Foster Youth Mentorship:

A Qualitative Investigation Into Motivations and Experiences

(A service-learning capstone project conducted by CSUCI Sociology Students for Casa Pacifica, Spring 2011)

Cristina Miranda, Raquel Montes, Elizabeth Contreras, & Pedro Mendoza
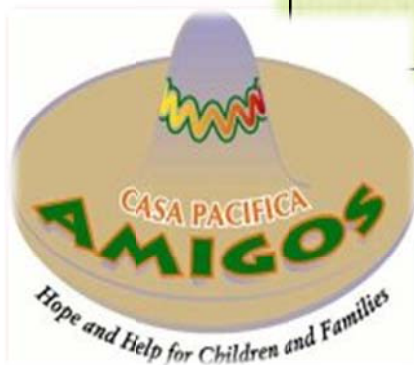
Dennis Downey (Faculty Supervisor)

CASA PACIFICA
Centers For Children & Families
Providing Hope & Help

CASA PACIFICA AMIGOS
Hope and Help for Children and Families

CYC
CALIFORNIA YOUTH CONNECTION
Our Voices, Our Future

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

❖ *Research origins and goals:* The research was conducted as a partnership between Casa Pacifica and the CSUCI Sociology Program, conducted by the investigators as their senior capstone project. The focus on the experiences and motivations of volunteers serving foster youth, with specific interest in mentoring roles, was selected by Casa Pacifica leaders as an area of vital importance to the youth that they serve. The goal is to identify practices that may encourage more volunteers to serve as mentors.

❖ *Research methods:* Research was based on qualitative interviews conducted with twenty volunteers who serve foster youth at Casa Pacifica. The sample included ten members of the Casa Pacifica Amigos, and members of the California Youth Connection Adult Supporters. Members of both organizations were chosen in order to broaden the range of volunteer experiences and to facilitate informal comparisons.

❖ *The need for and role of mentors:* Foster youth frequently lack the kind of close and sustained contact with role models that are essential to developing the everyday life skills (both practical and complex) that are crucial for a successful transition to independent living as an adult. Sustained contact with a mentor can prove to be the key difference between thriving and failing in that transition. However, there are currently not enough mentors to serve the needs of all foster youth in the region.

❖ *Definitions and perceptions of mentoring:* Respondents have varying ideas about what defines mentoring. Most definitions revolve around role modeling and surrogate parenting. Volunteers set a "high bar" for interactions to be considered mentoring.

❖ *Initial and current involvement:* The most common way that volunteers became involved with foster youth was through interactions with Casa Pacifica staff and other volunteers. Additionally, a number of respondents were themselves members of foster families growing up. Currently, volunteers spend significant time with the youth. Involvement tends to be either group-based recreational activities (characteristic of Amigos) or more extensive one-on-one contact (characteristic of Adult Supporters).

❖ *Sources of satisfaction and challenge:* Sources of satisfaction revolve around the benefits experienced by the youth, with respondents tending to focus on either "happiness" or "success" (depending largely on the nature of volunteers' interactions with the youth). Several broad areas of challenges emerged: time constraints experienced by volunteers (largely stemming from family or career); youth behaviors (particularly self-destructive behaviors); and issues related to the foster care system.

❖ *Future involvement:* Nearly all respondents expect to continue their involvement, and many plan to deepen their involvement. Many are looking for additional opportunities.

❖ *Needed support and encouragement:* Respondents identified two areas that could be improved to assist them in their work: increased communication (among and between staff and volunteers) and increased coordination (in identifying and providing services).

PART I: BACKGROUND & METHODS

Chapter 1: Foster Youth

A foster youth is a minor who is a ward of the court; this means that they are not under the care of their biological parents and the state has taken responsibility for their care. There are a number of reasons why youth may enter the foster care system. In some instances, a youth goes into a foster family or group home because his or her mother or father has a problem with drugs or alcohol. Parents may need so much help with their own problems that they are not able to focus on what their children need. In other cases, a parent may be very sick, in jail, or have some other issue that prevents them from being able to parent the child. There are also cases where children may be abused or neglected. As a consequence, youth who grow up in the foster care system have a range of vulnerabilities and needs that make the transition to independent adulthood particularly challenging.

Based on recent research, more than 500,000 youth are in some type of foster care throughout the country; 80,000 of those youth are in the state of California alone.[1] In 2010, Ventura County had 614 total cases of minors in foster care. Out of the 614 cases, 261 of them were between the ages of 11 and 18 years old. The state is legally required to provide for youth up to their eighteenth birthday or until they graduate high school, whichever is in the best interest of the youth. After that point, they are deemed independent by the court (referred to as "emancipation"), and are no longer eligible for federal and state funded services. That abrupt cessation of all services creates tremendous challenges for the transition to independent

---

[1] The statistics below come from the advocacy organization Honoring Emancipated Youth (HEY). HEY is a non-profit organization established in 1999, whose mission is to strengthen and connect systems of support for emancipated foster youth in San Francisco. In 2010, they merged with Transitional Age Youth, San Francisco (TAYSF). For more information on the organization and their research, see: http://www.heysf.org/pdfs/HEYFosterYouthStatistics.pdf.

adulthood. That problem has been recognized, and will change with the implementation of the state law AB 12 by January 2012.[2] Presently, Ventura County emancipates approximately 50 youth each year and most of those youth do not have a permanent connection to an adult or suitable housing. This creates the challenge for youth to be prepared for independent adulthood after emancipation.

Preparing for independence: While the foster care system removes minors from unhealthy situations with their biological family (and in far too many instances, situations that are abusive or otherwise intolerable), it raises a whole new set of challenges – both for the foster youth themselves and for the many components of the system created to care for them. The needs of particular foster youth vary from child to child; some need more than others, depending on the background in which they were raised, any trauma that they might have experienced, etc. However, the principal challenge for all of them is navigating their pre-adult years without the supportive family context that most children take for granted. For the foster care system (including foster families and facilities such as Casa Pacifica), the basic challenges are providing the basics of food, clothing, and shelter, and a healthy and nurturing context for foster youth to grow up. Beyond those day-to-day issues are the bigger challenges of preparing the youth for independent living when they "age out" of the system. Ultimately, the challenge for Casa Pacifica is not simply taking care of the youth, but teaching the youth how to take care of themselves.

At one level, taking care of themselves involves a range of basic living skills and everyday independent living tasks that most youth learn from their parents and take for granted.

---

[2] Assembly Bill AB12 will be implemented in January 2012 allows youth be eligible for services up until the age of 21. This new law gives the state ability to create relative guardianship programs that federal can help support financially. These federal funds will also be utilized for foster care, kinship-guardianship, and adoption assistance benefits to youth who meet the criteria and services will be available until age 21. For additional information, see the AB 12 Fact Sheet (Office of Assembly Member Jim Beall, Jr. 2011).

Those tasks include doing laundry, going grocery shopping, taking the trash out and replacing the bag, and remembering and being able to make a meal for oneself. Proficiency with those everyday tasks are crucial to independent living. Prior to emancipation, all of these tasks are done for foster youth; following emancipation, they are expected to do those same tasks for themselves. Beyond those routine tasks are much more complex skills that they need to develop in order to thrive as adults. For example: financial literacy and a whole range of employment skills; building strong relationships with friends and partners; maintaining self-esteem in the face of the many setbacks that all have to confront in early adulthood; and many, many more.

A weak foundation in any of those areas – from the simple everyday tasks to the complex emotional skills – can lead to an unsuccessful transition to independent adult living. As a result, after emancipation many of the youth are forced to go back to the place from which they were initially removed due to the lack of resources and not having a place to go. The lack of a safety net can lead to the inability to find and keep a job, too often resulting in homelessness, which can spiral into worse situations – for example, leading them toward involvement with minor crime and become part of the criminal justice system. National statistics show that within 18 month of emancipation 40-50% of foster youth become homeless.[3] 70% of teens who emancipate from foster care report that they want to attend college, but less than 50% complete their high school graduation and fewer than 10% of who graduate from high school enroll in college, and of those less than 1% graduate from college.[4] Former foster youth are also found to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at twice the rate of U.S. war veterans.

What can Casa Pacifica do to ensure that the youth in their care have the opportunity to develop those skills prior to emancipation, and to continue developing the more complex skills

---

[3] See: http://www.heysf.org/pdfs/HEYFosterYouthStatistics.pdf.
[4] See: http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/NorthwestAlumniStudy.htm.

throughout the transition period? It is important to recognize that most of those independent living skills, and certainly the more complex skills associated with emotional development, are extremely difficult to cultivate in group settings. Instead, they require the focused attention of supportive and caring adults in ongoing one-on-one relationships. Consequently, while institutions such as Casa Pacifica can provide for youths' physical and emotional stability up to the age of eighteen, there is a tremendous need for mentors who can help the youth to develop the crucial remaining crucial needs, to prepare them for (and during) the transition to independent adulthood.

Chapter 2: Mentors: Roles and Needs

The role of mentors: The statistics weighing against successful transitions to adulthood for foster youth are daunting. However, the evidence suggests that one factor can be crucial in helping them to "beat" those statistics and achieve a successful transition; that factor is having an ongoing relationship with a mentor. The focused and sustained attention of a healthy, positive adult role model who will not give up on them can play a crucial role in providing the skills and emotional stability that foster youth need. That constant unwavering support serves as a source of encouragement, and models a positive outlook for youth when much that they have learned in their lives can promote a self-reinforcing pessimism.

Among the most important effects of mentors is the way that they contribute to the crucial quality of resilience among foster youth. As Masten and Garmezy (1985) concluded in their important research: "Resilience research has consistently identified the presence of a supportive and caring non-parental adult in the lives of children and youth who succeed despite adversity and hardship." While mentors are important in the lives of *all* children, they are

particularly crucial for foster youth – both because they confront a greater level of "adversity and hardship," and because they are less likely to have extensive incidental exposure to supportive and caring non-parental adults" naturally in the course of their lives.

A person in this mentoring relationship needs to be consistent, particularly for those who are in the transition stage. They experience multiple transitions, with adults coming in and out of their lives as they move from home to home, in some cases as many as four to five times before they age out of the system. This presents a challenge too effective mentoring, however; because many foster youth have had multiple placements and lack permanency in their lives, they frequently have no experience in healthy relationships with adults. Mentors must overcome that obstacle in order to address the more basic needs.

Mentors play several important roles in the lives of foster youth. The three core dimensions of mentoring are: experience, guidance and a supportive relationship between the mentor and the mentee (Munson and McMillen 2008). An effective mentor is able to provide time to foster a relationship and fulfill the role of a consistent and permanent connection in the youths' lives. According to Collins et al. (2010: 232), "Mentoring, if done well, may hold the potential to meet some of the critical needs of youths transitioning from foster care to independent living and early adulthood."

The need for more mentors: While mentors can be extremely important in the lives of foster youth by addressing many of the needs that they confront, there are not simply enough of them to serve all of the foster youth who emancipate every year. Nationally, each year an estimated 20,000 of these youth emancipate or "age out" of the foster care system, and are discharged from the system, whether or not they are prepared to transition to adulthood; about

25% of these youth live in California.[5] Mentoring involves a substantial commitment which typically evolves into a deepening relationship; the tasks of identifying individuals willing to make that commitment, and finding ways to encourage them to do so, represent crucial challenges for foster youth advocates such as Casa Pacifica. And once mentors are involved, they need to do all that they can to help to support the maintenance of that relationship.

In recognition of the crucial role that mentoring can play in the lives of foster youth, many foster support agencies sponsor formal mentor prgrams. Some mentoring programs require that mentors make a one-year commitment and often encourage longer commitments, if possible. Individuals willing and able to make such commitments are far too scarce relative to the need. Consequently, in order to increase the number of mentors available for foster youth, agencies such as Casa Pacifica need to know more about what motivates interested adults to take the step to become a mentor, what obstacles they face in doing so, and what their overall experience is like. The ultimate goal is for each youth who is in the foster care system and who lives in Ventura County to have a mentor, so that they have a chance to reap the essential advantages that they present for a successful transition to adulthood – and, ultimately, a better chance at life.

This research was conducted as a contribution toward identifying ways to inspire and support those adults willing to become mentors for foster youth – at Casa Pacifica specifically, and in the community generally.

Chapter 3: A Research Partnership: Design & Methods

Service-learning research and community partnership: This research was conducted as a capstone project by students in the Sociology Program at California State University, Channel

---

[5] See: http://cssr.berkeley.edu/CWSCMSreports/.

Islands (CSUCI). CSUCI is committed to civic engagement and close partnerships between the university and the community. The Sociology capstone program reflects that commitment: all projects undertaken by capstone students are conducted as partnerships between students and community partners, designed in collaboration with the partners to produce applied research that will be useful to them. This research project emerged as a partnership between the CSUCI Sociology program and Casa Pacifica. Specifically, the project engaged three primary components: students in the Sociology capstone course (Cristina Miranda, Raquel Montes, Elizabeth Contreras, and Pedro Mendoza); Vicki Murphy, Chief Advancement Officer & Director of Alumni Services at Casa Pacifica; and Dennis Downey, faculty supervisor from the Sociology Program.

Casa Pacifica is a shelter home and residential treatment center for abused, neglected, and severely emotionally disturbed children and adolescents.[6] Casa Pacifica is located in Camarillo California and serves the tri-county region of Southern California which include Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo and Ventura Counties. It originated in the 1980s when a group of Ventura County citizens became concerned about the lack of services for children removed from home by Child Protective Services. Those citizens sought to generate the community support necessary to establish a facility that would serve those youth. Eventually, the community was able to raise the $10 million needed to build Casa Pacifica as a public-private partnership, and it opened its doors in the summer of 1994. Today, Casa Pacifica responds to an average of ten crisis calls each day in their mobile crisis response programs in the tri-county region. Casa Pacifica impacts the lives of 400 youth and their families in their service area each day. That includes the lives of youth who may not necessarily be in the facility but have been moved to a group home or placed back with their families. If it wasn't for the programs and services

---

[6] For more information on Casa Pacifica, see http://www.casapacifica.org/.

provided by Casa Pacifica, most of the children under their care would be placed out of county, far from home and community.

The newest of Casa Pacifica's programs is the Coaching Independence in Transitional Youth (CITY) program. The CITY program provides housing, emotional support, therapy, and in some cases financial support to youth who have exited the foster care system. This emphasis on what happens to foster youth *after* they reach adulthood and exit the system reflects the concern and vision that Casa Pacifica brings to their care for foster youth in the county. This research should prove to be particularly helpful for those services, given the key role that mentors play in the transition process.

At initial meetings in January of 2011, all partners (students, professor, community partners) met to discuss potential topics for research. After substantial discussion, Casa Pacifica asked us to conduct research that would identify key factors that encouraged supportive adults to commit to and to continue being a mentor for foster youth. Specifically, we were asked to focus on identifying and elaborating on the motivations and experiences of foster youth mentors, as well as adults who support foster youth but have not become mentors. By investigating those factors, we hoped to develop a better understanding of how to better encourage and support mentors, and thereby provide the information necessary for Casa Pacifica to design programs that will accomplish those goals. The research would focus on volunteers serving foster youth through organizations linked to Casa Pacifica (from groups introduced below), the implications would be useful for foster youth advocates far beyond the county.

Research questions, research design, and sample: With those goals in mind, we specified two basic research questions. What are the main sources of motivation that encourage adults to

become mentors for foster youth? What are some of the experiences that commonly lead to satisfaction and challenges in mentoring?

Given the nature of the research questions, we chose to design our research as a series of qualitative (or in-depth) interviews, which allowed us to interact with our respondents in their own language and on their own terms. Qualitative interviews are ideal for exploring internal motivations and complex experiences because they allow respondents the breadth to provide open and well-developed responses. (Those kinds of topics cannot be effectively accessed, for example, by the numerical data and statistical analyses central to survey research.) The result is an understanding of respondents' perspectives presented in their own words. It can also produce theories that more accurately describe real world issues and processes compared to quantitative data. While in-depth interviews emphasize the particular experiences of respondents, we can still use them to generate understandings that are applicable far beyond the immediate boundaries of the study.

In order to answer the research questions, we selected a sample of respondents that incorporated a comparison between adult volunteers from two volunteer organizations associated with Casa Pacifica. Members of both groups demonstrate a fundamental interest in and commitment to assisting and supporting foster youth, but the organizations are structured so that the volunteers have substantially different interactions with the youth with important implications for their potential role as mentors. The two organizations are the Casa Pacifica Amigos and the California Youth Connection Adult Supporters.

The *Casa Pacifica Amigos* is a group of volunteers who organize monthly events with the youth living at Casa Pacifica. The Amigos were started by two men in 2004 who wanted to serve the need for more positive male role models for the kids at Casa Pacifica. The Amigos are

composed of approximately 70 men and women with a clear commitment to foster youth and Casa Pacifica. The Amigos also have a monthly "business meeting" where they identify how they are going to spend their money and what type of event they will be putting on for the youth. Aside from their monthly meeting and monthly event with the youth, one of the primary tasks of the Amigos is to sponsor fundraising events. One of their regular and most successful events is their regular poker nights in which all the funds raised benefits the events for upcoming activities. Most of their work is to be involved with the youth on campus creating and facilitating recreational activities on a monthly basis. The Amigos are able to create a positive environment where the youth can interact with each other. Youth on campus know them by name and most of the Amigos have been around for years. The Amigos play a crucial role in the lives of foster youth at Casa Pacifica.

The Amigos spend their time in direct contact with the kids sponsoring a variety of recreational activities. Some of the activities include bike rides, hikes, and sports (such as soccer or softball). They sponsor an annual end of the summer party. The purpose of all of the activities is simply allow the youth to just be kids – something that has been denied to many of them for too much of their lives.

California Youth Connection (CYC) *Adult Supporters* is a youth-run and youth-driven organization composed of current and former foster youth, ages 14-24, who work together to create policies that will improve the foster care system.[7] Adult Supporters are committed individuals who are passionate about youth development and foster care reform throughout the state who live or work in a county with a CYC chapter. The Ventura County chapter of CYC has close links to Casa Pacifica, and holds their bi-monthly meetings there. Although CYC is a

---

[7] For more information on California Youth Connection, see http://www.calyouthconn.org/mission

youth-run organization, their work would not be possible without the active assistance and participation of the Adult Supporters; they are essential to the success of CYC chapters.

The purpose of Adult Supporters is to help youth members learn the skills that they need to lead and run their own chapter meetings and events, and to effectively advocate for change.[8] In their role as Adult Supporters, they consistently assist youth in a variety of ways – such as providing transportation, engaging youth, and being available to encourage/teach skills to the youth. In addition to that general assistance, most Adult Supporters also develop a more specific relationship with one or more foster youth or young adults recently emancipated from the foster care system. CYC does not mandate that Adult Supporters to become official mentors to the youth; rather, those relationships develop organically as a result of their commitment to and regular contact with foster youth.

As the above descriptions make clear, our research design integrates a comparison of two groups committed volunteers serving foster youth. While members of one of those groups typically engage in activities that would commonly be defined as mentorship, members of the other group typically play another role – although, as we will see, "mentoring" is defined in different ways by different respondents. We have chosen to select respondents from each group because that comparison will assist us in understanding why some volunteers take the step of becoming a foster youth mentor, while others who are also demonstrably committed to those youth choose not to do so.

Interview guide development and administration: The interview guide (i.e. the list of questions used to elicit responses from interviewees) was developed and designed by the students, under close supervision of the professor, and in close collaboration with our community partner (Vicki Murphy). The following topical areas were developed from the broad research

---

[8] For more information on Adult Supporters, see http://www.calyouthconn.org/adult-supporter.

questions: initial involvement, current involvement, sources of satisfaction & challenges, mentoring, future involvement, and support. Individual questions within those areas were crafted to direct respondents toward the areas of central interest, while giving them ample leeway to address related issues that they believed to be pertinent. The full interview guide is provided as an appendix to this report.

We conducted a total of twenty in-depth interviews, including ten respondents from each of the comparison groups (Casa Pacifica Amigos and CYC Adult Supporters – hereafter Amigos and Adult Supporters). Interviews were set up through emails or phone calls. The interviews were conducted in-person, in the place that best accommodated our respondents. That ranged from rooms located at Casa Pacifica to respondents' place of employment. All of the interviews were all recorded and transcribed, and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes (averaging 35 minutes). No identifying information will be reported in this study.

PART II: FINDINGS

Chapter 4: Respondent Demographics

This section provides general descriptive information about respondents, focusing on characteristics that may have an impact on the decision to mentor: respondents' gender, employment status, and whether they have children of their own.

Figure 1:
Gender Composition, Amigos & Adult Supporters
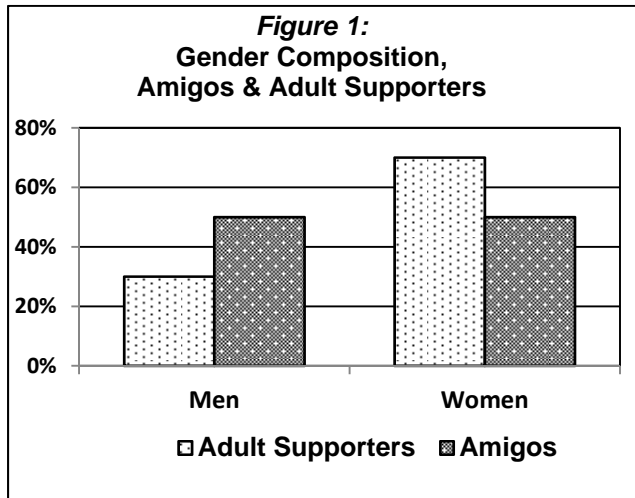
Gender (Figure 1): Overall, we interviewed twelve women and eight men. Women made up the majority of Adult Supporters (70%), while the Amigos were equally divided. Gender is an important variable in the decision to mentor, for a variety of reasons. We will discuss those reasons in the sections below.

Figure 2:
Parental Status of Respondents
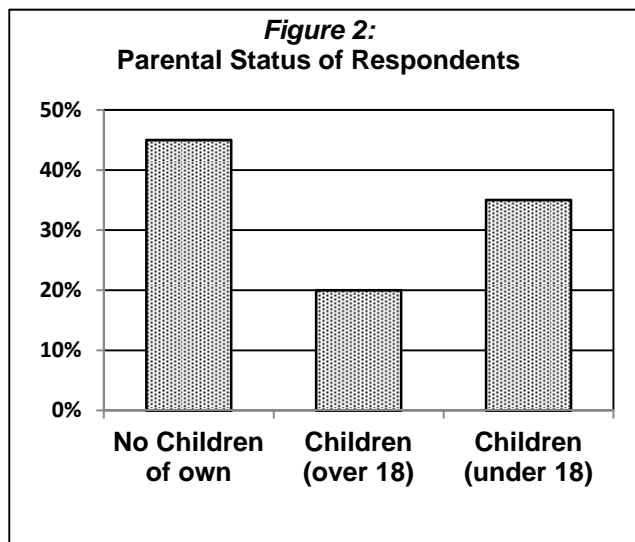
Parental Status of Respondents (Figure 2): The majority of interviewees had children of their own, comprising 55% of the sample. 45% of the interviewees had no children of their own, although this did not include foster children currently living with them, or step children. Out of the interviewees with children 35% had children under the age of 18 and 20% had children over the age of 18. As one might imagine, having children is an important consideration for adults choosing whether to become mentors due to

time constraints and familial responsibilities. Respondents elaborated on some of those considerations in our interviews, as we will present below.

Figure 3:
Employment status
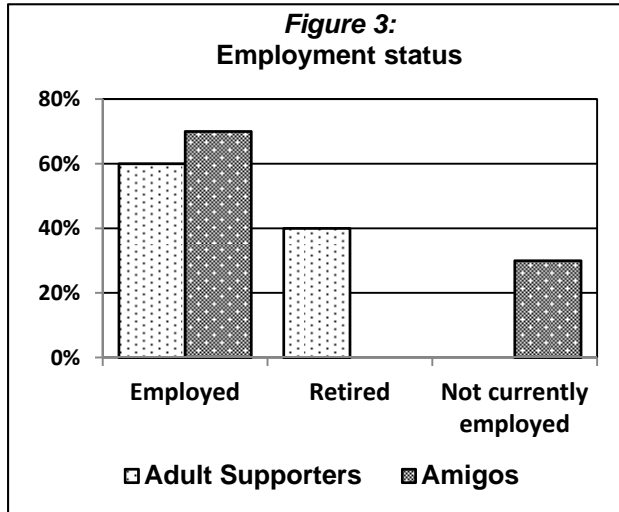
Employment status (Figure 3): The majority of the interviewees are currently employed (60% of Adult Supporters and 70% Amigos). There were, however, some respondents who were not currently employed, which of whom made up 30% of the Amigos. Some interviewees are currently retired, 40% of Adult Supporters.

Chapter 5: Definitions and Perceptions of Mentoring

Defining mentorship: As we presented in Chapter 2, there is substantial research that defines mentoring and identifies good mentoring practices. However, "mentor" and "mentoring" are terms that are broadly used, and may defined in different ways by different people. Because of that, we start by explaining how our respondents defined mentors and mentoring in order to develop a better sense of what the terms mean to them in our discussions.

When we asked respondents how they defined a mentor, the most common term that came up was "role modeling." 70% of respondents said that being a mentor is being a role model, which includes teaching basic life skills, coaching them through life decisions, and giving them a model of leadership. It was also important to respondents to note that being a mentor is a voluntary endeavor encompassing many different roles. As one of our respondents said:

As opposed to a boss or a parent, a mentor is a volunteering thing as I see it. It's a role you do because you want to and it's a role that has to adapt to the needs of the mentee. So a mentor, I think just says 'I see potential, and I have experience and I would like to fill the gap' and it's never going to be a one size fits all, but mentoring is trying to shed light on the possibilities of anybody. So that's what I see; it's a lot of things, it's leadership, vision, parenting, coaching, cheerleading. It's whatever one makes of those, and many more needed to lead the way. It's a commitment that could be forever, and it's not limited. (Amigo)

As stated above, this respondent feels that a mentor must take on more than one role, and must be flexible and able to adapt to the needs of the mentee.

The remaining 30% percent of the respondents had a different perspective when it came to mentoring. These respondents feel that mentoring takes a specific role, and relates to a mentee more as a parent does to his or her child. They see mentoring as a parenting role that includes the following: being supportive, trustworthy, involved in every aspect of their lives, assisting them financially and emotionally. As one respondent described the role of a mentor: "Being a dad, being trustful, and someone who encourages the youth to choose the best choices in their lives."

One additional characteristic that came up among respondents was consistency. Four respondents (or 20%) said that being a mentor requires a consistent presence in the lives of youth. These respondents understood that consistency is something that many foster youth lack; therefore they believed that consistency was an essential part of mentoring. As one respondent suggested, a mentor provides a "consistent relationship that is available . . . to provide advice when it's asked for – not just providing the advice but also role modeling in your everyday life."

Mentors in their own lives: One question regarding motivations of mentors concerns whether they themselves had mentors (currently, or in their early lives) that might have inspired them to give back to the next generation of youth. Consequently, we were interested in learning

whether our respondents had a mentor in their life, to see if there was a relationship between those respondents who chose to mentor and their own experience with a mentor. Of the 20 respondents, 14 said they did have a mentor in their lives. The other six respondents shared that they did not have a mentor to help guide them. The influence of an early mentor is clear in the words of the following respondent:

> Yeah, I have had some mentors – one when I was in grade school it's still an influence today. So you know one that set the bar high, encouraged me, and appreciated me. (Adult Supporter)

Respondents' roles as mentors: Because respondents had different ideas about what being a mentor entails, and the threshold for calling oneself a mentor, we needed to ask directly whether they currently considered themselves to be a mentor. Eleven out the twenty respondents said they considered themselves to be a mentor. We can see a dramatic differences across members of the two organizations here: among the ten Amigos, only one considered themselves to be a mentor; among CYC Adult Supporters, all ten said that they considered themselves to be a mentor.

For respondents who consider themselves to be a mentor, many were explicit about the challenges that it presents – and how seriously they take the role. The following respondent spoke very eloquently to that issue, giving a sense of how focused they are in meeting the challenges of effective mentoring.

> I try to [be a mentor], and I think it's a long term goal. And, like I said, it takes a certain amount of maturity. I'm willing to do it to a point, and as I get older it should be easier. I think that has been a long process where I'm more and more comfortable. Maybe because I hold myself to a very high standard [as a mentor], and making sure I'm doing it right. (Adult Supporter)

In that quote, the mentor's efforts to develop skills to become an effective mentor present a mirror image of the youth's efforts to develop the skills necessary for an effective transition to independent adulthood.

Seven of our respondents said they did not consider themselves to be a mentor. Most commonly, they responded that they could not claim to be a mentor because they did not spend enough time with the youth – or because they did not spend enough time with any youth in particular. As one respondent noted, he did not consider him/herself a mentor "because I don't spend time with any youth in particular." Again, focused time with a particular youth emerged as a crucial issue in defining whether one is a mentor.

Four of the volunteers responded somewhat ambivalently saying that it was hard for them to say whether or not they are mentors. These respondents brought up the important point that the question of whether one is a mentor is perhaps better asked not of the volunteers but of the youth. While they (the volunteers) may consider themselves to be a mentor, the youth may not consider them to be mentors. This might be due to the relatively small amount of time they spend with the youth, returning to the point that mentors are defined by the time and focused attention that they spend with a particular youth. That has important implications for volunteers who are committed to Casa Pacifica, rather than to particular youth. As one our respondents stated:

> By nature, Casa [Pacifica] is not a long term relationship, that's the way I see it. We have work to try and do a lot of more mentoring but we stick to our kind of events. Our sweet spot is going out there working with the kids creating a positive environment for a short period of time and then moving on.

This is important for advocates at Casa Pacifica to consider: there might be a slight tension between volunteers' commitment to Casa Pacifica as an organization dedicated to foster

youth, and their commitment to particular foster youth. Both commitments are wanted and needed; balancing them might be important in programs moving forward.

Chapter 6: Initial Involvement

Volunteers with any issue or organization have a trajectory to their involvement: that trajectory ideally moves from initial involvement to deepening involvement that is maintained over a long "career" of service. Here, we are particularly interested in those trajectories that lead to long-term involvement as a foster youth mentor. For foster youth advocates, it is essential to attract more volunteers and to encourage them to deepen and maintain their involvement over time – and, again, to identify the paths that are most likely to lead them to become mentors. In this section, we focus on volunteer trajectories, beginning questions about their initial involvement and the motivations that attracted them.

Prior connection and initial contact: In this section we sought explanations for how respondents first came to be involved as a volunteer working with foster youth – beginning with whether they had any prior connections that facilitated the involvement. Respondents reported a wide range of experiences with foster youth prior to their initial involvement with their current organizations.

Half of our respondents reported that they had never had a connection to foster youth prior to their involvement with the organization. On the other hand, some had a long history of connections with foster youth; 20% of respondents grew up in a foster family – either as foster children themselves or in a family with foster siblings. That included both Amigos and Adult Supporters. For those respondents, they reported that those early experiences inspired their involvement. As one Adult Supporter said:

My involvement with foster youth started many years ago when I was a little kid and I had my first foster sibling. We always had people I didn't know in Thanksgiving and Christmas. I think I was just raised in that type of environment where it was just normal to have people to be part of my family, not necessarily birth family, and we always had an open door.

The following is from another respondent who typifies this background. Again, we see how initial exposure led to a lifelong commitment:

I was three years old [when my parents first took in a foster child], and throughout my whole childhood my parents took foster kids. That's how I became familiar with the foster system. I always knew I wanted to be a foster parent by the time I was in my early 20's. I never thought I was going to be working with the population, but I always knew I wanted to be a foster parent. As soon as I had my own stable housing I became a foster parent that lead to the job I have now, and then lead to CYC. (Adult Supporter)

For respondents who grew up in an environment that involved foster youth, it gave them a much better understanding of the struggles these youth go through.

While growing up around foster youth can definitely have an impact on an individual who might later choose to also help out foster youth, that isn't always the case. Most of our respondents first came to be involved with foster youth through individuals who worked with or were acquainted with foster youth. Those who are already involved with foster youth (such as volunteers or staff) can play an important role in making those connections.

One main finding concerned the crucial outreach role played by Casa Pacifica staff. Nearly half of all respondents (45%) mentioned Casa Pacifica Staff as a crucial link to their initial involvement. As one respondents stated, "[I]t was through Vicki [Murphy]; her contagious energy affected me – or infected me, I don't know what it was." The staff members with whom the respondents came into contact were passionate about what they do for foster youth and that

they want the whole community to be part of them. That inspired and energetic context is very important in attracting volunteers. As another respondents suggested: "[I] was amazed that Casa Pacifica existed, Vicki Murphy gave my husband and I a tour and as you can imagine it is an amazing facility with an amazing group of people." That tour led to increased involvement with Casa Pacifica.

Other respondents heard about Amigos or CYC through an organization (such as a church) with which they were already involved. For example, an Adult Supporter said:

> My company supports a church. From a technical stand point they are a customer
> of mine. . . . The guy that ran the show in this case was John Franklin. I kind of
> told him a bit about my background and what I would like to get involved with.
> Then it was a year later that he contacted me saying that he had talked to Raquel
> and that they were putting up this organization [the California Youth Connection].
> That's pretty much how I got started.

Initial motivation: Here we wanted to see what inspired our respondents to initiate their involvement with foster youth – since the first step is the most crucial for expanding the volunteer base which serves as a pool for mentors. "Need" was a frequently cited motivation; the majority of respondents (60%) indicated that their main motivation was that they recognized the need – whether a general need in the community, or a specific need among foster youth.

For some, it was the abstract need to contribute to their community. As one Amigo said "I feel like . . . you have a responsibility to improve the lives of everyone in your community." For most, however, it was the specific need among foster youth; those respondents expressed the belief that if they do not help out these youth, then no one else will. As one respondent said:

> You have to become part of your community and help people out. No matter how
> tough someone's life may be, there is there is always someone who has it worse
> than you. (Amigo)

Often, having contact with the foster youth is able to bring that need to the surface in a way that promotes involvement. In the words of another respondent (an Amigo): "I saw the obvious enormous need and was able to put a face to the kids that live at Casa Pacifica." Regardless of whether the motivation was abstract or specific, that need is what inspired them to take that initial step to get involved with the organization.

Evolution of involvement: Because Casa Pacifica is interested in encouraging deepening involvement of volunteers with foster youth, we were particularly interested in the way that volunteers' involvements evolved over time. Specifically, all respondents were asked whether or not their involvement with their current organization has changed over time. Twelve of the 20 respondents (or 60%) confirmed that it has changed over time, mentioning how their involvement changed from the first meeting they went to and how it has evolved to where they are at today.

One important factor in generating that change is the deepening recognition of the needs on the part of foster youth. The more contact they had with the youth, the more respondents saw the struggles that they faced. As one Adult Supporter said:

> Oh yeah, I think I have a deeper understanding at what the implications are for foster youth. The implications of their life experiences, and having to live with someone who is not particular birth family, is really different to them than it is to me.

For one respondent, that deepening understanding led them to take their involvement to a much higher level. For that volunteer, it ultimately led to the adoption of a baby.

One other theme that emerged was change within the organizations that they were involved with. One Amigo noted that the change was not so much with his own involvement, but with the organization:

I don't think my involvement has changed much. Amigos have evolved as a group and how we interact with the kids has evolved. From initially being very tenuous and we were concerned how the kids would act and how the interactions will be and how much effort we had to put into it. Being out there and being there for the kids is enough. They don't really require a whole lot as long as it's simple. Like I found out in a foster youth when we were raising foster kids they have such a capacity to absorb love. Even if it's a little, it goes a long way.

Organizational changes can help to make the organizations run more smoothly, and they can also open up volunteering opportunities.

Chapter 7: Current Involvement & Activities with Youth

It is important to any volunteer organization to understand how their volunteers are involved. Specifically, Casa Pacifica was interested in learning about how frequently and how much time respondents spend with the youth, as well as the types of activities that they engage in during that time. An addition crucial are of information concerns the types of activities that volunteers enjoy the most and those that they enjoy the least; a more developed understanding of these issues might help Casa Pacifica to make volunteers' time more enjoyable, thereby presenting a greater chance that they will increase their involvement.

Frequency and time: In response to our question about the time that volunteers spend with the youth, we grouped them around the number of hours that they spend per month. Our responses indicate that volunteers spend a considerable amount of time with the youth – and some spend an enormous amount of time. A little under one third of respondents (30%) said that they generally spend 2-10 hours a month with the youth. Another (Amigo) indicated that they participated in one activity per month. Eight respondents (40%) stated that they spent approximately 10-15 hours a month with the youth. One respondent (an Adult Supporter) replied

that he spends 20-30 hours per month, mainly on the phone or the computer while talking to the youth. Two respondents indicated that they spend 50-80 hours a month with youth.

Preferred activities: In general, activities that volunteers most enjoy with youth are those that are mostly likely to make their experience most rewarding. Likewise, those that they least enjoy generally make their experiences less enjoyable or rewarding. One general area of preferences concerns preferences for one-to-one or group activities. A slight majority (11 out of the 20) said that they have no preference when participating in activities with either a group of youth or one on one. Five out of the 20 participants felt they enjoyed group settings more and four had a better experience when on a one to one activity with the youth. As we will see below, those preferences are related in important ways with whether the volunteers are involved with the Amigos or the CYC Adult Supporters.

One of the most common general responses was that participants told us they enjoyed direct interactions with the children (19 out of 20 respondents). Only one of the participants suggested that they preferred to focus their efforts on fundraising. Among the activities with youth that were reported as most enjoyable were the following, from most commonly reported to least commonly reported:

1. BBQ's and Food/Team activities

2. Hiking and Kayaking

3. Playing music

4. Events and holiday parties

5. Teaching skills

In their responses, volunteers indicated the enjoyment that they get in working with the youth, and the substantial passion that they bring to those interactions. We also see how the

connections that they make with the youth are a key element in what makes the activities enjoyable and rewarding. As one Amigo responded:

> I love to take them on hikes. I love being there. I love introducing people to Casa Pacifica. I love to bring instruments and teach the kids how to use them.

> Another Amigo , underscored that sense of joy in interacting with the youth:

> I enjoy bike rides and when we get to spend time individually. I think we have learned that when we get to hang [out] on an individual basis, it is a big reward.

Least preferred activities: It is also important to understand which activities are least enjoyable for volunteers, as well as the reasons why they do not enjoy them. When asked the question, respondents often mentioned something that was not an activity *per se*, but something about the nature or context of the interactions. In spite of the fact that the following are not all activities, we provide the list because it represents an accurate accounting of the volunteers' own responses – and it provides a preview to the section on "challenges" that we discuss below. The following is a list of what the participants enjoyed the least when spending time with the youth (again, from most to least common responses):

1. When youth/kids don't participate in activities
2. When they don't engage or make a connection
3. The system itself
4. Scheduling with conflicts within the organizations
5. Youth not following rules/direction and they loose their trust
6. Providing transportation
7. Chores and grocery shopping
8. Wii games; they don't interact with them as much

Among other things, those responses underscore the importance to mentors of establishing a real connection with the youth. Most of the responses can be seen as identifying some obstacle to a real connection. This suggests that the activity itself is perhaps not crucial to volunteers, but the resulting connection.

Below, we provide some of the responses that elaborate on how they described an activity with the youth that they found less enjoyable. The lack of connection is a recurring theme – for example, when volunteers sponsor an activity and the youth do not want to participate. As one of the volunteers described:

> I enjoy all the activities with the foster youth. Anything to get them out of their shell. The thing I enjoy the least is when the youth don't want to participate in the activities. (Amigo)

In some cases, it was not that the youth did not participate, but that they did not want to participate with or interact with the volunteers specifically:

> When we have parties or events, the kids would rather hang out with their friends. But I understand at times they don't want to hang out with a volunteer. (Amigo)

In general, the least enjoyable examples brought up by volunteers are the situations in which the youth are involved in activities that are self-destructive. That is particularly difficult for volunteers to deal with. One of the Adult Supporters described the difficult position that puts them in:

> When they participate in activities that are very destructive them…. I hate having to tell them that because my concern is that they will shut down or flee. (Adult Supporter)

Since nineteen of the participants enjoy direct interactions with the youth we can see how it affects them when the youth do not engage directly with the volunteer. The volunteers come

ready to connect with the youth once they arrive and it is less enjoyable for them when the youth do not make a connection with them. On the other hand because Adult Supporters have had an opportunity to build long lasting relationships with the youth they work with it's difficult for them to see a youth themselves engage in activities that are destructive to them and that makes their experience less rewarding or enjoying.

A distinction can be productively made here between Amigos and Adult Supporters. Most of the Amigos spend time with youth in extracurricular activities, children's events, and holidays. Such events are more structured and group oriented. One of the Amigos succinctly described that pattern: "We come twice a month for a few hours; we play sports, go hiking, have lunch, and just hang out."

Adult Supporters, on the other hand, commonly described the time they spend with the youth as meeting once or twice a month with the youth, but they also spend time with them outside of meetings and during special events, such as a youth's graduation. Their time tends to be more extensive, more individualized, and less structured. It is in that context that they are able to spend time teaching life skills and building a relationship with them – the kind of activities that generally constitute mentorship. As one described:

> I work in a mentoring capacity. I tend to be available a couple of hours to multiple
> hours a week. We chat on the cell in person, have coffee, text. I'm a resource; I
> help them with college and scholarship. I attend special events with them. I am
> available. I provide a relaxed, unstructured environment. No pressure, they don't
> have to work hard to keep the relationship. (Adult Supporter)

Matching: One final area of preferences that our partner was interested in learning about was volunteers' preferences concerning the characteristics of the youth with whom they are matched (e.g. gender, age, ethnicity, etc.). We found that none of the respondents had a

preference for a particular gender or ethnicity. Five respondents indicated that they have an age preference. One indicated a preference for youth who were ages 6 and older. Two more responded 18 and over. Only one responded that their first choice was youth ages 13-19.

One of the most interesting responses regarding matching came from one of the Adult Supporters who had an interesting perspective. He stated:

> The youth . . . choose who they want to get advice from. I think there is
> something special about that . . . in where the youth choose you. . . . Who they
> trust. I think there is some kind of magic about that in helping any youth in every
> way you can. (Adult Supporter)

As we can see this volunteer felt that the youth can (and should) make their own choices when participating in an activity with volunteers or (particularly) establishing a relationship with mentors. This person felt it really came down to trust – and we know that foster youth have trust issues that makes it difficult for the to believe in adults.

Chapter 8: Sources of Satisfaction

It is crucial to understand the satisfaction that mentors get out of the relationship or bond they build with a youth, as it is a factor in keeping them involved and potentially deepening their involvement. Also, the more positive their experiences, the more likely they are to encourage others to become involved – and we have already seen how important that is to bringing in new volunteers.

Sense of impact on youth: Overall, the most common theme regarding satisfaction concerns volunteers' sense that they are helping the youth – that they are having a positive impact. Essentially it comes from their feeling that they are making a difference in the lives of the youth. That was succinctly described by the following volunteer, who is an Adult Supporter:

It feeds my soul. It's part of who I am and what I want to do in the community. Working with specific young people & seeing that my involvement can make a difference. (Adult Supporter)

For any volunteer, the sense that their efforts are "paying off" is largely what motivates them to continue. In this case, a volunteer's sense that they are having an impact on youth positively encourages them to continue working with foster youth – and, potentially, to become more involved. So gauging their sense of whether they are having an impact is very important. Among Amigos, six out of the ten stated that they felt they had a positive impact of the youth they work with. That sense of impact – and satisfaction – is clear in the following quote:

I know that I made an impact on the 17 year old; that's a source of satisfaction. No matter what if it was a huge or small impact; I had an impact on her. She had to know that I loved her that I cared her.

The other four Amigos were not sure if the few hours they spent with the youth made a difference or not. One of them stated that uncertainty very directly:

I don't know [if I made an impact]. For the two hours I was there I don't know. I would hope so.

Likewise, most Adult Supporters clearly felt that they were having a positive impact on the youth. Seven of the ten respondents stated that their involvement with the youth impacted the youth's lives. The following Adult Supporter recognized the variability of outcomes, voicing the realistic assessment that there is no guarantee of having a positive impact. Nevertheless, the assessment gravitates toward one youth for which the outcome was relatively certain:

I think it really varies from kid to kid. I don't think there is a stamp. Like one youth that never lived at my home but had a strong connection. My impact on her is that she sees different possibilities for her future, like college is really in her picture now.

Another adult supporter had a similar response stating that his impact on the youth was a positive one he said most of the foster youth viewed him as a person they could trust. On the other hand, three of the 10 Adult Supporters stated that they were unsure of whether their work had impacted the youth with whom they were involved. One of the common reasons given by those Adult Supporters for their uncertainty about their impact on the youth was that they have never had a youth come back to them and say, "Hey, you made a positive impact on my life." That need for some sort of feedback (hopefully positive) from the youth with whom volunteers invest their time and energy may present an opportunity for programs seeking to encourage volunteers to remain involved with foster youth.

Happiness and success: When identifying more particular sources of satisfaction, a subtle difference emerged between the Amigos and the Adult Supporters. While the predominant response for the Amigos focused on the happiness of the youth, Adult Supporters focused on their success.

Among Amigos, most stated that their source of satisfaction was just to see the children happy. Six out of the ten amigos stated that they really enjoyed seeing a smile on the children's faces. That symbol of the smile – and what it means for the volunteers – was a recurring theme in Amigos responses. For example:

> Well I mean I get more than what they do. There is a sense of well-being that I get from spending time and sharing with them. They are smiling and they are laughing and they are having a good time.

Another Amigo echoed that, and stated directly: "I just enjoy any activity where the kids are involved and seeing them laugh and smile and having fun."

In contrast, the Adult Supporters were more likely to identify their source of satisfaction in seeing the youth succeed, and become strong and independent. Seeing their resiliency not only satisfied them, but also gave them hope.

Eight out of the ten Adult Supporters interviewed stated that seeing the youth come out on the other side of a difficult situation really brought joy to their own lives.

> There are times when I do feel that sense of satisfaction. It usually comes after the fact, after the relationship has been in place for a while. And maybe there is reflection where the youth will say 'I really appreciated something that you did.' Or when I see a youth who has gone through a lot of struggles and I see them come out on the other side, that gives me a great sense of satisfaction. It also gives me hope when I see youth that are struggling now to know that I have seen youth in the same position who have latter been fine, and come out as really strong people.

The contrast is not universal; Amigos get satisfaction out of successes, and Adult Supporters enjoy sharing happiness. But there is clearly a different emphasis among the groups. The differences are understandable when we consider the previously described differences in the nature of interactions between volunteers (Adult Supporters or Amigos) and the youth. Amigos spend time primarily with children ages 6 and up to 18, generally in periodic group activities that are largely recreational. Adult Supporters spend more time, and more intensive one-on-one time, with youth who are generally somewhat older (14 and up) – and consequently spend a lot of time dealing more frequently with the complex problems associated with emancipation. To a great extent, that explains why many of the Adult Supporters focus on success and resiliency as their source of satisfaction. In other words, Amigos and Adult Supporters see the youth struggling at different levels, and their different sources of satisfaction are a reflection of the youth's most direct needs at those different levels. Additionally, Adult Supporters' source of satisfaction is

determined by the long-term relationships they have with the youth, while the Amigos for the most part focus on the relatively short-term relationships they have with the foster youth.

Impacts on mentors: We wanted to know if the respondents felt that they made an impact on the youth, but we also wanted to know if the relationships with the youth had made an impact on the lives of the respondents. Our findings will not be surprising for those who work with foster youth: While mentors can have an important life-altering influence on the foster youth, the influence can run in the other direction as well. Multiple respondents mentioned that their interactions with the youth had profound influences on the volunteers themselves.

Fifteen out of the twenty respondents stated that being involved in the lives of these youth has made them a better person. One of the respondents specifically said: "Definitely, seeing how resilient they are given the obstacles life has put before them impact my life everyday" As another respondent stated:

> Yes absolutely, I have grown as a person, I learn so much about their world, even my family has been impacted in a positive way, [foster youth] are my extended family.

For many of the respondents, being able to be involved in the lives of foster youth has enriched their lives in one way or another. When youth make good choices to create positive change in their circumstances the adults involved in their lives gain hope by knowing that their guidance made a difference. For some respondents it made them grateful for the life that they've had and for others it opened their eyes to a life that they never knew existed.

Chapter 9: Sources of Challenges

In addition to learning about the sources of satisfactions for volunteers, Casa Pacifica was also interested in learning about the particular challenges that they face in that role. That is, what

is it about volunteers' experiences that are less satisfying, and that might potentially keep them maintaining their involvement or deepening their involvement into a more formal mentor role.

There were many similar challenges that came up for both the Amigos and the Adult Supporters, ranging from time conflicts to dealing with self-destructive behaviors and patterns among the youth. Several particular challenges or obstacles recurred in the interviews concerning working with youth or working within the organizations serving the youth. We have grouped those challenges under the following headings: time, youth behavior, and the foster care system. For the most part, the first is primarily an issue associated with the volunteers; the next three are issues associated primarily with the youth; and the final one is a broader contextual issue. Most respondents identified challenges in multiple areas.

Time: Not surprisingly, time emerged as an important challenge for volunteers. Nine out of the twenty respondents responded that time was a conflict in their lives and that it has kept them from becoming more involved with their organization. Most were professionals who already took a lot of time away from their home lives, and who were also raising small children. Collectively, those time constraints presented huge conflicts for them.

For one of our Amigo respondents, being able to fit volunteering into their already busy schedule became an issue: "Time is a big issue, because I have a family." When this respondent decided to volunteer their time with foster youth, they realized that it requires that they spend a lot of time away from their own family. Family emerged as a key issue in terms of generating time constraints. For programs seeking to recruit volunteers, recognizing this might allow them to welcome them on a limited basis while encouraging them to increase their involvement as their family situation changes (e.g. children grow up and require less time, etc.). On the other

hand, it is important to point out that six of the twenty participants reported that their involvement was not an issue for their families – and, if anything, it strengthened their families.

An Adult Supporter emphasized the time constraints associated with being a businessperson – and his comment points to issues associated with the particular needs of the youth as well. The volunteer found himself frustrated when youth asked him "to drive them around all day." As that respondent lamented, "I am the most expensive taxi in town." Here it conflicted with professional commitments. As he described:

> I cannot afford to be away from my business. It would be cheaper to pay someone
> to drive them around.

Between having family and professional commitments, among other obligation, volunteers have frequent time constraints. Moreover, many of our respondents indicated that they were surprised to find out how much time they would need to devote to the foster youth.

Youth behaviors: Seven out of the twenty respondents shared that specific behaviors of the youth represented a challenge. This is also not surprising; foster youth are raised in some of the most difficult and unsafe environments, and that tends to make them act and behave differently. This can create barriers when well-meaning volunteers try to intervene and provide the support and encouragement that might turn them in a positive direction.

One of the worst examples – an issue that was brought up earlier in another context – is self-destructive behavior. Respondents frequently pointed to self-destructive behavior as the issue that makes their experience as a volunteer most trying. As one noted:

> I think the hardest part for the youth is it took 18 years for them to get where
> they're at – whether it's a lack of trust, abuse, or drug addiction. It has taken them
> 18 years and they can't get better overnight. So to me what frustrates me is when
> we get them in a good setting – and I know it's a good setting – and they're
> getting all the resources, and then for whatever reason inside themselves they are

not feeling good enough, they create all this chaos to destroy the setting. (Adult
Supporter)

As that quote makes clear, volunteers generally understand the roots of the behavior; they
understand that foster youth are generally raised in an environment that makes them think and
act in self-destructive ways. But that doesn't necessarily make it easier for the volunteers to deal
with; in fact, the more attached they are to the youth, the more difficult it is likely to be. As the
following makes clear, it can be extremely difficult on the volunteers do all they can to guide the
youth in the right path, only to see them choose the wrong path:

A challenge is you can be working with the youth and trying to guide them [but often]
they have to learn the hard way…Even when you discuss the path they can take its
difficult when you have been talking and guiding, and they still choose what hurts them.
(Adult Supporter)

In the following quote, an Amigo describes the difficult decision that he faces when he
brings his own children while he is volunteering (in an attempt to address the time challenges
described above). He begins with an understated assessment:

Some of the kids are not always happy when they come here. There is a lot of
staff there but kids get aggressive they use language that we don't use at home. . .
. . I don't want my kids to hear that but the fact is that those kids are in his
community and he's got to spend time with them. My challenge is do I take my
child and put him in an environment where something can happen to him?
(Amigo)

Here we see that the youth themselves are challenging and when volunteers involve their
families it can get complicated for them. Although this volunteer described a challenging
situation he went further on in saying the following: "These kids are good people… inherently
good, but, put in situations that cause them to react differently." Dealing with the way foster
youth react in certain situations is a common challenge with our respondents.

Another area of behavior brought up by respondents is when youth attempt to manipulate them. A volunteer (Amigo) gave us the example of when he tried to tell a girl not to cut in line, and she retaliated saying that he "touched her inappropriately." He further said "in here I have no clue; these kids are very savvy on how they can control things." Although the participant states, "it was not a negative experience for him but an eye opener", we see that it is very important for volunteer to learn about these kinds of behaviors they may encounter when working with a youth in order to protect themselves. It is also important to note again that the more invested a volunteer is in a relationship with a youth, the more difficult it may be to deal with the behavior.

A final area of youth behavior mentioned by some respondents was the challenge presented by the youth's lack of trust – and how their behaviors can lead to a *mutual* lack of trust. Two of the twenty respondents mentioned that issue. In the following quote, the respondent begins with the issue of the youth's inability to trust the volunteers, and concludes with how that can lead to the reverse problem – both of which present fundamental challenges to building a supportive and encouraging relationship.

> Just the level of trust, like the level of trust that they have in me and the level of trust that you have to build in them can be challenging. Like, they are not here very long so it is hard for them to trust me. And when you see them do certain things or 'borrowing without permission' it makes it hard for me to trust them. (Adult Supporter)

This participant's honesty gives a clear view into the reality the volunteers are experiencing. This is invaluable information for us because we can see the barriers they experience when working with youth who come to them with lack of trust for adults. Most importantly we can acknowledge the difficulty of adults themselves being able to trust the youth. Many volunteers may feel like after they acknowledge certain behavior that they cannot trust the youth.

Volunteers must have a huge amount of compassion, empathy, and patience in order to effectively serve foster youth. Additional training may be necessary, however, to help volunteers to navigate the youth behaviors in a way that truly assists the youth while protecting the volunteers against the very real and intense negative emotional experiences that can be a part of their work – and keep them interested in continuing to invest their time and energy in helping foster youth.

Foster care system & organizational issues: In this section, we describe challenges introduced by volunteers that are related to the context in which they volunteer – principally, problems associated with the regulations and operation of the foster care system statewide, and some issues associated with their own organizations.

The foster care system is governed by many rules and regulations that are ostensibly designed to protect and support the children in the foster system. However, as our respondents noted, they often appear to have the opposite effect. That perception is enhanced because there are many aspects of the system that are not entirely understood by the community or adults involved in the lives of the youth – including the volunteers. That can be a source of frustration all around. Four out of the twenty participants felt that the system itself was a challenge for them. In the following response, we get a sense of the frustration that volunteers can feel, even if the precise source of those frustrations are not clear. It is also important to underscore the role that inadequate resources play:

> The government has one set of rules to play and the base partners have another set of rules to play. The County has their base of what they have to do and sometimes that isn't enough. I think that's the biggest frustration the gaps in those resources. The youth's challenges are not adequately being met by the resources of the County. (Adult Supporter)

Respondents also indicated that the system has made it difficult for them to keep ongoing positive connections with the foster youth after they develop a relationship. That is an important issue; one of the important needs in the lives of foster youth is the consistent connection with a supportive adult, so it is all the more frustrating when volunteers feel like they have made a connection that they are unable to maintain due to issues associated with the foster system itself. In the following quote, a respondent describes the frustrations associated with just such a situation.

> I made a connection with a little girl about two to three years ago, and she recently went back home. And I wrote her a little card and I just said, you know, I'm so proud of you, you know. Not to say that I am so happy that you are getting out of here kinda thing, but that she had worked through her stuff in order to be able to go back. And I miss her you know, I would love to know how she is doing and I don't know if legally they are allowed to contact me. (Amigo)

It is clear here that both the volunteer and the youth would have benefitted by maintaining that relationship. But the volunteer was not aware of how that could have been made possible.

That specific issue links to the broader issue of the transience that is all too often a central part of the experience of foster care for the youth. Respondents described youth as transient because of the situation in which they are constantly moving around. Three out of the twenty participants felt that transience presented a challenge as it made it all the more difficult for them to cultivate a long term relationship – which, of course, is essential to effective mentoring.

One thing that complicates the situation is that placements that may be made from Casa Pacifica in the youth's best interest are experienced by volunteers as transience (as in the quote above). Casa Pacifica is not only a residential placement but also a shelter home, so many of the youth will only be there for a period of time after which they will transition to a foster home,

group home, back to their families or some other placement. While that may be a positive step

for the youth, it makes the development of long-term relationships difficult for the volunteers. In

the following quote, an Amigo sharply analyzes the dual nature of that situation:

> The nature of Casa Pacifica, for the most part, is that the kids are transient when
> they come in. The idea behind Casa Pacifica is that they get put back with family
> members or in the community as soon as possible, because that's better for them
> than being institutionalized. It's not really great for us to try to endure ourselves
> on a one-to-one basis because that person or youth we could say could be gone
> the next week.

This information is a potentially important reason why some volunteers take on a

mentoring role while other committed volunteers do not. This individual's response makes clear

that the Amigos seem to have more barriers when trying to establish a one-to-one long-term

relationship relative to the Adult Supporters. Not only do Amigos generally interact with the

youth on a more limited basis, but their connection to them is mediated by Casa Pacifica. So, if

the youth leave Casa Pacifica, there is no direct way that the volunteers can maintain contact.

That is less likely to be the case among Adult Supporters.

Two respondents suggested that increased education or initial orientation for volunteers

would help to address some of those problems. The following represents that sentiment:

> The challenges are more administrative; the Amigos are not well educated about
> what is okay when working with the youth. Casa Pacifica needs to educate new
> members…letting them understand what they are looking for as far as
> volunteering opportunities, donating, basketball games , or any events the
> Amigos can do. There is a disconnect about what the kids at Casa Pacifica are
> able to do and the permitted level. (Amigo)

A final theme that emerged from respondents also pointed out that some challenges emerged from within their own organizations – although this was not a major theme. The quote below represents that perspective:

> No obstacles – just challenges trying to find a way to make it happen. It's not about being caught up in your ego…you have to let that go…and work together. (Amigo)

To conclude the section on a positive note, two out of the twenty respondents reported that they had not experienced any challenges or obstacles in their work with the youth. One person in particular referred it back to the great leadership and hard work of Casa Pacifica staff in managing to "mesh" all of their ideas together.

Chapter 10: Future Involvement

The longer volunteers remain involved with foster youth, the more likely it is that they will develop the experience, long-term perspective, and commitment that make effective mentorship possible. Consequently, the long-term trajectory of volunteers is of crucial interest to Casa Pacifica. In this section, we asked respondents to tell us about how they imagine their future involvement with foster youth in order to give Casa Pacifica a better sense of the future trajectories of their volunteers, allowing better planning for programs.

For most of our respondents, helping foster youth is their passion, and they look forward to continued involvement. Seven of our twenty respondents said they would definitely be more involved with their organization, whether through working with the youth directly or by helping Casa Pacifica to provide all of the services essential to the youth. As one Amigo said:

[I] look at my involvement with Casa [Pacifica] and Amigos to stay consistent and positive, but the same Trying to refine Amigos – consistent, positive, and keep on growing.

When they spoke of their future involvement, the nature of their contributions varied – for example, some mentioned one-to-one relationships with the youth, while mentioned working in a group setting, and others suggested that they might work in an administrative setting. In all cases, volunteers want to help the youth in the way that they are best able while focusing on any particular strength that they bring to the table. One example of trying to focus energies on one's particular strength came from a volunteer who mentioned wanting to focus on helping youth find employment:

I would like to increase my involvement. The thing I would like to do is . . . my vision is helping people get a job. It is fundamental – and it is the unique strength that I have. They are going to need a community to help a youth emotionally – but this is somewhere I think I can help a lot. (Adult Supporter)

Some members of the Amigos had similar ideas about focusing on particular issues. A number of them also imagined a future mentoring role:

I don't think I will ever stop – I hope I never stop. And I think having a mentoring role in addition to these other general volunteering roles will be quite interesting for me. I think one of the things that I would like to bring to mentoring – and I have been thinking about it for a long time, but haven't been able to put it to work yet – but my dream one day will be to do life planning as a mentor to kids. (Amigo)

As such statements make clear, the volunteers have a deep sense of commitment to helping foster youth become successful young adults.

Some of our respondents want to get more involved helping the youth by joining other organizations that work in conjunction with Casa Pacifica, such as Big Brothers. As one of respondents said:

> In addition to CYC, I would like to do the Big Brothers and Big Sisters program or be a Court Appointed Special Advocate – something a little more in depth; increasing the one-to-one, but maintaining the relationship I currently have.

Other respondents echoed that sentiment, expressing their desire to become more involved with organizations that assists foster youth beyond Casa Pacifica. While that may draw volunteers with substantial experience and commitment away from the organization itself, it will serve the needs of foster youth – which is the ultimate goal. However, Casa Pacifica might seek to identify and advertise creative means for those seeking "something a little more in depth" to do so within Casa Pacifica.

Some of our respondents (8 of 20) suggested that they would like their involvement with Casa Pacifica to remain at its current level. They were satisfied with that level of involvement, and did not want to make any changes; they consider the time they currently spend with the youth is about right for them.

Finally, some respondents (4 of 20) indicated that they are unsure what their future will be in their organization and how the level of their involvement might change. Most of those respondents are Amigos, and the main reasons cited regarding that uncertainty were time constraints stemming from career and family obligations. For many of those volunteers, it is difficult to leave their own children so they can spend time with the kids at Casa Pacifica. As one of respondents said, "My involvement will probably be the same time, because I have a family and my family activities are increasing." As noted previously, however, periods of intense time obligations associated with family and career are not indefinite. To the extent that Casa Pacifica

can keep those volunteers involved at some level throughout those periods, it is more likely that they will be available to make a greater investment of time and energy when those periods are over.

Chapter 11: Support and Encouragement

Our final area of inquiry focused on the support and encouragement that our respondents received (or did not receive) from the organization they are involved with. We wanted to identify what volunteers find most helpful in keeping them involved, as well as any possible needs that their organizations might serve in order to provide more support or to deepen their involvement with foster youth. Responses generally grouped around two topics: communication and coordination.

Communication: Nearly half of the respondents (45%) said that better communication between the organization's staff and members would be helpful. As an Amigo stated: "We need to communicate a lot better with our members, so that all members are able to receive emails of upcoming events and what-not." Something as simple as receiving regular emails helps members informed and linked in. Such increased communication can get more volunteers involved, and allows them to see what's happening within the organization and in related areas. Another volunteer pointed to a decidedly less technological means of communication, but underscored the same point.

> What could Casa do? I think you get volunteers by asking and knowing the opportunities. Just knowing what's available even as simple as a bulletin board at Casa Pacifica for volunteer opportunities like the wish list. People in the community will be happy to help. (Amigo)

Having better communication between the volunteers themselves was also noted as important. Whether communicating between staff and members, or among volunteers – increased communication keeps volunteers linked in, increasing their awareness of and willingness to commit to opportunities or needs that arise.

Coordination: A closely related issue that was mentioned by volunteers was the need for greater coordination. Adult Supporters mentioned this in the context of the need for a team approach when working with the youth. As one Adult Supporter explained: "People employed and others from the outside are not all on the same page; this is a huge deficit." For this respondent, a team approach (i.e. getting "on the same page") means that volunteers and professionals work together regarding the youth they are supporting at the moment, increasing the effectiveness of the organization as a whole in meeting their needs. The needs for foster youth can be overwhelming when volunteers try to approach them in isolation, so a team approach is critical.

Another volunteer brought up the same issue – the need to take a team approach. From the following perspective, one solution would be to offer the youth a checklist where they might identify their needs, and then coordinate the organizational resources to find ways to fulfill those needs.

> The idea of looking at a list of needs – where this youth can look at it and say, oh, I can get this or this. I would feel like it's kind of like a check box. The youth themselves can check off if they need assistance with these blank spots. I don't know; sometimes needs are very easy. The Adult Supporters can come together then wrap around that youth – 'cause right now, it's not happening. (Adult Supporter)

The following quote elaborates still further, focusing on identifying various volunteers who have their own strengths and capacities, and coordinating their activities to best provide the range of support that the foster youth need:

> There's not a team approach really, yet I think we are getting there. It's still not enough though. I think adults want to do something that they are good at, but when a kid is just overwhelming and they are not going to school don't want to work, it makes it that much tougher. There's this list of obstacles for one particular person to handle and to address all those needs. All these Adult Supporters have unique strengths – like Rosalinda with housing. Everybody has things they can offer to those kinds of things all these youth need. I think we can develop a more of a go-to network.

These volunteers felt there wasn't a team approach and that created a disconnect between what they were doing and what was needed for the youth to succeed. Again, coordinating the expertise of volunteers should be a priority of the organizations.

Beyond those recommendations, some of our respondents expressed their belief that their organization was great, and needed no improvements. As one Amigo said:

> They do great. The staff is great. They do a good job when all the volunteers have one common goal, and that goal is to help out foster youth in whichever way they can. . . . This change that they are making in youth's lives will give them hope that one day they will also be helping others in need.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The goal of our partnership was to conduct research that would enable Casa Pacifica to better understand the experiences and motivations of volunteers serving foster youth – especially those volunteers who have become foster youth mentors. That understanding would then provide a foundation for the improvement of practices and development of programs that will encourage more volunteers to become mentors, as well as to better support those who have already taken on that role. Having presented our research findings, here we take the final step in the research partnership: presenting recommendations that our research suggests will begin to address the dire need for more foster youth mentors. While implicit recommendations are scattered throughout the report, we present explicit recommendations based on issues that recurred in our conversations with volunteers.

In presenting our recommendations, we do not make a strong distinction between mentors and non-mentor volunteers. Mentors are generally volunteers who commit to a more intensive form of service. Therefore, in order to increase the number of adults in the community who are willing and able to take that step to becoming a mentor, it is essential to first increase the number of adults in the community who take the first step of becoming active and involved with foster youth. So many of our recommendations will serve to better encourage and support volunteers more generally, and only indirectly increase the number of mentors. Our first recommendation focuses on that specifically.

Cultivating more volunteers:

In order to increase the number of volunteers, we recommend focusing on those routes of initial involvement which were repeatedly mentioned by respondents: those with foster family backgrounds, and outreach through staff (and volunteers). Casa Pacifica should seek ways to identify members of the community who have experience with foster families, and invite them to

become a part of the "Casa Pacifica family." Also, the introductory role of Casa Pacifica staff and volunteers should be embraced as a means of increasing the number of volunteers through routine interactions with the community. To the extent that role can be institutionalized through formal outreach at community events or through sympathetic institutions (for example, the faith community), that is likely to be particularly productive.

Routine ways to deepen involvement:

Many volunteers suggested that they were seeking ways to deepen their involvement with foster youth. Casa Pacifica should develop a variety of roles that volunteers can step into to accomplish that – and find ways to advertise those opportunities. Given that many volunteers are somewhat daunted by the big step to becoming a mentor (discussed in the subsequent recommendation), Casa Pacifica should seek out ways for volunteers to take a series of "baby steps" toward increasing their involvement.

Facilitating the transition:

The role of mentor is taken very seriously, both by those who consider themselves mentors by and those who do not. They all realize the substantial time and energy – and responsibility – necessary to effectively fulfill that role for foster youth. While that is a positive sign of their deep commitment, it can present a serious hurdle to those who consider taking on that role. Making that transition to mentor status involves not simply a greater investment of time and energy, but a significant shift in the nature and types of interactions that they have with the youth – from group-oriented recreational activities with younger kids, to one-on-one intense emotional relationships with young adults. The size of that step makes it all the more daunting. The following comprises a list of possible practices and programs that Casa Pacifica could institute to make that step less daunting for volunteers considering becoming mentors.

- ✓ *Develop mentor training program:* Develop programs where those interested in becoming mentors can learn what it entails (in a no-obligation context), and where they can learn some of the skills necessary to succeed in the role. Training should focus in part on how to understand and deal with youth behaviors (which should be available to all volunteers).

- ✓ *Institute ongoing mentor support:* Make it known that mentors are not stepping into that role all alone; Casa Pacifica is willing and able to support mentors in that role. Develop formal programs of support which might include regular meetings where mentors can interact as peers to help each other solve challenges that they are facing with the youth, and which may include leadership by "master mentors."

- ✓ *Formalize gradual steps toward mentor roles:* Given the wide gap between the role of routine volunteers and the role of mentor, Casa Pacifica should seek to formalize a series of roles that would allow volunteers to gradually deepen their involvement in ways that would make becoming a mentor a more gradual (and therefore less daunting) process.

Dealing with time constraints:

Time constraints present a common challenge or barrier to deepening volunteers' involvement and/or becoming a mentor. In many cases, such time constraints are temporary – when volunteers have small children, or when they are involved in an intensive professional stage. That period may several months or more than a decade – but Casa Pacifica should take a long-term approach and try to find ways to keep volunteers involved so that when that time horizon concludes, they will still have an attachment to foster youth and may be interested in deepening their involvement. In the recommendation above, we suggested that Casa Pacifica

should help volunteers to deepen their involvement; here, we suggest ways that Casa Pacifica should help volunteers to lighten their involvement when necessary and maintain their involvement on some level. This may simply be expressing an explicit organizational value that accepts and works with volunteers' needs to step back from commitments. Finding ways to maintain that connection during those periods is likely to pay off in the long run.

Cultivating feedback:

The main reward for volunteers is the conviction that they are having a positive impact on the youth. That is another sign of their deep commitment. However, feedback that supports those convictions is not always forthcoming from the youth (and volunteers understand that as well). Casa Pacifica should seek ways to generate that kind of positive feedback – whether directly from the youth, indirectly from staff familiar with the youth, or vicariously from alumni who can speak to the importance of mentors generally. To the extent that such feedback can be cultivated, and volunteers conviction regarding the value of their work, that will go a long way toward providing the encouragement necessary for mentors and other volunteers. In doing so, it might also be useful to distinguish between different types of feedback that volunteers seek – specifically, signs of happiness or signs of success (as discussed in the report).

Maintaining relationships:

Like the foster youth themselves, some volunteers seem to be hesitant to deepen relationships with the youth when they perceive that those relationships will not have a chance to develop and persist. Casa Pacifica should seek out ways to facilitate contact and communication between youth and volunteers who have made a connection following placements external to Casa Pacifica. To the extent that Casa Pacifica can institutionalize such practices, volunteers are

likely to be more willing to deepen their emotional investment in particular youth – which is the crucial step toward becoming a mentor.

Increasing communication:

Volunteers suggested that increased communication would be helpful to maintain contact among themselves and with the organizations they work with. Volunteers value being "kept in the loop" and being aware of developments, opportunities, and general information. That can be done relatively easily through electronic media. Organizations should also have easy routes for open communication among mentors/volunteers and staff.

Increasing coordination:

A number of respondents felt that lack of coordination represented a lost opportunity. Most notably, volunteers recognize that each of them have specific skillsets and areas of expertise to offer to the youth. Rather than seeking to cultivate expertise in all necessary areas among all mentors, it would be more efficient and effective to find ways to identify those strengths and to develop structures that allow the youth to better take advantage of them. Better coordination would create a network among peer mentors in which the youth can benefit from the strengths that exist throughout the network. That would also benefit the mentors themselves as well.

SOURCES CITED:

Office of Assembly Member Jim Beall, Jr. 2011. AB 12 Fact Sheet (California Fostering
Connections to Success Act Fact Sheet): www.caichildlaw.org/Misc/AB12FactSheet-
02.13.09.pdf.

Child Welfare Dynamic Report System. 2011. A California Department of Social Services /
University of California at Berkeley collaboration. Retrieved on March 12, 2011 from
http://cssr.berkeley.edu/CWSCMSreports/

Collins, M.E., Spencer, R. & Ward, R.(2010). "Supporting youth in the transition from foster
care: Formal and informal connections." *Child Welfare* 89(1): 125-143.

Honoring Emancipated Youth. 2010. "Barriers facing foster care youth: National and Local
Statistics about Emancipating Foster Youth." Retrieved on March 24, 2011 from
http://www.heysf.org/pdfs/HEYFosterYouthStatistics.pdf.

Masten, A. S., & Garmezy, N. (1985). "Risk, vulnerability, and protective factors in the
developmental psychopathology." In B. B. Lahey & A. E. Kazdin (Eds.), *Advances in
clinical child psychology* (Vol. 8, pp. 1-51). New York: Plenum.

Munson, M.R. & McMillen, J.C.(2008). "Nonkin natural mentors in the lives of older youth in
the foster care." *Journal of Behavioral Health Services and Research* 35(4), 454-468.

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Initial involvement: We'd like to start by asking you some questions about how you first came to be involved with foster youth.

Please tell us about how and when you **first came to be involved** as a volunteer working with foster youth.

Initial inspiration: What inspired you to get involved in volunteering with the Amigos/CYC?

Prior connections: Prior to that initial involvement as a volunteer, did you have any connection to foster youth or the foster system?

Change over time: How has your involvement changed over time?

Current involvement: Now we'd like to ask you some questions about your current involvement with foster youth, and the kinds of activities that you engage in with them.

Can you tell us about how you are currently involved with foster youth? We would like to get a sense of how much **time** you spend with them, how **frequently** you spend time with them, and the **types of activities** that you engage in with them.

Activities: What are some of the activities with the youth that you enjoy the most and the least? (Why?)

Preferences: Do you prefer to be involved with **one** youth in particular, or with **groups** of youth? Do you have any preferences about the youth themselves – for example, their ages, or gender, or ethnic identity?

Sources of satisfaction & perceived impacts: Now we'd like to ask you about some of the main sources of satisfaction in your work with foster youth.

Can you tell us about some of the sources of satisfaction that you get from volunteering your time with foster youth – any kind of benefit that you get from your involvement.

Impacts on youth: Can you tell us from your perspective how you think your involvement has made an impact on the foster youth that you work with?

Impacts on self: Now can you tell us whether your involvement has had any impacts on you, in your own life?

Sources of challenge & obstacles: We would also like to know about some of the challenges or obstacles that you face in working with foster youth.

Can you tell us about any **challenges or obstacles** that you face in working with foster youth – anything that prevents you from getting more involved, or which makes your involvement less satisfying?

Time and family issues: One of the issues that sometimes comes up with people who are thinking about volunteering their time to work with foster youth are concerns about the amount of time and commitment that it might take – especially if they have families of their own. Have those issues had any impact on your involvement?

Mentoring: One of the topics that we're particularly interested in is mentoring, so we'd like to ask a couple of questions about that.

First, can you tell us how you define mentoring – or, what makes someone a mentor?

Own mentor: Did you have a mentor when you were younger? If so, can you tell us a little bit about that – how that happened, and what form their mentoring took?

Self: Do you **consider yourself** to be a mentor to foster youth?

Future involvement, support & encouragement: Now we'd like to turn to the future of your involvement with foster youth, and ways that Casa Pacifica might support or encourage that.

How do you see your involvement with foster youth changing in the foreseeable future – say within the next five years?
Would you like to **maintain** your current level of involvement, or to spend **more** or **less** time with your involvement?

Support & encouragement: Finally, we would like to learn about anything that Casa Pacifica (or another organization) might do to help you to maintain your involvement or to become more involved in the lives of foster youth.

What are the most important things that Casa Pacifica (or any other organization, for that matter) might do to help you to maintain your current involvement with foster youth – or to help you to deepen your involvement?
➔ *prompt:* offering some source of support, or eliminating some obstacles . . . .