

Building Our Future

Alameda County is one of the most ethnically and economically diverse communities in the state and country. According to the current census data, the population in the County is estimated to be 1.4 million residents. African Americans make up about 14.9 % of the total population; yet 21% of the youth in the county between the ages of 10-17 are African American. African American children represent more than 60% of the caseloads in the foster care system.

Foster parents provide a supportive and stable family for children who cannot live with their birth parents due to family problems. In most cases, foster parents work with social services staff to reunite the child with birth parents. One of the main goals of the Alameda County Social Services Agency is to assist families with reunification within an 18 month time period.

The high cost of living and the economic downturn are only few factors that contribute to children entering into the foster care system. There is the misconception that foster children are the rotten apples that no one wants; there is evidence that is not case. Foster children are usually removed from their homes for abuse or neglect. These children are not the same populations that are represented in group homes or camps. Alameda County provides essential services to our children in foster care such as shelter, food and clothing. Children who are not fortunate enough to reunify with their families receive additional support in order to prepare them as best as possible for their futures.

Kaleidoscope, a child welfare agency, states that 80 % of the people in adult correctional facilities and juvenile justice systems come from the foster care system. Negative outcomes of the foster care system are not limited to incarceration, lack of stability, extraordinary high incidences of substance abuse and psychological issues are additional problems for foster children. According to the California Department of Social Services, 32% of African American males are former foster youth who enter into the criminal justice system. Youth emancipating from the foster care system will experience poverty, homelessness, poor health, and unemployment at a greater rate than the general population.

The Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP) of Alameda County is an initiative designed to assist foster youth in their transition into adulthood. In 1986, the Federal government launched the Independent Living Program to enable state child welfare agencies to meet the needs of youth preparing to emancipate out of from foster care. Alameda County was one of the first counties in the state to develop an Independent Living Skills Program, opening its doors in 1987. Federal funding allowed for ILSP services to be made available to youth ages 16-18 that were dependents of the county probation wards placed out of home by the juvenile court or emancipated. Services for emancipated youth include weekly life skills classes, employment and educational support, health care, housing search assistance, social events celebrating students' successes, and after care support. Many ILSP graduates go on to enter 4 year colleges, community colleges, vocational training programs, and/or full time employment. Youth

can receive services up to their 21st birthday.

The ILSP is only one example of the type of support services that are needed for foster youth especially African Americans. African American youth need additional support services to assist them with the challenges of becoming an adult. Mentoring is an important example of how we as leaders in the community can be engaged with our youth. “Business leaders and the faith-based community can play a vital role as mentors and permanent adult connections for youth transitioning out of the foster care system,” states Carol Collins, Assistant Agency Director, Alameda County Children and Family Services. As African American leaders, I encourage you to reach out to the youth in the foster care system by becoming a mentor. Becoming a mentor in a youth’s life can make the difference on how one succeeds in life.

For those interested in making a difference in the life of a foster care youth, the Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) is a good vehicle. Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteers are appointed by the Court to advocate for the best interests of a child who is in the foster care system. For more information contact Kellie Carmichael at kcarmichael@acgov.org or 510-618-1963.

Foster care children are important members of our society and our future and in order to help maximize their fullest potential there is a need for more African American leaders to provide guidance to these very special youth.