



Mentoring Children in Foster Care:

Considerations and Partnership Strategies for Senior Corps Directors



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I. Introduction

Children in foster care are among our nation's most vulnerable young people. Many have been abused or neglected, resulting in a host of emotional and developmental needs. Because they may experience frequent transitions and instability, foster children can benefit tremendously from the attention of mature, caring adults who serve as mentors. Senior volunteers may be particularly well-suited to mentor foster children. The Senior Corps program resonates with the particular needs of foster youth, and the Corporation has prioritized expanding the number of senior volunteers serving foster youth in schools, after-school programs, community-based organizations, and other settings.

This toolkit is designed to help Senior Corps directors recruit, train, and place volunteers in mentoring programs serving foster youth. It can also help you identify and establish productive partnerships with mentoring programs and other agencies that are part of the foster care system. Well-coordinated services between Senior Corps and other partners will increase the positive impacts of mentoring, enabling children to cope better with their circumstances and transition more successfully into adulthood.

II. The Needs of Foster Youth and How Senior Corps Can Help

Recent data indicate that there are over half a million children in our nation's foster care system. Over half these youth are between the ages of 6 and 15, when the influence of positive role models and developmental support is critical (AFCARS, 2005). Every year over 20,000 foster youth age out of the system, losing needed services and entering adulthood whether they have the skills to do so effectively or not (Casey Family Programs, 2001). While many foster youth are reunited with relatives after a short period of time, 40% of foster youth remain in the system two years or longer. The stability of home and family, so critical for successful emotional, intellectual, and social development, is simply absent for long periods of time for many foster youth.

In addition to the trauma caused by the disruption to their family and home environment, foster youth often have a wide variety of other serious emotional and physical needs. Many are victims of abuse and neglect. They may have trouble forming healthy relationships with adults and peers. Many suffer from chronic health problems. Older foster youth may exhibit substance abuse, juvenile delinquency, or involvement in risky behaviors. Academics and educational goals often suffer during out-of-home placement. Even the most

resilient child can be thrown into a pattern of depression, self-doubt, and isolation when faced with the daunting world of foster care.

Because of the disruption in their lives and the loss of support networks, foster youth need many things: a stable, safe home environment, advocacy and representation in legal proceedings, academic assistance, healthcare, and stable peer relations. But perhaps most important, foster youth need caring, supportive adults to guide and nurture them. This is where a senior volunteer can play a valuable role.

A senior mentor can be many things to a foster youth:

- ★ ***A stable adult***— Foster youth are often overwhelmed by a rotating cast of caseworkers, foster parents, clinicians, legal advocates, and other adults. A mentor serves as an island in the storm—a continuous presence and source of support.
- ★ ***A positive role model***— Foster youth need positive relationships with adults they can learn from and grow with. Mentors can model appropriate behavior, provide guidance and advice, and enable foster youth to form healthy developmental relationships with adults they trust.
- ★ ***A connection to other clinical and support services***— While most decisions about services for foster youth are made by an agency case manager, a mentor can be invaluable in referring youth to other supports, such as academic assistance, job skills and training, faith institutions, counseling, and legal support.
- ★ ***A source of happiness***— In addition to the practical roles mentioned above, a mentor can also bring joy and fun to a foster youth's life. Simply bringing some laughter and entertainment to a foster youth's day can help foster normalcy in childhood experiences.

Special Considerations for Mentoring Foster Youth

Most mentor programs serve youth who have emotional, developmental, or educational needs. However, the special needs of foster care youth, and their placement in the foster care system itself, lead to some special considerations:

- **Consistency is key**— Foster youth have likely been hurt by some past relationships with adults. This history, combined with the transition of adults in and out of their lives, may leave them hesitant to form close relationships. If mentors are to be a constant, caring support for the youth, they must be dependable and commit to meeting regularly.
- **Mentors need the right skills and temperament**— This is true of all mentors, but it is especially so when mentoring difficult populations such as foster youth. Mentors must be patient, flexible, and resilient, as they may encounter challenges in forming relationships with youth and in interfacing with other services youth are receiving.
- **Delivering services can be tricky**— The unfortunate reality is that foster youth are highly transitory. They may move frequently from placement to placement, which can make meeting difficult and can challenge support and monitoring systems. Ability to plan around uncertainty is key.
- **Mentoring should connect with clinical support**— Mentoring is most effective when carried out in conjunction with other services (Jekielek, Moore, & Hair, 2002; Kuperminc et al, 2005). Because foster youth have unique needs, effective mentoring for them will be part of a coordinated treatment plan, designed by, or in partnership with, a clinician—someone with extensive experience working with foster youth in a professional context. Clinicians can help a program address special needs, share valuable information with mentors that can help the match succeed, provide access to additional resources, and enhance training of volunteers. (North & Ingram, 2003).

How Senior Corps Volunteers Can Help

Senior Corps volunteers can play an important role in mentoring foster youth, applying their unique assets and skills. Foster Grandparents, in particular, may be particularly suited to serve as mentors to this population.

Foster Grandparents can offer:

- ★ ***Adequate time and youth focus***— Given the need for consistency and availability in serving foster youth, Foster Grandparents' required service hours and focus on intensive and direct support for youth are good fits for mentoring.
- ★ ***Flexible schedules***— Many mentors struggle to fit mentoring into work and other demands. Foster Grandparents often have flexible schedules that increase their availability to youth and their ability to be involved in events that happen during work hours, such as family court appearances, school events, and clinical services.
- ★ ***Life experience***— Foster Grandparents have a wealth of knowledge and wisdom they can share with a young person. They can offer perspective, a sense of history, and a level of understanding about some issues that a younger mentor may not. As many Foster Grandparents have raised and nurtured several generations in their own families, they bring considerable knowledge about tending to a child's needs.
- ★ ***Community connections***— Many Foster Grandparents have been active in their communities for a long time, and have a wealth of relationships and community connections to offer foster youth.

RSVP Volunteers

Because of the need to build strong one-on-one relationships, mentoring roles should be reserved for RSVP volunteers who can make a long-term commitment. However, episodic or short term RSVP volunteers can still contribute by focusing on building the capacity of foster youth mentoring programs. RSVP volunteers, especially baby boomers or those with specialized skills can help mentoring programs:

- ★ Identify and serve foster youth
- ★ Build connections between local mentoring services and foster care systems
- ★ Recruit appropriate volunteers to work with foster youth
- ★ Assist with supporting and recognizing volunteers and participants
- ★ Assist with marketing and resource development efforts

Clearly, Senior Corps volunteers, especially Foster Grandparents, can serve effectively in stations that support foster youth. The rest of this toolkit examines how to identify, partner with, and begin placing volunteers in high quality programs serving foster youth.

III. Identifying Potential Partners

The first step in connecting Senior Corps volunteers with foster youth is to identify those in your community who are serving these children and youth. Few mentor programs are targeted solely toward serving youth in foster care. That said, heightened awareness in recent years of the needs of foster children has led to an increase in the number of traditional mentoring programs that intentionally reach out to this population.

Because most mentoring efforts serve at-risk youth, you should be able to find a number of local mentoring programs that have foster care youth among their mentees. Seek out partners in:

- ★ **Schools**— School-based mentoring has exploded in recent years as schools can offer facilities, financial resources, and access to youth. Schools are notified when a student is placed in foster care, so school-based mentoring programs should be able to identify foster youth they are serving.
- ★ **Supplemental educational services**— Services such as Head Start and after-school programs are likely to be serving youth in foster care. Many after-school programs, particularly 21st Century Community Learning Centers, offer mentoring components that Senior Corps volunteers can join.
- ★ **Child welfare agencies**— Foster care at the local level is governed by county social service agencies. Children in foster care receive a county-level case manager who coordinates their placement and referrals to other services. These services may engage a host of other agencies, group homes, residential treatment centers, advocacy providers—such as Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)—and community nonprofits that may offer mentoring. Contacting your county-level agency is a great place to start in determining who is serving foster youth via mentoring in your community.
- ★ **Family courts**— Some family courts have established partnerships with community-based mentoring programs to provide stable adult support for youth transitioning through the system.
- ★ **Faith-based organizations**— Communities of worship often provide mentoring and other services to children in out-of-home placement situations.

Keep in mind that mentor programs may serve foster youth in a variety of ways, depending upon the needs and ages of the children, as well as the focus of the agency. Mentors for foster youth can offer:

- ★ ***Academic assistance***— Children often fall behind in school when they enter the foster care system. Mentors can help children stay on track academically as well as advocate for them with school personnel.
- ★ ***Transition assistance***— Programs serving older foster youth often focus on independent living skills, vocational training and guidance, access to higher education, housing, and other services that help ease the transition out of foster care.
- ★ ***Emotional and developmental support***— Some programs simply provide foster youth with emotional support and a positive adult role model. They focus on helping the youth build a healthy relationship with an adult, often in conjunction with clinical support.

No two programs offer the exact same services to foster youth. Learning more about the *type* of mentoring local programs provide can help Senior Corps directors make the most appropriate volunteer placements.

IV. Assessing the Mentor Station's Fit with Senior Corps

Once you have found organizations that mentor foster youth in your community, you'll need to determine if they would be a good match for the goals of Senior Corps. As with any station, foster mentoring opportunities should be assessed for quality and alignment with FGP priorities and volunteer requirements.

Characteristics of High Quality Foster Mentor Services

As mentioned previously, there are special considerations to mentoring foster youth. Ask about and look for the following effective practices:

- ★ ***Clinical support***— Mentor programs serving foster youth should have available the support of a clinician, who can assist Senior Corps volunteers with the more complicated aspects of serving foster youth.
- ★ ***Partnerships with other appropriate agencies***— Because foster care youth are highly transitory and engaged with many service providers, programs must have partnerships with foster care and child welfare agencies that allow them to identify, track, and coordinate services effectively.
- ★ ***Involvement of foster families or group-home staff***— Effective programs bring care providers into the web of support they provide, and communicate with those providing out-of-home care for foster youth. Mentors need to communicate with foster parents, especially if problems arise in the relationship.
- ★ ***Clear volunteer position descriptions***— Because of the challenges of mentoring foster youth, it is especially important that programs bring the right volunteers to the table. Work with programs to develop position descriptions that highlight the need for serving these youth and articulate the personal characteristics and level of commitment needed.
- ★ ***Appropriate screening measures***— Gear screening around safety and the suitability of the volunteer to the position.

★ ***Appropriate pre-service training***— Volunteers working with foster youth will need more extensive training than those in most mentoring programs. In addition to relationship-building strategies, mentors of foster care youth will need special training in:

- Understanding the foster care system
- Understanding the special emotional, physical, and developmental needs of foster youth
- Talking about abuse and other difficult topics
- Setting boundaries
- Confidentiality (especially if they are working with other care providers)
- Handling crisis situations
- Dealing with reluctant mentees
- Working with other providers
- Working with foster parents
- Referring youth to other services
- Asking for help: Knowing when and whom to ask

★ ***Preparation of mentees***— Foster youth may be reluctant to form relationships with adults. Pre-match mentee orientation can help them understand the role of a mentor and how this person differs from the other new adults in their life. Ensure that the program you partner with provides mentee orientation and training.

★ ***Appropriate mentoring activities***— In general, activities for mentoring foster youth should:

- Broaden their experience
- Provide opportunities not otherwise offered by the foster care system
- Counteract the effects of institutionalization
- Reduce stigmatization of foster care
- Provide learning experiences (both educational and related to transitioning out of foster care)
(North & Ingram)

★ ***Systems for monitoring and supporting matches***— Effective programs have systems in place that allow them to track youth as they move through the system, monitor the progress of the match, and offer support and ongoing training when issues arise. Volunteers may need extra support and the assistance of a clinician when mentoring foster youth.

★ ***A closure process***— Foster youth's mentoring relationships can end for a variety of reasons—they are reunited with their family, they are placed in a new home, they age out of the system, or, the match simply wasn't working. Effective programs have a closure process that makes youth and volunteers feel good about the experience and what was achieved.

- ★ **Program evaluation**— Successful mentoring programs evaluate both internal processes and youth outcomes. Outcomes tracked should be clear, measurable, and appropriate to the population served (successful independent living, improved perceptions of self, improved peer relations, reduced delinquency, etc.).

Gauging the Fit with Senior Corps

As with all stations, look for a good fit between the program's goals and systems and the requirements FGP (and RSVP) guidelines. Be sure to look for:

- ★ **Compatibility of volunteer time requirements**— Foster Grandparents' hourly requirements and flexible schedules make them an ideal fit for such a placement. Because of the transient nature of foster youth, however, be sure to consider transportation issues.
- ★ **Missions and goals**— The youth-serving values and goals of Foster Grandparents make them a good fit for most foster youth mentoring programs.
- ★ **The ability of the station to support Senior Corps volunteers**— Ensure that the station can offer volunteers the support they need to make mentoring foster youth a successful and enjoyable experience for them.

Once you have determined that your local mentoring programs serving foster youth are up to the task and a good fit for your volunteers, you can move on to considering how the partnership will work.

V. Coordinating Roles and Responsibilities

As with all stations, it is important to spell out the details of your partnership in a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). An MOU can help coordinate services and delineate responsibilities between your office and the volunteer station. Specific to foster care mentoring, be sure to examine:

- ★ **Recruitment of volunteers**— Who will take the lead in finding appropriate senior volunteers to serve as mentors? Who is developing the position descriptions and coordinating marketing of volunteer opportunities?
- ★ **Pre-match training of volunteers**— How much training will you provide and how much will the program provide? Senior volunteers working with foster youth will need careful preparation and your MOU should articulate how that will happen.
- ★ **Monitoring and supervision of matches**— Determine who is responsible for tracking the activities matches engage in and progress they make toward goals. The MOU should include how data gets shared and how volunteers are supported.
- ★ **Connections to other services**— The MOU should capture the relationship that exists between your office (and your volunteers) and the other services foster youth are receiving, such as their county-level case manager, CASAs, clinical services, family courts, foster homes, and others. These may be informal connections, but volunteers will benefit from knowing their roles and responsibilities in interacting with these other providers.
- ★ **Sharing of resources**— This includes space for matches to meet, training materials, evaluation data, and trainers.

VI. Placing Senior Corps Volunteers as Mentors to Foster Youth

Once you have determined the roles and responsibilities of your partnership, it's time to begin recruiting, preparing, and placing volunteers.

- 1. Recruit the right volunteers**— Many Foster Grandparents will be a good fit for mentoring foster youth, and you may be able to find ample numbers of potential mentors through your typical recruiting efforts. A well-written position description can help refine your search (see sample on the following page). In general, look for volunteers who are committed, flexible, resilient, compassionate, and able to be the consistent presence foster youth need.
- 2. Deliver pre-service training**— Your MOU should have articulated the training volunteers receive and who conducts it. Now it's simply a matter of providing training and offering any extra support that volunteers may need before beginning service.
- 3. Make appropriate matches**— Not all of your volunteers will be a good fit for every foster youth mentoring program. As with all placements, make sure that the program is a good fit for each volunteer.
- 4. Provide extra support**— Volunteers will be working with very high-risk youth and are likely to encounter more obstacles and difficult situations than typical Senior Corps volunteers. Work with the mentoring program to give volunteers the ongoing training and assistance they need to stick with it. And recognize and thank mentors for their substantial contributions frequently!
- 5. Find creative ways for non-Foster Grandparents to help**— As mentioned above, the episodic nature of many RSVP volunteers may make them ideal for building capacity in foster youth mentoring programs. Work with your mentoring programs to generate specific capacity-building projects, such as recruitment campaigns or forming community coalitions that can enhance mentoring for foster youth.

Sample Position Description

Foster Youth Mentors Needed!

The Ray of Light Mentoring Program provides senior mentors to youth ages 6-18 in the Lancaster County Foster Care system. These children are in foster care for a variety of reasons, including abuse and neglect, but one thing they have in common is the need for a stable, caring adult in their lives.

The Mentor's Role

Our mentors help the area's foster youth by:

- Serving as a dependable friend and role model
- Working with clinical and social service providers to create a "network of support" for the young person
- Providing academic assistance
- Advocating for the youth
- Sticking with a youth as they move from placement to placement
- Providing fun and bringing a sense of normalcy back to their lives

Time Commitment

- One-year minimum commitment
- Eight hours per month one-to-one with mentee
- Weekly communication with mentee
- 4-hour initial training and two additional 2-hour training sessions each year
- Optional group events, mentor support groups, and our annual mentor recognition banquet

Desirable Qualities

- Dependable, these youth need adults who will not let them down
- Non-judgmental, tolerant and respectful of individual differences
- Encouraging and supportive
- Patient and flexible
- Willing listener
- Knowledge of the foster care system a plus

Additional Participation Requirements

- All Foster Grandparents are eligible to apply
- Residence in the Lancaster County area
- Interest in working with young people
- Access to an automobile, auto insurance, and a good driving record

Benefits

All FGP mentors are eligible for the following benefits:

- Pre-service and ongoing training
- Reimbursement for transportation
- Some meals during service
- Annual physical
- Accident and liability insurance while on duty
- A stipend for income-eligible volunteers
- The satisfaction of making a difference for a child

If you are interested in serving as a mentor for a foster youth in our community please contact Mike Garringer at garringer@rayofflight.org or by calling (254) 348-9733

VII. Conclusion

Mentoring foster youth is a very important undertaking, and Senior Corps volunteers may be ideally suited to support such efforts. By working in conjunction with other service providers, Senior Corps volunteers and local-level mentoring programs have the ability to support the foster care system and provide meaningful, healing relationships that may otherwise be unavailable to these youth. The Corporation for National and Community Service and Senior Corps appreciate the contributions of your program and your volunteers to this critical initiative. The lives and childhood experiences of foster youth will benefit greatly.

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Additional Reading and Resources

Publications:

Best Practice Guidelines for Foster Care Youth Mentoring (New York Administration for Children's Services):

www.nyc.gov/html/acs/html/getinvolved/mentoring_practices_addition.html

Connected by 25: A Plan for Investing in Successful Futures for Foster Youth (The Foster Care Work Group) www.aecf.org/publications/data/connected_by_25.pdf

Foster Youth Mentorship Training for Program Managers (EMT Group)

www.emt.org/userfiles/FosterYouthSeries5.pdf

Foundations of Successful Youth Mentoring: A Guidebook for Program Development (National Mentoring Center) www.nwrel.org/mentoring/foundations.html

How to Build a Successful Mentoring Program Using the Elements of Effective Practice (MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership)
www.mentoring.org/program_staff/eep/eeptoolkit/index.php

It's My Life: A Framework for Youth Transitioning from Foster Care to Successful Adulthood (Casey Family Programs)
www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/ItsMyLife.htm

Mentoring Foster Children (Democratic Leadership Council)
www.dlc.org/ndol_ci.cfm?kaid=139&subid=277&contentid=251931

When Stakes Are High: Research-Based Mentoring for Youth With Multiple Risk Factors (EMT Group) www.emt.org/userfiles/WhenStakesAreHigh.pdf

Websites:

Casey Family Programs www.casey.org

Child Welfare League of America www.cwla.org

Children's Bureau, Administration on Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb

National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning
www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp

The Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care <http://pewfostercare.org>