## THE TRANSITIONS  FRAMEWORK

*Transition Management and Social Change Organizations*
Agencies with independent living programs tend to focus exclusively on the hard skills (such as vocational training) adolescents need in order to live independently.  What is often left out of the equation are the psychological skills and emotional coping mechanisms that adolescents require to put the hard skills to work.  In order to assist foster youth transitioning to adulthood acquire some of these intangible skills, agencies and independent living programs must begin to address the emotional and psychological impact of the changes these youth experience.

The framework of Transition Management developed by William Bridges is increasingly used in the private, for-profit sector as a means of effectively implementing change.  At the invitation of the AFF, Bridges reflected on how the framework might be applied to social change initiatives. Through this process, Bridges came to appreciate how the framework might be naturally applied to the changes that many social change organizations work to effect.  This would include the changes that young people in foster care face as they age-out of the system.  Transition Management is about managing the challenges and maximizing the opportunities posed by change.  This is done through a focus on the *psychological* impacts of change.  Bridges emphasizes that without implementing Transition Management, there is no guarantee that strategic or change management will be implemented in a sustainable way.

In thinking about Transition Management and foster youth's transition to independence it helps to have a clear understanding of how "change" differs from "transition."  Change can be defined as an external event that is planned and implemented over a chronological period of time.  More often than not, it is practical and systemic, with clear distinctions between the old way and the new way of doing things.  Change is often situational and outcome focused, occurring within a particular time-frame.  Transition, on the other hand is psychological and individual.  It is more gradual than change, based in experiential and psychological processes.  Rather than being outcome-oriented, it facilitates the process of change.

*Transition Management: A Framework to Address the Needs of Youth Leaving Foster Care*

Transitioning out of foster care to independent living is a crucial period for youth.  Other youth, negotiating the process of moving from childhood and dependence to adulthood and independence, rely on the practical and psychological support of their families.  Without confidence in support systems and the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them, foster youth often do not develop the internal strengths and skills needed to successfully negotiate young adulthood.  The framework of Transition Management could be particularly useful in addressing the needs of foster youth aging out of the system.  Many agencies - both public and private - address the practical needs of these youth, for example, through independent housing or

job referral services. Some provide counseling services to address the psychological and therapeutic needs of foster care youth, particularly those with special needs. However, very few work within a framework that blends both practical and psychological aspects of this major life transition. Transition Management actually demands this, and Bridges would argue that programs that provide both psychological support and practical skills and opportunities will be most useful to foster care youth as they negotiate the changes they face, and begin to leave the system.

Bridges contends that, at its heart, Transition Management is a series of intentional acts that help people step away from their old world, assists them through the confusing period in which neither the old nor new ways of doing things is comfortable, and then eases them into the reality of their new world. The framework asserts that change cannot happen simply through the act of moving into a new "place." In fact, between the end of the old place and the beginning of the new place, the framework asserts that there is a gap. It is in negotiating this gap that people can either successfully move forward, or fall prey to old ideas and behaviors that undermine true and sustainable change.

The Transition Management Framework has three fluid phases:

Ending -------- Neutral Zone -------- New Beginning.

Endings open up the opportunity for deep learning, but only if the individuals involved - both staff and foster youth - are first supported to let go of the old way of doing things. This will include both practices and systems of doing, as well as norms, values, attitudes, behaviors and beliefs. With regard to leaving foster care, this includes leaving a range of familiar supports - social workers, foster care families, friends, services, school. This can be a daunting process, particularly for youth who have no other support systems. However, through necessity, they have to leave the system. For staff it may mean letting go of how they have dealt with their clients in the past - perhaps for their entire career. How they do this successfully will depend upon the extent to which they are allowed to acknowledge both the challenges and opportunities inherent in this considerable life change, and supported through this process.

Once individuals have processed the Ending, they enter the Neutral Zone. The Neutral Zone is a time in which organizations/institutions can capitalize on the energy being generated in individuals by encouraging them to learn what they do not already know (about the change), and giving them the freedom and space to exercise their creativity. Bridges argues that it is through this process that institutions involved in social change initiatives may be able to maximize the results of their visions, and possibly even exceed their own expectations. In helping individuals through the Neutral Zone, Bridges recommends that the people involved be brought together on a regular basis to engage. In foster care this might be achieved through regular youth council meetings to discuss the range of issues that may emerge, including feelings of abandonment, fear of failure, and the need to develop alternative sources of support. It may also involve regular meetings of staff to openly discuss issues that arise for them as they begin to approach their work in a different way.

Bridges asserts that change will not take root unless individuals are permitted some space to reorient themselves internally to circumstances that have changed externally.  It is around this issue, particularly with regard to social change initiatives, that Endings and the Neutral Zone become important.  If this internal reorientation does not occur, then, one, the staff of foster care agencies will continue to approach their "redefined" roles in the same old way, and two, many foster youth will "graduate" from programs with, in some instances, a continued underlying dependence upon institutional support, and without a set of norms, values, and beliefs with which they can effectively navigate young adulthood, thus reducing the potential for long-term positive outcomes.

Having successfully negotiated the Ending and Neutral Zone, foster youth will enter the final stage of the framework - New Beginnings.  New beginnings might consist of a young person successfully embarking upon post-secondary education, obtaining a full-time job, renting an apartment on their own, or maintaining stable personal relationships.  Bridges would contend that while all of these are *practical*, external achievements for youth leaving foster care, they also necessitate *psychological*, internal achievements in order to be sustainable.

Significantly, practitioners working in child welfare have begun to recognize the importance of dealing with some of these issues with foster youth.  In a working draft series prepared for the National Foster Care Awareness Project, the authors suggest that service providers implement preparation for adulthood counseling that help young people "make peace with the past."  The authors note that as young people prepare to transition out of care, unresolved issues (e.g. why they were removed from their families) often come to the surface and young people are often open to counseling during this time.  More explicitly, the authors recommend that service providers conduct counseling activities to help young people "work through the emotional stages of transition." (Promising Practices: Supporting Transition of Youth Served By The Foster Care System 1, Making the Transition to Adulthood, pp. 54-55)