

An Employment Model that Works for Youth in Foster Care

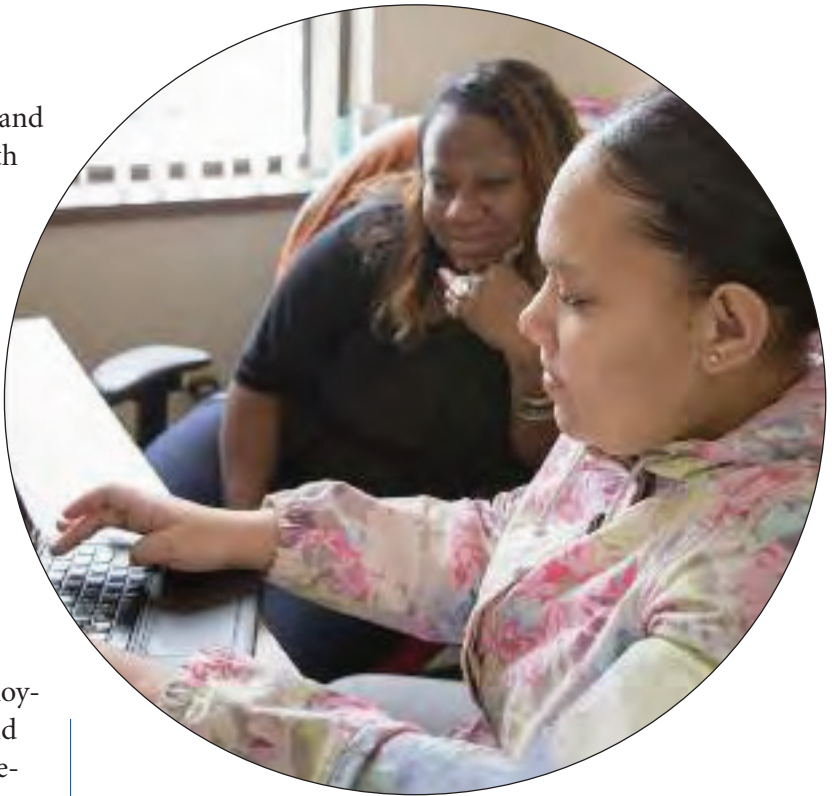
By Kat Keenan and Bernadette Tavares

Nestled in the heart of New England, Rhode Island is only 37 miles wide and 48 miles long, with 400 miles of coastline and a population of roughly one million people. We like to think of ourselves here in the Ocean State as being the biggest little state in the Union. Though Rhode Island is small in size, it is rich in diversity, culture, and language. Our state's mix of urban and rural environments provides unique opportunities and challenges, as well. All of this makes Rhode Island a great microcosm for testing new programs to address social problems affecting populations that are vulnerable.

An increasing body of national data on youth in and who have aged out of foster care show that this population is at greater risk for incarceration, unemployment, low educational attainment, early pregnancy and parenting, poverty, mental health problems, and homelessness. For 20 years, national efforts to help connect youth to the world of work have focused on traditional skill-up employment models that look to plug-and-play youth into an adult system of work. This model has not helped to address the economic insecurities, generational poverty, and dearth of relational competencies that exists for youth impacted by foster care. In fact in Rhode Island, while the youth unemployment rate sits at about 20 percent, it is more than double—at 52 percent—for youth who have experienced foster care.

To tackle this economic disparity, in 2011 Foster Forward and its partners—The Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, The Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training (DLT), The Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF), Rhode Island College School of Social Work, The Workplace Center at Columbia School of Social Work and The Voice (Rhode Island's statewide youth board)—worked together to research, build, test, implement, and evaluate a program called Works Wonders.

Works Wonders is a unique public-private innovation that harnesses the strengths and expertise of each sector



toward the collective goal of improving the lives of those impacted by foster care. Works Wonders doesn't just look to simply place youth in jobs; it works to help youth ages 16-24 connect with a career and build the social-emotional competencies that are necessary for positive, productive relationships.

An independent evaluation showed that unlike mainstream youth employment programs, Works Wonders is proven to deliver results for all youth in care, not just those who meet minimum educational requirements. Works Wonders has engaged some of our state's most disconnected youth—those not in school and not working—and have helped them to build the skills and confidence needed to get on a path to gain and maintain financially empowering employment.

Works Wonders is helping youth like 21-year-old London (pictured above with her employment coach Bernadette Tavares) to get back on her feet. In foster care for five years, London was reunified with her family at

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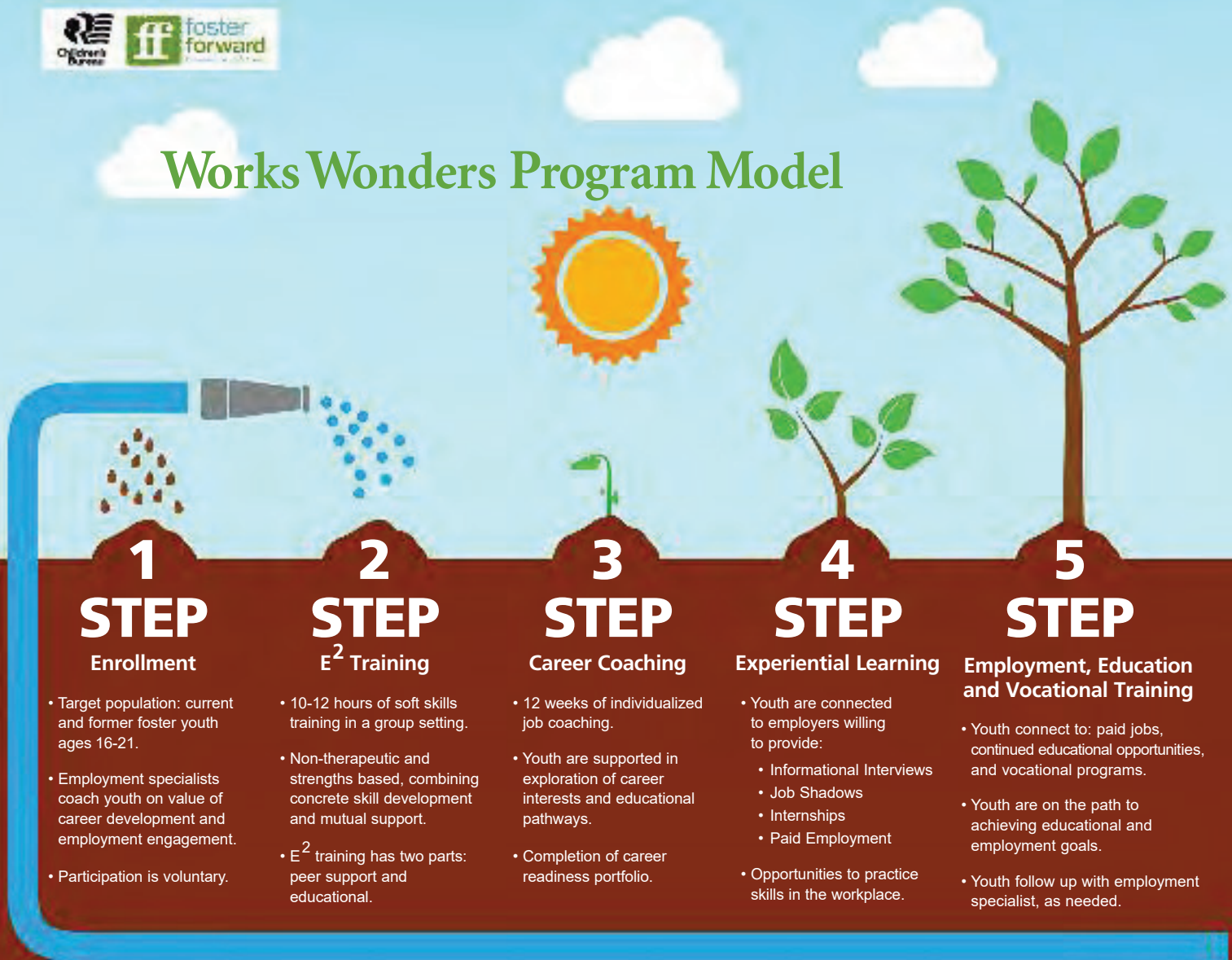
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age 16. When she turned 18 years old, things took a turn, and she decided to go to Job Corps to build her skills in welding. At age 21, she found herself homeless and unemployed and came to Works Wonders through Foster Forward's rapid rehousing program for former youth in care. She is now stably housed and working to secure a job in manufacturing, using her existing welding skills and newfound relational skills from Works Wonders.

The five-step Works Wonders model puts youth in the driver's seat for the entire process:

STEP 1: Youth who are referred are provided some early coaching on the value of exploring and engaging in career development and employment. We don't just plug youth into to minimum wage jobs; we help them explore what it is they want to do when they grow up.

STEP 2: Youth then take part in an evidence-supported skills training called E2 (Employment and Empowerment) for 10-12 hours, in which they learn and safely test applying those ever-important soft skills. The E2 Training is non-therapeutic, strengths-



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based, and combines concrete skill development with mutual support.

STEP 3: Following their training, youth meet one-on-one with a career coach for a minimum of 12 weeks to help them build their portfolios, practice their skills, identify and remove barriers to employment/education, and explore career/educational pathways. This coaching isn't about checking off boxes, but about providing each youth with the tools, support, and encouragement they need to effectively engage with the world of work.

STEP 4: Works Wonders includes paid experiential learning opportunities with employer partners who understand that our youth may need more time and support. Youth are connected to informational interviews, job shadows, internships, and even paid employment. Youth are provided as many of these opportunities as they need in order to feel prepared and ready to move forward with their educational or career goals.

STEP 5: Youth are connected to paid jobs, continuing educational opportunities, and vocational programs. By this point, youth are on their way to achieving their goals, but can follow up with their career coach at any time for additional support.

The lessons learned from Works Wonders are helping to lead the way for improving the employment outcomes for youth currently and formerly involved with the child welfare system. Works Wonders blends funding across multiple public and private streams and was built with replication in mind. Replication toolkits, manuals, and guides are available, as well as technical assistance to start Works Wonders in other jurisdictions.

For more information on Works Wonders or how to launch this initiative in your state, visit www.fosterforward.net/workswonders. ■

Kat Keenan is the Deputy Director of Foster Forward and served as the Project Director for Works Wonders during the research phase. Ms. Keenan has a master's degree in public policy and a background in data, evaluation, program development, and operations. She specializes in child welfare, youth development, and income support programs.

Bernadette Tavares is the current Works Wonders Program Coordinator. She has provided direct service to youth in mentoring, employment coaching, and substance use treatment. Ms. Tavares is responsible for the day-to-day operations of Works Wonders and is responsible for the development of employer and funding partners. Ms. Tavares has a bachelor's degree and extensive experience working with youth who are at risk.



Members



Is there a special child in your life that you'd like to see featured on the cover of CWLA's *Children's Voice* magazine? If so, here's your chance to spotlight the one you love! Submit a high-resolution photo, along with the name(s) of the subject and, if applicable, the name of the organization/agency you represent, and a photo credit to: msaulsbury@cwla.org.

Special note: The cover of *Children's Voice* features Zach and Megan Seales and their firstborn, Rhett. Zach is an account executive at Modern Litho in Jefferson City, Missouri. Modern Litho is the print vendor for this issue of *Children's Voice*.

