

Oregon Independent Living Program Review Findings

The Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS) contracts with nonprofits, for-profits, and governmental entities to provide ILP services across 36 counties in Oregon. As with other independent living programs across the nation, Oregon ILP providers coordinate with caseworkers, foster parents, and other supportive adults to conduct life skills assessments and help youth to develop individualized transition plans covering short and long-term goals to assist youth in their transition to adulthood. In February 2017, DHS contracted with the Human Services Research Institute (HSRI) to conduct a statewide review of its 17 contracted ILP providers— the goal was to gain a comprehensive understanding of service provision across the state and to ensure that federal and state service requirements are consistently being met.

Overall, the case audit showed that providers are largely meeting contract compliance standards for referral response time, progress reporting due dates, and monthly meetings with youth, with less timely performance for skills assessment and transition planning documentation; these findings are detailed in the full report. The full report also outlines findings from interviews and focus groups with ILP staff and managers, DHS caseworkers, foster parents, and youth from each of the contracted providers. Primary findings and related report recommendations are summarized below.

Independent Living Staff

A huge factor in the success of any ILP provider is the strength of the team that works directly with youth. Throughout site visits to each of the providers, review team members heard about the phenomenal ILP case managers serving foster youth in Oregon. Youth described case managers as figures who motivate them while holding them accountable, and youth across the state voiced their appreciation for their case managers' genuine, consistent, and caring presence. DHS caseworkers were grateful for the breadth of support that ILP case managers offer youth, especially because high turnover and large caseloads can often prevent caseworkers from providing that same support. One caseworker suggested that the ILP case managers'



role is to “engage and empower youth to be more active in their own lives and be willing to go above and beyond to get them the tools and skills necessary to do that.”

Ultimately, the agencies contracted to provide ILP services appear strongly dedicated to the program and to supporting youth in their transition to independent living. Each has recruited strong teams of passionate, driven staff with expertise in providing individualized support to current and former foster youth, and youth nearly unanimously stated that ILP has been the program that’s made the biggest impact on their transition to independence.

The report recommended **higher funding levels** for ILP providers across the board.

However, while their passion and dedication were evident, ILP case managers frequently carry heavy caseloads and work long hours often for low pay; unsurprisingly, staff turnover was identified as an issue in the majority of sites. Several agencies have sought additional funding to support the ILP program through increased pay, company cars, and benefits packages, though many agencies are not able to provide this kind of additional support to their ILP program staff.

The report recommends higher funding levels for ILP providers across the board. Additional funds would allow contracted providers to better compensate ILP staff and to increase services, supplies, and financial supports for youth. Additionally, skill-building opportunities could be offered to ILP case managers to raise their awareness and skill level in applying for and leveraging various local, state, and even federal resources. For instance, providing grant-writing workshops for ILP case managers throughout the state could help increase the likelihood of provider agencies securing additional funds, and serve as a professional development benefit for ILP case managers.

Collaboration & Communication with DHS

Collaborative efforts between ILP case managers and their local DHS partners is critical to providing youth with comprehensive and integrated supports. However, communication between the two entities was identified as an overarching challenge in nearly half of the sites. In sites where collaboration was high, regularly scheduled meetings were a primary reason for the good working relationship. In these sites, ILP staff visit DHS branch offices on a regular basis (e.g., once a month) to share information about workshops and other events and to answer questions about ILP. Case managers typically remain onsite after sharing their regular updates, to chat about individual cases and introduce themselves and the program to new caseworkers.

Encouragingly, in sites with less collaboration, both caseworkers and case managers were eager to improve their relationships and were open to establishing ongoing communication measures.



Because collaboration between the two entities is critical, the report recommends ongoing efforts at the branch level, and by the State ILP Coordinator, to facilitate regular interaction and collaboration between DHS caseworkers and ILP case managers.

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Referring Youth to ILP

There is specifically room to improve communication around ILP referrals. In many cases, ILP providers described inconsistent practices in terms of who referrals are sent to, missing or outdated youth contact information, and a lack of pertinent safety or trauma-related information. Additionally, due to high levels of turnover across the state, DHS caseworkers have varying levels of familiarity with ILP services, which can result in inconsistent messaging to youth about what ILP provides (for example, youth hearing about the financial benefits but not the skills training, or vice versa), which may impact youth enrollment and engagement, if the program is different than they expected it to be.

In response to these referral and messaging challenges, the report recommends required ILP training for new caseworkers, and the revision of existing trainings as needed, to increase caseworker knowledge of how the ILP program supports youth, foster parents, and caseworkers during the transition from foster care. Additionally, the report recommends DHS provide up-to-date ILP program materials (such as flyers) for youth, caseworkers, and foster parents. Although some foster parents participated in the program review, it was agreed that in general they are not particularly involved or informed around ILP services, so new efforts such as program materials geared towards them could increase involvement.

Although outside of the scope of this review, it is worth noting that many DHS caseworkers were not aware of recent changes in skills assessment and transition planning forms, and/or were not aware

that they are responsible for completing this process with youths aged 14-15 years old. There is transition planning training available to caseworkers electronically through the DHS Learning Center, but it is clear that some caseworkers are unaware of this training.

Statewide Data System

In conducting the review, the evaluation team had difficulty with the lack of systemization in maintaining youth records across sites, due to missing information, poorly organized files, illegible handwriting, and inconsistent documentation practices. Such lack of systemization likely impacts the daily efforts of ILP providers and DHS caseworkers to maintain consistent records within and across programs. To address these issues, the report recommends the development of a web-based data system that could be used for both case management and documentation purposes.

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For a one-time low-cost investment, a data system could be built for ILP case managers to enter case-level information for each youth served by the program. By doing so, the state could easily understand how each site is performing at the click of a button. The system could be tailored to meet the needs of both state administrators and case managers: it could generate automatic reminders when assessment or documentation updates are due, and reports could be run by provider, documentation type, or even case manager. In this way, state ILP administrators could monitor contract compliance regularly, and provide guidance and clarification to sites as soon as problems occur.

A web-based system containing case-level information would also provide a foundation for more rigorous evaluations, which could potentially yield information that could be used in grant applications for additional funding opportunities. Further still, it would enable the state to simply better understand the impact of ILP services on youth.

Conclusion

The agencies contracted to provide ILP services have all established vibrant programs with strong teams of case managers, clearly dedicated to helping this vulnerable population in their transition to independence. Throughout this review, the level of individualization within ILP services has been abundantly clear; from workshops catered to youth's individual needs to the updated assessment and transition plans and mandated one-on-one sessions, Oregon's ILP providers are excelling at providing comprehensive and individualized supports for youth aging out of care.

Ultimately, the stakeholders most knowledgeable about ILP services are youth themselves, and they were overwhelmingly satisfied. Youth conveyed deep appreciation for their ILP case managers for motivating them to succeed, and consistently described the process as youth-led and that their goals and aspirations are reflected in their transition plans. However, while youth interviewed were overwhelmingly satisfied with the process, case audit results revealed room for improvement in terms of completing timely transition plans across the majority of sites.

Lastly, while the contracted providers clearly play a large role in the strength of Oregon's ILP, program achievements can also be traced back to state administrators, who demonstrate commitment to the program through continuous quality improvement efforts and by working closely with ILP case managers and DHS caseworkers throughout the state to provide training and support, as well as listening to concerns and making program adjustments as needed. Ultimately, Oregon DHS is administering a strong and dynamic ILP. The report authors offer the preceding recommendations as potential avenues toward strengthening an already robust program.

