Introduction: Each year, approximately 26,000 youth age out of the foster care system in the United States and are forced to transition into adulthood without the social support or life skills needed to thrive. Many youth who enter foster care do so for reasons of child protection and safety and have been plagued by trauma, family dislocation, and disruption. Once they near aging out of the public’s care, foster youth too often lack stable housing, educational preparation, and life skills needed to become self-sufficient adults. As a result, they experience high incidences of homelessness, poverty, unemployment, and underemployment, and are dependent upon public benefits. Moreover, most systems are completely unprepared to address the specific and complex preparatory needs of teen mothers who are in foster care and struggle to provide for, not just themselves, but also their children. The following paper describes the two-generation approach to alleviating poverty among young mothers aging out of foster care implemented by The Elizabeth Ministry (TEM), a five-year residency and development program for teen mothers who will soon age out of the child welfare system in Washington, DC. In the following discussion, the unique needs of youth and young mothers aging out of foster care are described, providing the research and practical foundation upon which TEM’s program model was built. Later, the specific program components and mission of TEM’s program model are discussed, followed by the expected outcomes for the teen mothers and their children.
A Two-Generation Strategy to Eliminating Poverty for Teen Mothers Aging Out of Foster Care

A Young Mother’s Story: Nancy considers the day that child protective services came to take her from her mother’s home as the day her life was saved (Interview confidential; pseudonym used to protect the interviewee’s identity). By the age of 15, Nancy had witnessed her mother doing drugs, suffered physical abuse, and run away from home. Going into the foster care system and having to live in a group home was an unknown reality, but in Nancy’s eyes, it was better than what her future held with her mother. “If I would have stayed in that house a little bit longer, I probably would have been dead,” says Nancy, an 18 year-old resident at The Elizabeth Ministry (TEM), a Washington, DC, independent living program for young adult mothers who are near aging out of foster care.

Nancy insists that being in foster care has not changed her outlook on what is possible for her life. She maintained good grades throughout high school, stayed active in after-school programs, and successfully earned her diploma. Yet, the anger that she feels toward her mother understandably remains. Nancy continues to work through her anger using techniques like writing and talking things out with her brother or her godparents, whom she refers to as her “other mother and father” and credits with providing a semblance of stability throughout the last four years of her life. “Me and my [biological] mother don’t click. The other lady I call my mom—our bond is like we’re best friends. I’ve been in a couple of situations when I was down and I could pick up the phone and call them…They’ve probably saved me from a lot of things.”

It was while living on her godfather’s couch that she learned about TEM. A former social worker recommended her for the program and accompanied her on a visit to the campus. Instantly, Nancy was excited by the program and the independence she could enjoy at TEM, while also receiving help preparing to live completely on her own one day. “When I saw it, I loved it and wanted to move in ASAP.” Unlike her group home experience, TEM would allow Nancy to have her own two-bedroom apartment to raise her daughter. “In a group home, you’re living with two or three people in one room. It doesn’t have a lock—everybody can come in and mess with your stuff. Here, you’ve got your own apartment…you make sure your apartment is clean and you make sure your child has clean stuff. There are doors with locks where I know no one can come in and take stuff.”

The sense of security that came along with having her own apartment was a major benefit of TEM in Nancy’s eyes, alongside autonomy and support services available to help her map out plans for the future. At TEM, Nancy and the other residents work with counselors on creating plans for their financial and educational futures and are set up with mentors who help the women build networks outside of TEM. Residents are also provided spiritual and emotional counseling to help them deal with the trauma of their family histories. Things like breathing and guided meditation exercises help Nancy and other TEM residents learn how to deal with their personal anger as well as avoid conflict with others. Courses on nutrition and cooking, grocery shopping, and other life skills are taught to help fill in the gap of soft skills the young mothers living at TEM may not have acquired. And because the program is specifically designed for young mothers, an emphasis is placed on helping the residents become loving and nurturing parents. The on-site child development center provides day care and an early learning curriculum for young babies and toddlers in addition to parenting classes for TEM’s residents. According to Nancy, the programs offered at TEM are actually geared toward helping her prepare for the rest of her life, as opposed to other living situations where she felt the staff didn’t care that much about her. “In the group home, the staff that was on duty—they wouldn’t really pay attention to
A Two-Generation Strategy to Eliminating Poverty for Teen Mothers Aging Out of Foster Care

you. They would take you out to lunch and maybe spend their little couple of dollars on you, but that’s not going to help you in real life. In here [TEM] it’s much better.”

Nancy is eligible to stay at TEM for four more years and hopes to eventually have an apartment of her own with her daughter. She plans to pursue business management and culinary arts in college and ultimately wants to own a restaurant. But she’ll wait until her daughter is in school before continuing her own education. “It will be better for me because I won’t have to think about a baby while I’m in class…there are a lot of responsibilities I have to take care of. If I’m taking care of a baby, I’m not going to be able to finish my school work.” By living at TEM, Nancy can spend the important time with her daughter early on while having the support needed to work and pursue education when she is ready.

Nancy’s story reflects a population often overlooked: Young mothers in foster care who are near aging out of the child welfare system. Like Nancy, young mothers in foster care confront traumatic family histories and painful turmoil. They also face the task of parenting a new generation, sometimes without having healed relationships with their own parents, while dealing with the economic and social hardships that young adults exiting the foster care system typically face. TEM was created to address the unique needs of this population with a comprehensive set of support services, anchored in safe, stable housing, and including developmental programs for the children of the young mothers in TEM’s care.

Unique Needs of Young Mothers Exiting Foster Care: Nancy’s story illustrates that children in foster care are placed there largely because of abuse or neglect in their homes, with no alternative care available. Though the hope of foster care may be to reunify youth with their families, the reality is that those who enter foster care increasingly remain in the system until they “age out” or reach the age of independence—18 or 21, varying by state jurisdiction. The latest data show that nearly 400,000 children and youth were in foster care in the United States in 2012, with approximately 24,000 leaving due to emancipation (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). In Washington, D.C., youth remain in the foster care system until age 21, and the latest state-level data show that in 2011, there were approximately 2,000 youth in Washington, DC’s foster care system, with 163 exiting due to emancipation—20 percent of the 803 youth who left the system that year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). These young adults attempt to live independently, yet are often ill prepared to do so and face a number of obstacles that make their transition to adulthood difficult. These obstacles may be related to finding stable housing and gainful employment, or may be related to having few social networks or life skills needed to navigate day-to-day independent living smoothly.

In a comprehensive, longitudinal study following a sample of youth who aged out of the foster care system in Iowa, Illinois and Wisconsin, researchers at the University of Chicago and the University of Wisconsin collected data that provide an informative look at the lives of young adults after exiting care, and describe some of the problems prevalent in their lives (Courtney, Mark, Sherri Terao, and Noel Bost, 2004). Data from the “Midwest Study” was used by Dworsky and Courtney (2005) to examine the incidence of homelessness among youth aging out of foster care and found that 14 percent of youth in the study’s sample had reported being homeless after leaving the system; of those, over half had been homeless more than once (Dworsky and Courtney, 2005). Further, among those who hadn’t experienced homelessness, nearly a quarter had moved three or more times by age 19 (Dworsky and Courtney, 2005). With housing serving as a source of critical stability in anyone’s life, the precarious housing
experiences of youth aging out of foster care threaten their ability to successfully transition into productive adulthood.

In other areas, such as education and employment, youth aging out of foster care are also vulnerable. Among the same youth examined in the Midwest Study, researchers observed that at age 17, those in the study faced significant educational deficits—half had been placed in special education; they were more likely to have been suspended and four times as likely to have been expelled from school; and they were more likely to have received failing grades (Courtney, Terao, and Bost, 2004). Fast forwarding to age 23, these setbacks had lingering effects—a quarter of the group had not received a high school diploma or GED and only 6 percent had completed a two- or four-year degree (Courtney et. al, 2010). Compared to a similar peer group, youth formerly in foster care were more than three times as likely to not have received a high school diploma or GED (Courtney et. al, 2010). Also by age 23, 48 percent of these youth were unemployed, and those employed earned wages of around $10 an hour, $4 an hour less than those in a similar peer group. Additionally, almost half reported having experienced an economic hardship, like not being able to pay rent or other important bills, and nearly a third had low or very low food security (Courtney et. al, 2010).

Evidence from program practice suggests that the stark economic realities facing youth aging out of foster care are compounded by a lack of familial support or strong social networks. None of us transitions to adulthood in a vacuum; rather young adults benefit from networks of family and friends that support their growth into independence as a young adult. However, these networks are often strained for youth exiting the foster care system (Jim Casey Youth Opportunity Initiative, 2011). Based on their review of literature on adolescent development and its impact on youth leaving foster care, the Jim Casey Opportunity Initiative (2011) concludes that transitions to adulthood for foster care youth would be enhanced by efforts to help them build social networks with caring adults in the community and empower them to plan and make decisions about their lives prior to leaving the system. This would seem to confirm data from the Midwest Study, which found young adults that aged out of foster care wished they had been better prepared with budgeting, planning, and time management skills (Courtney et. al, 2010).

Taken together, it is clear that youth who leave the foster care system are not ready to transition into independent adulthood simply because they reach a certain age. Like all youth, becoming a successful, productive adult requires skills building and planning. It also requires the feeling of stability and safety that comes with secure housing and employment that provides a living wage. For youth in foster care, these components of basic adulthood are not guaranteed.

The Elizabeth Ministry (TEM): Preparing Young Mothers to Thrive Outside of Foster Care: In the previous discussion, the basic components youth aging out of foster care need to thrive in independence were described: stable housing; a pathway to educational advancement; employment with a living wage; improved decision making skills; and a community and network of adults who care about their future. For young mothers in the system, additional components include: educational opportunities for their children; support learning how to become a loving and nurturing mother; and healing from emotional trauma that can impact their own parenting. Answering the call to provide young mothers in foster care with these assets is the motivation behind TEM.

Program Description
TEM is a community in Northeast Washington, DC, where young mothers, ages 16-21, live independently while also receiving support services for themselves and their young children. TEM became fully operational with its first resident in the spring of 2013, yet the building blocks were in motion long before. In 2007, TEM purchased two vacant, run-down 15-unit apartment buildings and set out to transform them into a warm and nurturing living community. Through a combination of public and private financing that took years to assemble, the buildings were renovated to create the Talitha Koum Cooperative Apartments, a 27 two-bedroom apartment community where young mothers live with their children. The bottom floor of one of the buildings also houses the AsA Early Learning Center for child development and care provided to infants and toddlers ages 0-3. TEM is currently home to 15 young mothers. Most residents have one child or are pregnant with their first child, however there are two families with three children. Residents who live in TEM are expected to work or be in school. Five of the residents already have completed their high school diploma or received a GED. The remaining 10 residents are in school or have plans to enroll to complete their diplomas.

Residents are referred to TEM through the child welfare system, social workers, and others. Because the program is more than just a place to live, residents agree to participate in the full scope of programs and services, but more importantly, commit to their own development and the development of their children while living at TEM. Each resident creates an individual development plan (IDP) to guide their growth at TEM and the on-site counselors and staff assist them as they make progress towards their specific goals.

**TEM Program Components**

- **Housing** – Housing is the foundation upon which TEM’s program model is built. Often, these women had been living in group homes, on couches, or on the streets, while pregnant. The goal for TEM is to give them a stable foundation upon which to develop into nurturing and loving mothers so that they and their children prosper. Through TEM, each resident is provided a fully furnished, two-bedroom apartment and the residents are required to keep the unit clean and ready for inspection at any time. Two housemothers live onsite—one per building—and maintain close relationships with the residents. Housemothers encourage community building among the residents by hosting resident meetings, cooperative grocery shopping trips, and home-living workshops (Kench, 2013; Carmichael, 2013). Housemothers also enforce TEM’s policies and procedures, ensuring that everyone, including young children, in the community is safe. Most importantly, housemothers serve as an adult “go-to” in situations where mothers experience a medical emergency related to their pregnancy or simply need assistance in their day-to-day lives.

- **Spiritual/Emotional Counseling** – One of the most important aspects of TEM’s program model is attention paid to the spiritual and emotional health of residents (Ray, 2013). Each young woman living at TEM meets weekly with an on-site counselor who helps them address the trauma of their family history and learn strategies for anger management, de-stressing, and building greater spiritual awareness. Guided meditation and breathing, group counseling, and self-development exercises help the young women reconcile their emotions. An emphasis is placed on
encouraging residents to build spiritual awareness, without prescribing specific beliefs, in order to help the young women foster greater resiliency, self-esteem, and self-love. Attention to spiritual development has been seen in practice to help youth in or aging out of foster care confront inner pain that blocks many from being able to develop strong life skills (Wilson, 2005).

• **Financial & Educational Planning** – Within their IDPs, TEM residents identify goals for their financial and educational future (Graham, 2013). Weekly meetings with an on-site financial and educational planning coach ensures that residents are making progress toward their goals by consistently attending school if they are enrolled, preparing to enroll or researching higher educational programs of interest, applying for employment, and preparing for interviews. Rather than use an authoritarian approach that forces the residents into programs they are not interested in, TEM focuses on helping the young women identify their specific goals and passions, and empowering them to take positive steps towards those dreams; while the counselor assists in their planning, residents are held accountable for their action toward meeting their IDP goals.

• **Mentoring** – To help the residents create diverse social networks and increase the number of caring adults in their lives, each resident is placed with two adult mentors—one young and one mature professional—from the community (Brown, 2013). Mentors are trained in listening skills, positive reinforcement, and building trust before working with TEM’s residents. Placements are tailored-made to fit the personalities and needs of both residents and those volunteering to mentor the young women. Mentors communicate with TEM residents once a week via phone, email, or social media, and are expected to have face-to-face visits at least monthly. The hope is for residents to establish relationships that will continue throughout their lives.

• **“Communiversity”** – TEM provides a weekly array of workshops deemed “Communiversity” courses that cover topics ranging from heath and nutrition to financial budgeting and planning (Graham, 2013). Recently, TEM housemothers held a workshop on cooperative grocery shopping and buying budget-friendly, nutritious food. An on-site diet and nutrition expert also conducts workshops on healthy living and physical fitness. TEM also recently invited a published author and expert on financial planning to present financial education basics for the residents.

• **Banking** – Having financial resources to obtain an apartment is one of the critical barriers youth aging out foster care face (Graham, 2013). TEM has established relationships with local financial institutions to ensure that each resident has one checking and two savings accounts—one for themselves and one for their child. Financial education courses help the residents understand how to budget for saving, and the residents are encouraged to save up to $75 or more each month if they can.

• **AsA Early Learning Center** – The AsA Early Learning Center provides early childhood learning and development for the young children living at TEM (Battle, 2013). Led by an executive director trained in education and child development, the early learning center’s goal is to work with parents to provide a strong learning foundation for infants and toddlers, beginning at six weeks. Placing the center on-site allows residents to leave for school, work, or other appointments with peace of mind knowing that their children are taken care of. The center uses the “Abecedarian Curriculum,” a pedagogy tailored to meet the developmental needs of youth from
A Two-Generation Strategy to Eliminating Poverty for Teen Mothers Aging Out of Foster Care

disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. With educational games that can be performed in the center and in the home, the Abecedarian Curriculum facilitates a bridge of learning and development from the center to the home. Moreover, the center conducts parenting classes to help give parents critical knowledge that will reinforce the development that takes place every day at the center.

Discussion

The spirit of TEM is holistic. The components described above reinforce one another, and the 16-member program staff works collaboratively to create a seamless structure of support for the young women living in the community. Based on research and practice, it is clear that a de-compartmentalized approach to helping youth in foster care does not give them the full range of supports needed to launch fully into independent living. While housing is a critical component, it alone cannot ensure a prosperous future for a young adult if employment with a living wage is not obtainable to help maintain housing security. Even still, gainful employment will only help a young adult who has the financial awareness to budget, save, and plan for the future. Further, any amount of education or external assets fall short of their potential to help youth aging out of foster care if the hurt caused by family displacement has not been reconciled. TEM takes all of these into account.

The spirit of TEM is also empowering. TEM residents agree to participate fully in the program’s components, and staff check in with residents if they fail to meet certain meeting dates or required deadlines. An important aspect of the developmental process for these young adolescents, however, is to allow them to learn how to budget their time, make priorities, and follow through with responsibilities while living autonomously. As a result, TEM affords the residents the freedom and flexibility to manage their schedules accordingly, while offering a nurturing hand to get them back on track if they become negligent in any particular area.

The spirit of TEM is grounded in long-term care. The program model is based on a five-year trajectory. Though not all residents will benefit from the full five years, depending upon their age when they arrive, TEM’s model of care acknowledges the scars created by family displacement and poverty cannot be removed in 12 or even 18 months. Long-term nurturing and life-skills development is needed for youth, especially young mothers, in foster care to leave the system fully prepared to rise above impoverishment and live independently.

Lastly, the spirit of TEM rests on knowing poverty alleviation efforts must address the healthy development of parents and their children. Among programs supporting youth who are near aging out of foster care, TEM is distinct in that it solely focuses on preparing young mothers for life outside of the child welfare system; it is the program’s belief that by helping young mothers gain a foothold on their futures, the repeating fate of poverty can be thwarted. TEM is not alone in understanding that a two-generation approach to poverty alleviation is needed to truly give families a chance at a better future, and organizations like the Aspen Institute are supporting these models in order to bring fruitful practices to the forefront (Aspen Institute, 2012).
Looking Ahead: TEM is in its first year of implementation and must continue to collect data that will capture its impact on residents. Future evaluations will focus on measuring TEM’s progress on helping residents meet short-term outcome goals like showing positive growth in self-understanding, knowledge and skills gained in work readiness and parenting, budgeting time, and other essential abilities. In time, TEM expects residents to attain economic self-sufficiency, establish positive social relationships and community involvement, and abstain from negative behaviors like substance abuse or criminal justice involvement that might derail their eventual success. Additionally, looking ahead, TEM continues to fundraise to ensure the program’s sustainability so that, ultimately, young mothers in foster care can transcend past difficulties to move out of poverty and into productive adulthood.
A Two-Generation Strategy to Eliminating Poverty for Teen Mothers Aging Out of Foster Care

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A Two-Generation Strategy to Eliminating Poverty for Teen Mothers Aging Out of Foster Care
