



Roots & Wings

Strategies utilized by an AOI National Awards Program winner to support youth aging out of foster care on all four key fronts: education, employment, housing, and relationships

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About the AOI Holistic Services Award

The Aging Out Institute (AOI) National Awards Program recognizes organizations for the work that they are doing to help foster youth age out of foster care and into independence successfully. Relationship building, higher education, independent housing, and steady employment are key factors that contribute to a young person's success transitioning out of care. However, they also can be the key challenges that hinder youth from success.

In an effort to overcome these challenges, AOI celebrates and shares the programs and strategies that are effective in helping foster youth along the way to adulthood. This year, the AOI Holistic Services Award has been given to Roots & Wings for their work in all four of the key areas of relationship building, education, housing, and employment.





About Roots & Wings New Jersey

Program Overview

Founded in 1999, Roots & Wings' mission is to provide young adults who age out of the New Jersey foster care system with safe housing and educational support via case management, counseling, and life skills training. Their primary goal is to empower motivated young people toward self-sufficiency. Their innovative, holistic programs and services are aimed at remediating the deficiencies in education and socialization that result from the unstable and often abusive childhoods experienced by foster youth.

Youth leave Roots & Wings having broken the cycle of poverty, abuse, and despair that research shows often continues generation after generation without intensive outside intervention.

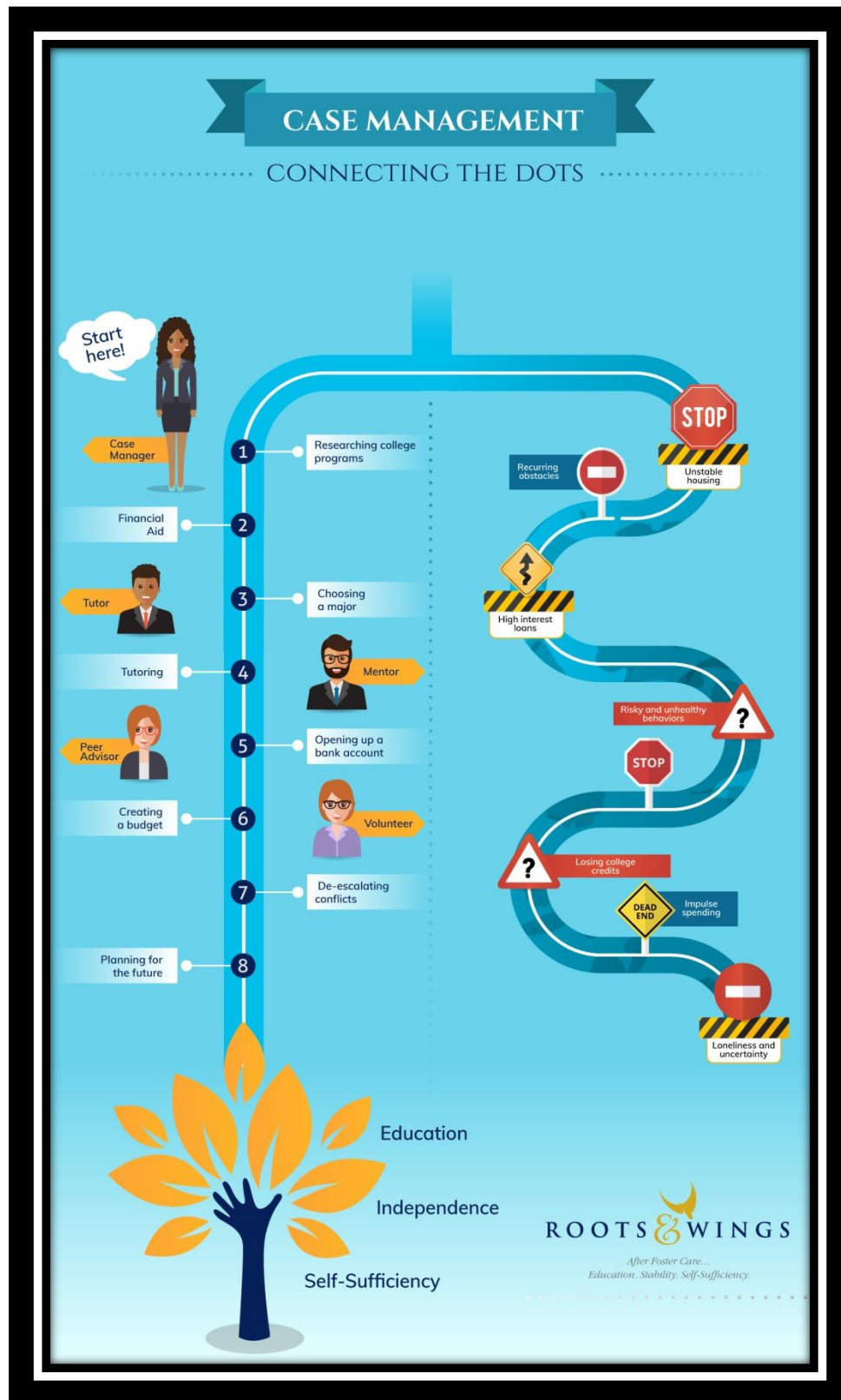
On the next page is an infographic showing the model that Roots & Wings uses to help guide young people through the variety of services and skills needed to complete the program and move onto a life of independence.

Roots & Wings has two direct service programs:

- 1) a residential program
- 2) an outreach case management program

The goal of both programs is to provide the opportunities and support these young people need to successfully transition from foster care to independent adulthood.

These programs emphasize life skills training, medical and dental needs, legal issues, financial literacy, financial independence, the value of a solid education as the gateway to meaningful job opportunities.



Program Structure & Roles

The goal of the RISE Program is to meet any immediate needs clients have regarding housing, food and medical care, while working with them on a longer-term basis to create and execute a plan for becoming self-sufficient, contributing members of the community.

Each residential client lives in fully furnished apartments that they share with other Roots & Wings clients. In addition, these young people benefit from the expertise and guidance of a team of adults who work with them that is comprised of a Case Manager, a Counselor, and a trained volunteer Mentor.

The Case Manager helps clients to establish goals and implement strategies to achieve them. The Counselor provides clinical support addressing emotional, behavioral, and mental health issues. The volunteer Mentor helps to fill the void left from lacking a warm and kind family by providing guidance, companionship, and unconditional support while the youth works to gain the confidence, skills, and education needed to transition to adult independence.

Residential clients meet with Roots & Wings professional staff a minimum of once per week, with frequent email and text check-ins, and staff is on call 24/7 for any emergencies. This team of advocates, overseen by the Program Director, addresses the specific needs of each individual client, offering access to educational support and career guidance, employment readiness skills, life skills training, resume writing, interviewing techniques, interpersonal skills, money and credit management, mental health counseling, and emergency crisis intervention.

The case management, individualized goal setting, close supervision, and advocacy, prepares each young adult for daily living, educational achievement, and career success.

Youth Participation Requirements:

Roots & Wings seeks to serve young adults ages 18-24 who have aged out of the foster care system, lack a permanent family connection or stable home placement and would otherwise be homeless, and are motivated to participate in Roots & Wings' Residential Independence Self-Sufficiency and Education (RISE) program.

RISE residential participants must be able to live independently, meaning they have no parenting responsibilities, no active chemical dependence, no history of violent crime, and are willing to live at one of Roots & Wings' residential apartments (which are all within one hour of Roots & Wings' headquarters in Denville, New Jersey).

Roots & Wings also operates the Facilitating Life-skills for Youth Program (FLY) that provides support and guidance for young adults who are transitioning into adulthood. Participants in the FLY program work one-on-one with a coach to achieve a personalized plan for independence with a focus on four main areas: career, education, financial management, and emotional wellness. In addition, participants are invited to meet with a mentor, attend holiday parties, celebrate milestones like graduation, and attend monthly workshops. The FLY program is available to young adults aged 18-24 who are currently residing in safe and stable housing and who have had contact with DCP&P at some point in their life.

Staffing

Title	Number of Positions	Details about Position
Executive Director	1	Oversees all programs, ensures the agency is staying true to the mission, and works with the board of directors.
Program Director	1	Oversees both the RISE and FLY programs.
Operations Manager	1	Oversees all the logistics requirements of the program and administration.
Development Associate/ Executive Assistant	1	Serves as the assistant to Executive Director and is responsible for helping develop the programs.
Part Time Volunteer Manager	1	Manages the volunteer database and over 220 volunteers of the agency while also recruiting new volunteers.
FLY Program Manager	1	Oversees all aspects of the FLY program, its development and its participants.
Case Manager	2	Provides case management to FLY and RISE clients.
Volunteers	220	Fills the roles of volunteer Mentors, plans fundraisers, organizes the food pantry, and handles other duties as needed.

Staff Training/Preparation

When hiring new staff, Roots & Wings looks for people who are trauma certified and who have experience working with aged out foster youth. All staff undergoes a background check and participates in any training that will enhance their ability to best serve this population. Although there are no required trainings for new employees of Roots & Wings, staff typically attends training sessions throughout the year through Rutgers School of Social Work's Continuing Education Program and investments in outside trainers. For example, the team recently completed a 6 hour "Nurtured Heart" training for the entire staff, from executive assistant to Board Members, so that all members of the team are interacting with all clients in a strength-based, cohesive, and consistent manner.

The Student Experience

Knowledge/Skills

Throughout the program, Roots & Wings helps youth build the following non-tangible skills that will help them succeed in life:

Level of Practice:

Active Learning: 80%

Passive Learning: 20%

Goal Setting: Throughout the RISE program, the clients actively participate in goal setting. Clients work with their Case Manager to set goals as soon as they enter into the program. Additionally, clients work with their Case Manager every quarter to review their progress on achieving their goals, discuss barriers or challenges they encountered, and to set new goals for the next quarter.

Decision Making: Clients are provided with many types of resources and support, which they then utilize when making decisions. Clients are also able to call their Case Manager or Mentor if they need help making any decisions.



Characteristics/Attitudes

Ro Roots & Wings also helps youth build character and positive attitudes that will help them succeed in life. Below are a few examples:

Creativity: Clients are encouraged to be creative and think big when determining what educational or career path is the best fit.

Self-Reliance: While Roots & Wings helps clients in any way needed with achieving their goals, Roots & Wings also places an emphasis on providing clients with the tools and skills they need so that they can be self-sufficient.

Desire for Learning: Roots & Wings helps clients close their education gaps and determine what educational path is the best choice, whether it's college or a vocational school. Once clients understand all of the opportunities that arise from advancing their education, clients are eager to continue learning.

Integrity: Clients are held accountable to fully participate in the expectations of the programs, including a weekly case management meeting, a weekly counseling session, time with their volunteer mentor, the monthly life skills seminar, going to school full-time, and working part-time. This helps instill in the clients the importance of following through with commitments they make in life.

Confidence: Roots & Wings helps clients build their confidence in their educational abilities by providing tutors, connecting clients with resource centers, and supporting and encouraging them along their educational journey. The youth are prepared for employment via resume building and interview preparation so that when they apply for and begin new jobs, they feel fully prepared and capable.

Optimism: Through relationship building, skill building, education, and the guidance and support provided through the program, clients become optimistic about their future and their ability to become and remain self-sufficient. As they advance in their education and get closer to their employment goals, they become increasingly more optimistic and confident in their ability to succeed.

Patience: Clients learn that they must be patient and persistent in order to achieve their educational and career goals. Once a client earns their high school diploma or GED, they then begin working towards their next educational goal. Each client's team of advocates continues to encourage the client to stay focused and patient.

Perseverance: Aged out foster youth who come to Roots & Wings have already had to persevere through many obstacles. The RISE program helps to reinforce in clients the importance of staying determined and focused on achieving their goals.

Relationship Building: The RISE program works on building trusting, supportive relationships between clients and adults from the day they enter into the program. RISE clients work weekly with their Case Manager, Counselor, and Mentor, all of whom provide support and guidance to the client.

Marketing

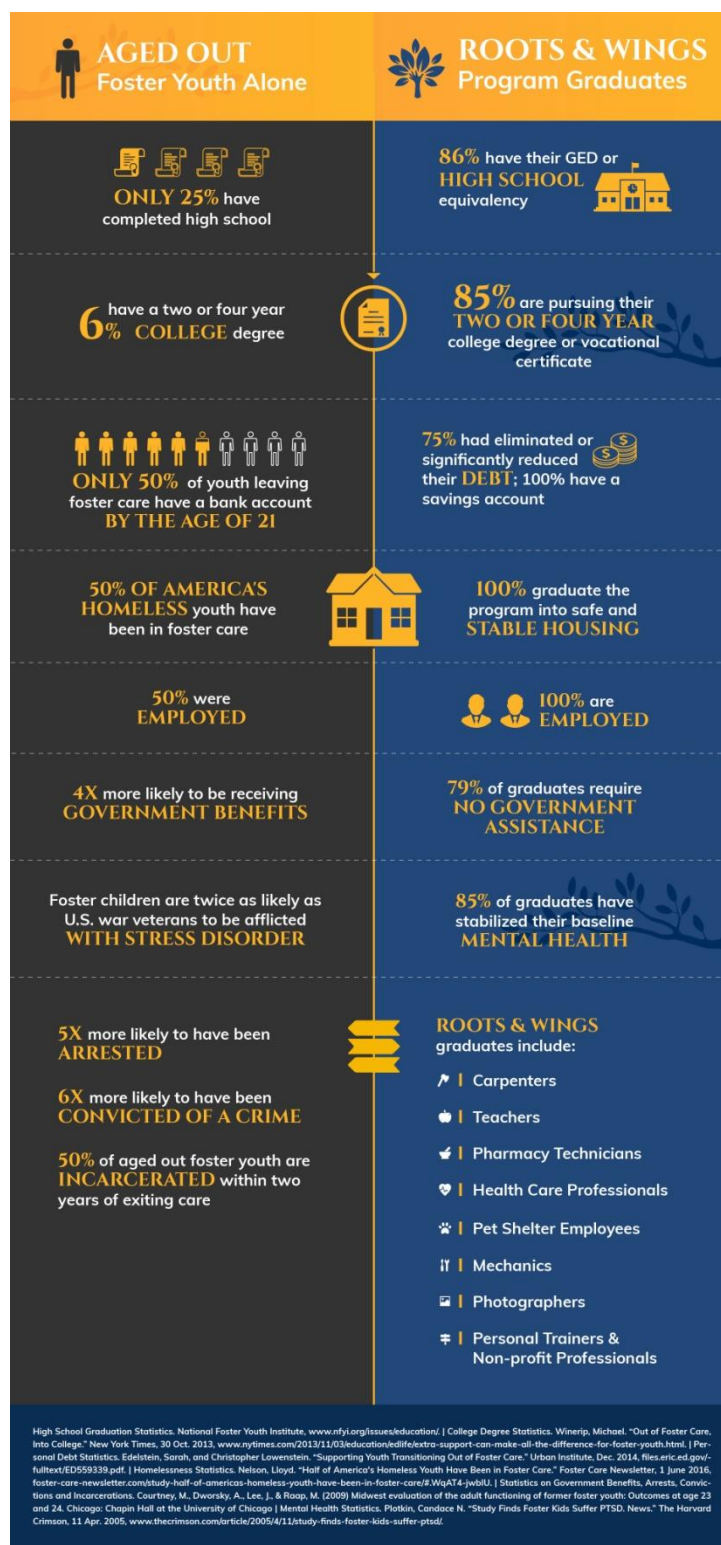
Roots & Wings markets their services through their website, emails, press releases, social media, print campaigns, and public speaking engagements. They also have their marketing materials placed at agencies and locations in the community where aged out foster youth receive services and where foster caregivers go for resources. Additionally, Roots & Wings has developed a spreadsheet that plots out when all major marketing campaigns should take place.

Measures of Youth Success

During Program

Upon entry into the RISE Program, each young adult is administered a Casey Life Skills assessment on nine knowledge and skill domains:

- Communication
- Daily living
- Work and study skills
- Home life
- Self-care
- Social relationships
- Housing and money management
- Career planning
- Work life



The assessment results serve as the basis for individualized goal plans for each client. Progress toward those goals is then measured through a variety of metrics, including additional CLS assessments, Case Manager notes, and direct client observation from the Counselor, Case Manager, Mentor and other adults affiliated with the client.

In addition, the Case Manager or Program Director visit and engage in direct observation of the client and their living environment on a weekly basis. The Program Director also interacts with the landlords to ensure that all needs are being met and that the clients are in compliance with both their apartment lease and their residential contract with Roots & Wings.

After Program

Roots & Wings has a Post-Residential Outreach Case Management Program that involves a follow-up every month for 18 months via phone, text, email, or in-person meetings to make sure the clients are still on track with their self-sufficiency goals. After that point, Roots & Wings conducts quarterly surveys and hosts in-person alumni events, including a summer barbecue and Holiday Party, at which time they can check in with their former clients on how they are faring.

To the right are some statistics reflecting the impact that the Roots & Wings has had on youth who successfully completed their program.

Continual Program Improvement

Roots & Wings continually evaluates the program and how it can best meet the needs of the clients. The program is currently developing an in-house remedial education program to address and intervene on significant education gaps that Roots & Wings is seeing in their clients.

Another in-progress development is a Pre-RISE Program for clients who are on the waitlist and clients who have just recently entered the program. The purpose of this program is to allow Roots & Wings to get to know the young adults and to better understand their current needs before they fully engage in the program and prior to clients setting long term goals. This program is comprised of a multi-part workshop on life-skills, education, and goal setting. This program was created because it takes the agency a long time to get through their waitlist and they don't want these young people to lose interest while they are waiting.

Roots & Wings also stocks multiple food and supplies pantries; one at the agency's main office in Denville, and two in buildings where clients live, as a way to better meet the needs of their clients. Clients are provided travel stipends and can visit the pantry and get free food and supply items whenever they need. This pantry continues to grow and offer more items.

Challenges

Since Roots & Wings is privately funded each year, fundraising has to bring in more than \$1million in order to continue serving aged out foster youth. Roots & Wings works with over 220 volunteers, including board members and advisory board members, to raise sufficient funds so that they can continue providing the highest level of client services.

Lessons Learned

Roots & Wings has learned to listen to the clients and give them opportunities and a way to become active – rather than passive – participants in the program. Additionally, they have also learned to empower the clients by giving them opportunities to volunteer, help others, and tell their story. Finally, Roots & Wings has learned how important it is to work with each client one-on-one and individually tailor the program supports to what each client needs rather than take a “one size fits all” approach.



L-R: Emily Marchese, Executive Director; Meagan Jensen, Operations Manager; Stella Cook, Program Director; Rebecca Hess, RISE Case Manager

Aging Out Institute would like to thank the following people for their support of the 2018 AOI National Awards Program:

We also want to thank the individuals who donated toward the fundraiser that enabled us to launch our awards program in 2018:

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SammSmeltzer	Vanessa Fernandez	Lynne Jasames
Johnson Lightfoote	Tom Berkshire	Betty Colonomos
Laura Sterner	Sarah Wilson	Anonymous
Beth Gliksmann		

THANK YOU!

And a special thank you to all the organization representatives who took the time to fill out an award application and let us know about the great work they are doing!



The judges who devoted a significant amount of time and effort to help design the awards program process and tools, review the applications, and helped to make the difficult decision about which organization should receive the Holistic Services award this year:

Dr. Linda Schmidt

Assistant Professor
Western Michigan University School of Social Work

Steve Walsh

Director of the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP)
California State University, Bakersfield

Chris Chmielewski

Former foster youth
Owner/Editor/Creator of *Foster Focus Magazine*

Dr. Johanna Greeson

Assistant Professor
University of PA School of Social Policy & Practice

Susan Punnett

Executive Director
Family & Youth Initiative

Dr. John DeGarmo

Expert and Consultant on Foster Care
Founder of The Foster Care Institute
Founder of Never Too Late

Courtney Dowling

Director of Residential Services
Wichita Campus at ACH Child and Family Services



MISSION: AOI promotes resources and strategies that help youth age out of foster care and into adulthood successfully.

VISION: To improve national outcomes for youth aging out of care by identifying, sharing and encouraging the widespread use of effective strategies for helping foster youth transition to adulthood.

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