

County Cumberland
Department of Social Services

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Project Title LINKS Graduation 2017

Category Empowering Clients to Self-Sufficiency
(Please select one)

Project Description and Summary

What did you do?

Describe your program or project. What did you do? What is the history behind the program/project? What did you hope to accomplish? What was your timeline? Your budget? How did you identify your objectives? How well did you use available resources?

Each year, our agency holds a graduation ceremony and reception for youth who are currently in our custody or who have aged out of foster care, and are actively participating in our LINKS Program. LINKS is a program which assists youth with establishing and maintaining connections with family, friends and mentors. The program also assists youth with educational and employment opportunities. In addition to individual assistance and support, LINKS has monthly meetings with

different speakers who address topics like healthy relationships, college admissions, and money management discussions; that help the youth develop skills needed for independence.

When we began holding the annual graduation ceremony, it took place in a conference room at the agency. There were few guests and a light reception. However, our LINKS Program Coordinator, Agency Director and the staff wanted a better way to honor the accomplishments of our graduates. Therefore, we have worked continuously each year to develop the ceremony into a program that is tailored towards the desires of our youth.

The 2017 LINKS graduation ceremony honored 14 of our graduates from nine local high schools. The ceremony was held in a large banquet room at a local church. There were over 100 people in attendance, including County Commissioners/Management, Social Services Board Representatives, City Council Members, DSS leaders/staff members, local Judges, school officials, foster care provider agencies; as well as family and friends of the youth. Each graduate was dressed in their cap and gown, and was given the opportunity to walk across the stage to be honored. Additionally, we had performances from a local high school show choir as entertainment during the ceremony. After the ceremony, the graduates and guests were provided a catered dinner and dessert. We are very appreciative for the Basic LINKS funding that we are allocated from the State throughout the year, which assists with program and administrative costs, and helps fund programs such as this. This year's graduation budget was approximately \$5,000.

This program is unique in that it directly targeted the desires of the youth. Our graduation committee, including school officials, met to discuss feedback received from graduates in previous years and used that information to modify and expand our 2017 graduation to meet the graduates' wants and needs. The feedback we received from past graduates was that while the program was appreciated, it did not focus on each graduate specifically. Each graduate wanted to be recognized in their own way, for their own unique accomplishments. This year, we shifted our focus to each individual graduate instead of the ceremony as a whole. We called the graduates to the stage one at a time. During this time, we announced the accomplishments of our graduates and discussed their

goals and aspirations. This information was obtained directly from each graduate prior to the ceremony. Additionally, during the reception, each graduate was given their own table, decorated in their school colors. The youth were encouraged to invite their own guests to sit at their table. Dignitaries were invited from the community to our graduation ceremony to show the youth that they have support from a variety of resources in the area.

Project Success and Impact

What was the outcome?

Was your program/project a success? What was the impact? How did you measure the impact? How widespread is the impact of your program/project? How were you able to overcome obstacles and challenges? Did your program/project meet your established objectives?

The objective of the 2017 Links Graduation was to develop a program that highlights the accomplishments of these youth. The students attending our LINKS graduation have overcome a lot of adversity. These students have come from unsafe home environments (whether due to abuse, neglect, dependency or abandonment) and have risen above these circumstances to complete their high school education. These students have fought back through all these difficulties and were still able to be successful. Many of them have plans to attend college or join the US Armed Forces. We aspired to hold an event that recognized the hard work and dedication it took to overcome these challenges. We wanted to make each student feel proud of themselves. We measured the success of the event through feedback from our youth and guests. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive. The youth appreciated the individualized attention, and the guests thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to learn more about each graduate.

The impact of this program can be looked at in two ways: how it impacts the youth at the ceremony and how it encourages future graduates. The long-term impact for the graduates is that the students can make lasting connections with dignitaries and resource providers at the ceremony to further their educational or career goals. Additionally, recognition in this manner is beneficial for improving the self-esteem and self-worth of this population who often feel disenfranchised. It is an opportunity for these youths to have a normal childhood experience, which is not always the

case for youth in foster care. For the future graduates, this ceremony gives them something to look forward to and encourages them to keep pushing towards their goals because their efforts are not going unnoticed.

The 2017 Links Graduation Ceremony would not have been possible without the collaboration and support from outside agencies and community partners. The planning team collaborated with local area businesses to obtain decorations, food, and gifts for the graduates. Additionally, we collaborated with our local school system to ensure that representatives from each graduates' school were present and able to congratulate the graduates on their accomplishments. The School System also assisted us by providing the show choir and color guard for the event. We also collaborated with placement agencies, group home staff, and social workers; to obtain the specific information each graduate wanted to share. We also worked with them to coordinate transportation to ensure that all graduates were able to come to the ceremony and stay for the duration of the program. Most importantly, we collaborated with the youth to make this program the experience that they wanted it to be. These collaborations have helped turn our graduation ceremony into a program that the youth look forward to attending.
