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Motivating Foster Youth to Become Activist within the Legislative Process

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**Abstract**

The Epicenter is a youth led and youth-run nonprofit organization located in Salinas, California. The organization works towards empowering at risk youth in Monterey County by providing them with a one-stop resource center. The project that was implemented was an outreach event targeting the foster youth population located in Monterey County. This included inviting the foster youth to come to The Epicenter and enjoy a fun-filled evening of creating their own comfort and stability through individualized pillowcases and enjoying a nice dinner. The goal of this event was to introduce these foster youth to The Epicenter as a resource that they can use and encourage some of them become a part of the foster youth programs that The Epicenter offers.

Key words: *The Epicenter, Foster youth, Empowerment, California Youth Connection, Stability*

### Motivating Foster Youth to Become Activist Within the Legislative Process

The Epicenter is a youth led and youth-run organization located in Salinas, California that was launched through a partnership of Monterey County Child Welfare Services and VOICES (Voice Our Independent Choices for Emancipation Support). VOICES is the first youth-designed and youth-led program in the nation for transition-age foster youth (The Epicenter, 2016). The Epicenter works towards empowering at risk youth in Monterey County by providing them with a one-stop resource center. This includes forming pillars that consist of education, employment, housing, and health and wellness. Programs that are available include Youth Council which is a leadership program for former and current foster youth and California Youth Connection which is part of a statewide program where former and current foster youth meet for local issues to make legislative changes with the foster care system. They also have a program known as Our Gente which is their LGBTQ+ group. The Epicenter's mission "... exists to empower at risk and system involved youth ages 16-24 to flourish by connecting them to community resources that provide opportunities for equity and hope in order to improve youth outcomes in Monterey County" (The Epicenter, 2016).

### **Problem Description**

There are over 400 children in foster care in Monterey County (Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health, 2015). Various problems have become apparent within the foster care system such as the rising number of children being put in the system, the amount of instability in foster youth's lives, and foster youth's needs going unheard. Many of these youth do not have full control of the decisions that are being determined in their lives and lack social support networks. Various amounts of foster youth are used to being overlooked, neglected, and traumatized (O'Neil & Nixon, 2015). This contributes to their self-esteem being challenged and

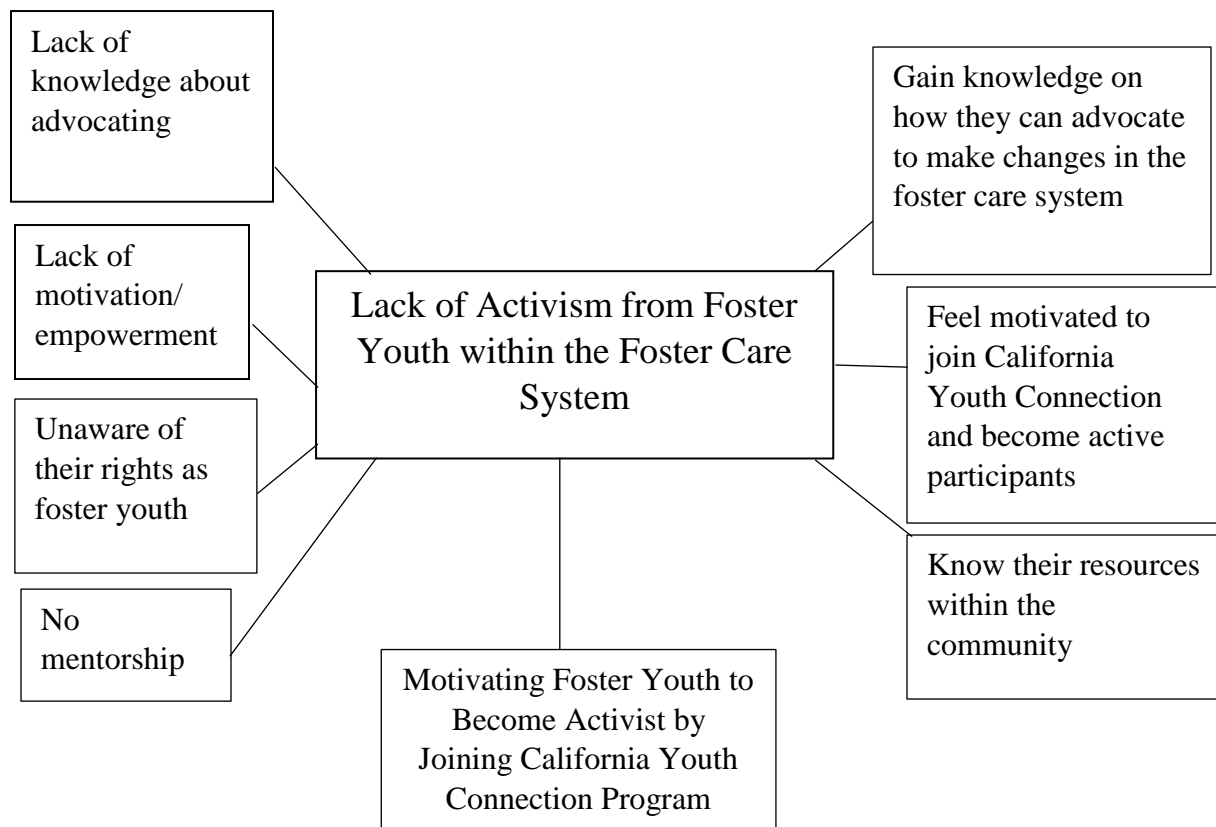
them feeling like their voices do not matter. According to Kaplan, Skolnik, and Turnbull (2009), “Emotional trauma attendant to foster care, including separation from one’s family of origin, frequent foster home and school changes, and the ending of care at age 18 can contribute to youth in care feeling disempowered regarding their current and future life conditions” (p.5). Due to these contributing factors, many of these youth may feel like they don’t have a voice regarding their life decisions, therefore this resulting in them not advocating for themselves.

### **Project Description and Justification**

This project will focus on an outreach event for The Epicenter targeting the foster youth population located in Monterey County. The event will be known as Pillows of Passion. The process will include reaching out to the foster youth of Monterey County and inviting them to come to The Epicenter and enjoy a fun-filled evening of decorating a pillow to take home with them and having a nice dinner. While the youth are decorating their pillow cases, some of the staff that are involved in The California Youth Connection Program will give a brief introduction about CYC and how the youth can get involved in it. The California Youth Connection program has recently been focusing on a campaign for foster stability. According to The Center for Human Services (2008), Children who are removed from their homes and then who experience placement disruption can lead to them experiencing profound distress and a sense of loss and not belonging, all of which can lead to distrust and a fear of forming secure healthy relationships (p.4). With the leadership and help of Assemblymember Mike A. Gipson, California Youth Connection successfully passed Assembly Bill 2247 on September 22, 2018, which implements a foundation for a youth-centered process for planning stability (California Youth Connection, 2018). This event will focus on the theme of foster stability by creating a fun, safe, and welcoming environment for these youth and giving them a tangible object (pillow) that can

provide comfort and support in their unstable life. During this event we hope to expand new relationships with the youth and learn more about their life, passions, and future goals that they would like to achieve. The overall goal of this event is to introduce new foster youth to The Epicenter as a resource that they can take advantage of and possibly become a part of programs that The Epicenter offers such as California Youth Connection and Youth Council. The Epicenter wants these foster youth to feel empowered to advocate for themselves and know their rights as foster youth. The way that they can gain this knowledge and become active participants to making changes in the foster care system is by joining the California Youth Connection Program. The Epicenter would also like to be able to help support more foster youth and expand their network of individuals coming to the center for services and host more events specifically for the foster youth population. Table 1, shown below, demonstrates how this project is expected to address problems related to the population that is being served at The Epicenter.

**Table 1. Problem Model**



### **Project Implementation Plan**

The project will consist of collecting resources and connections in order to contact the foster youth in Monterey County. This will require reaching out to organizations which could possibly include, Peacock Acres, Monterey County of Social Services, Door to Hope, schools in Monterey County and other organizations that can spread the word about this upcoming event. Once there is an adequate amount of outreach in the community there will need to be some data collected of an estimate of how many foster youth will be attending. Some people that I will be collaborating in order to plan this is Melissa Leong, who oversees the California Youth Connection program and Summer Rae, who is the Foster Service Coordinator at The Epicenter and is also a peer mentor in California Youth Connection. Melissa and Summer Rae already have some knowledge and connections regarding some of the foster youth within Monterey County and will be beneficial in this process. There will also be another foster youth that is part of Youth Council that will help support this event. Another step that must be taken to planning this event includes finding individuals or organizations that are willing to donate either money or pillows/pillow cases and art and craft supplies. There will also need to be thoughts about what type of food will be provided for the evening as well as if there are any other activities that would like to be incorporated.

Challenges that may arise within the process of this project include finding an adequate amount of foster youth that would be willing and able to come to the Pillows of Passion event. One barrier that may be a problem for some of these foster youth is transportation to The Epicenter. Other challenges include making sure to do enough outreach so that a lot of foster youth know about this event. To address the possible barrier of transportation, there may be an opportunity to rent a van or take a car to pick up some of the youth and then bring them back

after the event. In order to spread the word about Pillows of Passion there needs to be a great amount of communication within organizations, on social media, creating flyers and emailing individuals. Table 2, shown below, goes over a timeline of the methods and activities that will be implemented in order to organize the event.

**Table 2. Scope of Work and Timeline**

<b>Pillows of Passion Foster Youth Event</b>		
<b>Goal:</b> Create a fun, safe environment for new foster youth and introduce them to The Epicenter and California Youth Connection Program		
<b>Primary objective of the project:</b> Increase youth’s knowledge about The Epicenter and programs provided		
<b>Activities</b>	<b>Deliverables</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
1. Develop plan of what activities would like to be implemented for the event 2. Decide what materials will be needed 3. Find donations for materials needed 4. Develop outreach methods 5. Host event at The Epicenter	1. Activities finalized and implemented 2. Gather enough materials 3. Gather donations 4. Reach out to different organizations and collected data of who will be attending 5. Great turnout of foster youth and enough materials	1. November-December 2. December 3. December-Beginning of February 4. December-January 5. February 22, 2018

**Assessment**

Expected outcomes of the Pillow of Passion event would include having a great turnout of foster youth that attend the event and for them to have a fun time enjoying the activities that



were incorporated. Another outcome that would like to be achieved from this event is making an impact with the foster youth which will then make them want to come back to The Epicenter in the future. Regarding the CYC Program, the results that would like to be achieved would include motivating some of these foster youth to become members in this program. In order to assess if these outcomes have been achieved or not, we must take into account how many foster youth come to the event and who comes to receive services or join programs at The Epicenter after the event. It may also be beneficial to incorporate a survey or interview to get feedback on whether they liked or disliked the Pillows of Passion Event, what they would enjoy for future events, and if they would be interested in joining California Youth Connection.

### **Findings and Results**

The Pillows of Passion event resulted with five youth attending. The age ranges were between 12-16 years old. Although the goal of getting 10 youth to attend wasn't achieved, the youth that did attend were engaged in the pillow decorating project. All of the participants took a survey before they left and were asked to rate how much they enjoyed the event from 1-10. All of them gave the event a rating of 10. Also, 90% of the youth stated that they would possibly be interested in joining California Youth Connection. However, none of the youth have attended one of the CYC meetings yet. One way to encourage these foster youth to attend the meetings might be to reach out to them over phone call and emails. It would also be beneficial to provide transportation to and from the meetings because that could possibly be one of the barriers. Overall, the youth enjoyed the event and based off their surveys, would like to see more activities and events similar to the Pillows of Passion event in the future from The Epicenter.

### **Recommendations**

This project has provided an opportunity for foster youth to be introduced to The Epicenter. Not many events have been held for foster youth at the agency and that was one of the reasons why this was chosen for a capstone project. One recommendation that I would have for The Epicenter, specifically related to the CYC program, would be to host more events just for foster youth so that they feel more comfortable being in that environment. This will hopefully encourage more of these youth to become involved in The Epicenter's programs. The Epicenter will be hosting a larger event for foster youth at the end of May, so that would be a great opportunity for the staff to do more outreach.

### **Conclusion and Personal Reflection**

The success of this project helped to expand Monterey County foster youth's knowledge of a resource that can be used which is known as the The Epicenter. Hosting the Pillows of Passion event helped me to personally grow in the area of taking on the leadership role. This was one skill that was completely out of my comfort zone. This project required me to be involved in a great amount of collaboration whether that was with staff members at The Epicenter, various nonprofit agencies, or organizations that contributed donations. It also helped me to develop my professional communication skills by attending meetings and brainstorming with staff members, writing emails for outreach opportunities, and talking to different organizations for specific needs. I learned that outreach is a very important component to hosting events and that it is important to start planning as early as possible. Advice that I would give to future Collaborative Health and Human Services interns would be to don't be afraid to voice your ideas and opinions with the staff when it comes to your capstone project and also try something that is out of your comfort zone, so you can professionally grow and develop skills in different areas. Overall, I

think that this capstone project was a great learning experience for me and helped me develop various amounts of professional skills to be successful in the career field of Collaborative Health and Human Services.

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