



Sunrise Children's Services

VentureON Program

Strategies utilized by an AOI National Awards Program winner to help youth prepare for and acquire steady employment after aging out of foster care

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About the AOI Employment 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. Employment is a key success factor for all youth as they begin to live independently, but foster youth struggle more gaining employment experience and finding reliable, sustaining employment than do their non-fostered peers. In an effort to impact the poor employment statistics of foster youth, AOI celebrates and shares the strategies that are effective in helping youth set and reach employment goals. This year, the AOI Employment Award has been given to Sunrise Children's Services' VentureON program.





About Sunrise Children's Services VentureON Program

Program Overview

Sunrise Children's Services (Sunrise) is Kentucky's leader in comprehensive care to troubled families and neglected children. Started in 1869 for children orphaned by the Civil War, Sunrise today provides therapeutic residential treatment, foster care, family services, and counseling. They also administer their VentureON program for young adults age 18-24 who have aged out of state care.

VentureON is an innovative and life-changing program and represents the next generation of Sunrise's Independent Living program. It is the first comprehensive effort in the Commonwealth of Kentucky, bringing private businesses and industry, faith-based organizations, and the commonwealth together to create an environment of success for some of the most forgotten youth in the state.

VentureON Focuses on:

- Life plan development
- Education
- Employment
- Housing
- Life skills training
 - How to get a job and keep it
 - Interpersonal skills
 - Financial literacy
 - How to access and use public transportation



Program Structure & Roles

Life Plan Development

Each participant is assigned a Care Plan Team that consists of a state guardian, therapist, and an independent living specialist. These individuals become mentors and remain actively involved in the youth's activities, providing guidance in personal, emotional, and spiritual areas, as well as assisting with education and work-related needs. Other experts are included as needed on a case-by-case basis. Quarterly team meetings ensure progress, identify issues, and solve problems.

Education

Based on life plan development needs and goals, Sunrise connects the participant to an appropriate trade/technical school or college and ensures his or her successful admission. Sunrise guarantees that living expenses are fully covered through the VentureON budget. In addition, the commonwealth of Kentucky provides a tuition waiver for the cost of tuition and books.

Employment

Each participant not enrolled in technical school or college must seek meaningful employment so a business mentor is added to the participant's resources. Corporate partnerships have been formed with companies including Kroger, Texas Roadhouse, and UPS as part of the VentureON program.

From pre-employment workshops to on-the-job training and coaching, the corporate partners are dedicated to ensuring the success of the young adults in the program. These partnerships enable the youth to gain essential workforce skills, which include interview skills, resume writing, and work etiquette.

Housing

Sunrise secures apartments and fully furnishes them with help from corporate partners and the local resale store. A monthly stipend covers food, clothing, household expenses, and other basic necessities for youth as they experience living on their own for the first time.

Youth Participation Requirements:

Any youth aging out of state care is eligible to participate.

VentureON youth are typically referred through the Department of Community Based Services (DCBS), and the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services.

Many of the youth have been participants in the foster care and residential programs and then make a natural progression to VentureON. Others have self-referred through their own DCBS caseworkers.

Life Skills Training

The Care Plan Team works regularly with the youth to navigate the world of independent living and provide an environment with 24/7 supports. Weekly peer support groups provide additional support, and corporate partners help teach the youth critical interpersonal skills. Life skills classes include:

- Tax preparation and completion
- Housing options (information and resources)
- Employment (job seeking skills and resume development)
- Cooking on a budget
- Basics of etiquette
- How to spend and budget wisely
- Community skills (giving back through volunteering)
- Health (drugs and alcohol, scheduling medical appointments, and insurance)
- Legal awareness skills
- Interpersonal skills (managing stress, solving conflict, and coping skills)

The VentureON Model

Below is a model that captures the various areas of support that VentureON provides to youth:



Staffing

Title	Number of Positions	Details about Position
Independent Living Specialists	4	The specialists work with the youth on life plan development that includes education, employment, housing, and life skills training.
Therapists	3	Therapists meet with the young adults 3-4 times per month. Therapists administer the ACEs test at the beginning of treatment. Evaluation and success are determined by the re-administration of the test at the end of the youth's treatment.
Program Directors	3	Directors oversee the program while supervising specialists and therapists.
VentureON Data Coordinator	1	Data is collected and collated to track the student's progress and the success rate of the program.
Accounting Personnel	1	The accounting team handles the program's bookkeeping, invoicing, and account payables.
Grant Writer	1	The writer composes grant applications and works on additional fundraising initiatives.
Marketing Director	1	The marketing director handles promoting the program, future development plans, and gaining publicity about its success.
VentureON Administrative Assistant	1	The assistant helps with phone calls, meeting planning, correspondence, and other miscellaneous tasks.

Partnerships

VentureON benefits from partnerships across the commonwealth:

Kroger and Texas Roadhouse both give the young adults job readiness, business skill building, resume writing, interview training, and job opportunities. Texas Roadhouse has supplied nine completely furnished kitchens for VentureON apartments.

DCBS is a valued partner and has cited VentureON as the example of successful work and empowerment for young adults.

In addition, Sunrise works hand in hand with the Commonwealth of Kentucky, associations, and churches, as well as community resources, including Life Skills, Housing Authority, and FaceIT Initiative to provide true wrap-around care and support.

Staff Training/Preparation

All VentureON therapists are masters-level and clinically licensed through the commonwealth of Kentucky. All independent living staff members have a bachelor's degree in a related field, along with a background in foster care and residential services to youth. Therapists are trained in Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, an evidence-based treatment that provides the highest level of care and recovery.

All staff completes an agency New Employment Orientation (NEO) program. They are regularly reviewed for competence and success. Outside learning opportunities are sought for all staff around any identified needs. Job shadowing and one-on-one training by supervisors are the norm.



Individual and group therapy provides the young adults with critical healing. Therapists are all trained in Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavior Therapy (TF-CBT), an evidence-based practice that provides the most successful recovery, as well as the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) test that informs the therapeutic process.

Research Foundation

Below is listed the research that helped establish the structure and roles found in the VentureON program.

1. *Aging out of Foster Care in America - Annie E. Casey Foundation, Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, (2013, 2017)*

The research provides a clear picture of the plight of youth aging out of foster care without ongoing support. The research points to the need to advance the child welfare field's understanding of neuroscience and brain research to encourage implementation of more effective programs and policies. Dale Suttles, president and Kenneth Williams, Vice President of Community Based Services meet regularly with the state's lawmakers and DCBS officials to further this need.

2. *Trauma Informed Care – Samhsa.gov, 2015*

This research takes into consideration the significant role trauma plays in the young adult's life. This information is then used to develop treatment options to address the young adult's behavioral and emotional needs.

3. *Substance Abuse Treatment for Persons with Child Abuse and Neglect Issues - Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, (2000)*

Research and clinical evidence indicates that physical, sexual, and emotional abuse during childhood can increase a person's risk of developing substance abuse disorders.

4. *Adverse Childhood Experiences – Looking at How ACES Affects our Lives and Society - Vetoviolence.cdc.gov, 2016*

This landmark Kaiser ACE Study gave the public health field insight into how powerfully our experiences in childhood can influence our health as adults.

5. *Casey Life Skills – www.casey.org*

This research is referenced to assess the behavior and competencies youth need to achieve their long-term goals. The assessment includes maintaining healthy relationships, work and study habits, planning and goal setting, using community resources, daily living activities, budgeting and paying bills, and computer literacy, while facilitating permanent connections to caring adults. The VentureON program administers the assessment at the beginning of the young adult's enrollment with VentureON, and again upon completion.

The Student Experience

Knowledge/Skills

VentureON offers many opportunities for youth to gain knowledge and build skills. Below are several examples:

Goal Setting: Through the Independent Living Classes, goals for each of the areas taught are easily transferred into daily living. The young adults' Care Plan Team works with him or her to set goals and reach them.

Handling Failure: Although the program works daily to ensure success, there are opportunities to learn from failure. When that happens, the therapist and independent living specialist work to review decision-making and goal-setting to get them back on track for success.

Learning Balance:

Active Learning = 80%

Passive Learning = 20%

Leadership Skills: The young adults are given numerous and consistent opportunities to be leaders in their communities. This is seen in their advancement with their places of employment, their participation on community boards, and their speaking engagements to professionals. Young adults who are employed are consistently recognized as leaders in the workplace.

Problem Solving & Decision Making: The Independent Living classes described above equip each young adult with the knowledge to make the appropriate decisions in life that ensures success. A quarterly treatment plan process is scheduled to review specific objectives and evaluations are put in place to provide them with a plan to succeed.

Self-Control: Program participants are just like others their age who need to be encouraged and taught self-control. Recognition of the need to improve self-control through role-playing in group therapy, and discussions during life skills training all combines to provide essential tools that the young adult can use to improve this trait.

Characteristics/Attitudes

Along with knowledge and skills, the activities that students engage in as part of the VentureON program helps to build personal character and positive attitudes. Below are a few examples:

Confidence: Independent Living skills and the classes described above fosters confidence in their daily lives. Mentors for each young adult contribute to his or her confidence as they learn and are guided by an adult who truly cares about them. A mental health component is provided to support each youth, as well.

Desire for Learning: All the young adults are involved in higher education or skill training classes that promote learning. Individual learning objectives for each youth are built to continue to instill a life-long love of learning. The young adults learn to be successful students whether they're in college, technical school, life skills classes, or learning about their new job.

Empathy: Independent living skills are built into calendar opportunities for VentureON participants to give back to the community in various ways. They are allowed to select different options and how they want to support various organizations. As an example, one group chose to work with a local homeless shelter for women and children. Their chosen action was to serve behind the lines where they were allowed to use their creativity to design and organize the stock room.

Goal Orientation: Every VentureON youth is continuously encouraged to identify and work to build core values designed to assist them in identifying life goals that push them to independence. The goal is to ensure that every young adult moves to self-actualization and views themselves not as a victim but as a victor.

Optimism: Optimism is a key characteristic for success, and opportunities for instilling optimism is built into many program interactions. Creating a path to successful adulthood fosters feeling optimistic about life getting better

Patience: Patience is a learned trait, and one that can benefit each young adult. Teaching patience – like teaching optimism - is a process of modeling, explaining, encouraging, and coaching our young adults as they build their new lives.

Perseverance: The program applauds the young people daily for having the perseverance to continue to look toward the future. So many times their will to persevere has been the one thing that has kept them holding on. The program takes that determination and encourages youth to apply it to their new lives and hopes as they find their own life path.

Relationship Building: Regular group classes, volunteering with other VentureON young adults, and therapy groups all serve to foster relationships among participants. The young adult's mentors build a lasting relationship that provides the framework for future relationships. In addition, employment relationship building is a vital part of VentureON's success. The staff works with employers and young people to learn communication and successful techniques to help the young adult understand the relationship skills needed to gain employment and remain employed.

Resilience: Overcoming a life of tragedy, perhaps multiple foster homes, being bullied in school, and a myriad other obstacles has made these young adults naturally resilient. VentureON enforces this most worthy trait in individual and group therapy and skill-building classes.

Self-Awareness: When a youth has spent most of their life in foster care, there is no awareness of self. Building self-awareness through therapy, mirroring value in every interaction slowly builds self-awareness, and self worth.

Self-Reliance: When a young adult comes to the program after leaving state care, they've never had to make their own decisions, never had any independence, and most often had no input into their own lives. In the VentureON Program, they learn the benefits that a life of good choices and independence can bring.

Willpower: Learning to spend or save money through budgeting, being responsible at a job, and doing homework are all learning opportunities for willpower. The program's life skills classes include a component that reinforces the need for this characteristic – and the rewards that come as a result of having it.



Funding

Funder	Annual Amount	Purpose
Carson-Myre Foundation	\$75,000	General program support
Eckstein Foundation	\$35,000	General program support
Ticket to Dream Foundation	\$20,000	General program support
Texas Roadhouse	\$10,000	Kitchen and apartment set up for new clients
TJX Foundation	\$10,000	General program support
Aegon-Transamerica	\$5000	Technology support
Kentucky Foundation of Business and Professional Women	\$2500	General program support

Marketing

VentureON is marketed on its website and through Kentucky's regionally based Independent Living coordinators and Department of Community Based Services coordinators. Once a year, all VentureON youth are active participants in a weekend event designed specifically for those who have or will be aging out. Sunrise has the opportunity to present its program and its young adults promote the benefits of being a part of VentureON.

Measures of Youth Success

During Program

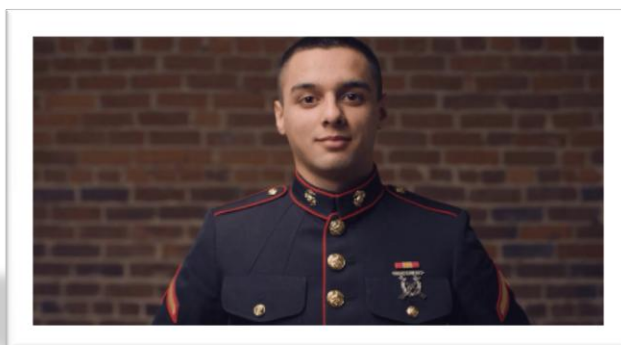
Young adults are participants in every way during their tenure at VentureON. Working alongside staff and leadership, the young adults engage in continuous dialogues with therapists, independent living specialists, mentors, job coaches, and leadership to refine and re-evaluate the program's success and pathways to get there. Through this staff/participant partnership, the program continues to redefine success for each individual young life and provides critical feedback that can be incorporated into the program.

The young adult's participation in creating his or her own path is critical in the process. Regular planned meetings allow the youth to update or add success goals and make suggestions for program improvements. Success is measured by a steady progression through:

- Life Skills training and subsequent application of the learning
- Progression through therapy
- Improved confidence and responsibility
- Educational attainment (good study habits, good grades)
- Successful employment and reports from employers
- Improved interaction with peers and outside of the VentureON community

At the conclusion of year one:

- 85% of participants will gain sufficient education and training to provide them with post-secondary education opportunities, and the ability to retain steady employment, as measured by positive grades in both education and skills training.
- 85% of the participants who have not completed secondary education will receive high school diplomas or GED as measured by diplomas or GED certificates. For those out of high school, 100% will be enrolled in technical school, college, or have meaningful employment as measured by school admission or employer verification.
- 75% of the participants will have a mastery of basic study skills, work skills, money management, social development, self-care and practical decision-making as measured by the Casey Life Skills Assessment.
- In year one, if the participant is not pursuing full time college or technical education, 75% of the young adults will gain employment as measured by employer reporting.



After Program

Staff remains engaged with our former VentureON participants and a number are still actively involved in our program, serving as mentors, program implementation assistants, and direct support to current program participants. Former participants are encouraged to remain active in the social and community service activities as a way for them to continue to feel engaged.

Continual Program Improvement

Upon completing the program, participants are given an "exit survey." This allows program staff to assess the processes and measure the success of the program as seen by the participating youth. In addition, staff meets regularly to gather information and feedback from those in the VentureON program. Continuous evaluation through outcome measures reporting and training improvements are reflected in the increased effectiveness of the program year by year.

Finally, the Inspector General audits the program annually, and the Joint Commission conducts an in-depth evaluation every three years. VentureOn sought an annual evaluation by the Commonwealth of Kentucky as well as an evaluation by the Joint Commission. These outside bodies and the program staff gathers on a quarterly basis to evaluate success rates and identify support gaps. Because our participants are actively involved, their suggestions and requests are continually sought and evaluated for implementation in order to make our participants and our program the best it can be.

Challenges

Sunrise acquired a bankrupt and dysfunctional Independent Living scattered apartment program and immediately began identifying and evaluating critical services needed for these young adults. Improvements were quickly put into place in conjunction with the Commonwealth Office of the Inspector General, including revamped client selection, staff training, program locations, and necessary public relations.

Participants' residences were evaluated and improved to promote safety and a sense of value and empowerment. The program established monthly, quarterly, and annual goals for all young adults and staff members, and then as part of the reevaluation, asked our participating young adults to assist in developing a program that met their needs and moved them toward independence.

Two years later, the VentureON programming is totally funded by grants. The program gives total support to our participants in the areas of technology, employment, academic support, and life skills.

Lessons Learned

VentureOn and its staff have learned to take a risk on young adults who came from troubled pasts. The staff has learned to phrase things in a way to motivate rather than challenge. The program has definitely benefitted from a community that rallied behind the work as a result of knocking on doors.

The program recommends asking potential participants what they see as the ideal situation in terms of individualized goals and steps to success. The vision of what it takes to change a person's life is not important if they do not believe it themselves. Listen to complaints and follow up with every concern.



L-R: Richard Ferguson; Heather Bailey; Valerie Crume; Jodi McCarty; Charlene Scites-Thompson; Lisa Porter; Misty Reynolds; Drew Lester; Lani Crume; Kellie Neal, Program Director

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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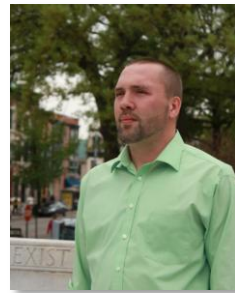
THANK YOU!

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

Chris Chmielewski

Former foster youth

Owner/Editor/Creator of *Foster Focus Magazine*



The Employment category sponsor that took a chance on a new awards program because they saw the need to come together to help foster youth who are aging out of care:



<https://www.deringconsulting.com>

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!





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.

www.agingoutinstitute.org