



Helping former foster youth go from surviving to thriving

Organizational Background

Fostering Hope has worked since 2006 to help children in foster care heal from the trauma of abuse and neglect and develop the resiliency and relationships they need to succeed as adults. Our goal is to create transformative change that disrupts the inter-generational cycle of abuse, neglect and poverty and improves mental health.

Our work began with the recruitment of volunteers to serve as “aunts, uncles, and grandparents” to foster families. We developed a way for ordinary people with a heart for service to do the work that the child welfare system and its professionals were not equipped to do. This proved effective, with significant improvements in key metrics such as foster parent retention, decreased disruptions (voluntary relinquishment of children), and an increase in adoptions and well-being indicators.

In 2016, in response to direct feedback from foster families with teens, we expanded the program to include youth who age out of foster care. Known as Fostering Adulthood, the emphasis here was to help teens and young adults make the successful transition into independent living post-foster care. In addition to the relational support that is at the core of what we do, this included the addition of transportation, workplace acculturation and employment, supportive housing, and mentorship and life skills.

Fostering Adulthood: A Closer Look

This segment of our program has experienced significant growth, going from 31 engaged/connected teens and young adults to 48 in just one year, 55% growth. About a third of the total children we serve are teens.

As these teens approach emancipation, they are introduced to volunteers and community partners who create a social safety net as youth navigate towards independence and full employment. Young adults can remain a part of this community as long as they need us, even into their late 20s or beyond.

Fostering Hope intends these adult friends to be there as “think partners” when needed, for individual friendship, advice and emotional support, just as older members of a traditional family are. Community-minded business partners offer job opportunities and take the time to understand trauma and work with our staff to support the youth as they learn of the responsibilities and expectations of employment.

Fostering Adulthood also incorporates a supportive housing initiative to support young adults in living independently in apartments that are partially and temporarily program subsidized. Fostering Hope holds a master lease through a partnership with Weidner Apartment Homes. Youth can lease from Fostering Hope on

an income-adjusted basis as they learn to live independently. We also provide donated vehicles and other transportation to help the youth get from home to school and work.

Our Outcomes

Without support, the future is bleak for these youth. We, however, have significantly reversed these statistics.

- Only 10% of young adults supported by our program have experienced homelessness in the first two years, compared to 50% nationally.
 - 100% of the young adults involved with us have graduated high school or obtained a GED, compared to 35% without our support.
 - 89% are employed, compared to 48% in Colorado. Many are going on to college or getting trade certifications.
 - None of the children of these young adults have entered the foster care system themselves, indicating inter-generational impact.
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Understanding the Need

Our success in reversing these grim statistics is only part of the story. While almost all our youth are working at any given time, many are barely getting by in minimum wage jobs and experiencing frequent employment transition. Although we have succeeded in keeping our young adults in safe and stable housing at lower-than-market rates, they are still overburdened by rental obligations that prevent them from saving and keep them stuck living paycheck-to-paycheck. Setbacks quickly become crises, and the cycle repeats itself.

This is not something to be remedied by new opportunities or additional resources alone. All our youth have experience physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse, or neglect at formative ages, resulting in complex trauma. Trauma changes the neurobiology of the brain and leads to maladaptive coping mechanisms that are difficult under any circumstances but especially harmful in the early stages of adulthood. Practically speaking, they are hypersensitive to stress, and without feeling safe they can be completely overwhelmed and retreat to destructive behaviors or disassociation. Their ability to think beyond the moment (i.e. plan for a future career) is often hijacked by the barriers in front of them given their biological propensity to live in a state of “fight, flight, or freeze.” Trauma triggers – such as a shame response to an innocent comment from a co-worker – can often lead them to quit or getting fired from jobs.

As challenging as this may seem, there is a solution, and that’s where we need your help.

Project Overview

Fostering Hope has put together a comprehensive plan to disrupt this cycle and put young adults we serve on a path to a more sustainable and thriving future. It consists of four parts:

1. Temporarily relieving part of the rental obligations our youth face so that their nervous system is not overwhelmed by the financial burden and the fear and shame associated with it. As one young adult once told us, “You can’t really think about your future when you don’t know where you are going to live next week.” Put another way, it is akin to asking someone to plan for college or save money while they are staring at hungry mountain lion in front of them. That part of the brain is temporarily shut off.
2. Providing individualized opportunities for young adults to pursue new career paths. Most of the young adults we work with do not fit the trajectory of a typical high school graduate. They may attend college for a short time before realizing they are not quite ready. They may float among jobs before they discover things about themselves that many of us get from our families as we grow up. Sadly, many of them are entering the world at 18 with the understanding/experiences of someone 13 or younger. Because we stay with the youth long-term (10 years or more), we are attuned to these moments and ready to take advantage of them. One young woman wants to be a hair stylist focusing on ethnic hair. A young man wants to be an auto mechanic. Another young man abandoned his plans to be a dental hygienist and now wants to study social work. Often, these plans fall outside of traditional educational assistance, either due to age, timing, or the chosen career path. We want to ensure that if someone is willing to invest in themselves, we can make the investment in the path for them to get there.
3. Developing a matched savings program for a better future. We seek to partner with financial institutions to help us develop a way to leverage this important window of time, when there is rental relief and a young person is focusing on the future, to create a financial foundation when they are done. We want to create a matched savings program that will enable them to have a nest egg once they are on their own, so that they have a rainy-day fund or even the seed money to start saving for a first home or vehicle.
4. Providing resources to help them cope and manage trauma. While the tactics above will create the long runway these youth need to a better career and future, there will come a time when they must be able to better manage their trauma in an uncompromising world. As our founder once said, we are offering unconditional love while preparing them for a conditional world. To this end, we are investing in resources that will equip them to “regulate” their trauma and cope with it more effectively. We are turning to therapists who specialize in practical, somatosensory techniques to teach our young adults about themselves and the underlying forces behind their experiences and equipping them with simple but effective ways to manage them. We have also hired a former program participant as a peer advocate to help them make sense of their experiences.

Funding Proposal

Although all four parts are important, this grant request focuses on the first two listed above. We are asking the Myron Stratton Foundation to fund “Stratton Scholarships” to seven young adults who show exceptional promise, allowing them to experience reduced rent and subsidized technical training over a two-year period, as they mature and realize their potential. The total amount of this request is \$100,000 and is broken down below:

Rental Assistance (\$42,000)

An average, modest 1-bedroom apartment costs \$1,200 in Colorado Springs. Fostering Hope holds a master lease with our partner, Weidner Apartment Homes, to lease any apartment at its 14 apartment communities across the city, and the company provides a 25% discount. In addition, they waive various fees so that we can change apartments and break leases early without penalty as youth move and situations change.

This partnership brings a typical apartment down to \$900. While this is substantially below market, it is still a daunting obligation for someone working minimum wage and who will experience disruptions in employment along the way. Such rent demands full-time hours, if not more than one job, with no margin for transition between employers. For young adults overwhelmed and exiting foster care, it's just not realistic.

This request, if funded, would enable us to pay an additional \$250/month for these seven young adults for a two-year period while they focus on building their future through education and work experience.

Education Assistance (\$42,000)

Whether it is an apprenticeship, a trade school, or even going back to college, we want to help our young adults get the training and experience they need to move beyond a job and into a career. Earlier this year, one of Fostering Hope's founding board members gifted us with the seed money to create the Nick and Margaret Ann Colarelli Opportunity Fund to set aside funding for this purpose. This fund, however, is an endowment and will take several years to grow: it currently can pay out about \$1,500 per year.

We are asking the Myron Stratton Foundation for \$42,000 to be used now, not as part of the endowment, so that we can meet the educational opportunities for seven young adults in the next two years. This would provide \$3,000 per year for seven youth interested in pursuing training, certificates, etc.

Administration (\$16,000)

We anticipate that this program will incur general and administrative costs of \$16,000 over the two-year period.

Summary

We believe that this support, which amounts to more than \$12,000 per young adult over the next two years, will be transformative and have intergenerational impact when combined with our expertise and the relational and social capital these youth have with our staff and volunteers.

Recognizing that our approach with each young person we serve is highly individualized, we request the flexibility to adjust the rental assistance and educational assistance for specific individuals as needed. For example, if one young person may need more than \$250 per month in rental assistance while another young person may require less, we would make the necessary changes.

We fully expect to report our progress. We consider the Myron Stratton Foundation to be a partner in this work, not a "funder," and we look forward to bringing you along on this journey with us as we learn and grow.