities lead to better outcomes for youth exiting foster care. Additionally, policies and systems are enhanced and made better when youth have the opportunity to authentically engage in the development stages of policies and strategies by offering adults valuable input and insight. Most recently, VOICES youth-led initiatives have realized powerful results for foster youth by developing opportunities for systems change in the areas of education, access to appropriate services, housing, human trafficking, and trauma-informed practices.

Examples of VOICES' system-change work includes:

- **Education Systems Change:** VOICES created a new Youth Education Navigator (YEN) who is actively working to provide foster youth with a wide range of emotional, housing, financial, and academic supports so that young people can concentrate on and meet their educational goals. In the first year, the YEN connected with 219 current and former foster youth attending the local Junior Colleges. The efforts of the YEN, coupled with the comprehensive services offered at VOICES, resulted in unprecedented outcomes for local youth.
- **Commercial Sexual Exploitation Youth Leadership Team:** VOICES developed YLTs aimed at reducing the incidents of commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) and human trafficking among foster youth. The YLTs created a youth-friendly training they presented to 187 service partners to raise awareness of the specific, related dangers for foster youth. As the YLTs have gained expertise in the topic, they have uncovered significant needs among foster youth in Sonoma and Napa Counties and have begun to build relationships with young victims.
- **Trauma-Informed Community Highlights:** For 3 years, VOICES has been working in partnership with the International Trauma Center (ITC) to become a fully integrated, trauma-informed organization. VOICES has received recognition for its work in the form of new service contracts and stronger relationships with mental health and child welfare professionals.



VOICES' ability to engage youth in the development and implementation of services and to build collaborative, youth-friendly service systems is the foundation of its success. Measurable outcomes realized by the program include:

- 100% of emancipating youth participants have achieved at least two-thirds of their LIFE Plan goals.
- 85% of youth participants demonstrated a positive change in health status, habits, skills, or knowledge.
- 88% of youth participating in education services have received a high school diploma or GED, or have enrolled in post-secondary education.
- 83% of youth participating in employment programs have gained work experience.
- 76% of homeless youth were placed into safe and stable housing.

While the breadth of impact provided by VOICES in Napa and Sonoma is remarkable, the true power of the model lies in the fact that the “experts” are the youth themselves. Through VOICES, youth are given opportunities to shape programs, services, and the community in order to transform the way in which foster youth are served. VOICES has been highlighted repeatedly in professional publications that indicate the program is “viewed by many youth advocates as a national model of collaboration and youth empowerment.” VOICES' intergenerational leadership model has been identified as a promising evidence-based practice: “The youth leaders of VOICES have demonstrated that youth can sometimes be more effective than adults in bringing together community resources and creating a center where youth's real needs are met.”

Each year, the number of current and former foster youth served by VOICES continues to grow. VOICES is now serving many Napa and Sonoma youth who live outside of their home counties, which highlights the fact that once a youth is connected they stay connected to the people and supports they need for success. VOICES is successfully “graduating” youth leaders, with VOICES alumni taking on professional-level community positions, living in stable housing, finishing college, and beginning to truly heal from past trauma.