

# THE ROAD TO SUCCESS



## SUMMARY OF LIFE-SKILLS ACTIVITIES AND PRINCIPLES



THE DIRECT SERVICE AGENCY OF  
THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

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# Welcome

Casey Family Services, the direct service agency of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, has been providing child welfare services for 30 years. Casey divisions operate in the six New England states (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont) and in Baltimore, Maryland. In addition to foster care, Casey offers a broad range of services designed to help children and youth to achieve the highest level of legal permanence possible. These services include: family resource centers, family preservation, family reunification, foster care (including treatment services and supporting the transition to adulthood), post-adoption, support for families affected by HIV/AIDS, and services for teen parents and young families.

Over the years, Casey has gained experience and knowledge in helping youth acquire the life skills they need to lead healthy and productive lives. In 1999, the agency completed a study of Casey alumni who had transitioned out of our foster care program. The youth transitioning from Casey foster care had better outcomes in several key areas, compared with youth transitioning from more traditional foster care. Seventy-three percent of the Casey alumni graduated from high school, compared with 60 percent of foster children in comparable studies. A significantly higher percentage of Casey foster youth delayed parenting beyond age 23, and were employed full or part time. Additionally, a large majority of the alumni reported that they regularly interacted with their neighbors and 15 percent volunteered in their communities.

The hallmark of Casey's work to help foster youth address problems and achieve goals has been individualized planning, based on a youth's strengths and needs, and teamwork with the youth, foster parents, birth parents, and other team members. The agency has adopted the Ansell Casey Life-Skills Assessment (ACLSA) as its standardized assessment tool. All foster care staff – and most foster parents – have been trained in its use, including its integration with permanency work and overall service planning. Results from the assessment, completed by both foster youth and one or more caregivers, guide the individualized planning and service delivery for each foster child and youth.

In addition to its direct services work, Casey has become actively involved in public policy and providing technical assistance through its Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice. Current priorities of the Casey Center include post-adoption services and integrating transitions work and permanency planning for youth.



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*Each division is responsible for assessing the life-skills capabilities of its youth in foster care, developing goals with each child and youth to build life skills, and designing individualized strategies with each to achieve these goals, within the broader context of permanency planning.*

*To enhance this case work, the Casey Family Services divisions have developed many programs and activities to increase and enhance life skills of youth in care.*

## Bridgeport, Connecticut Division

### Circle of Independence Life-Skills Framework

This comprehensive approach integrates Ansell Casey Life-Skills Assessment (ACLSA) domains into practice to allow Bridgeport Casey youth enhanced opportunities to learn both “hard” skills (e.g., job seeking skills, job readiness, money management, community resources, housing) and “soft” skills related to relationship-building (e.g., conflict resolution, communication and problem-solving).

Youth meet weeknights and Saturdays, three times a month or more, depending upon the activity. A Youth Advisory Committee provides oversight planning of activities and events. Staff works closely with many community providers including the regional office of the Department for Children and Families (DCF) Community Life Skills Program and with the DCF Bureau of Adolescent and Transitional Services.

**The Employment Center** incorporates a partnership with the State Department of Labor, through which youth and families receive a list of available jobs in the area. Youth have opportunities to get work experience through relationships with businesses and nonprofit agencies. More than 10 youth had such jobs over the summer of 2005. For four weeks before youth are placed at job sites, Casey staff provides assistance with filling out job applications, developing interview skills, dressing for interviews, and communicating. Job coaching is provided when needed to support the youth’s success. “Real life banking” opportunities are offered with local area banks to allow youth to develop saving and budgeting habits.

**The Survival/Real World** program offers activities and events that expose youth to life-skills enrichment through hands-on applications, including Casey Camper Corps and the Performing Art Troupe.

**Casey Camper Corps** is a youth-directed program that offers youth ages 15 and older a camping and outdoor adventure weekend with youth from other Casey divisions. During these weekends, youth refine social interaction skills, increase self-esteem, and learn specific life skills in areas such as employment readiness, job finding, and job skills. Youth create the theme for the weekend and organize the Saturday dance, gather to create projects (such as a hand-painted and crafted mural done in 2005 to support our troops), and plan the structured downtime for the weekend. Division alumni traditionally partner with the group by sharing their stories and facilitating groups. For 2006, the youth have requested that the alumni take a greater consultation role. Youth learn to apply the skills they gain in the camp experience to their everyday life.

Youth participate in two weekends per year, one of which includes their foster parents. In February 2005, 40 youth in care, including six from other Casey divisions, gathered for a weekend at a YMCA camp. They worked with Youth Rights Media of New Haven to create and videotape nine skits on challenging teen issues. The youth divided up roles and together planned, directed, rehearsed, and performed the skits, with youth-directed camera crews. The director of Youth Rights Media then edited the material into a cohesive video, with youth-selected music added.

**Performing Arts Troupe (PAT)** provides youth with a therapeutic arts and music experience to broaden their socialization skills through enhanced competence and mastery skill development. PAT allows youth ages 8 to 21 the opportunity to heal past traumas through learning, voicing, and demonstrating a variety of cultural art forms targeted at increasing their self-worth, pride, trust, confidence, and competence. All these skills are readily transferable to other areas of their life. They meet weekly for eight weeks in the spring and fall semesters. At a recital during the spring and at the division's Family Holiday Party, they showcase their talents, strengths, and accomplishments.

**The Volunteer Clinic**, through Casey Cares Youth Volunteers (CCYV), provides internal and external community service projects. For the past two years, the CCYV has supported the 29th Annual Walk Against Hunger sponsored by the Connecticut Food Bank, raising more than \$2,000. Youth Volunteers work quarterly at the Food Bank to sort and pack thousands of pounds of food. They also have participated in the Bridgeport Annual AIDS Walk, raising over \$5,000. They host a Senior Holiday Luncheon at a home for the elderly and mentally ill, where they serve lunch, sing holiday songs, and spend quality time getting to know the seniors. They also give a handmade card and gift to each resident. The group has created its own dessert label, "Casey's Desserts to Soothe the Soul," and makes homemade pies, cakes, and cookies for community families in need during the holiday season. These youth also create volunteer ideas around world crisis events.

#### **Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (JCYOI)**

Building on the experience of the School-to-Career Partnership, funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Casey Family Services, the State Department of Children and Families (DCF), and Connecticut Voices for Children have created a version of the JCYOI for Bridgeport and Hartford. (See details at: [www.jimcaseyyouth.org](http://www.jimcaseyyouth.org).) Youth in state care and a few from Casey are being recruited to participate, through community-based youth service contractors, including one with extensive youth business experience and another with experience managing Individual Development Accounts. DCF has already signaled that the JCYOI approach to packaging transition services, including more emphasis on permanency planning, will likely become the model for more youth in state care and has requested state funding to do this.

## Hartford, Connecticut Division

### Life Skills Youth Group

The division has a long-standing group for high school age foster youth that meets on Saturdays and weeknights for training on hard and soft life-skills development. Meetings generally have different life skill themes (e.g., building relationships, job seeking skills and job readiness, money management, community resources, housing, conflict resolution, communication and problem-solving skills, and peer support). In 2005, more than 20 foster and adopted youth participated in these sessions.

The division has negotiated with the State Department of Children and Families (DCF) to have the Casey Family Services Life-Skills Curriculum – the framework for the Youth Groups – approved as meeting DCF’s curriculum requirements for youth in care of the state and private agencies that contract with the state.

### Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (JCYOI)

Building on the experience of the School-to-Career Partnership, funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Casey Family Services, the State Department of Children and Families (DCF), and Connecticut Voices for Children have created a version of the JCYOI for Bridgeport and Hartford. (See details at: [www.jimcaseyouth.org](http://www.jimcaseyouth.org).) Youth in state care and a few from Casey are being recruited to participate, through community-based youth service contractors, including one with extensive youth business experience and another with experience managing Individual Development Accounts. DCF has already signaled that the JCYOI approach to packaging transition services, including more emphasis on permanency planning, will likely become the model for more youth in state care and has requested state funding to do this.

### Youth Business

In 2004, the Life Skills Youth Group created “Tempting Tasteez,” a small business that sells fruit smoothies at large events, as a way to introduce youth to the challenges and opportunities in running a business. Working with a retired businessman, these youth comprise the board of directors and, along with Casey staff, decide how to distribute revenues and plan for future events. All revenues flow through the nonprofit organization, Street Smart Ventures (SSV). SSV also provides technical assistance to other organizations on youth entrepreneurship and how this concept can fit into a broader youth employment strategy.

## Maine Division

### The Casey Adventure Group

Youth 12 to 15 years old participate in monthly outdoor activities beginning with a facilitated challenge course. At the end of the challenge course, each youth establishes one or two social skills goals. Opportunities to work on these goals are presented during each activity. Examples of activities include hiking, biking, overnight camping, and a trip to Boston. Examples of goals are making new friends, taking pride in accomplishments, being a more constructive leader, stating opinions and thoughts to others, and being aware of how others are feeling and how actions affect them. After each activity, Family Support Specialists or the Life-Skills Specialist completes a home visit to follow up on the youth's progress on his or her goals and to attempt to transfer learning into the home environment. At the end of the program, youth and family members participate in a graduation ceremony where they receive a certificate of accomplishment and verbal recognition of their efforts and progress.

### Casey Advisory Transition Team (CATT)

The primary purpose of CATT is to provide a forum for young adults to discuss their plans for transition out of high school, group or foster care into further education and training, the job market, and/or apartment, group, or dorm living. CATT helps young people develop their plan through guidance, encouragement, listening, and challenging them to think of all aspects of a more independent life. Young adults are encouraged to include people – their own foster parents, social workers, or friends – to whom they will look for support along their journey.

CATT is made up of young people over the age of 18 who are experiencing their own transitions. In addition to young adults and alumni, foster parents and Casey staff participate in CATT. The CATT process integrates with broader permanency work to increase the likelihood that each youth's transition will include legal or other family relationships.

### Inter-ACTION

Youth 12 to 16 years old who are involved in the Fostering Permanence and Sustaining Permanency programs participate in a weekly two-hour meeting for six consecutive weeks. Each meeting addresses a different social skill or set of social skills through role plays and discussion based on *Social Skills Activities for Secondary Students with Special Needs* by Darlene Mannix.

### **Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (JCYOI)**

Building on the experience of the School-to-Career Partnership funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Casey Family Services staff helped the Muskie Institute at the University of Southern Maine to manage the statewide implementation of the JCYOI in 2004. The grant is in its third year, and 17 Casey youth are enrolled in the Opportunity Passport program with open Individual Development Accounts and checking accounts. Some Casey youth are also engaged in the Youth and Community Boards and working on “Door Openers” to address additional transition needs. These youth are building their savings through the development of good saving habits. A few have used their savings to buy cars, finance college, and pay rent, which are the types of needs envisioned by JCYOI.

### **Sailing on the Bagheera**

Girls 12 to 16 years old participate in this seven-week program each summer. One day each week youth meet at Maine State Pier in Portland and board a 72-foot, 80-year-old wooden schooner named “Bagheera.” In addition to working on communication and a variety of other social skills, youth learn the following about working on a sailing vessel. As one teen described it:

*“You are a crew member, someone who is expected to be fully involved in all operations of the boat. Crew members will work toward – and achieve! – the knowledge required for running the boat itself. Each session aboard the Bagheera will build upon the last, so that participants, without aid from the boat’s professional crew, are capable of completing a final challenge: getting the boat underway from the dock, setting the sails, and steering a course around the islands before returning to the dock.... And most important, every person aboard has a vital role in the boat’s operation. In short, care for Bagheera, and she will care for you.”*

### **Summer Wilderness Work Project**

This 10-day adventure-based work training program gives 14- and 15-year-old youth the chance to earn a paycheck while developing their self-concept and social skills through group living in a back-country setting. Youth are evaluated on their work skills and effort on each of the four days they learn and work with a Maine Conservation Corps trail crew. The second half of the trip entails paddling down the St. Croix River, which forms the border between Maine and New Brunswick, Canada. Each group does a service project in cooperation with the St. Croix International Waterway Commission. Youth are also responsible for taking care of their tents, cooking, cleaning-up, maintaining a drinking water supply, and learning outdoor camping skills. In 2005, separate trips were conducted for boys and girls. This program is in its 10th season.



## Baltimore, Maryland Division

### After-School Services

The after-school program provides a safe environment for boys and girls ages 11 to 14. Youth receive homework help, tutoring, and life-skill building experiences such as creative expression projects with art and literature, anger management, pregnancy prevention, violence prevention, and social skills groups.

### Family-based Day Care

Childcare services are sponsored in licensed day care homes that afford young parents the opportunity to complete their high school diploma, attend job training, or maintain employment, while their children are in a safe and nurturing environment.

### Family Economic Success (FES)

The FES initiative supports families building stronger financial stability. FES integrates workforce development and family economic support to achieve economic self-sufficiency for families. This includes financial management workshops, continuing education, childcare information, resume writing, and assistance with job readiness.

### Family Support

This consists of a series of classes, groups, and activities that foster economic success, children entering school ready to learn, peer-to-peer support, and networking. These groups and activities include GED, Pre-GED, ESL, and computer classes. There also are parenting education classes, play groups in English and Spanish, creative arts group, support groups, a mentor program, an after-school program, and community events such as the family dinner, holiday cookie bake, summer picnic, and a host of other family fun activities.

### Male/Fatherhood Services

These services provide fathers and other males with support services that include parenting, advocacy, personal consultation, resource utilization, and employment preparation and referrals.

### **Road 2 Success**

The Road 2 Success is a one-day simulation of the “real world.” Modeled on Casey’s 2003 youth conference “Youth Building Our World”, the event concretely addresses responsible decision-making in combination with lifestyle choices (such as housing, transportation, and leisure). In both 2004 and 2005, this event provided over 100 youth with the challenge of “selecting” an occupation based on an employment-education assessment, budgeting a hypothetical monthly salary based on everyday needs (e.g., rent, utilities, groceries, and transportation) and situational crises (e.g., medical, emotional, social, and accidental). This event helped youth to re-evaluate occupational choices based on lifestyle preferences while gaining essential life skills.

### **Youth Action Committee**

Formerly known as the Youth Advisory Board, this committee is composed of 10 to 15 youth ages 14 to 18. Its purpose is to empower youth to become informed, involved, and a part of efforts to impact community issues. Youth organize various projects including a Black History Celebration, Social Work Month activity, Violence Prevention, support to the homeless, and the most recent project of donating personal hygiene kits to the Red Cross’ Hurricane Katrina Relief.

### **Young Parents Program**

The division’s original program addresses a variety of related life-skills issues such as parenting, education, and health care of young parents among ages 12 to 26. Staff, participants, and parents work together on assessing and identifying the life-skills needs and goals of each participant, addressing those needs through home visitation, case management, center-based support services, and collaboration with other agencies.

## Massachusetts Division

### Life Skills Assessment and Planning

The Ansell Casey Life Skills Assessment (ACLSA) is used with all youth in care age 8 and older. Because of the intensive case management and relationship building, staff are generally very aware of life-skills needs and use the ACLSA to complement that experience. All social work staff have been trained to use this tool.

The division works hard to place each youth into a developmentally appropriate educational and vocational track as part of service planning, and as part of the agency's expanding focus on helping every youth in its care achieve permanence through "life-long family ties." For example, a youth who is capable of community college, but not a four-year program, will develop a plan that will include matching that youth with the best possible community college resource, advocating for special services if needed, and assessing computer skills and transportation needs. Ultimately, the plan defines a "permanency network" that encompasses all these needs.

The division has extensive experience in helping teens with life-skills needs, such as getting a driver's license, finding jobs and job counseling, budgeting in goal-directed ways, and learning the stages necessary to live independently in an apartment. Staff also have developed pre-vocational programs like "Casey Dollars" where youth do volunteer work or achieve in school to earn credits that can be used to buy items they want or convert into savings. This program has been very helpful for youth who have not yet developed the skills to succeed in the open job market.

### Youth Advisory Councils

Through its two family resource centers located in public housing projects, Casey works with youth and families to address a variety of needs. Each center has created a Youth Advisory Council, made up of adolescent youth from the respective neighborhoods. The youths' work includes life-skills needs, peer group relationships, and school-related support.

### Youth Advocacy

Since the Division opened 13 years ago, it has a "generation" of foster care alumni in their 20s, and has identified those with the ability to provide leadership to younger foster youth through group activities. These activities include: Teen Talk, which regularly hosts an alumnus or alumna to talk with younger youth in care, advocacy at local, state and national legislative levels for foster care issues, and participation in publicity efforts through radio, newspaper and television to heighten awareness of foster care issues and facilitate foster parent recruitment. An annual alumni dinner brings together as many division alumni as possible to "catch up," talk about current challenges, and just socialize.

## New Hampshire Division

### Teen and Caregiver Groups

The division provides a life-skills group for 13 to 14 year olds who are in foster care and some youth in the post-adoption program. Meeting nine to 10 times per year on school holidays, the group focuses in the first year on intangible life-skills areas as emotional health, exercise, friends, hygiene, nutrition, relationships, and sexuality. Each participating youth gets paid \$5.50 an hour while attending the day-long group sessions, but actual pay is determined by each youth's behavior, so that participation feels like a real job experience. The curriculum, time sheets, ACLSA results, and related materials are kept in a workbook customized for each youth. During the second year, the group follows the requirements of New Hampshire's "TRAILS" curriculum.

### Teen Advisory Board

This five-year-old group of foster youth at least 15 years of age, undertakes a variety of activities such as putting out a newsletter (*Today's Dreams, Tomorrow's Futures*) that includes poetry, art work, photography, puzzles, advice, and more; developing a *Handbook for Teens in the Foster Care System*; and participating in various recreational activities.

## Rhode Island Division

### **Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (JCYOI)**

In partnership with the State Department of Youth and Families and several community-based organizations, the division created, runs, houses, and staffs the Rhode Island version of the JCYOI. Building on the School-to-Career Partnership, JCYOI serves Casey youth, state child welfare system youth, and other at-risk Rhode Island youth. The Youth Board works closely with the Community Partnership Board to govern the project and allocate funding to projects benefiting foster youth. Seventy-five youth were enrolled in JCYOI in 2005.

### **Life-Skills Groups**

Various life-skills groups are formed to meet the needs of different age groups of youth in care.

The division currently has a Life-Skills Group of 13- to 19-year-old girls and boys that explores issues selected by the youths through a variety of educational and recreational activities. Issues include sexuality, relationships, family issues, communications, job finding, and college preparation. The “Skills Streaming Curriculum” provides the foundation for much of this group work. Two additional groups were created in 2005: a Monthly Teen Leadership Group for adopted boys ages 16 to 18, and a Teen Movie Group for adopted girls and boys ages 14 to 16. Both groups do fun activities and discuss adoption-related issues with an appropriately trained staff member.

## Vermont Division

### Casey Companions

Since 1989, Casey Companions have been devoting individualized attention to Casey children and youth. Companions are selected after being interviewed by staff and foster parents and passing a criminal records checks. They are paid for their services. Casey companions range in age from older adolescents to retirees and often include Casey alumni or youth in independent living who serve as companions for younger Casey kids. Individual social workers sometimes enlist companions who are already known to a child or youth through natural connections with their biological or foster family.

### Casey Learning to Work Program

Launched in 1990, this program prepares younger adolescents for the world of work through supported, supervised internships. Casey works cooperatively with local businesses to create opportunities for young people to experience the responsibility and rewards of work. Expectations for punctuality, reliability, and performance are all established by the business and close supervision of the work of the Casey intern is provided. Casey asks the business to consider some stipend for the youth, if necessary, Casey may supplement or assume the total cost of the stipend.

### Foster Parents as Landlords

Some transitioning older teens are placed temporarily with foster families who, acting as landlords, create a contract with them. Foster parents enforce the types of rules and procedures that youth could expect if living in an apartment in the community.

### Goal-Setting

The McGill Action Planning System (MAPS) was created to aid in the development of Individual Education Plans (IEP) for children in need of services. MAPS was adapted by Casey as a structured conversation among a team of people including the youth, the youth's families (birth, adoptive, foster, and/or extended), friends, and professionals whom the child chooses. The information expressed through the process leads to a vision of what the youth hopes and dreams for and ideas about how to realize those dreams. After completing the MAPS, the team follows additional steps to help ensure that the plan will be successful, including setting time for a review of the plan.

Foster parents have commented that the MAPS process takes some of the pressure off them by providing a "reality check" to youth in transition. The plan generated also helps define what the youth needs from the foster parents in order to achieve his or her goals. Youth feel "heard" by the people included in the MAPS. Even the shyest of youth find their voice when the process highlights their strengths and challenges.

### **Life-Skills Groups**

Various life-skills groups are formed to meet the needs of children and youth in care. The division currently offers a Movie Group in each location open to 13- to 19-year-old girls and boys from the foster care and post-adoption programs. Participants have dinner, watch the movie, and discuss themes such as difference, belonging, and family. The group addresses “soft” life skills such as social skills.

### **Transitional housing**

The division is a member of the Upper Valley Consortium for Transitional Housing, which received a Federal grant to build or renovate 28 rental units made available in 2003. Casey youth leaving foster care have access to several units.

*Although most life-skills programs and activities occur at the divisions, some agencywide programs include youth and alumni from two or more divisions.*

## Activities and Programs

### Alumni Involvement

Casey Family Services reaches out to its alumni to see “how they are doing” and to involve them in talking with current youth in care and parents and in representing the agency at conferences as speakers and panel members.

For example, four Casey alumni – three in college and one working and married – attended the 2005 Pathways Conference in Atlanta with Casey’s life-skills coordinator. They presented a “fishbowl forum” workshop, in which volunteer workshop attendees sat in two circles with the alumni and asked each other questions, posed by Casey’s life-skills coordinator, about their time in care and listened respectfully while the other group discussed the questions.

In the summer of 2005, another Casey alumnus, a college graduate and high school teacher in Brooklyn, undertook an internship at the New Haven Administration Office to develop a policy on “strategic sharing” for younger youth in care. This was based on a 2004 training on alumni leadership development in Austin, Texas, sponsored by Casey Family Programs and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. This policy will be incorporated into a broader Casey Family Services policy on “Youth and Alumni Leadership Development.”

In February 2006, five foster care alumni participated in a “fishbowl forum” with agency staff in New Haven. Employees and alumni took turns asking questions of each other in an open dialogue.

In April 2006, five Casey Family Services alumni presented the workshop “Alumni Look at Permanence: Looking Back and Forward” for staff at the agency’s 2006 Interdivisional Conference in Waterville Valley, New Hampshire. The youths discussed what family meant to them and their personal journeys toward permanence.

### The Ansell Casey Life-Skills Assessment (ACLSA)

Casey’s Management Team approved regular use of the ACLSA by all social workers in all eight divisions in 2004. All youth in long-term care, age 8 and older, have their life-skills competency assessed, through the ACLSA. Life skills goals are developed – with youth, caregivers, and social workers participating – and integrated into overall service planning. Follow-up training – for new staff and as a refresher for veteran staff – will be done in 2006, with an emphasis on how life-skills learning integrates into overall service-planning, and facilitated Casey’s focus on permanence.



### Connecticut Youth Policy Advisory Committee

In late 2004, staff from the two Casey Family Services divisions in Connecticut convened “focus groups” of youth in care and alumni, and posed the questions: “If you were talking with state legislators, the State Commissioner, or the Governor, what would you say to them about your experience in the system? What was helpful? What was missing? What changes would you recommend to improve the system?”

Over the next few months, staff synthesized the results, validated them with the youth in both groups, and then brought the groups together to discuss the issues, and select a theme. The theme chosen was “Family Connections,” with a focus on maintaining sibling relationships.

From January through April, staff prepared the group of about 20 youth and alumni, to share their stories, and advocate for change. With the help of a state legislator and Casey staff, “Youth Advocacy Day” was set into motion. The youth group made two trips to the Capital to hand-deliver invitations and flyers, meet legislators, and become familiar with “their” legislature and the Capitol environment. Casey’s youth honed their presentation skills. By learning how to strategically frame their stories about being removed from their homes, placed in foster care or group homes, and having lost contact with siblings and other family members. Casey staff helped youth prepare through role-playing and provided tips on presentation, dress, behavior, and overcoming stage fright.

Six youths were selected to make two-minute presentations in a main hearing room at the Connecticut State Capitol Building in Hartford. Twelve others made up the “support team,” who were prepared to engage in the discussion that followed the presentations. They were encouraged to ask and answer questions from the legislators, state officials, and other audience members. Reactions were overwhelmingly positive, with several legislators promising to put the youths’ concerns “front and center” in the next session. More important, several legislators expressed gratitude for the knowledge they gained from the session.

In February 2006, Casey Family Services staff, three current youths in care, and a foster care alumnus presented at the Child Welfare League of America’s National Conference in Washington, D.C. The group shared its youth-driven legislative advocacy efforts in Connecticut. These young adults told an enthusiastic audience about how they had prepared themselves to talk with legislators and policymakers regarding their concerns.

### **Integration of Life Skills into Permanency Planning**

Casey's commitment to permanence for all youth coming into foster care is based on two general goals: life-long family ties and preparation for adulthood. These goals are discussed in detail in "A Call to Action: An Integrated Approach to Youth Permanency and Preparation for Adulthood," developed in collaboration with Casey Family Programs and available online at [www.caseyfamilyservices.org](http://www.caseyfamilyservices.org).

Life-skills work – assessment, goal-setting, and recognition of increased competency in key outcome areas – occurs within a broader permanency planning framework. Thus, life-skills work, or preparation for adulthood, occurs within families, in the community, and at Casey offices through individual counseling and life-skills and social groups for both younger and older adolescents. All of this coordinated work points toward the development of self-sufficiency, but within a permanency structure – ideally a legal structure – as desired by each young person.

Using the sequential structure of the ACLSA, a "life-skills learning plan" is developed for each youth that begins with the assessment, develops realistic goals addressing both interests and challenges, pursues activities to accomplish these goals, and is reviewed periodically to see whether desired competencies have been increased. The "Sample Life-Skills Goals and Competencies" exhibit, on page 21, illustrates what these goals could look like for one youth.

### **Youth Conferences**

Every two years, Casey brings together most of its foster youth for two days of fun and life-skills learning. In 2001, youth, staff, and presenters gathered at the Waterville Valley ski resort in New Hampshire for a variety of workshops and interactive events. In 2003, youth and a core group of alumni gathered at Bentley College in Waltham, Massachusetts, for a weekend that included a "life-skills simulation" called "Success City," a related series of workshops, and interactive entertainment, including a Brazilian dance team. For June 2006 the Youth and Alumni Planning Committee has worked with staff from the National Resource Center for Youth Services at Oklahoma University to present a similar conference at the University of Connecticut. As in the past, this event featured large- and small-group sessions revolving around the general theme of "Youth Leadership," and focused on permanence.

## Guidelines

Casey Family Services' life-skills work is guided by the following standards:

1. Requirements of the Council on Accreditation,
2. Recently-released "Standards of Excellence for Transition, Independent Living, and Self-Sufficiency Services," from the Child Welfare League of America, and,
3. Permanency Principles outlined in the "Call to Action: An Integrated Approach to Youth Permanency and Preparation for Adulthood."

## Principles and Implementation Strategies

**Life-skills planning** is central to effective service planning, successful transitions, and permanence. Such goal-setting is not a discrete activity, but is central to effective practice for all youth with whom we have long-term relationships.

### Implementation

1. Life-skills planning should be included in all service planning and case reviews.
2. The integration of life-skills learning with permanency planning is essential to successful transitions.
3. Comprehensive assessment of a youth's strengths and challenges is central to successful joint planning for life skills and permanence.

**Assessment** defines both strengths and challenges, providing the foundation for goal-setting and the recognition, and even measurement – by youth, parents, and social workers – of goal achievement.

### Implementation

1. The Ansell Casey Life-Skills Assessment (ACLSA) should be used with all youth in foster care who are at least 8 years old at three to six months after placement, and then again at regular intervals. Life-skills goals, and the activities used to achieve those goals, should be structured around the nine domains that underlie the ACLSA. See page 21 for an example of one youth's plan.
2. All foster parents, and prospective foster parents, should be introduced to the ACLSA, either at home or in groups.
3. Life-skills learning occurs best in a "real world" context.

*All of Casey Family Services' life-skills and transition-planning work is based on promising practices and a framework of guidelines and standards applicable to the agency.*

**Families** – birth families, foster families, relatives, and neighbors – are the primary vehicle for life-skills learning. Youth-centered, family-focused collaborative team planning and decision-making should develop and strengthen family team planning and decision-making. But groups, especially for adolescents, can effectively supplement what happens – or occasionally replace – what does not happen at home. Practice (ideally out in the community) makes perfect.

#### Implementation

1. Family members and other adults in a youth's network of relationships should be engaged in joint permanency and life-skills planning.
2. Youth should be the lead partner in joint planning and decision-making.
3. Life-skills goals should be a part of youth-driven, family team meetings focused on each youth's definition of permanence, and at the heart of their "preparation for adulthood."
4. Youth in care, especially adolescents, should be offered a life-skills group planned and staffed by Casey Family Services life-skills specialists, to foster life-skills learning in the nine ACLSA domains. Parents should participate where appropriate.
5. All Casey youth in care should participate in a Real World Fair or similar community-based life-skills learning, as a complement to family-focused life-skills learning.

**Youth Engagement** – active involvement on multiple levels of youth being served – is critical to effective long-term outcomes for those youth. Empowering youth to shape their world means involving them in their case discussions, and in leadership groups that also improve agency practice.

#### Implementation

All divisions should have a working Youth Advisory Board that serves as a leadership training vehicle for the agency and as a forum for feedback on services. Members would logically be drawn from a life-skills youth group.

## Standards

**Diversity** underlies effective life-skills and transition work. An assertive appreciation of the nuances and impact of diversity among different types of youth, families, communities, and even staff, enhances the quality of all the agency’s work, from basic service planning and related life-skills planning, through a transition period.

### Implementation

1. Diversity of all types (e.g., racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation) should be a regular part of life-skills learning – through discussions and experiential activities.

**Transition and permanency planning** should begin at service entry and continue until exit from Casey care.

### Implementation

1. The focus on permanence, safety, and well-being should begin as soon as a youth comes into care and continue as long as he or she is with Casey.
2. All foster parents, and prospective foster parents, should be introduced to the ACLSA, either at home or in groups.
3. Tangible life skills, per the ACLSA domains, should relate to intangible life skills, including clinical issues.
4. Youth should create an “extended family network” in the community, consisting of foster family, biological family if possible, and other types of mentors and friends.

**Once a Casey youth, always a Casey connection.** Life-skills work and transition planning, begun early, teach healthy self-sufficiency and model essential lifelong relationships, but not disconnection from Casey. Long-term support is family-focused and based on youth-centered needs, promote self-sufficiency, safe and secure family and community relationships, based on mutual benefit, and continues to nurture young adults, while educating the agency.

### Implementation

1. Periodic outreach to alumni should be conducted through regular communications and occasional events (e.g., dinners or conferences).
2. Accurate, up-to-date information on alumni should be maintained.
3. Alumni could be used selectively to mentor current youth in care.

**Collaboration** with community partners increases our capacity to foster positive, long-term outcomes for our youth. Community partners bring additional expertise, and collaborative, multi-sector work is the real world – good life-skills learning for staff, youth and parents.

### Implementation

1. Each division should work with community coalitions and community-based organizations related to key life-skills areas for youth in care (e.g., education, employment, housing, health care, and community service).
2. Life skills specialists and community liaisons should help social workers “network” in the community regarding resources for youth in care.
3. Community partnerships and life-skill learning partners provide an expanded pool of potential permanent family relationships for youth.

**Evaluation research** examines long-term outcomes. Evaluation points toward effective practice, and desirable outcomes can never be far removed from case-planning goals.

### Implementation

1. Exit interviews should be conducted with all youth leaving Casey care (“closed cases”) as part of a longitudinal evaluation now underway.
2. Contact information should be kept on alumni willing to stay in touch with the agency.
3. Process evaluation and/or quality service reviews that are conducted should give attention to life-skills and transitions issues.
4. Current life-skills and transition practices should be compared to known best practices around the country.
5. Regular feedback on services should be sought from current youth in care and alumni.

# Sample Life Skills, Goals, and Competencies

| ACLSA Domain                            | Subcategories                | Sample Goal   | Tasks and Activities   | Sample Indicators  |                              |
|---|------------------------------|---|--|--|------------------------------|
| Examples of three (out of nine) Domains |                              | Goals selected from the ACLSA "Guidebook" at <a href="http://www.casey.org">www.casey.org</a> | Activities selected from the ACLSA "Guidebook" at <a href="http://www.casey.org">www.casey.org</a> | Indicators developed by Casey Family Services                          |                              |
| Daily Living                            | Grocery Shopping             | Grocery Shopping  | Prepare a shopping list  | List prepared  |                              |
|   | Nutrition                    |   | Shop for a meal  | Shopping completed   |                              |
|   | Menu Planning                | Meal Preparation  | Prepare the meal   | Meal prepared <i>and</i> edible  |                              |
|   | Dining                       |   |  |  |                              |
|   | Meal Preparation             |   |  |  |                              |
|   | Kitchen Clean Up and Storage |   |  |  |                              |
|   | Home Management              |   |  |  |                              |
|   | Home Safety                  |   |  |  |                              |
|   | Saving                       |   |  |  | Understand how to save money |
|   | Beliefs Regarding Money      | Evidence of savings offered   |  |  |                              |
|   | Banking and Credit           | Savings account opened  |  |  |                              |
|   | Budgeting and Spending       | Savings accumulated over time   |  |  |                              |
|   | Consuming                    |   |  |  |                              |
|   | Leisure time                 |   |  |  |                              |
| Legal Issues                            |                              |   |  |  |                              |
| Career Planning                         | Work Goals                   | Find career fields that match skills, abilities, likes, and dislikes                          | Plan and prepare for an "informational interview"  | Clear explanation in writing offered                                   |                              |
|   | Employment                   |   | Locate job openings  | Interviews conducted   |                              |
|   | Workplace Communication      | Explain what people in different jobs do  |  | Multiple interviews held   |                              |
|   |                              | Know how to search for a job  |  | Job obtained   |                              |
| Social Relationships                    | Personal Development         | Know and understand one's personal strengths and needs  | Identify three personal strengths and needs  | Clear ideas to enhance strengths and address needs described           |                              |
|   | Cultural Awareness           |   |  |  |                              |
|   | Interpersonal Communication  | Describe everyday etiquette   | Role play saying "thank you" with another person   | Different types of relationships successfully role played              |                              |
|   | Relationships                | Know how to use anger-management techniques   | Demonstrate two anger-management techniques that could be used at home, school, or work            | Examples of putting techniques to work in actual relationships cited   |                              |
|   |                              | Know how to develop and maintain healthy relationships  | Identify three characteristics of healthy and unhealthy relationships                              | Examples of experiences with healthy and unhealthy relationships cited |                              |



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