



Eric Morton
NECCO Lexington Program Director

Over the summer, NECCO offices in Florence, Lexington, and Paducah, KY launched formal Independent Living programs to help youth experience a more positive transition from foster care to adulthood. The Lexington team led by Program Director **Eric Morton** and Case Manager **Jennifer Stamper** are leading the charge on program development and have done an outstanding job launching what is sure to become a very successful program for youth aging out of foster care.

NECCO News spoke with Eric recently about the launch of the Independent Living program in his service area.

NN: What does the Independent Living program mean to you and your staff?

EM: I think the IL program is a great opportunity for kids and the company, as well as our staff. We took veteran staff like Corey (Birch) and Jennifer (Stamper) who have dedicated over 8 years of service to Necco and found a way to prevent burn out by assigning them to the IL program. They love the experience.

NN: Can you describe how the IL program is in line with Necco's mission statement, "to take the best possible care of those we serve and those who serve them?"

EM: The IL program is the latest step along a continuum of care that focuses on a youth's future as an adult while creating a more complete system of care for youth served by NECCO in general. For example, when the IL program was launched we transitioned at least 9 youth who were 18 or close to turning 18 and placed them in apartments. This created at least 9 new spots for foster youth who needed placements. Taking the best possible care of youth also means giving them the skills they need to live independently after foster care ends. For years we have discussed a way to support youth beyond turning 18 and now we have created a program that will in my mind have a generational affect.

NN: Does the IL program operate according to a particular philosophy or principle?

EM: The program is deeply grounded in the 12 principles of re-education according to Dr. Nicholas Hobbs in his book *The Troubled and Troubling Child*. We believe that young people are able to learn the skills they need to be happy and productive citizens and provide positive experiences for learning. For example, we provide the kids with incentives connected to IL skill development. For the month of August whomever has the cheapest utility bill will get an extra \$50 on their food stipend as a reward.

NN: Leadership seems to be an important component to a successful Independent Living program. Can you provide some examples of how Necco promotes leadership to these kids?

EM: Leadership and community service are integral components to our IL program. We are developing leaders by identifying one IL youth in each of the apartment complexes to act as RA's for their complex. These RA's will be responsible for things like showing new youth around the area, monitoring the behavior of other youth in the apartment complex, helping move furniture in the apartment and participating in the advisory council.

We have youth who will be tutoring through Southland Christian Church. These youth will go to an assigned elementary school one hour per week to help a child sharpen their reading skills.

We have committed to feeding the hungry at a local homeless shelter in September. This will be one our of quarterly community service projects. Other projects will include habitat build, 5 k run walks, and stocking local food banks.

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NN: Personal achievement and the concept of self-actualization are cornerstones to human development in general. It must be even more important in the lives of foster youth who already have to overcome so many obstacles. How does your IL program promote personal achievement?

EM: We are very supportive of youth's personal goals and encourage the development of these goals as far as the youth are willing to take them. For example, we had one youth participate in the Bluegrass State Games. He competed in the 800m, 19-24 year old division and was awarded a 2nd place medal. That was awesome!

NN: How many youth are currently served by the IL program?

EM: We have 14 youth

NN: Education is touted as an important piece of your program. What are some of the careers, interests, and/or courses of study that the kids are pursuing?

EM: Currently we have 3 students perusing their GED and 1 high school student. We have one youth currently attending Strayer University and seeking her BS in criminal justice. We also have one youth attending UK and seeking her BA in anthropology. We have one youth attending Barber School and seven other youth attending Bluegrass Technical and Community College. These kids are studying subjects like computer science, pre-law, X-ray tech, political science, electronics, and social work.

NN: Are the youth employed? What types of jobs do they hold?

EM: Positive work experience is central to our IL program. Currently we have one youth who works at a movie theater, one who does landscaping, one who works at an after school program, and one who works at a local Amazon.

NN: What is the overall goal of the IL program? What do you aim to achieve?

EM: The goal of the program is to facilitate growth by providing a continuum of care which we hope will lead to positive change and impact our community one youth at a time. If we can give these young men and women a strong foundation in their early adult years we will help them as well as their future children. ★

NECCO accepts placement referrals for 17-21 year olds. In addition, youth must be committed to the Kentucky Department of Community Based Services, have 6 months of previous placement stability, be motivated to learn and grow, and demonstrate an ability to save money for successful independence.

The NECCO Lexington office accepts monetary and in-kind donations geared toward enhancement of the IL program. **If you are interested in making a donation or would like to learn more please contact Jennifer Stamper of the Lexington office at (859) 264.8796.**