



An Entry Level Job Can Save a Young Person From Homelessness

Every night, over 3000 youth experience homelessness in Los Angeles County. Transition-age foster and re-entry youth account for over 60% of the unhoused young people on our streets. In LA, the risk of experiencing homelessness is 83% higher for Black youth, 33% higher for Latinx youth.

Instead of surviving day to day, what if our most vulnerable youth were employed, housed, and pursuing a stable future? That is what The RightWay Foundation, a nonprofit based in South Los Angeles, works toward every day.

Established in 2011 by Franco Vega, an orphan and former probation youth, The RightWay Foundation helps foster and re-entry youth build stable lives, grounded in mental health treatment and solidified through employment. Utilizing intensive therapy, tailored job training and placement, dedicated housing, financial capability building, and community, RightWay's transformative programs are working to create a systemic sea change for foster and probation youth.

The system has failed our kids. Already burdened by trauma and instability, foster youth in group homes never get the chance to join Girl Scouts or have a summer job. Moved from school to school, system-impacted youth never get the chance to join a basketball team or lead a club. They enter adulthood with no resume, no entry level work experience, and none of the tools they need to find employment, keep employment, and build financial stability. But they are expected to make it on their own.

Research suggests that young people who do not have stable jobs by their early twenties are at a higher risk of unemployment and lower earnings throughout their adulthood. For transition-age foster and justice-involved youth, structural racism and the effects of trauma yield an even greater risk of socioeconomic immobility. The statistics are bleak. Nearly 25% of California's foster youth are incarcerated within two years of emancipation. Most of the young women picked up in sex trafficking raids are from the child welfare system. Half of foster youth will be homeless within a few years of exiting the system.

"It's not your fault, but it is your life." This is a phrase Vega often shares with the young adults in RightWay's programs. Youth come to RightWay to get a job and break the cycle of poverty. RightWay connects each youth with a job and gives them the support they need to keep that job.

"No one else is mixing therapy into employment services and helping to find housing, all under one roof," said Vega.

At RightWay's offices, youth are also connected to therapists, housing navigators, job developers, life skills coaches, financial literacy, and community.

Vega and his team know that retaining young people can be a challenge in the new economy. To support employers, RightWay developed a culturally competent, trauma-informed training to give companies and managers the tools to motivate, mentor, and manage the young people they hire. RightWay's program fosters leadership transformation and understanding in managers and employers, giving them tools to effectively advance professional and personal development in young employees



and lower turnover rates. RightWay works closely with employers of all sizes to help them retain employees with traumatic backgrounds and provide meaningful work experience for system-impacted youth in LA County. From restaurants in LAX to plumbers and museums, RightWay's employment partners transform the lives of foster youth and probation youth.

A survey from the Urban Institute showed that young people of color are employed at much lower rates than white youth, and Black and Latino/a/x youth who work are paid less than their white peers. This gap in access to employment opportunities, along with the reality that only 7% of working youth who age out of the foster care system in California earn a livable wage at age 24, poses a nearly insurmountable barrier for system-involved youth.

But every barrier can be dismantled.

RightWay believes that building strong relationships with employers who hire system-impacted young people is critical to advancing racial equity and satisfaction within the workplace. Through RightWay's Motivate, Mentor, Manage training, employer partners learn how to encourage young people's personal and professional growth and development. RightWay provides employers with an in-depth look at trauma and its impact, so that managers and employers can learn best practices for building and maintaining trust-based, supportive relationships with employees. The training guides employers toward self-reflection, self-evaluation, and self-awareness of their own biases and perspectives, how they impact their relationship with youth, and how bridging differences creates growth within a company. When a young per-

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son feels a sense of belonging in their organization, they are more likely to feel committed and connected to the organization's mission and their future in the workplace and career.

RightWay's five-hour training educates employers what it means to be trauma-informed in the context of employment and how to promote leadership that encourages teamwork, mutual understanding, and communication vital to a productive environment. Participants of the training learn how to nurture and advance empathy, connection, and trust in order to foster an inclusive and supportive workplace, thus impacting agency-wide reduction of employee turnover and stress. Participating companies report an increase in morale across the organization as a result of the awareness and training. By learning a trauma-informed approach to leadership, management, and mentoring, participants can further promote growth opportunities and racial equity for young people entering the workforce.

A foster youth in RightWay's programs

shared her experience: "I was struggling financially on probation and without a home for more than two years. This program has supported me with all of my pain, depression, excessive stress, and emotional breakdowns. I had one goal when I entered the program which was to obtain full-time employment. Over the years they have supported me beyond what I expected. The RightWay Foundation has demonstrated what a supportive family feels like. In August 2021, The RightWay Foundation moved me into my own apartment. One take away: No excuses!"

Together with youth and employers, RightWay's critical preventative work aims to stop the pipelines from foster care to homelessness, unemployment, and incarceration. RightWay's programs break down the barriers perpetuating poverty and trauma for system-impacted youth and counter the corrosive effects of the homeless crisis that endangers young people of color and damages communities.

Learn more at therightwayfoundation.org.