

# FIRST PLACE FOR YOUTH

## ALIGNING STRATEGY, DATA, AND CULTURE TO DRIVE IMPACT

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**E**mbodied within First Place for Youth’s DNA is a commitment to building evidence from within and leveraging learnings to continuously improve services, raise the bar for programmatic impact, and drive systems change.<sup>1</sup> This case study highlights First Place’s continuing journey to generate knowledge and impact that catalyzes programmatic and system-level impact on one “north star” outcome: life sustaining, living wage employment for youth aging out of foster care.

### LOCATING THE NORTH STAR

In 2018, First Place partnered with an external evaluator to complete an evaluability and implementation assessment of its core My First Place (MFP) program to inform program improvement strategies and determine its readiness for a more rigorous impact evaluation. The yearlong assessment confirmed where the model was succeeding: outcomes were strong in the areas of employment placements, housing stability, and unplanned pregnancies. At the same time, the evaluation revealed how far the model still needed to go to impart meaningful impact. Youth were enrolling in post-secondary programs but were not necessarily sticking with them; and while

youth were getting placed in jobs, those jobs were well below living wage. These findings were echoed by the results of concurrent policy research undertaken at a statewide level.<sup>2</sup>

It had become clear that without developing more specific measures and improvement methods that supported a line of sight toward education and career success, First Place would fall short of advancing long-term economic self-sufficiency for its youth participants. First Place took these learnings as a call to action and, in 2019, formed the Cross-Departmental Strategy Workgroup (CDW) to develop and implement robust organizational and system-level strategies to target disparities uncovered through this internal and state-level research. Members of the CDW included the leaders responsible for strategic oversight of the Evaluation and Learning (E&L), Policy, and Program departments broadly, as well as the specialized employment and education program components implemented through MFP.

Using the Annie E. Casey Foundation's *Accountability for Equitable Results Framework* (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2019), these leaders first set out to identify a single, measurable result to anchor their strategy development and collaboration, and to provide an ultimate barometer of shared accountability and success. As its north star metric, the CDW selected weekly income from employment and set a target to increase the median weekly earnings for all youth to within 90 percent of the county living wage, using the MIT living wage standard.<sup>3</sup> The metric and associated target allowed for benchmarking that accounted for the disparate cost of living across counties, and for comparison against state-level administrative data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

In addition to analyzing organization- and population-level data on youth earnings over time, the team conducted a factor analysis of positive and negative influences on earnings to illuminate the “story behind the data,” and identify the belief systems, legal and regulatory structures, and practice norms contributing to inequities for foster youth in obtaining living wage employment. This process resulted in the identification of several factors that became the focus of the CDW strategies at the organizational and systems levels.

Prior to focusing on this north star, First Place had become mired in conflicting priorities—set internally by different departments and externally by public and private funding sources—complicated data collection practices, and competing targets. The CDW recognized that increasing

living wage employment would require an organizational reset and the focused alignment of effort across leaders, colleagues, stakeholders, and partners. This focus would help the organization pursue public partnerships and private funding with intentionality, streamline and simplify its data collection and performance monitoring, and reduce program burnout.

### **ALIGNING TOWARD A NORTH STAR OUTCOME: EMBRACING A “LESS IS MORE” APPROACH**

The CDW developed and implemented a set of process strategies to help redirect and align the organization’s attention at all levels toward the living wage result.<sup>4</sup> This required taking a “less is more” approach to shape and implement strategies that drive impact. The following examples showcase how a razor-sharp focus on the north star outcomes strengthened team, measurement, and collaborative functions.

#### ***Re-Envisioning the Continuous Quality Improvement Team***

An unspoken rule of thumb at First Place had dictated that more is always better: more meetings, more metrics, and a constant push to deliver and scale new program innovations. This resulted in a lack of clarity around priorities, roles, and decision making. Without a clear point-of-view on how to facilitate change, the organization vacillated between two extremes in implementation—premature scale *or* abandonment of innovations.

To address these adaptive challenges, First Place re-imagined and reconstituted its existing continuous quality improvement forum into the Practice Innovation Group (PIG). The PIG was rebranded as an implementation off-shoot of the CDW. It brought together key decision makers and leaders from the Program and E&L departments charged with the design and implementation of strategies engineered to impact living wage employment. PIG leaders engaged critical stakeholders, including young people and direct line staff, to shape the design and ownership of CDW strategies. Meeting cadence was shifted from bimonthly to weekly, allowing dedicated time for planning, problem solving, and constant alignment toward the north star result.

#### ***Bringing Policy to the Learning Table***

As part of its new “less is more” approach, First Place also revisited the relationship between its program learnings and its policy change agenda. The

organization had long operated from the perspective that the data generated from service delivery should drive its policy agenda. Over time, however, departmental functions had become siloed, diminishing that focus. Data remained integral to the organization's policy activity, but increasingly, policy priorities were set independently, and data was pulled subsequently to support policy arguments.

Focusing on the living wage result across all departments involved three major shifts to organizational practice, starting with ensuring that the Policy department was "at the table" with E&L as it shaped research questions and metrics for collection and evaluation. This ensured that First Place was asking questions that were relevant not just to the organization but to external stakeholders, systems, and policy audiences. Next, Policy began partnering intentionally with E&L to analyze findings on the impact of living wage strategies to develop recommendations for system reform. Finally, advocacy efforts were targeted on increasing system-wide access to employment and education-related data.

### *Eliminating the Noise*

Prior to the CDW initiative, the E&L department was overburdened, tracking more than 120 internal performance and outcome metrics as well as countless contract metrics reported regularly to its public and private funders. This caused stagnation within the department due to the constant need to focus staff time and effort on producing metrics or fixing calculation errors. These conditions had begun to erode programmatic trust in the accuracy and relevance of the data produced. E&L needed to restore trust and free up staff time to measure impact, analyze trends, and uncover pathways to improved living wage employment outcomes.

After soliciting feedback from front-line staff and organizational leaders, the department reduced the number of internal outcome metrics from thirty down to just five—focused on stable housing, post-secondary persistence and completion, employment, and attainment of living wage. The streamlined metrics aligned directly with the CDW strategies and reflected a more sophisticated, nuanced, and specific assessment of incremental progress toward a living wage. By focusing on youth outcomes at exit and setting specific targets for the next fiscal year, the metrics better aligned staff focus with the mission of the organization.

E&L provided access to all five metrics in a well-designed dashboard updated each morning and available to all staff. Research jargon was re-

placed with language familiar to social workers, and the development of reports started with staff needs and ideas solicited throughout the creation process. Staff were able to look closely at individual youth progress, drilling down on the data to support outcome attainment. Simultaneously, E&L eliminated countless forms and reports in First Place's case management system that had amplified the data burden felt by staff without providing sufficient value in supporting outcomes. With increased data literacy across the organization, greater focus on living wage employment, and accurate, real-time data, the organization had more capacity to develop and launch new innovations.

### **CREATING SUSTAINABLE CHANGE STRATEGIES**

After creating the enabling conditions to pursue a living wage strategy, the CDW turned its attention to sustainable implementation. First, the organization contracted with BCT Partners to develop a decision support data tool for practitioners using precision analytics and quasi-experimental methodologies. The Youth Roadmap Tool (YRT) helps staff and managers identify and target effective services to optimize each youth's likelihood of success. BCT Partners leveraged five years of First Place data to identify the largest predictors of living wage attainment by program exit. The data modeling was used to create a web-based dashboard for front-line staff and managers, with custom snapshots showing where youth are in programs and which high-impact services and goal areas will most impact the north star outcome.

The PIG successfully led the development and launch of: 1) a post-secondary education coaching innovation that provides youth with the pre-enrollment information, experiences, and networks necessary to increase persistence, attainment, completion, and earning potential; and 2) a pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programming model designed to help young people "earn while they learn," receive incremental pay increases, and secure living wage jobs in high-demand markets. For each of these innovations, a measurement line of sight and specific progress indicators were designed to evaluate incremental success toward the weekly earnings target.

Finally, First Place's charge to elevate system-level attention and expectations toward the north star outcome manifested in a data and research partnership with Mark Courtney and the team at the University of Chicago

responsible for implementation of the CalYOUTH Study to create greater access to employment and education data among providers and system stakeholders.<sup>5</sup>

## RESULTS AND REFLECTIONS ON THE WAY AHEAD

Two years into its execution, promising results of the CDW work are emergent and will unfold over years to come. First Place has released a research and policy brief titled *Raising the Bar: Building System- and Provider-Level Evidence to Drive Equitable Education and Employment Outcomes for Youth in Extended Foster Care* (Van Buren, Schroeder, and York, 2021). The brief shared key findings and emergent learnings from the CalYOUTH and BCT partnerships, and provided targeted practice and policy recommendations aimed at increasing living wage employment system-wide. In the state legislative cycle corresponding with publication of the brief, First Place collaborated on two state bills that would target investments accordingly, and uplifted key findings in conversations with advocates and public policymakers.

The PSE coaching intervention is being actively evaluated, and is demonstrating early evidence of success in supporting young people to persist in educational placements. Likewise, the pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship program is moving through a generative learning and development phase to determine uptake, retention, and need for refinement. The Youth Roadmap Tool has been adopted *by* practitioners *for* practitioners, and Program and E&L are collaborating on the development of an evaluation dashboard to monitor uptake and success of the tool. These new interventions have taken root as the way First Place works, and the process underpinning their development has generated more ownership of the data, a more individualized and evidence-informed approach to service delivery, and a culture shift around expectation for impact. In fact, an initial round of staff surveys revealed that the data literacy across the organization increased significantly, and practitioners reported they were more likely to apply data to practice.

Perhaps the most powerful result is that First Place is aligned toward equitable results in ways it never was before; the entire organization is hyper-focused on living wage attainment for *all youth* during a time when this outcome could not be more important. Despite the challenges and setbacks from the COVID-19 pandemic, feedback from youth and staff has

been positive, and the new tools are expected to help youth rebound more quickly. As strategies build evidence of impact on the core result, First Place will scale these interventions with the same approach used to develop them: an unwavering focus on the north star.

## NOTES

1. The story of First Place for Youth is a tale of the relentless, often rocky pursuit of meaningful results and systems change in service to young people aging out of foster care into the world of independence. The organization's guiding vision holds that involvement in the foster care system should not limit the opportunity to thrive in adulthood; in contribution to that vision, First Place's mission is to support foster youth to build the comprehensive skills needed to make a successful transition to self-sufficiency and responsible adulthood. Since its founding in 1998 in Oakland, California, First Place's core program model—My First Place (MFP)—has evolved into one of the largest providers of housing, care management, employment, and education services for youth who were in California's foster care system on their eighteenth birthday. The MFP program provides youth in extended foster care with a stable foundation of housing, along with employment and education services, intensive care management, and a focus on youth-driven skill development in key self-sufficiency areas to promote a successful transition to independence. Its influence has expanded to other states as one of the only evidence-informed placement models nationwide for older youth in care.

2. Dr. Mark Courtney and his research team at the University of Chicago conducted seminal policy research on the impact of California's extended foster care policy on key outcomes for youth (Courtney, Okpych, and Park 2018). Findings from this research mirrored those uncovered by First Place: participation in extended foster care yielded a myriad of positive and preventative outcomes for youth, but the system was not making meaningful strides in post-secondary persistence, degree attainment, or, perhaps most notably, in significant change in income.

3. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Living Wage calculator, accessed 1/4/23, <https://livingwage.mit.edu/>.

4. The CDW initiated a radical shift in the way organizational leaders thought about working vertically and laterally across departments. This included clear interdependencies, distributive leadership roles, and shared accountability for leveraging data, building evidence, and holding the living wage result at the center. To optimize the collaborative role each department would play in supporting the result, the CDW established clear aspirations and a container for strategy execution: 1) program teams would implement program strategy innovations using Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) continuous quality

improvement (CQI) cycles; 2) E&L staff would develop mechanisms to provide access to *better* data on employment and education and support CQI design, execution and learning habits, and coaching on data practices; and 3) policy staff would partner with E&L to shape the questions to be addressed through research and data, analyzing learnings to determine an advocacy agenda, and disseminate knowledge to drive systems change.

5. The double bottom line for the CalYouth partnership was: 1) to expand the knowledge base on the impact of diverse foster care placements on post-secondary and employment outcomes throughout California; and 2) to create broader provider-level access to administrative data on longitudinal PSE and employment outcomes in the interest of refocusing their attention and interest on improving living wage employment outcomes among the youth they serve. Policy and E&L collaborated closely to form a stakeholder workgroup of extended foster care providers across the state who helped design an “outcomes snapshot” that would provide multiyear data on post-secondary and employment outcomes for each individual provider, leveraging reliable administrative data from California’s Employment Development Department and National Student Clearinghouse. Larger providers also would receive quasi-experimental analysis comparing their risk-adjusted outcomes against state-level averages and other extended foster care providers in similar counties. The ultimate goal in pursuing these dual aims was to support a systems-change (policy) agenda: strengthening the evidence base to push for more targeted investments in the extended foster care system in the areas of employment and education, and democratizing access to data to drive change at the provider level.

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