

# FOSTERED ARIZONA VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

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**2014  
-  
2019**



# REFLECTIONS

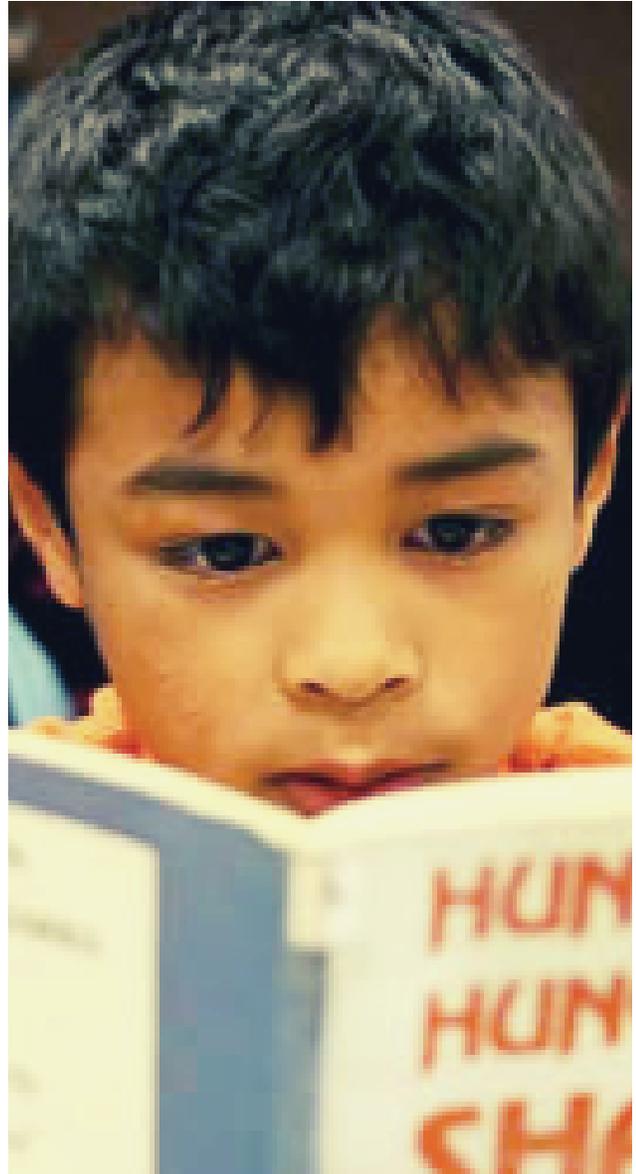
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This report summarizes the five-year span when FosterEd Arizona collaborated with the communities that surround our students and engaged volunteers as Educational Champions, Academic Guides, and Success Coaches for students in foster care. It features our diverse group of volunteers and includes key takeaways that summarize our growth and the goals we achieved as a program.

Engaging volunteers in any organization should be beneficial to the individuals giving energy and time, the populations they serve, and the organization itself. FosterEd Arizona has managed a volunteer program that supported young people in foster care striving towards their educational goals and simultaneously raised awareness in our communities, creating advocates out of educators, students, and parents.

As sole coordinator of the FosterEd Arizona Volunteer Program, I am incredibly proud of the connections that volunteers of all different backgrounds made with our students. Every match, every goal, and every champion has made an impact in these young people's lives.

Our volunteer program's ethos was beautifully summed up by longtime volunteer Sue Vardon when she reminded me, **"I don't expect things to suddenly happen. Our job, as adults who work with kids, is to plant seeds, even if you don't get to see what grows."**



**arayah larson**

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF  
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

# TIMELINE

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## SEEING THE NEED

In the fall of 2014 after a year of serving youth in Pima County, FosterEd's direct service program was off to a strong start. The program model consisted of Education Champions, Education Teams, and Student Centered Engagement. Quickly, our Education Liaisons noticed a disparity among the students they served. Students with natural supports on their team were able to overcome educational obstacles faster and benefit from FosterEd support at a higher level than those without natural supports or whose natural supports were not ready to take lead roles in advocacy. Seeing this need, FosterEd decided that the best path to take was to engage the community and bring in volunteers to take on the role of Education Champions for youth.

## FOSTERED VOLUNTEER PROGRAM 1.0

For the first two and half years, FosterEd's volunteers served in the role of volunteer Education Champions, advocating for the young person and their educational goals in Child Family Team meetings, within their placement, and at schools. These champions were called upon when students working with FosterEd Educational Liaisons couldn't identify a strong voice for education within the child's current support system, and they were supported by a court order signed by a Juvenile Court Judge that allowed them legal rights to the student's school records.

## VOLUNTEER EDUCATION CHAMPIONS

In this role, volunteers were able to become what their student needed; some guided students applying to college, some tutored young people struggling to read, others were passionate advocates, fighting against unjust school discipline decisions or inadequate special education services the way many parents fight for their child's rights at school. All of this work was encompassed by the single title of Volunteer Education Champion, but the needs our volunteers filled would lead us towards more defined roles in the future.

## RECRUITMENT

FosterEd Volunteer Education Champions committed to a year with their student, but most worked with their student from the time of assignment until the young person was no longer in the care of the Department of Child Safety, helping their students transition to more stable lives. As a program, we were careful to recruit volunteers ready to make this commitment. Our volunteers were parents, experienced educators, and tended to be older adults with some understanding of the foster care system and the children that live within it. This kept our volunteer program limited in size, but each volunteer was more likely to stay through their commitment and be patient through a student's tough times.



Lori Riegel trained to be an Educational Champion with FosterEd in early 2015. She went on to be a donor and community partner, and transitioned into work as an Academic Guide and Success Coach when volunteer roles changed.



Matthew brought his experience as a former foster child to his volunteer work with FosterEd. He worked with two students.

# TIMELINE



When UA student Regan told her mom, Lisa, about FosterEd, they both became volunteers. Regan volunteered in Tucson with two near-peer high school students. Lisa used her strong math background in accounting to tutor a student in Prescott, Arizona on math.



University of Arizona Honors Program students Isabella, Regan, and Kailey pose with their training binders after their Volunteer Training.

## EXPANSION

With the passing of Arizona House Bill 2665, FosterEd took on the challenge of expanding and refining our program model. Along with the opportunity to implement FosterEd statewide came a need to re-evaluate how our volunteer work force could serve more young people in foster care and have more training and specificity in their role. This would make the work of our volunteers, by then a substantial number of community members with individual goals and motivations, more rewarding and effective. Like all good volunteer programs, we had another goal: build community support and a donor network for FosterEd Arizona. Our aim was to have happy, supported, fulfilled volunteers.

## VOLUNTEER PROGRAM 2.0

The new, expansion-ready version of the volunteer program had multiple goals:

1. Provide educational support to young people in foster care and model goal-setting, academic confidence, and build trust between students and community members in their lives.
2. Implement the volunteer program wherever our direct services are provided and make a quality volunteer match available for every student who is ready for help.
3. Build community support and a donor network for FosterEd Arizona.

## ROLES

With expansion, our volunteers served in two roles: Academic Guides and Success Coaches. Approximately 93% of all volunteer requests were for Academic Guides, our term for goal-driven and growth-mindset-oriented tutors; the remaining 7% of students were referred for a Success Coach, an adult ready to support their transition from high school to post-secondary education and provide any mentoring and guidance they may need to help make that plan a reality.

## A MORE DIVERSE VOLUNTEER FORCE

Our goal was to find enough volunteers with a variety of skills in every region so that a student in any region where FosterEd provides services could ask for assistance and be provided a volunteer who wouldn't have an inconvenient distance to travel. These guidelines structured the 2.0 version of the volunteer program and made the student/volunteer matches more meaningful and impactful.

One of the challenges of adhering to these guidelines was difficulty recruiting in specific areas, such as the west valley of Maricopa County. But that challenge, in turn, was the impetus of the partnerships we began with local college students, an age group that we found provided more math-specific expertise than their colleagues. The additional flexibility of volunteers meeting with students at their placements and on their schedule allowed stay-at-home and working parents to volunteer when it worked for them, creating a more inclusive and diverse volunteer force than the 1.0 version.

# DATA & ANALYSIS

## ORIGINAL PROGRAM

Between 2014 and mid-2016, FosterEd Volunteer Program 1.0 recruited carefully, focusing on finding a match for every student and a student for every volunteer. If our evaluation of student need decreased, our recruitment intentionally slowed. One of our primary programmatic goals was to assure that every volunteer felt valued, necessary, and productive.

## SEPTEMBER 2016

By September 2016, a year and a half later, FosterEd was asked to report on its success as a volunteer program. In a report to the Community Foundation of Southern Arizona, we reported that 23% of all FosterEd students had a volunteer education champion. By then FosterEd had been using volunteers for approximately three years. During that period:

**90 individuals expressed interest.**

**54% of those individuals went through qualifying and training and were matched with a student.**

## JULY 2017

In early 2017, with uncertainty about continued funding, we stopped recruiting new volunteers, using our existing volunteer work force as efficiently as possible to keep serving the students in need of support. This was a difficult but important choice to assure that volunteers trusted FosterEd to communicate openly with them every step of the way. By July 2017 we knew we would be expanding statewide and changing our volunteer program model. At the end of FosterEd Volunteer Program Version 1.0:

**124 individuals expressed interest.**

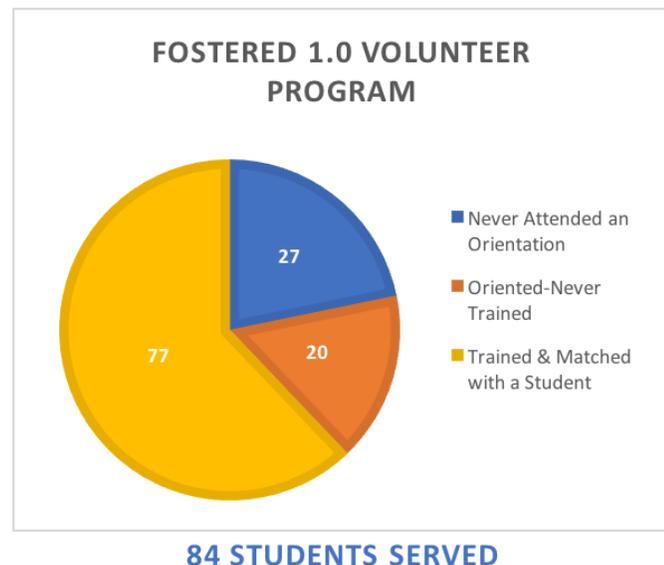
**62% of those individuals completed qualification and training and were matched with at least one student.**

**84 students were matched with a Volunteer Educational Champion.**

## A SMALL, BUT ADAPTABLE PROGRAM

We recruited volunteers with experience and understanding of the foster care and education systems, supported them throughout their work with students, and kept retention rates high enough that volunteers took on additional students. This resulted in a lean but impactful volunteer program, manageable by one coordinator and flexible enough to provide support that suited each unique student.

This adaptability also allowed us to bring many of our 1.0 program volunteers over to the new program that would have more specific and defined roles.



# DATA & ANALYSIS

## EXPANSION OF PROGRAM

Under the 2.0 version of our program, Academic Guides and Success Coaches were matched with a student in their region with corresponding needs that the volunteer felt able to provide. This made our recruitment needs much higher, but also allowed us to serve more students overall. *The numbers to the right reflect only the last 2 years of the volunteer program, the entire span of FosterEd Arizona 2.0.*

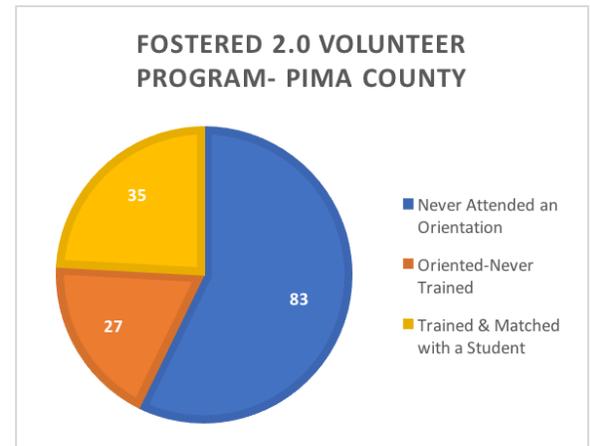
## ANALYSIS OF OUR NUMBERS

Something important to notice about our numbers is that our interested volunteers were far more likely to drop off before attending an Orientation than after. This was beneficial because it meant people interested in volunteering were more likely to drop off before learning more about our work. It also means that our first step of informing interested volunteers about the commitment and patience required to do our work did the work of preventing interested individuals from attending an Orientation and not finding it a good fit for their life and schedule.

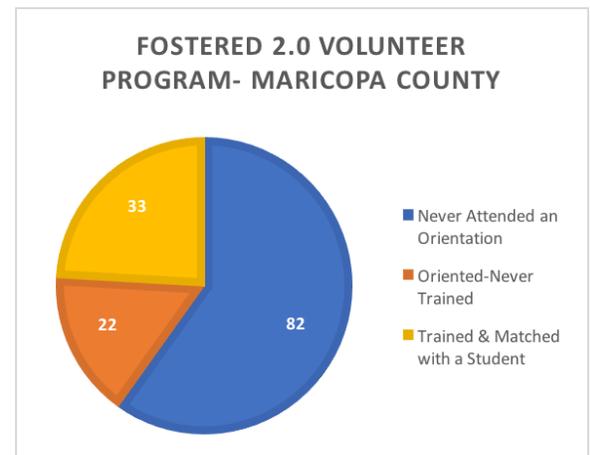
Volunteers who were trained often waited for a student match in the 2.0 version, and what we initially thought would be a difficult ask turned out to be something volunteers were incredibly willing to do, to wait for the student that needed them most. However, the need for a broad work force of volunteers with diverse skills and specialties required larger recruitment goals, and it was difficult to achieve this in three counties with their own populations and cultures.

## END OF PROGRAM – AUGUST 2019

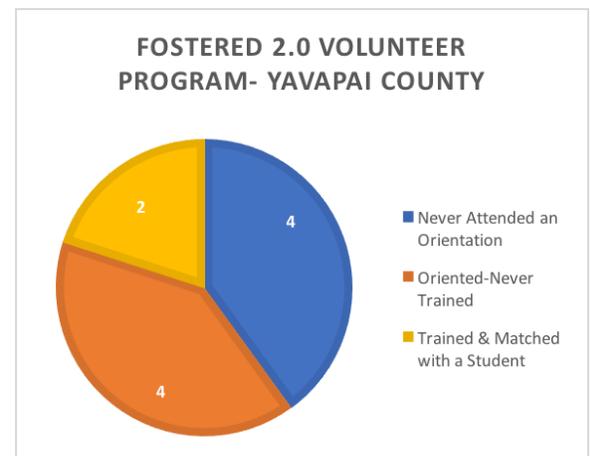
By November 2017, FosterEd Volunteer Program 2.0 was launched along with new roles and recruitment across Maricopa and Pima County. A little over a year later, recruitment began in December 2018 in Yavapai County. Unfortunately, the limitation of monthly orientations, training (and a snow storm!) slowed the development of our Yavapai volunteer program. In Maricopa County, the economics of the valley limited our ability to match students and volunteers. The majority of our students lived in the West Valley, but ASU recruitment as well as retired volunteers were much more likely to live in the East Valley. In the end, minimal students that were referred were not matched with tutors because of these recruitment difficulties, but without these challenges the coordinator's limited time could have been used to better support the assigned volunteers.



**45 STUDENTS SERVED**



**30 STUDENTS SERVED**



**1 STUDENT SERVED**

# TAKEAWAYS

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- 1. The Theory of Change** FosterEd believes that high-quality relationships focused on a young person's education will lead to high-quality outcomes. FosterEd volunteers, in their various roles, were applying this theory of change. The value of volunteers in the lives of our students was the power that they had as community members who aren't being paid to spend time and energy with students in their own neighborhoods. As one student put it, "I didn't care about my education until someone whose job it wasn't told me to care."
- 2. A good volunteer program** can operate within a vacuum with targeted recruitment, effective and inspiring training, and retention support. However, an excellent volunteer program—one that is fully committed to the population served and works in tandem with direct service providers—requires a level of support that a single coordinator cannot provide across three counties with limited resources and other programmatic priorities.
- 3. Understanding the realities of the foster care system** was a key component of every FosterEd volunteer's training. Our volunteers went into their work with an understanding of trauma, systemic issues that limit our students' abilities to thrive in educational settings, and the often-temporary status of every placement a student finds themselves in. As a conclusion, our volunteer/student matches were often eagerly dedicated at the beginning, but volunteer burnout, student trauma, and busy schedules often made the kind of lasting, impactful relationships that FosterEd's theory of change requires impossible.
- 4. The FosterEd Practice Model**, the cornerstone of our direct service work, has made an incredible impact in the educational services of the young people with whom we work. However, because the volunteer program was never fully integrated into the practice model, resources for it were not prioritized and both staff and public partners were not given enough information to be highly invested in the work. This impacted the volunteer program in many ways, but the most substantial was that we were not able to be as innovative or pursue ideas outside of a strict program structure with few volunteer roles. Ideas like campus visits, group home tutoring, and college counseling clinics led by volunteers were not feasible.
- 5. Our statewide expansion** in the last two years has allowed us to reach more students than ever, have a program flexible enough to partner with college students and working parents, reach rural students in areas outside of Prescott, groups of siblings in Tucson, and young people in every busy corner of the valley. The downside to our rapid expansion was that we weren't able to support them the way we wish we could have. Our volunteers deserved more feedback, more communication, quicker matches to students, and more help facilitating often difficult relationships with group homes and bio-parents. The ongoing schedule of recruitment, orientation and training also left less time and fewer resources for supporting the volunteers already assigned to students.
- 6. Our volunteers served more than 160 kids** through tutoring, advocacy, coaching, and building relationships with patience, kindness, and compassion. They have fought for fair discipline in schools, assured appropriate special education services, guided students through classes as varied as kindergarten and calculus. They have helped students apply for college and build the time management and study skills they'll need to succeed there. They have talked to students' foster parents and unified teams of professionals struggling to balance our students' many priorities. The impact they made may not have always felt visible or immediate, but the young people they worked with are more likely to trust adults, engage in their community as adults, and set achievable goals for their education. We can't wait to see what these young people, and these amazing volunteers, do with the skills they've learned together.