

Helping Foster Youth Transition to Independent Adulthood

MEE has conducted focus groups directly with transitioning foster youth ages 18-22, along with one-on-one interviews with subject-matter experts in the field. This has allowed MEE to gain a comprehensive understanding of where young people are now (Point A) when it comes to making choices for their future after foster care. That knowledge can be used to inform the development of persuasive appeals that will help all of us move youth to the desired "Point B" (more youth making informed choices, including choosing transitioning programs and services as they turn 18).

Key highlights gained from MEE expert interviews and focus groups with foster youth are:

Many transitioning foster youth feel unprepared to take charge of their lives once they turn 18. Overall, the number of choices and decisions to be made (i.e., finding a place to live; and lack of skills and know-how about living independently) often felt overwhelming and stressful.

Transitioning youth have experienced situations that leave them lacking trust. Clearly, youth who were in the foster care system into their late teens were impacted by institutional trauma. They told story after story about how

there were very few caring and non-judgmental adults in their lives, particularly those who could provide messages of hope. Many participants mentioned foster parents and social workers who are "in it for the money." Youth reported not knowing where to turn for help or whom they could really trust.

While seen as influential, relationships with social workers are not always seen as positive or helpful. Rather than a "coaching" relationship, most participants described their interaction with their social worker about their personal goals as non-existent or counterproductive. In many cases, staff at social

Continued on page 2

What's Inside

Helping Foster Youth Transition to Independent Adulthood [Page 1](#)

Foster Youth Are Not Monolithic: Targeting various Audiences [Page 3](#)

Educating Communities About Foster Care Transitions: Effective Messaging [Page 4](#)

Designing a Social Marketing Campaign [Page 5](#)

The Importance of Social Media [Page 7](#)

Analysis continued...

work agencies are not trained how to coach the youth in their case loads, rather they direct them to the choices they think make the most sense, with little active input from the affected youth.

Knowledge about the available options for transition programs and services was limited. Many youth said that their social workers had not really discussed with them the ins and outs of different programs.

Youth recall few to no media messages focused on them. Participants said they

had not seen or heard ads, particularly in mainstream media, promoting transitional programs and services, job training or continuing education for former foster youth.

Peers may be an under utilized source of information. At this stage of their lives (late teens), peers are an extremely influential group for transitioning foster youth. Word-of-mouth (positive or negative) about different transition options carries a lot of weight. Peers who have already transitioned

into supportive services can provide “thumbs up” or “thumbs down” recommendations based on their personal experiences.

Caregivers of foster youth can also be influential in their decision making.

These caregivers interact with foster youth on a daily basis. With the right tools and information, they can become a young person’s biggest cheerleader or advocate. Some caregivers, however, will need to be directly and persuasively invited to join an effort to raise the level of life expectations for foster youth. [UT](#)

From The President

Every year, hundreds of thousands of children of color in America turn 18 and may “age out” or must make a decision about their next steps in the foster care system. Without intervention and support services, along with ongoing adult involvement and guidance, children who age out of this system face uncertain futures.

Young adults from foster care backgrounds have told MEE about the institutional trauma they experience—multiple placements, lack of stability in schools and living arrangements, high turnover in their assigned social workers, being prescribed strong medications as a way to “keep them under control,” and a paucity of caring non-judgmental adults in their lives. Life experiences leave them unwilling or afraid to trust most people. Our foster youth receive few messages of hope; our society has lowered expectations, assuming that they will fail or eventually fall by the wayside, due to the circumstances of their earlier lives.

Transitioning foster youth need information and guidance in order to make smart choices about what programs and services can make their transition into independent adulthood as smooth as possible. Instead, some of them are paralyzed and overwhelmed by the array of choices in front of them. Foster youth eligible to receive services will likely have to engage in a num

ber of interpersonal interactions and conversations with people they trust before they leave the “contemplation stage” of behavior change and are ready to actively engage in enrolling in a specific transition-support program. MEE also believes that the educated foster youth will make good decisions once they have the proper information and adequate decision-making resources.

MEE has conducted a substantial amount of focus group research with youth of color, many of whom were in the foster care system. We have also developed and implemented education, awareness and mobilization campaigns for thousands of urban youth and low-income young adults who have experienced sustained trauma, both inside and outside of the child welfare systems designed to protect them. In this issue of UrbanTrends, we share some lessons learned and some possible ways forward in changing the life outcomes for young men and women exiting our nation’s foster care system.

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Foster Youth Are Not Monolithic: *Targeting Various Audiences*

The transitioning foster youth audience can be broken down into three (overlapping) categories that MEE has deemed Ready2Go; Make Another Choice/U-Turn; and Planting the Seeds Youth.

Ready2Go:

These are the transition-age/eligible foster youth (16, 17 and recently turned 18 year olds) who have the mind-set that “I know I should, I want to, I can do this” about successfully transitioning from foster care into independent adulthood. Message themes for this audience should emphasize, “if you’re ready to make it [success] happen, we’re here to help you achieve your dream.”

U-Turn/Making Another Choice:

These are young people who at age 18 either chose to leave the system altogether or have been living on their own. Many of these

young adults know that they made a mistake but don’t want to be judged; instead, they want support as they try a different approach. Message themes would emphasize that it’s OK (and not too late) to make a different choice and that staff at the sponsoring agency are here to support, rather than judge transitioning foster youth.

Planting the Seeds:

This target audience consists of eligible foster youth (15 to 17 year olds) who are approaching transition age, but in pre-contemplation. Like many other young people, even outside foster care, who live day to day, they have behavior change inertia, i.e., “I don’t know about what happens next; I don’t want to be connected to the system in any way; I can’t/don’t know how to take control; it won’t work; it’s too hard

to figure out.” Even though they are not yet focusing down the road, the message to this audience should be that, when they are ready, the social service agency is here to connect them to the supports they need to be a success. Messages to “pre-contemplation” youth must include strong counter-arguments delivered in conjunction with real stories and experiences of others who have been where they are.

For all three of the above audiences, it is important to develop educational events with a social focus, a “safe” place where they can ask any questions (even those they may think are “stupid”) and can network

Continued on page 6



Educating Communities About Foster Care Transitions: Effective Messaging

Educating communities about specific foster-transition programs requires messages that provide multiple kinds of information and support to transitioning youth. These messages should drive young people to credible and trusted sources of information that will help them (1) weigh the different choices; and (2) know the specific action steps to apply and enroll in available transitioning programs and services.

The Messages

Following are key working concepts that need to be considered for both direct-to-consumer and community-education messages about foster care transition programs:

- **Tailor messages to the target audience’s daily reality.** Oversimplified, “just do it” messages will fail to resonate. These young people do not live simple lives. Foster youth and the influencers in their lives will respond to authentic, “non-sugar

coated” messages that appeal directly to them. They want answers to basic questions, i.e., why this issue should matter to them and what’s the first step they need to take in order to begin down a better road for themselves.

- **Begin the process by educating foster youth about the options available to them when they turn 18.** Any effort will require educating youth about why making an informed choice should be important to them and demands their action. A well-informed youth will be more likely to become an engaged foster youth.
- **Messages should engage and empower foster youth.** Campaign messages should avoid any appearance of being judgmental or stigmatizing, while also making foster youth feel motivated to

make a difference for themselves.

- **Use reality-based messages that focus on the consequences of “doing nothing” to stimulate action among foster youth who are in denial (pre-contemplation).** These messages would help community members understand the perils facing youth who enter adulthood without support.
- **Reflect the positive life experiences foster youth can have for themselves with the support provided by a comprehensive transition-support program.** Social media is a great venue for youth to share experiences such as getting their first place, first car, graduation, finding a good job, etc., with each other. They can be role models for youth in the earlier stages of deciding what to do at age 18. [UT](#)



Designing a Social Marketing Campaign

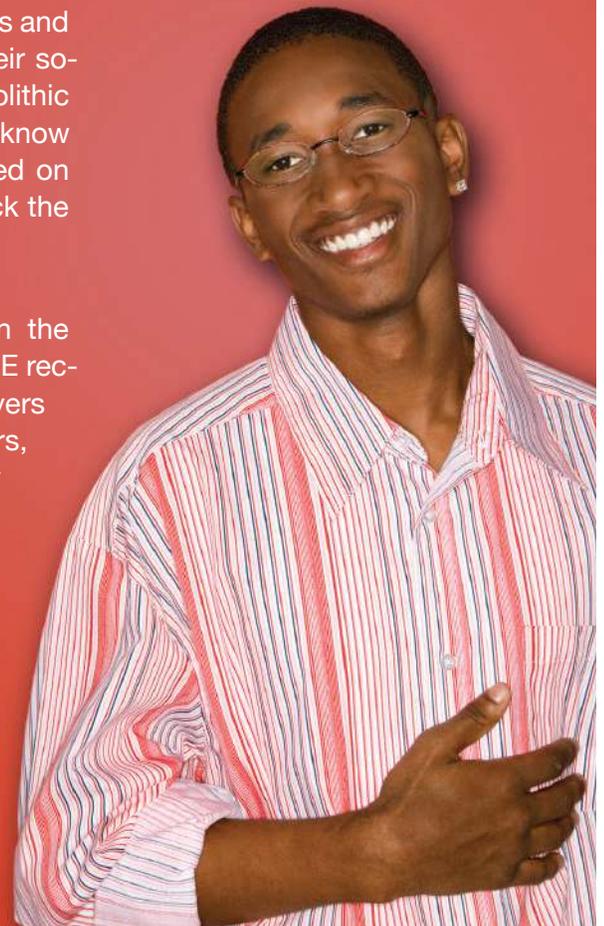
MEE's recommends using a number of available levers to move transitioning foster youth from "Point A" (low rates of awareness and enrollment) to "Point B" (more foster youth choosing transition programs and services as they turn 18).

Research has shown that children who "age out" of the foster care system are at increased risk of early pregnancy, substance abuse, poverty, homelessness, addiction and re-entry into the public welfare or criminal justice system. They also are likely to have achieved a lesser level of education, meaning that their job, and self-sufficiency prospects become limited. Many foster children have had to deal with adult issues well before their time and many are overwhelmed by hopelessness, feeling that they live in a world of limited options and a weak or nonexistent support system. As reflected in national statistics over the last decade, but especially in California, African Americans, Latinos and other communities of color are disproportionately represented in the foster care system. What MEE has learned in its work is that foster youth who are "aging out" need tools and specific strategies that connect them with much-needed services.

A campaign promoting specific supportive services and/or agencies should include two target audiences: transitioning foster youth as the primary audience; and social workers and other adult influencers as a secondary, but important audience. For the transitioning foster youth, MEE recommends a culturally specific, direct-to-consumer education campaign that reaches them at various decision and access points and tells them to gather information, take their time and talk with their social workers about all of their options. Foster youth are not monolithic in how they go about deciding next steps in their lives. Some know they want "independence," but lack the motivation to get started on the process; others know they want to improve their lives, but lack the resources or know-how to take action on their desires.

Motivating adults (both professionals in social services and in the broader community) in the lives of foster-care youth is critical. MEE recommends a much-needed dialogue that will educate multiple layers of the community — social workers, foster parents, policymakers, probation officers, service providers, high schools and community colleges, etc. — about the importance of providing transitioning foster youth with a full range of supports. Social service and foster care transition agencies need campaigns that are designed to meet a range of transitioning foster youth "where they are," giving them the tools to make an informed choice and moving as many of them as possible at least one step closer to choosing the available transitioning programs and services that best meets their needs, both short- and long-term. We need to invite the adult-influencer community to join local efforts and collaborations that have high expectations for transition-aged youth (something that is sorely missing). **UT**

Social workers and probation officers are often overworked, with significant caseloads that lead to burnout and staff turnover. Keeping these key influencers up-to-date on the benefits of specific agencies, programs or services for transitioning foster youth should be a priority when considering intervention campaigns.



Targeting continued...

with other youth and come in contact with caring, non-judgmental adult resources.

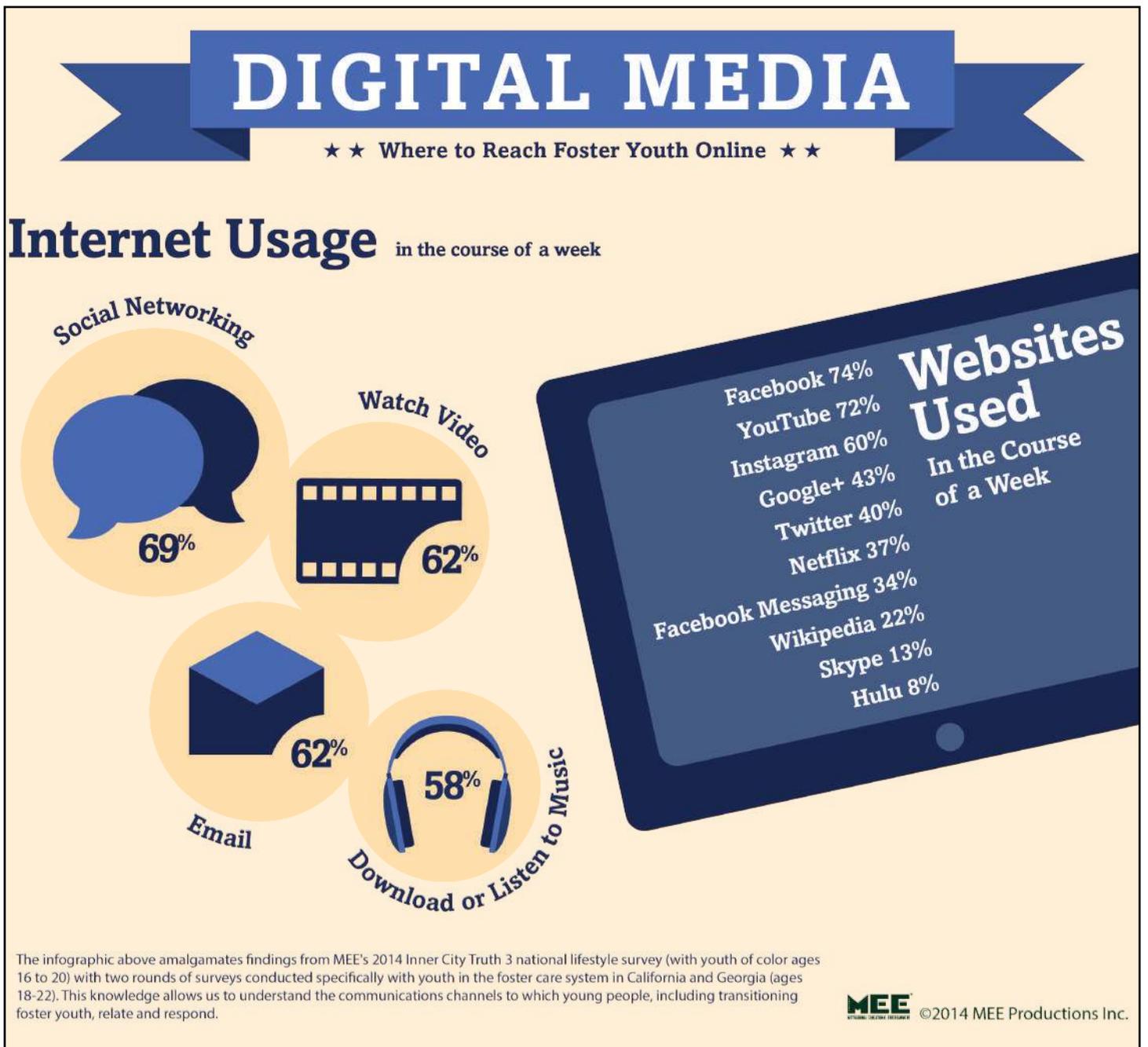
Social Workers and Adult Influencers

Foster care professionals (social workers, legal advocates, probation officers, etc.) and the broader community of adults (including policymakers and other key stakeholders) would be a secondary target audience for a

campaign promoting programs and services for transition-age foster youth.

Social workers and probation officers are often busy and overworked, with significant case loads. Staying up-to-date on the offerings for transitioning foster youth requires ongoing access to information and education for the social services community. Turnover among social services professionals means that transitioning youth may be dealing

with someone who does not have the depth of experience or specific cultural and content knowledge to help them make informed choices about next steps. Having a promotional campaign that educates the community about a particular transition program actually helps social workers and related professionals do their jobs better by providing them with information about a program that delivers proven results in moving foster youth towards independent adulthood. [UT](#)



The Importance of Social Media

These days, reaching and engaging low-income millennials of color requires an understanding of and facility in leveraging social media. While this is true of mainstream youth, what MEE discovered in its national Inner City Truth 3 (ICT3) survey research is that many young people of color are “power users” of social media. Focus groups with foster youth in California and Georgia confirmed these findings. When we asked young people about the channels that would be best suited to reach them, comments were typical of this one from a foster youth in Los Angeles: “This generation is based on technology ... on the Internet.”

National research shows that YouTube is now the second-most popular search tool for young people, behind powerhouse Google. When it comes to communication channels, YouTube, Instagram and Pandora are rivaling traditional media tools such as urban radio, which has long been a staple of MEE’s social marketing campaigns for communities of color. Almost 95% of

youth surveyed in recent focus groups had listened to music on the Internet within the last week; and almost 75% of them listened to it on their phones.

Beyond social media being the newest and most popular message channel, it

Social networking sites have transformed many aspects of social marketing, and therefore must be included as apart of any behavioral health communications strategy targeting at-risk youth. Social media channels should provide synergies with traditional media placement that may already be apart of the media mix.

also provides a contextual framing for how today’s young people view and interact with their peer group and the world around them. We observed increased excitement in focus groups with urban youth when we presented messages within the framework of a social media post, such as on Face-

book or Instagram. Having folks who look and sound like them delivering personal messages on YouTube offered built-in, instant credibility for low-income millennials of color. An Oakland young adult, for example, explained that since his friends hang out on Facebook and Instagram, it would be easier to connect with them there and share helpful information about programs and services that he uses and endorses.

Placing behavioral health messages within this framework provides several benefits: it makes it easy for youth to share the information with others in their extended social networks; youth-sanctioned and -delivered messages have automatic “insider” status; and you can link from one social media platform to another (i.e., Twitter to Facebook).

A customized campaign Facebook page could include practical resources and step-by-step guidance about how to access youth friendly services. A campaign’s Facebook page and YouTube channel should emphasize interactive elements that reflect oral communications culture; including the ability to watch short videos at the end user’s own pace, in the order that they choose, creating and controlling a customized experience.

Working in the digital space also allows you to roll out a series of themed, promotional sub-campaigns for transitioning foster youth over the course of a year. They can share their experiences such as getting their first job, graduating or how they are coping with independence. Most important, leveraging social media is a cost-effective communication solution that generates the kind of analytics data that allows you to easily assess the intermediate return on investment. **UT**



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For more information or to join the Community Network:

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