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Experiences of Youth Transitioning Out of Juvenile Justice or Foster Care Systems: The Correlates of Successful Moves to Independence

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Abstract
Youth transitioning out of the juvenile justice and foster care systems face many challenges, one of which is securing housing. Unfortunately, programs around the country created to address these challenges often do not use an integrated holistic approach, leaving youth at risk of an unsuccessful transition to independence. This study assesses the *Bridging the Gap* intervention which integrates housing services and an independent living coach (ILC) to address the instrumental and relational support needs during the youth's transition. This study uses mixed methods to deeply understand the needs of youth transitioning out of juvenile justice and foster care systems and to assess correlates of a successful transition. Qualitative and quantitative results confirm that youth transitioning our of juvenile justice and foster care systems face a wide range of challenges. Results also show that only a participant's age is correlated with a successful transition. Findings from the study can be used to inform other programs addressing both the instrumental and relationship support needs of youth transitioning out of foster care and corrections.

Keywords Foster care · Juvenile justice · Youth transitions · Housing · Social support

Youth transitioning out of foster care or juvenile justice systems are expected to live as independent adults but they do not have a supportive transition similar to that of many youth growing up with biological family. Youth transitioning out of foster care leave with limited supports from the system and often experience trauma (Riebschleger, Day, & Damashek, 2015). The transition out of juvenile justice and foster care systems places youth at higher risk for negative outcomes including substance abuse, homelessness, and low educational attainment (Dworksy et al., 2012; Massinga & Pecora, 2004). This paper assesses the impact of one intervention that aims to provide necessary supports to youth during this critical transition.

The Family Unification Program (FUP) is part of a federal policy that mandates programs to teach youth the skills necessary to live independently (Family Unification Program, 2018). One goal of the FUP program is to provide housing to youth age 18–21 who are transitioning out of juvenile justice and foster care systems. Using a FUP housing voucher, the transitioning youth pays 30–40% of their income toward their housing and the government pays the rest. Additional FUP benefits include money management skills, job preparation, educational counseling, proper nutrition and meal preparation (Family Unification Program, 2018). However, this program is only designed to take care of the instrumental housing needs, and not the relational social supports that are critical for a successful transition to independence (Fowler, Marcal, Zhang, Day, & Landsverk, 2017).

On any given day, there are over 50,000 people under the age of 21 who are confined in juvenile justice facilities (Fact Sheet, 2018). Additionally, more than 20,000 young people transition out of foster care each year (Fowler et al., 2017). Prevalence statistics suggest that in the first 12 months of exiting the foster care system, 25–40% of youth will experience homelessness (Courtney et al., 2011). Prevalence statistics show us that 36%-45% of people experiencing homelessness report a history of foster care involvement (Roman & Wolfe, 1997). In fact, estimates of the prevalence of youth homelessness range from 1.6 to 2.8 million annually in the United States (National Center for Homeless Education, 2012). These

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prevelance rates, as well as the extant literature, suggest that this vulnerable population is in need of additional services to support the transition from foster care or juvenile justice systems to indepenednent living (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Dworksy et al., 2012).

This research assesses the impact of an innovative intervention developed at the Mile-High United Way in Denver, CO called *Bridging the Gap* (BTG), which combines FUP vouchers with an independent living coach (ILC) for youth transitioning out of juvenile justice or foster care systems in order to successfully transition youth to independent living. In this way, BTG addresses both the instrumental and social support needs of youth. Findings from this research inform practitioners interested in addressing both the instrumental and relational social support needs of youth transitioning out of juvenile justice and foster care systems.

Social Support for a Successful Transition to Independent Living

BTG is based on the theoretical principle that social support is a critical element of a youth's successful transition to independence. Theoretically, social support is the exchange of resources between actors with the goal of addressing felt needs (Shumaker & Brownell, 1984). The concept of social support has received considerable scholarly attention and is commonly understood to refer to positive interactions or relationships, and includes the reciprocal support received in an exchange (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Hupcey, 1998). Social support occurs in social networks and evolves based on social and cultural context and based on needs and perceived needs (Eyrich, Pollio, & North, 2003). Additionally, social support has been found to be a mediating variable in a person's capacity to cope with stress (Cobb, 1976; Coohey, 2007).

The BTG intervention considers both instrumental and relational social support critical to a youth's successful tranition to adulthood. Instrumental social support refers to aid and services provided to individuals (Hwang et al., 2009), and relational social support refers to feelings of trust, reciprocity, and emotional caring in a relationship (Due, Holstein, Lund, Modvig, & Avlund, 1999). High levels of access and use of instrumental social support are related to better physical and mental health and lower rates of victimization (Hwang et al., 2009). Relational social support is related to better health and mental health (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001).

Youth Transitioning from Juvenile Justice or Foster Care Systems

Regardless of the type of placement from which they transition, youth transitioning from juvenile justice or foster care systems present with some similar challenges. The majority of these youth have adverse childhood experiences which include family instability, abuse/neglect, and substance abuse (Bilchik & Nash, 2008; Courtney et al., 2011; Vidal et al., 2017). Foster youth often have strained relationships with their family members, possibly due to the reasons for family separation, which include sexual abuse, physical abuse, parents who are absent or incarcerated, or parents who have passed away (National Center for Homeless Education, 2012). The combination of a disruption of services and a lack of family support put transitioning youth at high risk for housing insecurity and other challenges (Fowler et al., 2017). Youth transitioning out of foster care of juvenile justice systems struggle to meet basic needs such as food and housing and have real barriers to economic success including low educational attainment, criminal backgrounds, lack of preparedness for the workforce, minimal if any financial planning, and untreated mental health and substance abuse issues (Chung, Little, & Steinberg, 2005; Courtney et al., 2011; Rebbe, Nurius, Ahrens, & Courtney, 2017; Braciszewski & Stout, 2012; Naccarato, Brophy, & Courtney, 2010; Okpych & Courtney, 2017). In addition, youth exiting these systems may not have a network of people encouraging growth toward adult responsibilities. Although many placement providers have programming designed to equip young people with the education or skills they need, young people may not take advantage of the opportunities. Young people in different types of public systems care have shared that they are exhausted by all of the classes and groups they have to attend and others have shared that they didn't think those classes were relevant to their current situation (Thompson, Wojciak, & Cooley, 2018; Freundlich, Avery, & Padgett, 2007).

One of the biggest challenges for youth exiting foster care or juvenile justice systems is that they rarely are given the opportunity to practice the skills they will need to be successful in their transition to adulthood, especially with a supportive safety net in place (Avery & Freundlich, 2009; Chung et al., 2005; Freundlich et al., 2007; Cunningham & Diversi, 2013). These skills include living on their own, accessing transportation, working or going to school, saving money, and tending to their physical and mental health. Instead, they begin practicing these critical skills when the consequences of making a mistake can lead to housing eviction, criminal charges or compromised health. In the event of an eviction, the young person may experience homelessness and future housing challenges with a tarnished rental payment record.

The complex needs faced by young people transitioning out of foster care or juvenile justice systems requires an intervention that provides for instrumental and relational social support needs (Chung et al., 2005; Curry & Abrams, 2015; Karabanow & Clement, 2004; Stewart, Reutter, Letourneau, Makwarimba, & Hungler, 2010). The BTG

intervention provides for both of these types of social support by combining the the instrumental support of the FUP housing voucher with the relational social support of an independent living coach (ILC). Many programs offer either housing or supportive services to youth transitioning out of juvenile justice or foster care systems, but they are often not integrated. This can be challenging for youth because they have numerous and complicated needs that require concurrent management and planning (Greenen & Powers, 2007). Traditional Housing Choice Vouchers (HCVs) are available to this population (Family Unification Program, 2018); however, HCVs are extremely hard to secure and are not accompanied with supportive services (Housing Choice Voucher Fact Sheet, 2018). Young people exiting the foster care or juvenile justice systems and living on their own for the first time need significant support through coaching or case management to successfully maintain housing (Curry & Abrams, 2015). Additionally, vocational and financial health training is needed to properly develop skills for independent living (Curry & Abrams, 2015), which is not included with most HCVs.

Youth Transition Programs

There are programs that address the transition for youth out of foster care or juvenile justice systems to independent living. However, these programs do not address the combination of instrumental social support and relational social support in the explicit manner of BTG. Next we review a few existing programs for youth transitioning out of foster care or juvenile justice systems.

Youth Villages has programs around the nation with the goal of helping young people aging out of state custody or other care arrangements successfully transition to independence (Jacobs, Skemer, & Courtney, 2015). *Youth Villages* focuses on helping the young person connect with family or other support system, which they consider to be a vital part of a successful transition. *Youth Villages* recognizes the importance of a supportive adult to the success of the young adults in the program. The *Youth Villages* model includes small caseloads of eight to 10 young adults per specialist who make frequent contact. For the purposes of this paper, the relational social support provided by a case manager is considered similar to that provided by an ILC in BTG. It is through the relational social support with the specialists that young people then set goals for their futures and dedicate themselves to taking advantage of services (Jacobs et al., 2015). While *Youth Villages* primarily focuses on social support, it has been found to improve health and safety and reduce housing and material hardship, including homelessness (Jacobs et al., 2015). *Youth Villages* is a program that closely resembles BTG and both programs should continue to be tested for their impact on the lives of youth transitioning out of foster care or juvenline justice systems.

Beyond Emancipation is a program originating from Oakland, CA that works with youth who are aging out of foster care and who have aged out of foster care. As opposed to the mentoring approach of *Youth Villages*, *Beyond Emancipation* focuses on a broad array of services including employment, education, housing, and transition services. The *Beyond Emancipation* program uses an innovative coaching approach, Creative, Connected, Resourceful, Whole (CCRW) throughout their services that empowers youth, helps them build inner resiliency and create lasting community connections. This program focuses on building critical skills and relationships that are the foundation of a healthy transition to adulthood (Beyond Emancipation Homepage, 2018). Though it does provide both housing and social support, the housing that is offered is either host housing or community housing instead of the more flexible FUP voucher used in BTG.

The Colorado Department of Human Services began developing the *Pathways to Success* program in 2013 after receiving a planning grant (Phase I) from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Children's Bureau under their Youth-At-Risk-of-Homelessness (YARH) demonstration projects. This intervention is an intensive, youth-driven case management approach and is designed to serve youth ages 14 to 21 who are currently in or transitioning out of foster care, or who are homeless up to the age of 21 with foster care histories. The long-term goal is to prevent homelessness by improving permanent connections, health and well-being, housing, education, and employment of participating youth. The intervention utilizes a Navigator who works with youth to help identify and work towards achieving goals. The model is early in implementation and thus still needs further research (Davis, Prendergast, & McHugh, 2018).

This paper uses mixed methods to assess characteristics of the BTG intervention BTG provides instrumental social support by providing FUP housing vouchers as well as providing relational social support through an ILC. Understanding the needs and successes of the BTG program is an important early step in developing effective interventions for youth transitioning to indepenednece from foster care or juvenile justice systems.

Research Questions

The following research questions are addressed in this study.

What are the needs and challenges youth experience upon exiting foster care or juvenile justice systems, and what supports are helpful in transitioning to independent living?

1. What are the characteristics of a successful relationship between a transitioning youth and an ILC?
2. What characteristics are associated with a successful transition to independence for youth exiting foster care or juvenile justice systems?

Methods

Study Setting

BTG is a program of the Mile-High United Way based in Denver, Colorado. BTG hires trauma-informed ILCs to work with young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 who have aged out of juvenile justice or foster care systems. BTG participants receive FUP housing vouchers, which provide 18 months of housing subsidy. When a young adult receives a FUP voucher, the participants are assigned a BTG ILC who supports them in becoming independent and self-sufficient adults through coaching. Coaching sessions are designed to help BTG participants find, secure, and maintain housing with their FUP voucher. Additionally, the BTG ILC supports independent living goals by assisting young adults in the core program areas of wellness, healthy connections, crisis intervention, education, employment, financial health, and civic engagement. BTG brings together critical skills, services, and resources for young people to have and develop as they are exiting the foster care or juvenile justice systems and combines these with a meaningful supportive relationship. It is also through the ILC relationship that young people develop goals and a support plan for how they will achieve these goals and move into living independently.

Data Collection

The authors use a mixed-methods design to provide a triangulation of results to inform the three research questions. This mixed-methods design is appropriate as the BTG intervention is still in the feasibility and pilot testing phases. The following data sources are used in the study: (1) interviews with former BTG participants, (2) interviews with current and former BTG ILCs; and (3) review of administrative case data.

BTG Participant Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with former BTG participants who took part in the program from January 2014 through December 2015. The dates were selected to precede a policy change in the FUP voucher, which extended the program from 18 to 36 months. A sampling frame of 82 participants was selected based on those BTG participants who completed the program between the aforementioned dates. Characteristics of the 82-participant sampling frame are provided in Table 1.

To gather in-depth information about BTG, each of the 82 former participants were contacted via telephone, text message, or email. Fifteen former BTG participants agreed to discuss their experiences exiting the child welfare or corrections systems, their perceptions of core coaching components, and their perceptions of how coaching impacted their personal success in the program.

The participant interview protocol was comprised of 17 qualitative items. Each interview lasted approximately 75 min and was recorded. Each study participant provided consent for participation in the study. Each study participant was compensated with a $100 gift card.

ILC Interviews

Over 20 ILCs have participated in the BTG program. Six current and former BTG ILCs with whom the program still maintains regular contact, and who were deeply engaged with BTG were invited to participate in an interview. Of those contacted, three agreed to participate in the study. Researchers met with the three purposively selected current and former ILCs to capture their perceptions of the needs and challenges experienced by BTG participants as well as core components related to the coaching process. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to capture qualitative information from ILCs. Each ILC interview lasted approximately 75 min and was recorded. ILCs provided consent to

Table 1 Participant sample characteristics

Sample characteristics (N = 82)	Mean (SD) or percent (frequency)
Age	22 (1.2)
Self-identified race:	
American Indian or Alaska Native	7% (6)
Black or African American	35% (29)
White	24% (20)
Self-identified ethnicity:	
Hispanic/Latino (not Black or American Indian or Alaska Native)	30% (25)
Self-identified gender	
Female	41.5% (34)
Male	58.5% (48)
High School Diploma, equivalent, or greater education	76.8% (63)
Parent (yes)	23.2% (19)
Number of coaching sessions	14.3 (13.3)
Number of months housed	11.8 (6.4)
Number of months employed	7 (5.9)
Number of months enrolled in school	2.8 (4.6)

participate in the study. No compensation was provided to ILCs who participated in the study.

Administrative Case Data

The 82-case sampling frame was used for the administrative case review. The 82-case sample included participants who took part in the program from January 2014 through December 2015. Data was pulled from the BTG Efforts to Outcome (ETO) database. The data documents the total number of coaching sessions received, the total number of months employed, the total number of months enrolled in school, and the total number of months housed. Additional notes from ETO were used to inform a participant's reasons for exiting the program.

As Table 1 shows, the sample was a fairly equal mix of those indentifying as male or female, and the sample contained an approximately equal proportion of participants identifying as Black or African American, White, or Hispanic/Latino. Seventy-seven percent had at least a high school diploma and almost one-quarter were parents. On average, participants engaged in 14 coaching sessions, were housed for 12 months, were employed for seven months, and were enrolled in school for three months.

Measures

Qualitative Data

Qualitative interviews included open ended questions to both BTG participants and ILCs about the needs and challenges youth face when exiting out of the foster care or juvenile justice systems, the supports that are necessary during the transition, and the characteristics and qualities that foster a successful relationship between a BTG participant and an ILC. Qualitative interviews also included questions that assessed how often BTG participants and ILCs discussed the following topics: securing and maintaining housing; physical, mental, sexual or emotional health concerns and needs; making healthy, safe connections in the community; personal crisis; employment goals; managing finances; educational goals; how to communicate; and how to advocate for oneself. During the qualitative interviews, BTG participants and ILCs were asked to score how often the above topics were discussed on a scale from 1 (very infrequently) to 5 (very frequently). These scores are then used as indicators in the quantitative analysis.

Administrative Case Data

Administrative case data captured a number of variables that provide a description of BTG participants experience in the program. Descriptive statistics from this data can be found in Table 1. Administrative data was also used, along with a case review by the BTG Program Director, to determine success in the program. Success in the BTG program was based on one of two definitions: (1) a BTG participant completed the 18-month program or (2) the BTG participant opted out of the FUP voucher and BTG program at some point having secured stable housing and employment/education goals. The BTG Program Director defined unsuccessful exits in one of two ways: (1) the BTG participant was evicted from their apartment and lost their FUP voucher or (2) the BTG participant left the program without securing stable housing or achieving employment/education goals.

Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed by two researchers to promote internal validity and trustworthiness of results using a two-step content analysis technique (Schreier, 2014). The first-step in the analysis resulted in content saturation and a comprehensive list of codes largely aligned with the predetermined research questions. In the second step of the analysis, individual quotes categorized under each code (or research question) were further analyzed for subcategories. Related subcategories were combined and organized based on unifying themes. The convergent themes represent the final results of the analysis and are reported along with relevant quotes from the various interviews. Descriptive statistics and bivariate analysis were used to analyze the administrative case data. Specifically t-tests were used to asses statistically significant differences in participant characteristics for those identified as successful compared to those identified as not successful in the program.

Results

Challenges and Supports

BTG participants reported experiencing a range of challenges upon exiting previous systems and entering the BTG program. Many of these challenges proved to be complex and persistent in nature. Analysis of interview data showed no discernable trends or patterns with regards to reported challenges based on either successful/unsuccessful program completion or foster care/juvenile justice involvement. Challenges proved to be unique and dependent upon individual circumstances and therefore no themes were identified, other than the needs were widely varying and individually dependent. In terms of supports, particpants identified: (1) material supports; (2) healthy relationships; and (3) moral supports; as helping with the transition to independent living.

Material Supports

BTG participants expressed a number of supports that were helpful to address their needs. Supports were often material or financial in nature, including the FUP voucher, bus passes, rides, diapers, bedding, kitchen supplies, food, and gift cards. One participant noted the critical nature of material supports considering their economic situation:

> I mean, I was broke a few times, and I was given gift cards and bus tokens or bus passes. They would give me diapers for him when I needed them. Those are crises to me because, I mean, if I was broke and I didn't have a kid, I could manage. But he needs diapers, he needs food, and they always helped me out every time I needed those.

Another BTG participant noted that the material supports were provided during the initial transition to living on their own. The participant shows awareness that this material support was a help for the transition to independence.

> Yeah, I mean there was times where they did help out. They gave me, like, when I first moved in they gave me, like, bedding and just stuff to live with. They gave me, like, glasses and cups and dishes and stuff, so they did help me out in that regard when I first moved in.

Material supports are important for someone initially starting to live on their own. Money, and the things one can buy with money, (furniture, bus passess) are necessary when someone first lives on their own. The material supports provided by the BTG program were one of the supports that mattered for a successful transition to independent living.

Healthy Relationships

BTG participants also expressed appreciation for the support they received around building healthy relationships, specifically being challenged to re-evaluate the quality and intentions of their peer groups, help navigating conflicts in romantic and family relationships, and generally receiving guidance around communication and advocacy of their needs with others. One BTG participant seems to express surprise that the ILC would go as far as to help them choose friends, and that this support in building healthy relationships was important for improving their life.

> She actually talked to me about picking my friends wisely…My friends would try to come over and drink with me. They always wanted to come over. She was just like, 'You know what? You need to focus on yourself. You need to make – The people that are trying to put you in the bad path, you need to cut them off because they are just gonna – ' She expressed to me that those people weren't a good influence on me. Honestly, I just cut them off and my life is better now.

As this BTG participant says, picking friends wisely can lead to better independent living outcomes. BTG ILC's were helpful to participants in developing healthy relationships and this matters as one transitions to living on their own.

Moral Supports

Moral support stood out as having a major impact on participants as well. one common form of intangible moral support involved having someone who was there when participants needed them, who motivated and encouraged them, who they trusted and felt they could go to for help or advice. A BTG participant noted the importance of the unconditional support when they said:

> Knowing that someone was already there for you, no matter what kind of thing. If you needed help with something, then they could help you find the answer. So, it wasn't just me on a mission trying to find something; I had another person helping me.

In this quote, the BTG participant notes how important the feeling of support is, that they do not need to carry the weight of every decision on their own. Instead, BTG ILCs were available to share the challenges that a participant faces when transitioning to independent living.

Succesful Relationships with BTG ILCs

Next, the charachteristics of a successful relationship between the BTG participant and the ILC were assessed. The following themes were identified as important for a successful relationship: empathy; fit; communication; parental type support; ILC savvy; goal setting; and program engagement. Additionally, BTG participants and ILCs were asked how often they discussed various topics on a scale from 1 (very infrequently) to 5 (very frequently). Average responses and paired-sample t-test scores for each topic area were assessed for significant differences in participant and ILC ratings. These scores are presented in Table 2.

From Table 2, it can be observed that, on average, ILCs perceived that they talked about most of the topics at least frequently, with the exception of "Community Connections" and "Communications & Personal Advocacy", which they talked about occasionally to frequently. BTG participants' ratings differed from ILCs in that they felt, on average, that "Employment" was discussed most frequently, with "Health & Wellness" and "Crisis Management" discussed least frequently. Interestingly, there is a statistically significant difference between ILCs' perceptions of how often they talked about Health & Wellness and Crisis Management and

Table 2 BTG participant and ILC frequency of discussing key independent living concepts (BTG participants: n = 15, BTG ILCs: n = 3**)

Topics discussed	Participant mean (SD)	ILC mean (SD)	t-value
Housing	3.5 (1.25)	4.7 (.58)	− 1.50
Health & Wellness	2.4 (1.35)	4.7 (.58)	− 2.80*
Community Connections	3.3 (1.29)	3.7 (.58)	− 0.43
Crisis Management	2.5 (1.36)	5.0 (0)	− 3.20*
Employment	4.4 (.83)	4.3 (.58)	− 0.13
Financial Management	3.8 (1.15)	4.0 (1.0)	− 0.28
Education	3.8 (1.61)	4.0 (0)	− 0.21
Communications & Personal Advocacy	3.1 (1.73)	3.7 (.58)	− 0.52

Note that there was a sample of three ILCs interviewed. Due to this relatively small sample, interpretations of mean scores and standard deviations should be done with caution as there may not be sufficient power to assess statistical significance

*$p < .05$. T-tests used Levene's test for equality of variance, given the variable sample size of groups

participants' perceptions of how often they talked about these same topics. In fact, all three ILCs said they talked about Crisis Management very frequently, while participants, on average, rated this topic as one they talked about the least.

Qualitative responses from BTG participants and ILCs were also analyzed for themes about the features that make for a good ILC and a successful coaching relationship. Qualitative results support findings from the quantitiative results. Participants identified the following themes as being helpful or desirable for an ILC: instrumental and informational support, empathy, fit, communication, parental-type support, ILC savvy, and goal setting. Next, we provide a brief description of each identified theme and supporting quotes from participants.

Instrumental and Informational Support

As previously mentioned, the ability of ILCs to assist in the provision of material and financial goods was seen as beneficial to BTG participants. This not only included housing resources, financial support, and other supplies and goods but also assistance navigating systems, information about community resources, coping skills, and other practical advice. One participant talked about how important this support was when faced with the task of securing an apartment.

> Getting into an apartment and explaining those things because they've been there and they've done that. You don't know anything about it and some people try to scam you, especially if you're a girl. If you're a young girl, people try to scam you, you know? So it's nice to have somebody go in and check it out, knowing things that need to be done in an apartment and knowing what you should spend and how to manage because younger people just are not that coordinated. And it's nice to have someone there that is, like, basically another voice for you.

Another participant noted that this informational support was also helpful for finding and securing a job.

> It was nice having someone I could talk to about housing stuff, and, you know, it was nice to get the emails about job stuff. Or she'd send everybody links of, these are places hiring, these are job fairs, these are this. So it was nice to be able to be like, okay, so this is what I could do. Yeah, it really was her that got me into my youth corp. Even though I wasn't really there long, that was really cool to experience in my life.

Providing instrumental and informational support that BTG participants found helpful was one important part of developing the ILC and participant relationship.

Empathy

One of the most commonly cited qualities valued in an ILC was empathy, which participants broadly described as being patient, open-minded, non-judgmental, relational, reliable, and supportive.

> I feel like an understanding, being able to understand others and where they came from and how they communicate with them. You know, just need to have that overall understanding. I feel like it's a skill that all BTG coaches need.

Another participant, when asked to describe about qualities that lead to a good ILC and participant relationship said the following, "*Patience, a lot of patience and understanding. Then being humble*."

An ILC with empathy took the time to listen to and really hear the participant and responded with flexibility and genuine warmth. The ILC was able to convey a genuine understanding of the where the participants were coming from.

Fit

Some participants described a natural connection they felt with their ILC, that their personalities just meshed. One participant said, "She had a personality. She was the right coach for me, let me put it that way. She was the right coach for me."

Often, the ILC was credited with taking the time to build rapport, develop trust, and foster a relationship that felt appropriately mutual (versus one-sided). Other participants

expressed a misfit or lack of connection with their ILC, citing that this was something they wished had been addressed or prioritized in the program.

Communication

BTG participants described communication skills as an important quality in an ILC. This entailed regular and reliable contact; flexibility as needed (especially when participants had scheduling conflicts, like work); a sense of organization and professionalism from the ILC; and a proactive approach involving clearly established expectations, terms, and structures. One participant said:

> She always checked up on me when I had any questions or concerns or advice. I would always call her, and she would call me back immediately. She would answer emails. I mean,there was a lot of frequent communication between me and my coach.

One area of communication that many participants expressed disappointment in was the termination of their relationship with their ILC and BTG.

> Expressing disappointment: "Once my voucher ended, she, like, washed her hands and was, like, 'okay, well I'm done with this lady.' For me, with working with somebody for 16 months and building that relationship, I still talk to the people from X County. But with her, she just had to, like – was fed up or something. I don't even know…but it wasn't closure. It was just, like, 'okay, bye, you're out of the program.' So I feel like she could've been a little bit more to me respectful. Cause by the end of it, I did change my ways, and I was trying to be respectful and, like, take her into consideration, but I didn't feel like I was getting that back."

Several participants noted that there was not sufficient acknowledgement of the fact that their time with the program had come to an end or explicit instructions or expectations about what to expect at that stage of the process.

Parental-Type Support

Several BTG participants appreciated a quality often described as parental or familial in nature. This person provided what felt like firm or tough love; they were consistently there and didn't just tell participants what they "wanted to hear." These ILCs acted as something of an adult role model and even disciplinarian. One participant said, "Even though he knew he wasn't exactly like a parent, it really did feel having a parent around, and I needed that for sure. I needed an adult role model." Another participant talked about the parental type support in terms of motivation and "tough love".

> She was always motivating me. She was always telling me – she gave me, like, tough love. That's why I said she's like a sister. You know, she reminded me of someone like a sister because she wasn't the type of person to tell me what she felt I wanted to hear. She told me what I needed to hear, whether it hurt my feelings. I really love her for that.

Parental-type support could be hard for participants to accept. However, when it worked, it was an important part of an ILC developing a good relationship with a participant.

ILC Savvy

Some participants noted ILC savvy as important in their relationship development. ILC savvy consisted of not taking everything at face value and continuing to dig in or pursue the full story, even when participants pushed back and presented a tough exterior. One BTG participant said:

> Let's say there's a teenager who's been, let's say, molested, and then she doesn't feel too comfortable with just talking about things. But the BTG's job, or career, is to focus on trying to get the kid to feel more comfortable and open up to them. But if you just go over exaggerating, like your smile is too big or just, you know, kind of thing and then just lean into something too fast for the handshake, like, 'hi, my name' and, you know, the voice. That's going to push that person away.

This quality involved knowing where the BTG participants were coming from and how to appropriately respond to them.

Goal Setting

This quality was directly related to program outcomes and the ability of participants to achieve their goals. Participants expressed great value in having an ILC who provided guidance and structure around setting clear goals, who helped them stay focused and positive about those goals. One BTG participant noted that goal setting support was what they needed at the time.

> A lot of what I felt that I needed during the time was I needed more 'what's your goals, where are you headed to, and how are you going to reach those goals.' Instead, it was more 'these are the resources that we currently have, and this is how we're going to help you, and here's your coach, and they're there to support you.' But there wasn't necessarily a strategy of – other

> than just getting someone housing and employment. Obviously what's in the long-term because this isn't going to last.

ILCs that used goal setting successfully provided encouragement, motivation, and wisdom. They held participants accountable in a way that felt helpful, safe, and productive, and they ultimately believed in the participant's ability to succeed.

Program Engagement

Some participants reported that they weren't as engaged in the coaching relationship as they could have been and, in hindsight, wish they had been. One BTG participant owned their own role in not succeeding with their ILC because they were not ready to engage in the program.

> It's a great program. I mean, like I said, I wish I would've taken advantage of it. Now when I think back on it, I would love to have that program again cause I know the things that I know now that I didn't know when I was 18 and especially coming out from foster care and rehab.

Another BTG participant also shared that they weren't ready to engage in the program at the time.

> She would ask me how am I feeling, how am I doing, you know? Am I – because I would deal with depression, so she would ask about it. She would ask about who I have as a support system. And at that time I didn't have nobody, so that's really why I didn't ever wanna talk about it…I really wish I'd take that help back then.

Several reasons were cited for lack of engagement and motivation: logistics, just being young, participant characteristics, poor communication, and poor fit. Participants demonstrated a high level of self-awareness about other personality traits or characteristics that may have impeded the coaching relationship. One BTG participant was able to discuss in some depth the trust issues that made developing a relationship with an ILC so hard.

> Especially with me being young, I didn't know how to interact with that person. I didn't know whether to trust that person or to have faith in that person. I think myself and other people feel like that all the time because there's numerous people going through their life. And then when they meet someone, it's like, oh great, I'm going to get some resources. I'm going to get some help. But how do I have that confidence and that trust and that faith that this person is someone that I feel, like, not necessarily dependent on for everything, but I can communicate clearly and I can go ahead and be, like, 'you know what, this is what's going on.' Or 'hey, I need to talk to someone about my mental health.' Something like that.

A range of personal descriptions were provided, including being hard-headed, strong-willed, resistant, intimidated, selfish, easily bored, frustrated, annoyed, impatient, and not nice. Trust was also raised as a personal barrier, with some participants describing themselves as guarded due to past traumas.

Participant Characteristics Associated with Succesful Transition to Independent Living

Next, participant characteristics associated with a successful transition to independence were assessed. Administrative case data from 82 BTG participants who completed the program were used to assess whether a relationship exists between specific participant characteristics and successful program completion. Table 3 presents mean participant characteristics and identifies, with the use of t-tests whether program characteristics were associated with successful or unsuccessful program completion.

Interestingly, the only statistically significant difference in demographic characteristics between those participants considered successful and unsuccessful is age. On average, being older is associated with a higher rate of program success. Interestingly, 'months housed,' 'months employed,' and 'months enrolled in school' were not found to be significantly related to program success.

Administrative data from the 82 BTG participants were also used to assess if a relationship exists between coaching touchpoints (number of coaching contacts), the number of coaching sessions, and successful program completion. Table 4 presents mean coaching touchpoints, mean coaching sessions, and the discrepancy between touchpoints and months in the program. Table 4 also provides t-test results assessing if there is a significant difference in reported success based on average touchpoints and coaching sessions.

The mean number of monthly touchpoints for those participants identified as successfully completing the program was 13.8. The mean number of monthly touchpoints for those participants identified as unsuccessfully completing the program was 14.6. A statistically significant difference was not found between the two means. The mean number of coaching sessions for successful participants was 14.8, while the mean number of coaching sessions for those who were not successful was 13.9. There is not a statistically significant difference between these two means. For those identified as successfully exiting BTG, the mean discrepancy between touchpoints and months in the program was − 0.6. This means that, on average, successful participants had nearly one less touchpoint than the number of months

Table 3 Comparing participant characteristics and success in the BTG program (n = 82)

Participant characteristics	Mean/frequency of success, n = 38 (sd or pct)	Mean/frequency of not success, n = 44 (sd or pct.)	T-value/Chi-square value
Age	22.6 (1.2)	21.9 (1.03)	− 2.50*
Days in program	346 (158)	390 (164)	1.20
Months housed	11.0 (6.62)	12.4 (6.27)	0.90
Months employed	6.4 (5.61)	7.5 (6.18)	0.90
Months enrolled in school	2.6 (3.94)	2.9 (5.04)	0.40
Self-identified race			
American Indian or Alaska Native	3 (8%)	6 (14%)	2.33
Black or African American	13 (34%)	17 (39%)	2.33
White	18 (47%)	19 (43%)	2.33
Ethnicity			
Hispanic/Latino	13 (34%)	12 (27%)	1.75
Parent: yes	10 (26%)	9 (20%)	0.39
Parent: no	28 (74%)	35 (80%)	0.39
Self-identified gender			
Female	17 (45%)	17 (39%)	0.31
Male	21 (55%)	27 (61%)	0.31

*p < .05. T-tests used Levene's test for equality of variance, given the variable sample size of groups

Table 4 Comparing coaching characteristics and success in the BTG program (n = 82)

Coaching characteristics	Mean for those successful, n = 38 (SD)	Mean for those not successful, n = 44 (SD)	t-value
Monthly touch points	13.8 (5.76)	14.6 (5.27)	0.6
Discrepancy between touchpoints and months in the program (Elite)	− 0.6	− 0.8	− 0.6
Coaching sessions	14.8 (12.98)	13.9 (13.66)	− 0.3

T-tests used Levene's test for equality of variance, given the variable sample size of groups

*p < .05

they were in the program. For those participants identified as unsuccessfully exiting BTG, the mean discrepancy was − 0.8. There is not a statistically significant difference between touchpoint discrepancies for program participants identified as successful and unsuccessful.

Discussion

The purpose of this research is to assess the BTG intervention, which provides instrumental and relational social support for youth aging out of foster care or juvenile justice systems. The transition out of foster care or juvenile justice is a critical time for youth. Many young people exiting foster care or juvenile justice systems are expected to move seamlessly from a care system into independence while simultaneously losing most of the financial support and resource connections previously provided.

Results show that participants in BTG have incredibly diverse experiences. They come from different places and vastly different histories. Despite their differences, many participants have similar needs; a need for both the instrumental support of safe and stable housing and the relational support of a caring and invested adult. The BTG program meets both needs within the context of a relatable, trusting, committed relationship between young people and their ILC. Interestingly, results show that many BTG participants have to be personally willing to accept the supports provided by the ILC for these supports to be perceived as effective.

Programs like BTG must be prepared to respond to several presenting issues occurring simultaneously in the lives of participants. Results from this study show that presenting issues for transitioning youth may be related education, employment, housing, life skills, mental health, parenting, and transportation. Further, findings from the study reveal characteristics that are important in a mentoring relationship. These themes can be applied to other mentoring programs working with youth transitioning out of foster care or juvenile justice systems.

Findings from the study suggest that transitioning youth need support to overcome the many barriers they face. For example, advocating for a participant to conduct a housing search independently (with support from the ILC) may be more impactful than if an ILC leads the housing search process for the participant. This can be a challenge as staff balance supporting and teaching young people with encouraging—and sometimes, challenging—young people to learn and practice new skills. This is a vital time for an ILC to do the work of teaching soft skills and relationship skills to help young people to overcome their discomfort and learn to work with people, even when there may be distrust.

In contrast, findings from the study also show that there needs to be a "fit" between the participant and the ILC. Part of the fit may include participant readiness to engage in the ILC relationship and program. BTG, and other programs like it, could benefit from an initial assessment tool that scores on participant readiness and provides fit criteria for ILCs and participants. For example, findings from the study show that participants and ILCs do not perceive crisis situations the same way. It is likely that because the young people have life experience that are often unstable they may not believe their situation to be a crisis whereas the ILC perceives the youth to be in a crisis state. An initial assessment tool could help address differences in perceived levels of crisis for different issue domains, including housing, health, education, and relationships.

Limitations

This study provides useful information for staff and administrators interested in serving young adults transitioning out of foster care or juvenile justice systems. However, there are limitations to the findings. First, generalizations should not be made from this study to all young adults transitioning out of foster care or juvenile justice systems. The 15 participants selected for qualitative interviews in this study were those most willing to participate. Therefore, future investigations should attempt to confirm the results presented here for the specific samples with whom they are working. Additionally, the interview protocols prompted responses on specific domain areas. Thus, much of the information received pertains to the prompted domain areas.

Selection bias is also a considerable limitation of the study. This is an assessment of one program which is at the early stage of pilot testing. Considering this, participants either self selected, or were purposely chosen for the program. Therefore, as said previously, findings from the study should not be generalized outside the study sample. To address this issue, the BTG program should be tested using a randomized control trial.

Implications for Social Work Practice, Research and Policy

Findings provide important insight into the experiences of both ILCs and BTG participants that can inform interventions serving youth exiting the juvenile justice or foster care systems. Findings show that success in the program is variable and may depend, at least partly, on the readiness of participants. From these findings, there are a few important next steps that can be pursued by stakeholders interested in services for youth transitioning out of juvenile justice or foster care. Including assessment information for participant program readiness may be useful in maximizing program impact. By understanding program readiness, BTG administrators can then prioritize participants who have the best chance to succeed. With assessment information, BTG administrators could also provide training or education to potential participants that may increase their chances of entering and succeeding in the program.

An implication for social work research is to investigate what creates good fit between an ILC and a participant. Again, assessment information about both ILCs and participants can be used as data for this purpose. Specific analyses on characteristics, or matching, in successful and unsuccessful relationships can be undertaken. Information from these analyses can be used as guidance in creating the best fit for future ILCs and participants.

For policy makers, it is important to understand that the transition out of foster care or juvenile justice systems is a critical time. If this transition is successful, former system involved youth can go on to successful adulthood. If not done well, this transition could be an initial entry into an experience of homelessness, which can have a profound, and often negative, impact on an individual's life. Preventing homelessness should be a high priority of social service providers and policy makers. Therefore, it is critical to continue to fund and test interventions that provide instrumental and social support for youth transitioning out of foster care or juvenile justice systems. Identifying and understanding programs that target this transition time and can demonstrate success in keeping young adults stably housed can be a critical homelessness prevention strategy. Youth enter foster care and juvenile justice systems for a multitude of reasons. Yet, when they transition out of these systems, they often need housing, and they often need ongoing supportive services in order to transition to independence.

Conclusions

Youth in foster care or juvenile justice systems face a challenging transiton to independent living. The BTG program addresses this challenging transition by

providing instrumental support in the form of a housing choice voucher, and both instrumental and relational social support in the form of an ILC. Findings from this study show that both instrumental and relational social support have an impact on BTG participants' success transitioning to independent living.

While results from the study support that BTG can be successful in supporting the transiton from foster care of juvenile justice systems, results also suggest that more can be done by BTG, and other youth serving programs, to address the wide range of needs during this transition. Importantly, results from the study show that readiness for social support, or willingness to participate in a supportive relationship, are critical for a participants success. One way to address this is for programs to assess for the trust and confidence (as stated by one BTG participant) needed to be ready for the program. Then, programming can work with youth to develop this readiness prior to enrollment.

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Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval Compliance with the Principal Investigators Institutional Review Board policies for research involving human subjects.

Informed Consent Receving signed informed consent for all subjects providing original data for the research.

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