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RELATIONSHIP TRANSFORMS COMMUNITIES™



*An Open Table In Virginia*

# Lessons Learned Transition Age Youth

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## Background

The Open Table® is a novel and exciting process of providing direct support to persons with complex needs, including transition-age young adults. Direct support is defined as one-on-one relationships with peers, adults, and other volunteer community members. In dozens of communities across the U.S., Open Table is being used to coordinate direct support for transition-age young adults. This paper summarizes the lessons being learned from this important work.

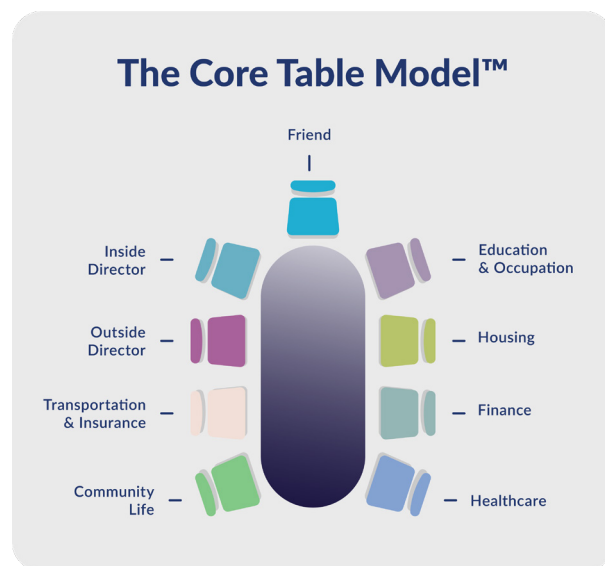
## Major Lessons Learned

Over the last decade, as communities began to use the Open Table process to serve transition-age young adults with the model, significant lessons have been learned. Some of these lessons include:

- The gaps in services to transition-age young adults can have a major negative effect on these young adults. Even though significant progress has been made around the country, the need for the transition-age young adults to have permanent, life-long community connections still needs work.
- Almost all people have challenges during the early transition years. However, what is often loss of family, friends, and the ir place in the community results in especially enormous obstacles for these young adults.
- Every community has massive untapped social and relational capital. When this capital is accessed through the Open Table process, the lives of many young adults are changed in positive ways. This document includes a number of examples from the lives of transition-age young adults served in the process.

## The Open Table Process

Open Table is used to address the needs of transition-age young adults, persons with mental illness, those reentering society from incarceration, and families involved with child welfare, juvenile justice, education, and other areas of need. Open Table involves four to ten individuals from the community who are trained to be in direct relationship with the person with complex needs. The person supported is referred to as a “Friend” and the volunteers are called Table members. The team, or the “Table” makes a long-term commitment to do whatever it takes to support a



healthy transition that is based on the Friend's immediate and long-term definitions of their own needs. The Table is guided by a life plan that reflects the goals of the Friend, along with Table assistance in clarifying approaches.

## Gaps in Existing National Services to Transition-age Young Adults.

The needs of the transition-age young adults have been well-documented, especially in the pioneering work of Chapin Hall's "Voices of Youth Count" initiative. Frequently, even if involved in quality child welfare or juvenile justice services, transition-age young adults are left with few supports. In many communities in the United States, services have been developed to address these needs. At a Federal level, in 2018, Health and Human Services awarded over 600 grants to communities to improve transition outcomes for this population. These efforts primarily focused on four outcome goals:

1. Providing housing.
2. Supporting the transition-age young adults completing education and entering the work force.
3. Encouraging pro-social relationships with peers and community members and promote a healthy lifestyle.
4. Building a permanent place in the community, including positive long-term relationships.

In many of these important local efforts, significant programmatic progress has been made in the first three outcome areas. As they become adults, transition-age young adults may enter quality transition services which have been provided by non-profits or done in tandem with child welfare or juvenile justice agencies. Ideally, these transition services begin a number of months or even years prior to the transition-age youth becoming adults, avoiding the aging out "cliff" which can await many transition-age young adults.



*Friend and Table member in Ohio*

However, the fourth outcome area has often gone unmet, and transition-age youth are often at risk for poor outcomes as they age out of state custody. In addition, many transition-age youth who have been in state custody suffer from the illusion that life will be perfect if they could only be independent and out of custody. As a result, many transition-age young adults are not enthusiastic about joining transition services.

## The Need for the “Fourth Area” of Building a Permanent Place in the Community

Existing transition services are often age-limited and can last until the transition-age young adults are either 20 or 21 years old. For example, transition funding in Colorado for transition-age young adults expires on the 21st birthday of the young adult. In quality transition services, the goal is that the young adults are ready to find their own housing opportunities, have skills in establishing positive relationships, and are ready to either continue work force readiness services or have secure employment and be able to support themselves. For a small group of transition-age young adults, these goals have been met. However, as documented by the Pew Research Center in 2018, the majority of these young adults need additional support to achieve these goals.

## Normalization About Being 21-25 Years Old!

It is important to note that a majority of young adults ages 21-25 have struggles with the goals of continuing education, gaining employment, and learning how to successfully navigate life. Even with a supportive family of origin, most adults can recount their own disasters during these



*Friend who graduated Open Table 2 years ago and Table member in Virginia*

formative years. The Pew Research Center (2019) on social and demographic trends cites that although most Americans believe young adults should be financially independent by age 22, the reality is that the majority of young adults are still financially dependent on their parents at age 29.

For transition-age youth who have lived in foster care, residential treatment centers, or juvenile justice facilities, or who have been victimized, the psychic wounds often prohibit a “normal” transition curve. However, most transition funding, if it exists at all, stops at 21 years old. We often pretend that transition-age youth are truly ready for their long-term adult lives, even though most of us needed additional support to become functioning older adults.

## Long-term Supports and Relationships Needed by Transition-age Young Adults.

We know that transition-age young adults can benefit from positive long-term supports, including but not limited to:

- Having champions to provide encouragement for positive actions such as obtaining additional higher education.
- Being able to access mentors, either older or peers, to “bounce” ideas off, and brainstorm with.
- Spending time with others to engage in positive behaviors, entertainment, and pro-social activities.
- Learning crisis management: Crisis is part of life, but it is managing the inevitable crises that supportive and long-term relationships can help with.

Recently, a Table graduate, now in his early 30’s and a decade after his Table formally ended, shared that he had recently completed his bachelor’s degree, and invited his entire former Table to the graduation. Each of the seven Table members attended and celebrated with him.



## Lessons Learned by Open Table from Serving Transition-age Young Adults.

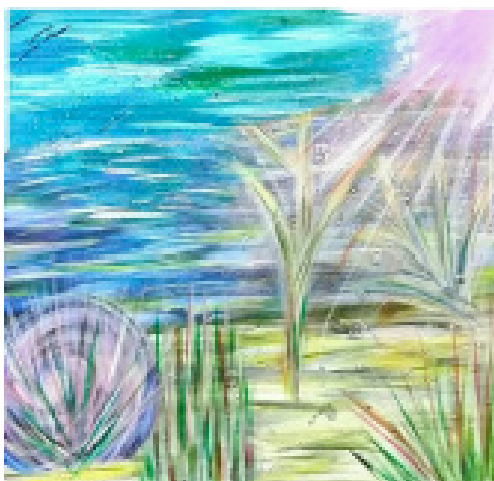
Across the United States, transition-age young adults have been and are being served by Open Table. These services are carried out in ways that reflect true transition, which often lasts into the early thirties or longer. Selected lessons are as follows and include italicized case examples. Confidentiality was protected through modification of non-essential details and name changes.

### 1. Tables Provide Diverse and Creative Supports.

*Dee was 18-years old when she left the foster care system. She had major unmet medical needs as well as other challenges. She was referred to Open Table by her child welfare worker. In her community, a local service club sponsored Tables specifically for transition-age young adults. Her volunteer Table members included a physician, an attorney, a leader from her community, and others, who helped her clarify her goals. Due to her connection with the physician and other Table members, Dee was able to get support in accessing medical care as well as helping her reinstate her Medicaid when it lapsed. Dee wanted to learn to drive a car and to own a car. One of her Table members knew a local Driver’s Education Instructor who agreed to do individualized instruction to teach her to drive. Another Table*

member knew of a local charity that provided cars to persons in poverty, and Dee was able to obtain a 2010 sedan after she got a part-time job and earned the money for the license and insurance. Each of Dee's Table members brought their own experiences and social and relational capital to help Dee experience positive opportunities in her community.

## 2. Tables Can Include Peers Who Contribute and Benefit From Table Membership.



Painting about the Open Table experiences by a young adult in Virginia titled "Gratitude"

As a homeless youth and then young adult, Emilio had lived on the streets of his large city for over three years prior to being convicted at age 19 for repeated petty street crimes. The local judge referred him to Open Table as a diversion from incarceration, and to help him with transition and permanency potential. His Table consisted of five citizens from a local business that provided volunteers for Tables. In addition, Emilio asked if he could have two of his street friends participate in the Table. The local Open Table Community Engagement Coordinator (a person who helps coordinate Tables for a community) first screened and then welcomed the peers.

Her interview of Emilio showed that he, based on his street experiences, had little trust of older adults. His peers were invaluable to help Emilio understand that this was a real opportunity far more than simply a diversion from doing jail time. Later, one of the peers requested his own Table and was served through the model. The Judge later commented that Emilio, at age 23, had one of the most successful diversions he had seen and was at low risk for future legal problems.

## 3. Transition-Age Young Adults Often Have Experienced Trauma, Including Victimization.

The Table members need to understand the basic elements of trauma. Although Table members are not clinicians, Tables often provide supports which help reduce and manage trauma triggers. Transition-age young adults can learn to trust again when surrounded by caring, dependable, safe adults and peers.

Becky and LaTonnja were close friends with similar past experiences, and who had aged out of the foster care system. Five months prior to turning 18, they were referred to an Open Table effort which was through a local faith community. The referral came from a case worker. These transition-age young adults were the first "duo" referral in their community. They were both young single moms. Because of their history of trauma and having been sexually victimized, they experienced significant

*anxiety and hyper-vigilance related to the safety and well-being of their children. When Open Table coordinators met them, these two young mothers literally would not let their infants out of their sight for even a second. Becky noted that even after her Table had formally ended and her basic plan was implemented, she was still reluctant to trust Table members. However, in relationship with two of her former Table members, Becky finally began to trust that they cared for her and had her best interests in mind. A year after her formal Table ended, Becky was hospitalized due to a serious illness. These two Table members and LaTonnja were there by her side and cared for her infant while she recovered.*

#### **4. Transition-Age Young Adults Must Have Voice and Choice.**

Table members can learn to avoid seeing their role as directing young persons what to do.

*Table members quickly realize that telling transition-age young adults what to do rarely works. Lynn was 19 when he has referred to Open Table by his probation officer when he aged out of a juvenile justice facility. He was attracted to the model because he was assured that he had the primary say in what happened in his plan. One Table member's tone would escalate Lynn during Table meetings. This Table member came from the field of education and thought if she outlined exactly what needed to be done, it would help teach Lynn to see what options were best. Lynn was having none of this and felt he was being preached to.*



*With the coaching help of the Table coordinator, Lynn brought up the issue in a meeting and told the Table he did not want this to continue. The Table member was not even aware she was doing it until Lynn brought it up. They had a separate conversation and were able to come to an understanding. They agreed to have a code word empowering Lynn to signal to the Table member when she was “telling him what to do” and the Table member would stop. Lynn eventually acknowledged that the Table member had some good ideas, and together they successfully implemented his plan.*



## 5. Transition-Age Young Adults Can and Do Learn To Become Positive Community Members.

Marley was referred to Open Table by an outreach staff person from a local mental health agency. Marley was distrustful about the process and thought she would be disrespected. She had a strong personality and was a leader of her group of street youth. Her Table coordinator saw this and asked her to co-facilitate the meetings. Through this experience, Marley learned the skills needed to work with and manage a team of people, as well as how to best advocate for herself. Within four months, Marley was managing the meetings by herself. A year after her Table ended, Marley was interviewed about her perceptions about why her process was successful. She said that this process helped her recognize her story has power.

Marley has begun accepting speaking engagements where she tells her story to large groups of people, to help decrease the stigma around mental health issues. She credits the Table experience for helping her have the courage to do this. She was also beginning to volunteer for a youth voice organization to help other youth who may have similar experiences to her own.



## 6. A Job Is Not Always the Goal.

Employment by itself is not the goal. The true objective is to develop the confidence and skills to get vocational education or find a job.

*Rosario, age 18, had experienced over a dozen foster homes in six years. She had come into Open Table from a joint school and child welfare referral. Rosario had personal ambitions about becoming a famous singer, but eventually, with the support of her Table, targeted some other more realistic employment goals. A pre-vocational assessment by the school showed that Rosario had no idea how to find a job and knew even less about keeping a job. She did not want to go to formal vocational assistance programs, but instead chose to be mentored by two Table members (both grandmothers who between them had 18 grandchildren and greatgrandchildren) in job searching and in how to keep a job.*

*They role-played with her, doing mock interviews and pretending to be her boss at a neighborhood store. She would then demonstrate her skills in front of the whole Table, getting important validation about her efforts.*

*Eventually, Rosario found a minimum-wage clerk job at a music store and used her “Grandmas” to get through the initial rough spots. Unfortunately, after a six-month window, she was laid off from her job when the store closed. After a brief time of panic, through supportive conversations with her Grandmas, Rosario was able to regroup and applied for 20 jobs within 24 hours. Within two weeks, she had multiple interviews and ultimately ended up with employment resulting in more hours and higher pay than her previous job. She had learned confidence needed to move forward with her life.*

## **7. Crisis Can Be Managed With Less Trauma and Life Disruption.**

Crisis is part of life, but if not addressed, can derail years of progress. Successful transition does not mean that all problems vanish, and that the sun comes out and life is perfect. For transition-age young adults, the goal is to have supports during inevitable ups and downs, and the Table can be there during these times. In crisis, the Table does not “take over” but rather provides support as needed.

Open Table staff report many examples of seeing crisis support be effective with transition-age young adults:

- One Table member went to the apartment of a transition-age young adults as police arrived (in the midst of the transition-age young adult having a physical altercation with a relative) to provide emotional support during her temporary detainment.
- Table members helped a transition-age young adult find her lost wallet and recover her ID, Social Security card, and Medicaid card.
- Table members picked up a transition-age young adult after an auto accident and helped him navigate the police report, insurance claim, and auto repair.
- A Table member provided a transition-age young adult with temporary housing in the Table member’s home when the transition-age young adult’s current living situation became unsafe and the police had to intervene.

## **8. Being Part of a Table for a Transition-Age Young Adults Is Transformative for Table Members.**

Table members come from many different places, including when a business sponsors Tables, from faith communities hosting Tables, and from community organizations or nonprofits. Open Table research on Table outcomes has found that Table membership changes not only the life of the Friend, but of the Table members.



*An Open Table serving a young adult in Ohio*

- A Table member who was a bank officer for a local bank spoke in front of a civic group and shared that her experience on a Table for transition-age young adults gave her a true sense of purpose and was one of the most impactful encounters of her life. She said it helped her understand her own teens better in that she learned how to balance teen voice and choice with family rules.
- Another Table member reported that as a human services worker, though she worked on a regular basis with those in need, the experience of being on a Table completely transformed her understanding of the daily challenges and barriers which transition-age young adults and other Friends in the process can face.
- One Table member reported that her experience of being on a Table had a positive impact on her marriage and that she learned to be a better listener.
- Another Table member reported that she quickly realized that her past assumptions about why people live in poverty were wrong. She said that she previously saw poverty as a character problem and a choice. She said that by getting to know her transition-age young adults, she found that life circumstances were major contributors to poverty.

**Optional: a Quick Quiz About Your Own Transition to Adulthood.  
Please Answer the Following Questions.**

1. If you were raised by an adoptive or biological parent(s), at what age were you financially independent from your parents or guardians?
2. Did you have any major challenges in transitioning to adulthood? If so, why were those challenges?
3. If you had been victimized or sexually trafficked as a teenager, would it have affected your eventual transition to adulthood? How?
4. Name one or more persons (other than immediate family) who positively influenced you in helping transition to older adulthood. Were these short-term or long-term relationships?

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