



LaShea Baker's first encounter with a social worker as a teenager in south Los Angeles quite simply changed her life. When a friend confided in her with a long-held secret, her first instinct was to find any way to help, eventually consulting a social worker stationed at her high school.

“Even though I wasn't there for myself, that social worker still cared for and worked with me because just hearing about the abuse was traumatic,” she remembers. “The work she did with my friend was amazing and inspired me to pursue social work. Once I started, I absolutely fell in love with the work and felt like I'd hit a home run. I also realized that there are very few fields that are this fulfilling and have this kind of impact.”

LaShea encouraged and was there to support her friend through the process of coming forward to seek help through the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). The experience of seeing firsthand that social workers can have such a profound impact on vulnerable youth as they prepare to transition from childhood into adulthood propelled her into a 21-year social work career with the department.

All youth working to get through high school and thinking about heading off to college face challenges, but LaShea knows better than most the obstacles that foster youth must overcome, above and beyond that of many of their peers. As one of 17 Independent Living Program (ILP) Transition Coordinators, she works every day to help transition-aged youth learn skills that many others may take for granted.

Foster youth often lack a parental figure or mentor to provide oversight and teach them basic life lessons, including how to navigate education options, financial literacy, employment preparation, physical and mental health, and the importance of stable housing. The ILP Transition Coordinators work with more than 5,700 youth age 16 to 21 to provide guidance across many of these areas and to ensure that youth have access to resources. They help develop a transition plan for each youth based on their goals and aspirations and teach them how to navigate different agencies to access services.

A big piece of LaShea's work is focused specifically on helping youth with issues related to education, including obtaining a high school diploma and attending a college or vocational school. She helps them review the cost of attendance, ensure that fees are paid and that they have proper housing so they can focus on school.

“These youth often just naturally want to be free and independent from the rules of the foster care system,” she acknowledges. “In their minds, they know what life is about and they have their own ideas about how they want



to navigate things. It's my job to be a support person, provide guidance and keep them engaged with their plan, but still give them the space to find their own way."

The ongoing public health crisis has exacerbated the issues faced by DCFS youth who are in the midst of trying to successfully transition to adulthood. Many of these young men and women are low income and working to make ends meet. Unfortunately, the health restrictions and resulting economic downturn caused many of these young workers to lose jobs, threatening their ability to afford college on top of necessities such as food and housing. In addition to requiring them to secure technology resources necessary for virtual instruction, the decision by many colleges to begin this school year remotely also complicates matters for youth intending to live on campus.

LaShea confronts these issues head-on, working closely with housing programs and educational institutions to find creative ways to help youth keep their dreams alive. She touches base with every youth at least once a week, and frequently spends her days on the phone with institutions trying to iron out details like living and funding arrangements to bridge the gap in the face of continued confusion and uncertainty. Knowing that the pandemic created significant obstacles for youth who were previously doing well following their transition plan, she tries to navigate the ambiguity to make sure youth are safe and able to continue their education.

While she finds the work itself fulfilling, LaShea gets a special sense of accomplishment when she can use her magic to help youth succeed. You can hear the smile in her voice as she recounts her experience helping one driven young woman who voluntarily reached out to ILP for help applying to Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

"She called me again around March in tears," LaShea recalls. "She had received acceptances to every school but was convinced she couldn't afford to attend. I worked with her and the schools to identify scholarships and financial assistance to bring the cost down, and I am absolutely thrilled that she is headed off to her first-choice school in Georgia this fall!"

At the end of the day, LaShea hopes to raise awareness about the difficulties of foster youth transitioning into young adulthood and the services that are available through ILP.

"So much of the emphasis tends to be on younger children, and unfortunately the transition-aged youth tend to be forgotten," she said. "It's important to remember that the services we provide are integral to their safety, given the risks of being unprepared to live on your own. There are so many supports and resources that we have, and much of what we do creates positive outcomes for youth. I want people to know that sometimes a simple telephone call is all it takes to reach out and get the ball rolling."



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Parade.

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