

Developing a Comprehensive Independent Living Skills Plan to Support Youth in Preparation
for Independent Living

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Abstract

Research on comprehensive independent living skills programs for at-risk youth remains limited. Many youth are underprepared for the transition from out-of-home care to independent living. This seminar research study was conducted to review academic literature on youths' independent living skills needs, understand youth perspectives, and assess six currently operational independent living skills programs to guide the development of a comprehensive independent living skills program. Based on the findings from the literary review and secondary program reviews, a comprehensive independent living skills program with clear guidelines and objectives were developed. Recommendations for piloting the program and tracking outcome measures are discussed.

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Introduction

Problem Statement

Youth in out-of-home care, such as foster home or group home temporary placements, are often ill-equipped for transition to independent living once out-of-home care ends. While some transition from out-of-home care to reunify within their parental home, some youth turn 18, age out of care, and are forced to be self-sufficient regardless of their readiness. The primary aim of independent living skill development is to support the youth in preparation for basic independence as they continue to receive parental or guardian support or rely on navigation of community-based supports (Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013).

Out-of-Home Care

The Wisconsin Juvenile Justice Code defines and regulates out-of-home care and out-of-home care providers. Chapter 938 includes provisions for family members providing care for youth, known as kinship care providers, foster homes, group homes, residential treatment centers, and county secure detention and shelter facilities run by their respective sheriff's departments (Wis. Leg. Code. Ch. 938). Under the Wisconsin Juvenile Justice Code, all out-of-home placements are overseen by the court in conjunction with each county's social work department and law enforcement (Wis. Leg. Code Ch. 938). The Wisconsin Juvenile Justice Code requires permanency planning, transitional planning, and Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Standard (RPPS) decision-making between the social work department, placement provider, and service providers. Permanency planning occurs to secure a permanent living arrangement that provides long-term stability (such as parental reunification, placement with a fit

and willing relative, or transition to independent living), while RPPS decisions allow the placement provider to make reasonable decisions regarding the youths' participation in age-appropriate social activities (including independent living skills events), and transitional planning allows the youths' care team to develop an independent living plan to ease the transition from out-of-home care to the permanency plan objectives (Wis. Leg. Code Ch. 938).

Risk Factors

At-risk youth are youth whose behavioral, individual, and environmental risk factors put them at risk for future adverse outcomes (McWhirter et al., 2013). Socioeconomic status, family strain, social stressors, academic difficulties, and potentially adverse individual thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors (McWhirter et al., 2013). Out-of-home youth are at much higher risk for dropping out of school, unemployment, homelessness, and others. Trejos-Castillo, Davis, & Hipps (2015) researched the association between economic well-being and independent living skills. Financial literacy, professional networking, educational attainment, securing adequate affordable housing, and vocational skills building were among the components contributing to positive independent living outcomes (Trejos-Castillo, Davis, & Hipps, 2015; Massinga & Pecora, 2004). Most of the youth transitioning from out-of-home care lack these skills (Trejos-Castillo, Davis, & Hipps, 2015; Massinga & Pecora, 2004).

Identified risk factors may not be current pressing issues, though they are more likely to emerge without early intervention efforts (McWhirter et al., 2013). Youth who are not currently homeless, adjudicated delinquent, or suffering from other risk factors are still at risk of developing these problems over time without planned skill building interventions. Research by Jones (2014) discusses similar post-discharge difficulties for youth transitioning to basic independent living. While youth may feel prepared for the freedoms and responsibility that

inevitably come with adulthood, such as securing housing, professional skill development, and financial sustainability, research on independent living outcomes suggests otherwise (Jones, 2014).

Identified Independent Living Skill Deficits

Eilertson (2002) conducted research on independent living outcomes and found the following results: 37% graduated from high school, 39% had a job, 32% were on public assistance, 18% had been incarcerated, and deficits in access to healthcare and mental health services were prevalent. Similar outcomes were reported in a 2017 report for Marathon County Social Services in Wisconsin (Kirmse-Fuhrer, K. & Laurynz, A., personal communication, September 27, 2018). Eilertson (2002) found additional concerns regarding housing, work, skill development, and relational support needs.

Purpose of Research

The primary aim of this study is to address youth independent living service deficits through two objectives. First, through a review of scholarly research, this study seeks to identify the need for a comprehensive independent living program to more effectively support youth transitioning from out-of-home care. Second, recommendations for ideal program components of a comprehensive independent living skills program to be mandated for all youth in out-of-home care will be discussed.

Significance of Research

Research on independent living outcomes for youth in out-of-home care and demographic reports issued by the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families support a significant need for improved programs that will prepare youth for successful independent living. Independent living resources and supports for these youth are significantly underutilized, and specific criteria

for measuring and tracking mastery of independent living skills remain underdeveloped. Using research data and understanding youth perspectives post-discharge will guide development of a specialized independent living program for youth in out-of-home care aimed at achieving positive outcomes. Development of an independent living planning model to support the protective factors and minimize risk factors increases the chance of success post-out-of-home care (McWhirter et al., 2013). Youth receiving consistent independent living services are more likely to be self-sufficient (Barth et al., 2009). Literary research supports the need for a comprehensive independent living program required for out-of-home care that includes a streamlined process with clear guidelines and objectives.

Petr (2006) evaluated youth perspectives post-care and found that, while youth had strongly positive attitudes about the inclusion of independent living programs, they transitioned from care feeling uninformed and reported that they did not receive the services that had been established by state policy. Such self-report demonstrates the need for a comprehensive program with clear, measurable guidelines and objectives that are required for youth in out-of-home care. Topics of use to these youth included financial literacy, job development, cooking and home maintenance skills, financial management, housing and transportation assistance, and substance use prevention (Petr, 2006).

Literature Review

Independent Living Skills Findings

Youth outcome measures. To further support the problem statement, youth outcome report measures were reviewed to determine the current state of youth independent living skills acquisition and youth success rates upon discharge from out-of-home placement. Information drawn from these reports demonstrated a strong need for prioritized focus on independent living skills programs for youth in out-of-home care. A 2017 efficacy report for current Wisconsin independent living initiatives tracked the success rates of youth aging out of care and found that current independent living outcomes are lacking (Kirmse-Fuhrer, K. & Laurynz, A., personal communication, September 27, 2018). Similar outcomes were reported in research by Mares (2010). Marathon County Kinship Coordinator Laurynz, Aidyn and Regional Independent Living Skills Coordinator Kirmse-Fuhrer, Katie shared their observations that, despite the state's obligation to provide independent living services and prepare youth for self-sufficiency, the youth they work with continue to struggle (Kirmse-Fuhrer, K. & Laurynz, A., personal communication, September 27, 2018).

A 2016 annual outcomes report by the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families reported rates of re-entry within the first 12 months following youths' discharge from out-of-home care. Re-entry is the process whereby youth are successfully discharged from out-of-home care to a permanent, supportive living arrangement (such as family or a fit and willing relative) and court-ordered supervision ends, then the youth return to out-of-home care and court-ordered supervision is reinstated because the permanency plan was unsuccessful (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2017). Re-entry rates are used to measure long-term success rates because these rates determine the length of time the youth is successfully returned to the

community without intervention from Child Welfare and the court. The goal of permanency and transitional planning is to minimize or prevent re-entry and keep youth in a permanent stable, supportive living environment where they can succeed. The annual outcomes report identified a statewide re-entry average in Wisconsin of 11.5% (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2017.) Of the 11.5% of youth who re-entered out-of-home care in the 12 months following discharge, 14-16 year old youth maintained the highest re-entry rate of 28.6% (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2017). The primary classification for re-entry was behavioral problems, presumably during a time where these youth should prioritize their education, engagement in age-appropriate activities, gaining meaningful job supports, and exposure to self-sufficiency through basic independent living skills and self-care practices (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2017).

Need for a comprehensive Independent Living Skills program. The National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) gathers self-report data from youth at periodic intervals during the ages of 17, 19, and 21 to evaluate independent living services offered to youth in out-of-home care (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2018a; National Youth in Transition Database, 2017). Despite the provision of statewide independent living services, youth struggled in many critical areas of independent living, including homelessness, educational achievement, financial literacy, and self-care practices such as coping skills and healthy lifestyle choices (National Youth in Transition Database, 2017). These results demonstrate the ongoing need for the development of a comprehensive Independent Living Skills program with a streamlined curriculum focusing on a specific set of learning objectives and daily life skills acquisition.

With assistance from a structured independent living program, the youth reported increased academic performance and attendance, improved relationships with supportive adults,

Medicaid service utilization, decreased exposure to high-risk outcomes, and lower reports of homelessness (National Youth in Transition Database, 2017). By age 19, youth involved in intensive independent living support services reported graduating from high school or earning their GED and showed increasing financial stability (National Youth in Transition Database, 2017). Developing an appropriately supportive independent living skills program for youth placed out-of-home may lead to increased youth success and successful completion of statewide independent living initiatives.

Further research supports the potential that if youth do not receive adequate independent living services, they will be at increased risk for future delinquency and adult criminality, among other negative outcomes such as substance abuse, homelessness, unemployment or underemployment, low educational attainment, financial difficulties, and mental health challenges that contribute to eventual delinquency and criminality (Williams-Mbengue, 2018; Jones, 2014; Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Scaife, 2006; Massinga & Pecora, 2004; Casey Family Programs, n.d.).

Difficulties transitioning compared to non-removed youth. Trejos-Castillo, Davis, & Hips (2015) suggest that youth placed out-of-home and those who age out of care have a significantly more difficult time transitioning to adulthood and independent living than youth who are not removed from the home, noting an abrupt shift and lack of preparation as contributing concerns to their challenges. Difficulties transitioning to independent living further induce their risk for mental health and behavioral health challenges that result in poor decision-making and eventual re-entry into the juvenile justice system or entry into the adult justice system, thus creating a revolving door effect (Trejos-Castillo, Davis, & Hips, 2015; Mares, 2010).

Independent living programs in easing the transition. Further research suggests youth placed out-of-home struggle more than peers who have not been removed from the parental home. The development of a comprehensive independent living skills program may be effective in easing the transition that comes more abruptly to out-of-home youth than their counterparts (Williams-Mbengue, 2018). Barth et al. (2009) found that independent living programs designed to include groups of skills resulted in positive outcomes, whereas individualized programs tailored to fit each youth's individualized objectives had no significance. Additional research hypothesized that standardized independent living skills programs might help ease the transition to adulthood and increase self-sufficiency (Jones, 2014).

Legislative Support

Independent living support requirements. Marathon County Kinship Coordinator Laurynz, Aidyn and Regional Independent Living Skills Coordinator Kirmse-Fuhrer, Katie emphasized statewide legislation that requires the provision of independent living support services for youth placed out-of-home, regardless of placement type (Kirmse-Fuhrer, K. & Laurynz, A., personal communication, September 27, 2018). In Wisconsin, each county is legislatively mandated to document and report on the independent living skills services provided to youth, the professional providing the service, and specific skills categories and objectives being developed in exchange for state funding to provide these service supports. Each county also determines the placement providers, such as a group home, that can be delegated to complete the services on behalf of the County Social Services or Health and Human Services Departments.

Williams-Mbengue (2018) connects the identified lack of preparation for transition to independent living to state initiatives aimed at providing ongoing support and minimizing the

risk of re-entry by raising the eligibility requirements from age 18 to 21. Legislation such as the Family First Prevention Act and Foster Care Independence Act additionally support mandated independent living services to assist in successful outcomes for youth transitioning from out-of-home placement to increased self-sufficiency (Family First Prevention Services Act, 2018; Foster Care Independence Act, 1999).

Family First Prevention Act. The Family First Prevention Act, signed by President Trump in 2018, emphasizes prevention services and least-restrictive care (Family First Prevention Services Act, 2018). Under this Act, funding is designated for services to prevent out-of-home placement and prioritize least-restrictive measures such as preference of kinship care over group home care, using group home care over inpatient residential treatment facilities, and residential treatment over incarceration (Family First Prevention Services Act, 2018). Additional measures include state reimbursement for independent living services, including the cost of mental health and AODA prevention and treatment services, parenting programs such as Functional Family Therapy (FFT) or Family Preservation (FP), driver's education, use of a cell phone for emergencies and scheduling treatment services, costs of transportation to appointments and court appearances, and other basic independent living support costs (Kirmse-Fuhrer, K., & Laurynz, A., personal communication, September 27, 2018; Massinga & Pecora, 2004). The Family First Prevention Services Act (2018) seeks to develop and implement a database for accurate tracking of independent living outcomes and information obtained through NYTD surveys, as well as providing opportunities for collaboration between service providers as they conduct focus groups on independent living skills program developments.

Foster Care Independence Act. The Foster Care Independence Act (1999) set the precedent for the Family First Prevention Services Act. Under this Independence Act, the goals

of youth self-sufficiency through independent living skills acquisition and transition assistance were outlined (Foster Care Independence Act, 1999; Scaife, 2006; Massinga & Pecora, 2004). Through this federal legislation, states were given the autonomy to develop, pilot, and assess their own independent living programs while simultaneously enforcing the expectation that the provision of independent living services is a requirement, not an optional service for youth in out-of-home care, eventually leading to the requirement for Wisconsin counties to provide independent living services to youth and service tracking through eWiSACWIS programming (Foster Care Independence Act, 1999; Kirmse-Fuhrer, K. & Laurynz, A., personal communication, September 27, 2018).

Recommendations for independent living services included financial support, housing securement, health education, academic success, and employment support services, in addition to broadening program eligibility standards to capitalize on available Medicaid support, incentives for foster care providers, and monetary adoption incentives (Foster Care Independence Act, 1999). While autonomy to develop individualized independent living skills programs allows for more flexibility from county to county, having a streamlined program with core outcomes and objectives would allow for increased efficacy and more consistent reporting of youth outcomes.

Under the Foster Care Independence Act (1999), the Wisconsin Regional Independent Living Coordinator position was implemented to continue working with youth until age 21 to receive transitional supports during their reintegration back into the community as independent adults, services that would not be possible if provided by County Social Services or Health and Human Services Departments. Expanding the age range of program eligibility additionally coincides with Williams-Mbengue's (2018) proposal to further support youth during the transition process and impact more positive youth outcomes.

Child welfare agency responsibility. Both legislations outline the responsibility of the supervising child welfare agency to provide independent living services and transitional planning supports and oversight. The Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (2018a) requires dissemination of a handbook for youth placed out-of-home. This handbook states that the social worker assigned to the youth's case is responsible for making sure that youth are preparing for independence and self-sufficiency outlined in transitional and discharge planning if they are over the age of 14 (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2018a; Kirmse-Fuhrer, K., & Laurynz, A., personal communication, September 27, 2018). Additional requirements include treatment planning, permanency planning, transitional planning, and monthly treatment team meetings (Wis. Leg. Code Ch. DCF 57; Wis. Leg. Code Ch. 938). Including an Independent Living Coordinator in ongoing meetings is recommended for goal mapping, resource identification, and support purposes.

Youth Perspectives

In addition to literary documentation that outlines professional opinions of youths' independent living needs, evaluations of youth perspectives were analyzed. Research by Jones (2014) reviewed youth's self-reported experiences to determine where predominant independent living support needs lie. In a survey of 95 youth who completed the initial six-month period following discharge from out-of-home placement, Jones (2014) documented that youth reported needs related to their independent living skills programs, financial support, housing, transportation, and the prioritization of follow-up services to ensure their continued support, also referred to as aftercare.

Consistent with the problem statement, Jones (2014) reported that youth felt overconfident in their ability to transition quickly to independent living when compared to their

actual experiences post-discharge, with 40% of youth surveyed reporting dissatisfaction with transitional planning and discharge planning once they transitioned from out-of-home care. Basic competencies in meal preparation, laundry completion, and household chores were achieved, though youth reported significant concerns with financial competency, self-care, employment and academic habits, and inapplicability of independent living skills programs to real-world experiences post-discharge (Jones, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

Modern criminal justice practices prioritize evidence-based foundations in the implementation and review of new programs and policies. The United States Department of Justice (2009) defines evidence-based practice as using current research in the development of new programs, practices, and policies. Evidence-based practice is crucial because it employs ongoing literary reviews and highlights research, helping to ensure that particular techniques, theories, or strategies have successful outcomes (The United States Department of Justice, 2009). The United States Department of Justice (2009) values experiential research over reliance on individual information-sharing. Research that has been deemed by prior trials to have been successful will effectively guide the development and pilot of new programs such as a comprehensive independent living skills program. However, experimental research often cannot be done with this cohort due to environmental factors, licensing requirements, and program expectations to provide services to all youth in the out-of-home setting. Program reviews still serve as evidence by tracking services provided in the absence of raw data, which is better than simply sharing information about programs.

Prevention-Treatment Continuum

The prevention-treatment continuum encompasses prevention tactics, early intervention measures, and treatment initiatives (McWhirter et al., 2013). At-risk youth can move along this continuum depending on the topic being measured and the youths' individual experiences at that time. As McWhirter et al. (2013) suggest, the prevention-treatment continuum exists to prevent risk factors from occurring, minimize the effects of trauma and delinquency as soon as they start, and correct problem behaviors such as delinquency engagement in order to prevent ongoing delinquency that leads to future criminality. The prevention-treatment continuum offers the

flexibility to be applicable to a wide range of youth and their experiences. At-risk youth have varied lifestyles, experiences, trauma exposure, parental involvement, ages of entering out-of-home care, and placement experiences. The continuum serves to meet youth where they are at, thus employing a trauma-informed care approach and emphasizing Motivational Interviewing practices to provide an individualistic approach while simultaneously adhering to a comprehensive program with specific goals and objectives. Motivational Interviewing is an effective approach with youth due to its nonjudgmental orientation. The technique involves youths guiding their own positive behavior change rather than being given direct instruction or advice (Hall, 2014).

McWhirter et al. (2013) recommend using the continuum for all areas of prevention, early intervention, and treatment. This approach applies in the development of a comprehensive independent living skills program. For example, anger management skill development can be one objective of an emotional regulation goal. For a youth in the prevention stage, this may include general education on emotions and anger management outlets whereas a youth who is observed at the early intervention stage of the continuum may require one-on-one reprocessing when he becomes angry and punches a wall. A youth requiring treatment may participate in anger management counseling or abuse education groups to participate in the behavior change process and prevent further criminality due to his present engagement in unhealthy behaviors.

Continuum Goals

Minimizing risk factors that lead to negative future outcomes while serving as many youth as possible is a primary outcome of the prevention-treatment continuum (McWhirter et al., 2013). As mentioned in the literature review, this may include risk factors leading to homelessness, lack of educational attainment, mental health challenges, financial instability, and

others. This goal is attainable by providing a comprehensive independent living skills program that adequately addresses youths' needs and provides standardized skill-building opportunities to maximize their chances for success.

Independent Living Program Review

A variety of independent living skills programs are available to youth, though an ongoing need for a comprehensive independent living skills program that addresses all areas of necessary support takes precedence. Review of current independent living skills programs will identify some commonalities and fundamental differences. These comparisons will then be used to develop a comprehensive independent living skills program for out-of-home placements. As examples of evidence-based practices, the following programs will be compared and contrasted: Life Skills Training Program, Adolescent Transition Program, Supervised Independent Living Program, Independent Life Skills Program, Kansas Independent Living Program, and Fostering Success Foundation Transitional Living Program.

Secondary Program Reviews

Six currently operational independent living programs were selected for secondary review from peer-reviewed academic sources. The Life Skills Training Program, Adolescent Transition Program, Supervised Independent Living Program, Independent Life Skills Program, Kansas Independent Living Program, and Fostering Success Foundation Transitional Living Program operate in different states, have various program goals, and highlight specific characteristics, such as age, use of an assessment tool, skill categories, and effectiveness rates. A summary chart is also included.

Six-Point Rating Scale

Many of the programs reviewed utilized the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse (CEBC) Scientific Rating Scale to determine program effectiveness (Clark, 2016; Barth et al., 2009). The CEBC Scientific Rating Scale uses points one through six, with point one equaling the strongest level of research supporting the program's effectiveness, whereas a rating of four, five, or six indicates significantly less support for efficacy (Clark, 2015; Barth et al., 2009). For efficacy determinations, see Table 1 (Clark, 2015; Barth et al., 2009).

TABLE 1

Rating Score	Classification	Definition
1	Well-supported by research	Sustained effectiveness; program is reliable and valid
2	Supported by research	Research conducted in a highly controlled setting; demonstrates superior practice

3	Promising practice	Some experimental control is established; demonstrates some level of efficacy
4	Acceptable research	Research is generally accepted for practice but lacks adequate research showing effectiveness
5	Research fails to demonstrate effectiveness	Research has not resulted in improved outcomes
6	Concerning practice	Risk of harm is present to participants

Life Skills Training Program

The Life Skills Training Program goal is to help youth conquer daily life challenges through development of biopsychosocial skillsets (Ghasemian & Venkatesh, 2017). Biopsychosocial skillsets include physical skills, individual thoughts, feelings, and actions, and the interactions between an individual and the people, places, and things in the environment (Ghasemian & Venkatesh, 2017). Life Skills Training Program objectives include self-awareness, empathy, interpersonal relationship exploration, communication, critical and creative thinking, decision-making, problem solving, emotions identification, and coping strategies to promote self-care (Ghasemian & Venkatesh, 2017). Ghasemian and Venkatesh (2017) found that the Life Skills Training Program increased youth autonomy, which is necessary for successful independent living.

Adolescent Transition Program

California has implemented an adolescent transition program, alternatively known as the Transition to Independence Process, which serves adolescents ages 14 to 25 who have or are at risk of developing mental health and behavior challenges, as well as risk factors of homelessness, legal system involvement, and substance abuse (Clark, 2016). The Transition Program objectives include strengths-based needs assessments, future planning, problem solving and complex decision-making, high-risk behavior prevention, employment skill building and career exploration, educational support, housing and basic home maintenance, physical, mental, and emotional health, community functioning, coping skills, social skills, relationship development, and participation in evidence-based groups as appropriate (Clark, 2016). Clark's (2016) research identified this program as a level three promising practice on a six-point scale, meaning that some effectiveness was established.

Supervised Independent Living Program

Barth et al. (2009) describe the Supervised Independent Living Program as a program for emancipated minors living on their own in a monitored apartment with adult supervision, psychosocial support, and employment skill building. In this program, youth independently manage their apartment, organize their time, cook food, and manage their hobbies and free time, though the program supports the youth through counseling, job support, and supervised check-ins (Barth et al., 2009). Though researchers were unable to measure the program's effectiveness, Barth et al. (2009) listed the Supervised Independent Living Program as a level three promising practice on a six-point scale, where some effectiveness was established from participation in this program. This program is highly based on natural consequences. For example, if a youth does

not independently manage his or her meal preparation responsibilities, hunger ensues, thus promoting completion of this basic daily task.

Independent Life Skills Program

The Independent Life Skills Program serves youth ages 16 and older with the goal of these youth aging out of care and transitioning to independent living (Barth et al., 2009). Goals of this program include life skill development, self-care, employment skills training, and transitional support services, with individualized mentoring, counseling, and educational support services included as needed (Barth et al., 2009). Results by Barth et al. (2009) showed that the Independent Life Skills Program is rated as a level three promising practice, based on a six-level rating scale. Some effectiveness was observed through youths' participation in this program. Research findings supported youths' recommendations to improve the independent living program through more focused involvement between counselors and the youth, parent training, reevaluation of program eligibility requirements, and increasing funding assistance to program participants (Barth et al., 2009).

Kansas Independent Living Program

The Kansas Independent Living Program conducts an initial independent living skills assessment with youth beginning at age 15, though the assessment type or measures were not identified in Petr's (2006) research. Education (on-site and school-based learning), transitional mentorship (through family, community, foster parents, and others), life skills, vocational preparation, and education on independent living skills benefits (such as foster care grants, scholarships, county-based housing support, medical assistance, driver's education subsidies, and other financial supports) are emphasized through the Kansas Independent Living Program (Petr, 2006).

Petr (2006) reported results that identified the knowledge gained regarding independent living program benefits provided a strong foundation from which to gain other independent living skills. Youth often resist social supports aside from peer involvement, thus requiring the inclusion of a variety of supports to include nuclear and extended family, community-based mentors, service providers, and coaches to help the youth build diverse support networks (Bates & Swan, 2014; McWhirter et al., 2013; Petr, 2006).

Fostering Success Foundation Transitional Living Program

The Fostering Success Foundation (n.d.) first gauges participants' experience and knowledge of independent living skills using the Casey Life Skills Assessment and uses these scores to develop service plans that prioritize education, life skills, basic home maintenance skills, health and hygiene, interpersonal relationships, financial savviness, employability skills, and career planning. The Fostering Success Foundation Transitional Living Program is designed for youth 14 years and older (Fostering Success Foundation, n.d.). This program's objectives include health and safety practices, financial competency (through money management, budgeting, and financial resource securement), transportation support, access to community-based resources, parenting education, community involvement, employment, meal planning and preparation, smart shopping skills, housing and utility supports, vocational planning and supports, physical and mental health services, legal supports, and goal mapping to support independent living (Fostering Success Foundation, n.d.).

Additional Program Recommendations

Massinga & Pecora (2004) recommend an independent living program that prioritizes youths' permanency, involves youth in decision-making and treatment planning, involves parents, uses a systems of care approach through collaboration with schools and community

service providers, addresses basic independent living skill development, fosters support network development, and provides creative activities and ideas to help the youth learn.

Mares (2010) evaluated a Lucas County independent living program providing services regarding assessment, transition planning, educational support, career exploration, vocational training, budgeting, housing and health education, family support, mentoring, financial support, legal assistance, physical, mental health, and substance abuse services and treatment, transportation, and enrollment in state benefits. Fernandes-Alcantara (2019), in conjunction with the Congressional Research Service, proposed supports in the areas of housing, WIOA job training, education, financial aid, and Medicaid.

Program Comparisons

Commonalities

Upon review of six current independent living programs, most programs included relationship building or mentoring focus, employment support, housing and home maintenance, physical, mental, and emotional health services, and community reintegration opportunities. Research by Ghasemian and Venkatesh (2017), Clark (2016), Barth et al. (2009), Petr (2006), and the Fostering Success Foundation (n.d.) provided strong suggestions for independent living micro-skill development that could be included under broader categories, such as financial support, safety and transportation, and skills to address mental and emotional needs that positively impact overall independent living success. Additionally, these programs provided follow-up surveys to participants to gauge overall service satisfaction.

Fundamental Differences

Age. These independent living programs serve youth from an age range of 14 to 25 years old, with each program differing in age of eligibility (Ghasemian & Venkatesh, 2017; Clark,

2016; Barth et al., 2009; Petr, 2006; Fostering Success Foundation, n.d.). Independent living program eligibility requirements vary by state and program emphasis, which may account for this difference.

Use of skills or needs assessment. Used to gather baseline data for development of a complete strengths profile, administering an independent living needs assessment is a critical first step in treatment planning and goal mapping. Despite the importance of this practice, only a few programs mentioned using a needs assessment as part of their independent living program curriculums (Clark, 2016; Petr, 2006; Fostering Success Foundation, n.d.).

Program emphasis. Consistent with the literary review, independent living programs lack a comprehensive independent living program with specific goals and objectives. The Life Skills Training Program prioritizes focus on mental and emotional needs, whereas the Supervised Independent Living Program targets a select few skills sets for emancipated minors (Ghasemian & Venkatesh, 2017; Barth et al., 2009). The Adolescent Transition Program (TIP), Kansas Independent Living Program, and Fostering Success Foundation incorporate a more comprehensive set of objectives while the Independent Life Skills Program selectively balances between the objectives of the Life Skills Training Program and more comprehensive programs (Clark, 2016; Barth et al., 2009; Petr, 2006; Fostering Success Foundation, n.d.). The Fostering Success Foundation (n.d.) further identifies that the transitional living program does not meet the same goals of traditional independent living programs.

Summary Chart

TABLE 2

NOS = unspecified

Program	Life Skills Training Program	Adolescent Transition Program	Supervised Independent Living Program	Independent Living Skills Program	Kansas Independent Living Program	Fostering Success Foundation Transitional Living Program
Age of Youth Served	NOS	14-25	Emancipation Status	16 and older	NOS	14 and older
Skills Assessment Used		X			X	X
Basic Life Skills		X	X	X	X	X
Physical Health		X		X		X
Mental Health		X	X	X		X
Emotional Health	X	X		X		X
Coping Skills	X	X				
Relationship Development	X	X	X	X	X	X
Community Reintegration		X	X		X	X
Communication	X					
Critical Thinking / Problem Solving	X	X				X
Transitional Planning		X		X	X	X
Risk Behavior Prevention		X				X
Vocational / Career Planning		X	X		X	X
Employment		X	X	X		X
Housing / Home Maintenance		X	X		X	X
Financial Management					X	X
Education		X		X	X	X

Transportation						X
Parenting Education						X
Legal Support						X
Consumer Education						X

This chart shows that these programs vary in in the amount of independent living skills they offer, and lack consistent program guidelines. Interestingly, relationship-building and basic life skills are included in all programs. Including relationship-building and basic life skills seems to be a basic minimum of what a comprehensive independent living skills program should address.

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Summary

Youth in out-of-home care are often ill-equipped for transition to independent living at the expiration of out-of-home care placement. Through a scholarly literature review, this study acknowledged the need for comprehensive independent living programs to more effectively support youth transitioning from out-of-home care. Independent living programs, resources, and community supports are significantly underutilized, and lack specific criteria for measuring and tracking independent living skills proficiency. Research supports the need for a comprehensive independent living program required for out-of-home care that includes a streamlined process with clear guidelines and objectives and identifies the increased risk for delinquency, adult criminality, and other adverse outcomes if youth do not receive comprehensive independent living services.

Secondary data analysis involved methodically reviewing research on out-of-home care trends, program deficits, and youth perspectives on their out-of-home experiences. Current youth independent living program initiatives were evaluated with the primary outcome of developing and proposing an evidence-based independent living skills training program for at-risk youth in out-of-home care. Based on the literary review and program reviews, several program recommendations are considered.

Program Recommendations

McWhirter et al. (2013) recommend comprehensive skills programming, supporting the proposal for an independent living skills curriculum with clear goals and objectives. Based on program reviews, components of an ideal independent living program include sustainable housing support, employment coaching, educational planning services and guidance, financial

literacy and management training, and mentorship for community reintegration (Barth et al., 2009; Eilertson, 2002; Greene, 2002; Williams-Mbengue, 2018). Researchers Scaife (2006), Massinga and Pecora (2004) further recommend mandated baseline assessment tools to aid in tracking independent living skills progress and outcome measures.

Funding is a critical component to the successful implementation of any program. Barth et al. (2009) and Greene (2002) strongly support funding to pilot skills programs in group care settings, due to the extraneous variables that occur with controlled clinical trials and the heavy reliance on community partnerships to meet specific goals and objectives. Funding supports are necessary to ensure that an adequate amount of time and resources are devoted to ensuring successful outcome measures and successful youth.

Comprehensive Independent Living Skills Program Proposal

Assessment Tools

WSDSHS Assessment. A comprehensive independent living skills program begins with a baseline assessment to develop a strengths profile and gauge each participant's level of need. The Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (2000) uses a life skills inventory to evaluate youths' independent living skills. It employs 15 survey items by which youth are asked to rate their skills proficiency on a scale of basic, intermediate, advanced, and exceptional. While this assessment tool is thorough, the items are less user-friendly than the Casey Life Skills Assessment, which was designed with youth independent living proficiency in mind.

Casey Life Skills Assessment. The Casey Life Skills Assessment evaluates basic independent living skills in the areas of money management, food management, personal appearance, personal hygiene, housekeeping, transportation, emergency and safety,

community resources, interpersonal relationships, legal assistance, housing, educational planning, and job attainment (Casey Family Programs, n.d.). The Casey Family Programs (n.d.) website includes options to enroll for a free online profile to electronically administer the assessment tool and maintain records of results, in addition to paper copies of the assessment. Considering the effectiveness of this tool and ease of use from personal experience, the Casey Life Skills Assessment is recommended as part of the comprehensive independent living skills curriculum.

Assessment Use

Once the assessment is complete, staff would build a “strengths and needs” profile based on the results and formulate an independent living skills plan that highlights each youth’s proficiencies and areas for growth. At three-month intervals, the Casey Life Skills Assessment is to be re-administered with an updated independent living skills plan to ensure progress toward proficiency in alignment with federal requirements regarding case planning, permanency planning, and transition planning (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2019). A copy of the Casey Life Skills Assessment tool is referenced in Appendix A.

Eligibility Rules

State of Wisconsin. The Wisconsin Department of Children and Families regulates standards for all out-of-home care placements in the state. In Wisconsin, independent living services are required to be provided to youth between the ages of 14-18 who are eligible for services once they have been placed out-of-home under a court order for six months (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2018b). Additional stipulations apply, but for the purposes of this study, the primary focus of independent living skills is on any youth who is court-ordered to be placed out of home,

maintaining eligibility for services through the duration of placement under court-ordered supervision (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2018b).

Federal regulations. Fernandes-Alcantara (2019) reviewed federal independent living service eligibility guidelines and found that youth are eligible for independent living services between the ages of 14-18. Extensions have been made for youth to continue receiving services until age 21 in certain cases (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2019; Williams-Mbengue, 2019; Foster Care Independence Act, 1999).

Program Goals, Objectives, and Tasks

The following comprehensive independent living skills program is a personal recommendation for independent living best practices. This comprehensive independent living skills program includes sustainable housing support, employment coaching, educational planning, financial literacy and management, and community reintegration mentorship. The table below outlines each skills goal, objectives, and tasks.

ILS Goal	Objectives	Tasks
Sustainable Housing	Develop advanced knowledge of housing options and a realistic plan for individual housing securement.	<p>Educate youth on the difference between buying and renting.</p> <p>Educate youth on rent costs, leases, security deposits, utility set-up, lease violations, home loans, and housing resources.</p> <p>Review the Wisconsin 211 resource sheet.</p> <p>Network with area property management services.</p>

		<p>Practice filling out housing applications and record keeping.</p> <p>Review the eviction notice process and measures to avoid evictions.</p> <p>Develop a housing budget.</p> <p>Practice setting the table.</p> <p>Explore table manners and ordering from a menu.</p> <p>Develop a transitional housing plan.</p> <p>Practice meal prep, cooking, and following recipes.</p> <p>Build a weekly grocery list.</p> <p>Explore appropriate food storage and disposal.</p> <p>Develop basic cleaning skills.</p> <p>Practice basic home maintenance, including lawn care and small project fixes.</p> <p>Explore the pros and cons of having a roommate.</p> <p>Develop a roommate contract with expectations.</p> <p>Practice basic laundry completion.</p> <p>Contact area utility providers for information on energy saving programs and financial assistance programs.</p>
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<p>Employment</p>	<p>Development of an active resume and references list.</p> <p>Obtaining at least one paid job experience before the age of 18.</p> <p>Acquire transferrable employability skills.</p>	<p>Participate in job shadowing.</p> <p>Enroll in a school career planning course.</p> <p>Review online job resources and ads.</p> <p>Participate in a consultation at an area job center.</p> <p>Practice filling out job applications.</p> <p>Create a resume.</p> <p>Identify a list of positive job references.</p> <p>Participate in mock interviews.</p> <p>Educate youth on conflict resolution in the workplace, workplace etiquette, appropriate dress, and professional skill development.</p> <p>Secure all documents necessary for work, including a birth certificate, state identification card, Social Security card, and work permit.</p> <p>Assist the youth in completing their employment forms.</p> <p>Participate in job fairs.</p> <p>Review the Occupational Outlook Handbook online.</p>
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		<p>Utilize state statutes for employment law education.</p> <p>Develop a work support plan if additional supervision, emotional regulation, or job supports are needed.</p>
<p>Educational Planning</p>	<p>Completion of high school with a diploma.</p> <p>Develop a career plan.</p>	<p>Enroll the youth in school or an equivalent educational program.</p> <p>Arrange IEP meetings when applicable.</p> <p>Develop a credit recovery plan.</p> <p>Establish daily study time to work on homework.</p> <p>Arrange transportation through the school district.</p> <p>Schedule academic testing (such as the TABE test, ACT, Civics exam, or others required for graduation).</p> <p>Enroll the youth in tutoring services.</p> <p>Educate the youth on healthy study habits (such as note taking, effective textbook reading strategies, setting aside time to study in an environment free of distractions, rewarding self for studying by taking appropriate breaks, etc.).</p> <p>Explore trade program of interest.</p>

		<p>Complete the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Inventory.</p> <p>Complete various career aptitude assessments.</p> <p>Research technical colleges and 4-year colleges or universities of interest to the youth.</p> <p>Schedule campus tours.</p> <p>Assist the youth in college applications and essay submissions.</p> <p>Assist the youth in filling out the FAFSA if the youth is attending college.</p> <p>Participate in college career fairs.</p> <p>Attend educational meetings, conferences, and progress reviews.</p> <p>Explore the youth's preferred learning style.</p>
Financial Literacy	Develop the skills to achieve financial self-sufficiency.	<p>Enroll the youth in Medicaid.</p> <p>Develop a budget.</p> <p>Practice price comparisons at stores.</p> <p>Educate the youth on savings and checking accounts.</p> <p>Open a savings account.</p> <p>Practice writing checks and balancing a checkbook.</p>

		<p>Develop a savings plan.</p> <p>Educate the youth on credit and debit cards, loans, and debt.</p> <p>Review the youth's credit report yearly.</p> <p>Assist the youth in filing their taxes.</p> <p>Practice budgeting for buying a car, car maintenance, and insurance.</p> <p>Educate the youth on homeowner's insurance, renter's insurance, auto insurance, and life insurance.</p> <p>Develop an emergency savings plan.</p> <p>Educate the youth on the process of paying bills.</p>
Community Reintegration	<p>The youth's physical, mental, and emotional health needs are met.</p> <p>Transportation and community support services are obtained.</p>	<p>Enroll the youth in MTM, Inc. transportation services through Wisconsin ForwardHealth.</p> <p>Schedule regular hair care appointments.</p> <p>Practice basic hygiene skills.</p> <p>Educate the youth on health insurance.</p> <p>Develop a self-care plan.</p> <p>Identify and use positive coping skills.</p>

		<p>Participate in drug and alcohol education.</p> <p>Establish and practice physical, verbal, and emotional boundaries.</p> <p>Learn medication management skills, including names of medications, indications, doses, time of administration, and colors of pills.</p> <p>Practice refilling medications.</p> <p>Schedule a primary care appointment.</p> <p>Schedule individual counseling appointments.</p> <p>Schedule routine dental appointments.</p> <p>Schedule yearly optical appointments.</p> <p>Schedule family counseling appointments if applicable.</p> <p>Schedule psychiatric care if applicable.</p> <p>Secure legal services for the youth if applicable.</p> <p>Enroll the youth in social skill building groups.</p> <p>Tour a courthouse, including civil and criminal departments.</p> <p>Tour a community jail or prison.</p>
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		<p>Participate in volunteer activities.</p> <p>Educate the youth on healthy interpersonal relationship development.</p> <p>Locate driver's education programs for youth when appropriate.</p> <p>Practice using public transportation (such as the bus system).</p> <p>Learn to purchase bus tickets.</p> <p>Prioritize permanency planning and scheduled home visits with immediate and extended family as deemed appropriate.</p> <p>Establish the youth with mentoring services.</p> <p>Explore crisis support resources, including area crisis centers and hotlines.</p> <p>Participate in community-based events, extracurricular activities, and appropriate hobbies.</p> <p>Educate the youth on appropriate cell phone usage, cellular contracts, and cell phone etiquette.</p> <p>Explore safety best practices, including who to call in an emergency, technology and online safety, self-defense techniques, self-awareness,</p>
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		<p>and environmental awareness, 911 resources, and local police, fire, and EMS services.</p> <p>Explore community clubs, such as the Boys & Girls Club, YMCA, and area gyms.</p> <p>Educate the youth on reproductive health and sexual education.</p> <p>Educate the youth on nutrition, exercise, and sleep hygiene.</p> <p>Write a list of individual strengths.</p> <p>Explore self-advocacy skills.</p> <p>Practice directional skills, including looking for landmarks, reading a map, and using a GPS to reach one's destination.</p> <p>Practice leadership skill education and development.</p> <p>Engage in goal mapping based on short-term and long-term goals.</p> <p>Involve youth in responsible pet ownership activities and education.</p> <p>Complete Selective Service Registration for youth within 30 days prior to turning 18.</p> <p>Identify and explore parenting programs and resources.</p>
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Piloting the Program

This comprehensive independent living skills program is recommended to be piloted in group home care facilities serving youth between the ages of 14-18 who are court-ordered to be placed out of home. The Casey Life Skills Assessment tool is to be utilized at the commencement of independent living services and re-evaluated quarterly along with each youth's treatment plan and transitional planning recommendations. Development of a statewide tracking program in addition to the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families dashboard is recommended as a future project to assist the state in more effectively tracking independent living outcomes and setting the precedent for national independent living program standards.

Conclusion

Based on a review of literary research and Wisconsin outcome measures for youth placed out-of-home, a strong need for a more comprehensive independent living skills program was identified. Upon review of currently employed independent living programs, personal recommendations were made for a comprehensive independent living skills program with clear guidelines and objectives to support youth in preparation for independent living.

Recommendations for piloting this comprehensive independent living skills program and tracking independent living outcomes were also discussed.

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Wis. Leg. Code Ch. DCF 57

Wis. Leg. Code Ch. 938

Appendices

Appendix A. Casey Life Skills Assessment Tool (Casey Family Programs, n.d.b).

Name _____ Date _____

Daily Living

Are the following statements like me	No	Mostly No	Somewhat	Mostly Yes	Yes
I know where to go to get on the Internet.					
I can find what I need on the Internet.					
I know how to use my email account.					
I can create, save, print and send computer documents.					
I know the risks of meeting someone in person that I met online.					
I would not post pictures or messages if I thought it would hurt someone's feelings.					
If someone sent me messages online that made me feel bad or scared, I would know what to do or who to tell.					
I know at least one adult, other than my worker, who would take my call in the middle of the night if I had an emergency.					
An adult I trust, other than my worker, checks in with me regularly.					
When I shop for food, I take a list and I compare prices.					
I can make meals with or without using a recipe.					
I think about what I eat and how it impacts my health.					
I understand how to read food product labels to see how much fat, sugar, salt, and calories the food has.					
I know how to do my own laundry.					
I keep my living space clean.					
I know the products to use when cleaning the bathroom and kitchen.					
I know how to use a fire extinguisher.					

Self Care

Are the following statements like me	No	Mostly No	Somewhat	Mostly Yes	Yes
I can take care of my own minor injuries and illnesses.					
I can get medical and dental care when I need it.					
I know how to make my own medical and dental appointments.					
I know when I should go to the emergency room instead of the doctor's office.					
I know my family medical history.					
I know how to get health insurance when I am older than 18.					
I have at least one trusted adult who would visit me if I were in the hospital.					
There is at least one adult I trust who would be legally allowed to make medical decisions for me and advocate for me if I was unable to speak for myself.					
I know how to get the benefits I am eligible for, such as Social Security, Medicaid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Education and Training Vouchers (ETV).					
I bathe (wash up) daily.					
I brush my teeth daily.					
I know how to get myself away from harmful situations.					
I have a place to go when I feel unsafe.					
I can turn down a sexual advance.					
I know ways to protect myself from sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).					
I know how to prevent getting pregnant or getting someone else pregnant.					
I know where to go to get information on sex or pregnancy.					

Relationships and Communication

Are the following statements like me	No	Mostly No	Somewhat	Mostly Yes	Yes
I can speak up for myself.					
I know how to act in social or professional situations.					
I know how to show respect to people with different beliefs, opinions, and cultures.					
I can describe my racial and ethnic identity.					
I can explain the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity.					
I have friends I like to be with who help me feel valued and worthwhile.					
I am a part of a family and we care about each other.					
I can get in touch with at least one family member when I want to.					
I have friends or family to spend time with on holidays and special occasions.					
I know at least one adult I can depend on when I exit care.					
I know an adult who could be a grandparent, aunt or uncle to my children now or my future children.					
My relationships are free from hitting, slapping, shoving, being made fun of, or name calling.					
I know the signs of an abusive relationship.					
I know what my legal permanency goal is.					
I have information about my family members.					
I think about how my choices impact others.					
I can deal with anger without hurting others or damaging things.					
I show others that I care about them.					

Housing & Money Management

Are the following statements like me	No	Mostly No	Somewhat	Mostly Yes	Yes
I understand how interest rates work on loans or credit purchases.					
I understand the disadvantages of making purchases with my credit card.					
I know the importance of a good credit score.					
I know how to balance my bank account.					
I put money in my savings account when I can.					
I know an adult who would help me if I had a financial emergency.					
I use online banking to keep track of my money.					
I know the advantages and disadvantages of using a check cashing or payday loan store.					
I know how to find safe and affordable housing.					
I can figure out the costs to move to a new place, such as deposits, rents, utilities, and furniture.					
I know how to fill out an apartment rental application.					
I know how to get emergency help to pay for water, electricity, and gas bills.					
I know what can happen if I break my rental lease.					
I can explain why people need renter's or homeowner's insurance.					
I know an adult I could live with for a few days or weeks if I needed to.					
There is at least one adult that I have regular contact with, other than my case manager or other professional, who lives in stable and safe housing.					
I know an adult I can go to for financial advice.					
I plan for the expenses that I must pay each month.					

Are the following statements like me	No	Mostly No	Somewhat	Mostly Yes	Yes
I keep records of the money I am paid and the bills I pay.					
I know what happens in my state if I am caught driving without car insurance or a driver's license.					
I can explain how to get and renew a driver's license or state ID card.					
I can figure out all the costs of car ownership, such as registration, repairs, insurance, and gas.					
I know how to use public transportation to get where I need to go.					

Work and Study Life

Are the following statements like me	No	Mostly No	Somewhat	Mostly Yes	Yes
I know how to develop a resume.					
I know how to fill out a job application.					
I know how to prepare for a job interview.					
I know what the information on a pay stub means.					
I can fill out a W-4 payroll exemption form when I get a job.					
I know what employee benefits are.					
I know what sexual harassment and discrimination are.					
I know the reasons why my personal contacts are important for finding a job.					
I know how to get the documents I need for work, such as my Social Security card and birth certificate.					
I know how and when I can see my child welfare or juvenile justice records.					
I know an adult who will go with me if I need to change schools.					

Are the following statements like me	No	Mostly No	Somewhat	Mostly Yes	Yes
I know how to get help from my school's mental health services.					
I know where I can get help with an income tax form.					
I have an adult in my life who cares about how I am doing at school or work.					
I can take criticism and direction at school or work without losing my temper.					
I know how to prepare for exams and/or presentations.					
I know where I can get tutoring or other help with school work.					
I look over my work for mistakes.					
I get to school or work on time.					
I get my work done and turned in on time.					

Career and Education Planning

Are the following statements like me	No	Mostly No	Somewhat	Mostly Yes	Yes
I know how to find work-related internships.					
I know where to find information about job training.					
I can explain the benefits of doing volunteer work.					
I have recently talked to an adult who works in a job I would like to have.					
I know what type (college, trade school) education I need for the work I want to do.					
I know how to get into the school, training, or job I want after high school.					

Are the following statements like me	No	Mostly No	Somewhat	Mostly Yes	Yes
I know how to find financial aid to help pay for my education or training.					
I have talked about my education plans with an adult who cares about me.					
I know an adult who will help me apply for training or education after high school.					

Looking Forward

Are the following statements like me	No	Mostly No	Somewhat	Mostly Yes	Yes
I believe I can influence how my life will turn out.					
I can describe my vision for myself as a successful adult.					
I have a good relationship with a trusted adult I like and respect.					
I would like to use my experience to help other youth.					
I believe my relationships with others will help me succeed.					
I feel I am ready for the next phase of my life.					
Most days, I am proud of the way I am living my life.					
Most days, I feel I have control of how my life will turn out.					