

---

# A TRANSITIONAL HOUSING PROGRAM FOR OLDER FOSTER YOUTH: HOW DO YOUTH FARE AFTER EXITING?



## A Study of the Outcomes of Side by Side's Real Alternatives Program **Executive Summary**



FORMERLY SUNNY HILLS SERVICES/BAYC

[SidebySideYouth.org](https://SidebySideYouth.org)

Generously funded by  
the Albert and Elaine Borchard Foundation

## About Real Alternatives

For many youth aging out of the foster care system, the transition to adulthood and independence is a struggle, especially in comparison to their peers who have grown up in long-lasting, consistent family settings. Most foster youth have histories of trauma and abandonment and have missed the developmental support afforded to children raised in stable homes.

Established in 2003 as the first transitional housing program in Alameda County for youth in foster care, Side by Side's Real Alternatives program helps prepare participating youth to live independently. Real Alternatives provides free or subsidized rent in scattered-site housing to 18-24 year olds and on-site supervision in one fourplex apartment building for 16-17 year olds. In 2010, after California's Assembly Bill 12 was enacted to extend foster care from age 18 to 21, Real Alternatives was the first program in the state of California to serve this new population of older, transition-age dependent youth.

Of course, housing is only one of many challenges facing transition-age foster youth. Real Alternatives provides additional services that are individualized based on each young person's unique strengths, challenges, aspirations, and needs, including:

- Clinical case management and comprehensive mental and behavioral health services;
- Extensive educational support for completion of a high school diploma or GED and possible preparation for post-secondary education;
- Job-skill training, career development workshops, and internships;
- Life-skills mentoring and training that includes budgeting, banking, and bill paying; shopping and cooking; and cultivating relationships with roommates, family, neighbors, and landlords.

Participants receive stipends each month that they budget for food, transportation, clothing, and other miscellaneous items. Real Alternatives participants must go to school regularly and/or work or volunteer at least ten hours per week and be present at weekly community meetings and roommate mediations. Crisis and emergency support is available to the youth 24 hours per day, seven days per week.

The aim of the program is to reduce homelessness and involvement in the criminal justice system and to increase achievement in education, employment, and overall independent living skills.



## Five-Year Longitudinal Study

In 2013, Side by Side examined the efficacy of Real Alternatives with a five-year longitudinal study, funded by the Albert and Elaine Borchard Foundation. The study quantified the impact of Real Alternatives' provision of supported housing and wraparound services to foster, former foster, and probation youth ages 16-24 in Hayward, California. It is one of only three known studies of its kind.

Modeled on the seminal Midwest Study<sup>1</sup> of former foster youth, the Real Alternatives study tracked outcomes for housing security/homelessness, educational attainment, employment and wages, parenting, sexual exploitation, and incarceration. Fifty-seven out of 180 former clients who left the program between 2007 and 2016 were surveyed over five years (2013-2018).

### Results

Results of the study were, for the most part, positive when compared to the Midwest Study, particularly in employment; where former Real Alternatives clients were not only employed at a significantly higher rate, they earned a living wage relevant to cost of living in Alameda County. Real Alternatives clients have high rates of current stable housing which is important as some of the youth had exited the program as long as eight years earlier. Additionally, their likelihood of becoming a parent was half what the Midwest study population demonstrated and 92% had a high school diploma or higher, which is much higher than all studies of former foster youth reviewed by the Midwest Study.

Examined Outcome	Real Alternatives	Midwest Study
Stable housing	98%	96%
High School degree or GED	67%	60%
Enrolled/Obtained college degree	33%	40%
Employed	81%	46%
Average wages	\$16.92	\$10.80
Had become a parent	33%	63%
Incarcerated	26%	21%

While the study had some limitations, including the non-random and relatively small sample size, it provides critical data for the field in general and important and relevant data that reflects Real Alternatives' successes and highlights areas for growth and improvement.

### Key Learnings

Based on the study's findings, Real Alternatives has since partnered with two local nonprofits to further bolster offerings in the area of educational achievement and job readiness and better support clients' future aspirations.

Most significantly, the study demonstrates the critical role of supportive transitional housing and related services in helping former foster youth grow beyond their difficult pasts to become stable, productive adults.

In the absence of an adequate supply of affordable, quality housing units – especially in expensive places like the San Francisco Bay Area – youth can experience difficulty with transitioning successfully to adulthood. For foster and former foster youth, those struggles are all the more acute. Side by Side's Real Alternatives transitional housing program, in combination with offered wraparound services, gives participating youth a clear advantage in making their way in the world.

---

<sup>1</sup> Courtney, M.E., Dworsky, A., Brown, A., Cary, C., Love, K., & Vorhies, V. (2011). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 26*. Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.

## REGIONAL OFFICES

---

### **Marin County (headquarters)**

Phone: 415-457-3200

Hours: M-F 8:30am – 5:00pm

300 Sunny Hills Drive, Bldg. #5  
San Anselmo, CA 94960

### **Alameda County**

Phone: 510-727-9401

Hours: M-F 8:30am – 5:00pm

22245 Main St, Ste 200  
Hayward, CA 94541

### **Sonoma and Napa Counties**

Phone: 707-569-0877

Hours: M-F 8:30am – 5:00pm

1360 N. Dutton, Ste 100  
Santa Rosa, CA 95401

