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Foster Care Service Barriers and Social Work Practice in the Virgin Islands

Anna Maria Clarke
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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Anna Clarke

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Walden University
2020

Abstract

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by

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MSW, Walden University, 2017

M Ed, University of the Virgin Islands, 1998

BSW, Clark Atlanta University, 1990

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Social Work

Walden University

November 2020

Abstract

This qualitative research study explored service barriers social workers encountered while working with their foster clients aging out of placement in the Virgin Islands. This study provided an understanding of the problem and seminal literature that warrants further study in the future. The foundation for this study was grounded in ecological systems theory. Data collection consisted of narrative interviews with social workers from a single government agency. Six social workers from the islands of St. Croix and St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands discussed the challenges they encountered while working with their foster clients aging out of placement. Key findings from the study and the main themes included (a) lack of family support/community involvement, (b) lack of housing, (c) adolescents' lack of intellectual capacity/independent living skills, (d) lack of training/employment opportunities for adolescents, (e) services not suited for adolescents, and (f) uncooperative and combative clients. The findings from this study may inform social work practice and policy for the single government agency. The findings may also influence interventions and positive social change by resulting in a reduction in the number of adolescents aging-out of the foster care system without supportive resources.

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Dedication

This Doctoral Capstone Research Project is dedicated to the loving memory of my parents, Mr. Melbourne Clarke and Mrs. Janet Joyce Amaro-Clarke. Neither lived to see this great accomplishment; however, I am sure they will be watching over me during my hooding ceremony. I also dedicate this study to my daughter, Aliyah Makeda Brooks, as you are my biggest cheerleader and best accomplishment. I know your love is always with me in whatever I pursue. This project is also dedicated to my siblings Ray A. and Lynette Clarke; we may have taken different paths, but we will forever be bonded by sharing the same beginning in our journey. Lastly, I dedicate this study to all foster children; those currently in placement and those who have aged-out out of placement.

Acknowledgments

“No one who achieves success does so without acknowledging the help of others. The wise and confident acknowledge this help with gratitude.” ~ Alfred North Whitehead

First, I must acknowledge and thank God for his never-ending grace, mercy, and provision during what has proven to be one of the most challenging times of my life. I received a great deal of support throughout the writing of this Doctor of Social Work Capstone Research Project. I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my committee chair, Dr. Tom McLaughlin. Your expertise, guidance, and support were invaluable throughout my doctoral journey, and for that I would like to extend a heartfelt “thank-you.” I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Andre P. Stevenson. Thank you for your listening ear, a shoulder to cry on, and holding my hand when I needed it. Dr. Gillian McKnight-Tutein, you are the sole reason I entered the DSW program, as we both know. Dr. G, you were an awesome mentor and friend. I’ll never forget your FB post asking my friends and Sorors not to invite me anywhere until I submit my proposal...LOL. Thank you for helping me see and believe, what you saw and already knew.

My sister circle - Shana Brathwaite, Vanda Alezy-Baptiste, Arlene Helenese, Dr. Jennifer James, Richetta Akins, Angela Martinez, Dr. Sophia Joseph Parrilla, Soror Connie Francis, Soror Etta Lee Pickering-Mitchell, Soror Pauline James, Soror Zulima Webster-Lake, and Rheitza Javois - each of you provided unending love and inspiration. Thank you to my MSN (Male Support Network) - Dennis “Dingo” Brow, George “Georgie” Chiverton, Fitzroy “Figgy” O’Garro, and Patrick “Soljah” Farrell.

Dennis, my brother, the only thing that separates us from being true siblings is DNA. You have been a brother to me from our initial meeting in 1990 to present. You have come through for me too many times to count. I appreciate and love you for always being there for me as well as for everything you have done for me. Georgie, I appreciate you for the road we have traveled over the last 20+ years. My story brought me to you, and I would not revise a word of my past if it led me anywhere but to you. Figgy, thank you for being an injection of motivation when I needed it most. I really appreciated each text message and phone call of support and encouragement. Patrick, your generosity is deeply appreciated. I am forever grateful and appreciate you more than these words can express.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

Annually, approximately 23,000 foster adolescents age-out of foster placement in the United States, where many face challenges as they make the transition to adulthood (Shah et al., 2017). As of 2015, approximately 428,000 adolescents were in placement in the foster care system, per Duke, Farruggia, and Germ (2017). Foster adolescents must begin the process of transitioning out of placement or *aging out* as they approach the legal age of 18; the age when they encounter a host of new responsibilities and challenges (Fowler, Marcal, Zhang, Day, & Landsversk (2017). Homelessness was also noted as a barrier for aging out foster adolescents as indicated by (Pryce et al., 2017). Inadequate housing and homelessness are barriers encountered by aging out foster adolescents also noted by (Shah et al., 2017). Richards (2014) referenced a report, relative to housing for adolescents aging out of foster placement by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which confirms a body of research that suggests there are high rates of homelessness among this population. Certain critical needs such as the need for medical care and mental health also serve as service barriers (Ahmann, 2017). It should be noted that these adolescents have far higher rates of mental health challenges than non-foster adolescents as indicated by Sakai et al., (2014). Other barriers include a risk for involvement in the criminal justice system for adolescents aging out of foster care placement into adulthood (Crawford, Pharris, & Dorsett-Burrell, 2018). An additional barrier to making a successful transition to adulthood is the labels placed on some such as deviant, delinquent, or criminal as noted by Lee, Courtney, Harachi, and Tajima (2015). There are many barriers that preclude foster adolescents' successful transition to

adulthood in the community when they begin the process of aging out of placement. The many barriers identified in the literature pose challenges to the successful transition to adult life for many aging out foster adolescents. Housing and homelessness as a result of unstable or unavailable housing are major factors that negatively impact foster adolescents, lack of medical and mental health care, along with involvement in the criminal justice system also influence the success of transition to adult life for aging out foster adolescents. This issue relative to aging out of placement is not unique to the states, but also impacts a territory of the United States; more specifically, the Virgin Islands.

Problem Statement

The primary problem for both Division of Children and Family Services social workers and their aging-out foster clients is the barriers they encounter without supportive resources, that non foster clients do not encounter, which precludes their successful transition to adulthood at the age of 18.

In the Virgin Islands, there is a single government agency whose focus is the delivery of services to children who have suffered abuse and/or neglect perpetrated by their family (Department of Human Services, 2016). These children may be required to be removed from the home of their family of origin and placed in the foster care system for some period time (Department of Human Services, 2016). This single government agency is the sole licensed social service agency with the authority to legally remove children from their homes; and this agency provides social services to the Virgin Islands communities (Liu & Wang, 2015).

The Division of Children and Family Services District Manager, L. Johnson, discussed the geographic challenges that influence the availability of services to the Virgin Islands. Per L. Johnson, given the islands' geography (each surrounded by water) it is not possible to travel to nearby islands or states to access services; that the limited resources and services available on one island are the same for all four islands (personal communication, January 13, 2019). There is little to no existing information relative to the specific challenges facing the Virgin Islands; this study uncovered the information relative to those challenges. Division of Children and Family Services social worker, D. Hicks, also discussed most of the identified challenges in the literature encountered by social workers in the states, as well as the lack of health insurance, a supportive family, and early parenthood encountered by foster care social workers and clients on the island of St. Croix (D. Hicks, personal communication, January 13, 2019). Lack of health insurance and early pregnancy are barriers indicated by data presented in The Mena Report (2016). All identified barriers are the ramifications of aging out of foster care without supportive services, which present challenges not just for social workers, but also the foster adolescent clients they serve. D. Hicks (personal communication, January 13, 2019) explained that there is a need for effective interventions, in the Division of Children and Family Services, to address service barriers encountered while working with this population.

Given the information, in this qualitative research project, I sought to understand what service barriers social workers at the Division of Children and Family Services face relative to their foster adolescents aging out of placement. The results intend to inform

social work practice and policy for the single government agency as well as to influence interventions and positive social change. Exploring the barriers can inform child welfare systems, potentially resulting in a reduction of the number of foster adolescents transitioning out of the foster care system unsuccessfully.

Purpose Statement and Research Question

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the service barriers social workers encounter while working with their foster adolescent clients as they begin aging out of foster placement in the Virgin Islands. I sought to provide an understanding of this problem and provide seminal literature that may warrant further study in the future. The research questions of this capstone research project are as follows:

RQ1: What service barriers do social workers, at a single government agency, encounter while working with adolescents aging out of foster care in the Virgin Islands?

RQ2: How do the challenges that social workers experience, at the single government agency, impact their practice at the micro-, mezzo-, and macrosystem levels in the Virgin Islands?

Key Terms

The following key terms used throughout this capstone research project are as follows:

Aging-out: Aging out refers to adolescents in a state or territorial foster care system who remain in placement as they approach the legal age of adulthood, which is usually when they graduate from high school (Collins, Jimenez & Thomas, 2018).

Child abuse: Maltreatment in the form of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse perpetrated by an adult on a minor; the perpetrator is usually a parent or guardian (Aadnanes & Gulbrandsen, 2017).

Child neglect: Failure to supply the basic needs of an adolescent, such as food, shelter, and clothing (Friedman & Billick, 2015; Rebbe, 2018).

Child welfare system: An agency, state, or nonprofit that assumes the management of a foster child's case at the point in time the child enters treatment (Pickover & Brown, 2016).

Family reunification: Subsequent to separation mandated by the court, a child subjected to abandonment, neglect, or abuse returns to their birth family (Bansal, Smith, & Vaara, 2018).

Foster care system: An alternative form of care for children whereby a child is placed in the care of a different family other than their family of birth (Konijn et al., 2019).

Macro level social work practice: Social work interventions provided on a large scale that affect communities and systems of care (Cox, 2019).

Mezzo level social work practice: A social work practice with small to medium sized groups such as schools, neighborhoods, or community organizations (Cox, 2019).

Microlevel practice: The most common type of social practice which involves direct practice with an individual or family (Cox, 2019).

Service barriers: Challenges experienced by foster adolescents that preclude their successful transition to adulthood such as completing their education, obtaining gainful

employment, lack of finances and housing, and addressing critical needs such as medical and mental health (Ahmann, 2017).

Social work practice: Possessing knowledge of human development and behavior, as well as cultural and social institutions. Possessing professional skills to assist individuals in obtaining services, advocating for clients, assisting communities with improvement to its social and health services, and providing therapy to clients (Ornellas, Engelbrecht & Spolander, 2018).

Social worker: One who has knowledge of human development and behavior as well as of various institutions and applies social work knowledge, values, principles, and techniques when assisting clients in attaining services; providing psychotherapy interventions with micro- and mezzo systems; effecting positive social change in communities; as well as advocacy efforts on the legislative level (Hill, Fogel, Donaldson & Erickson, 2017). Per Mandel (2019), an individual can practice as a professional social worker if he/she earned a Master of social work degree (MSW), then completed post graduate work for 2 years while supervised by a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW).

Transition: The period when foster adolescents age out of care, usually from public systems, and enter into adulthood (Manuel et al., (2017).

A study with a focus on foster care has not been conducted in the single government agency to date, per social worker D. Hicks (personal communication, January 13, 2019). Supervisor L. Johnson also confirmed the lack of research in this area for the single government agency (personal communication, January 13, 2019). This

study is necessary and vital to the Virgin Islands as the results may address the issue of the growing number of aging-out foster adolescents. Additionally, this study provided seminal literature as no other research relative to foster care has been conducted to date in the Virgin Islands. The results informed and advanced professional social work practice for the single government agency relative to interventions. Lastly, the study results may influence existing policy and/or result in the development of new policy and programming for the department.

Nature of the Doctoral Project

This doctoral capstone research project focuses on the Division of Children and Family Services social workers' practice with their clients in foster care in the Virgin Islands. A qualitative study was conducted to explore the service barriers that social workers at the Division of Children and Family Services encounter while working with their clients. A narrative research design was applied to address the research questions and uncover the research participants' experiences in their practice setting. This design is consistent with the exploratory research questions posed and the purpose of the study as it generated qualitative data based on experiences and perspectives. It is a naturalistic inquiry that poses a question of a social nature (Beuving & Vries, 2015) which makes it ideal for a narrative approach. Purposeful sampling was used to select research participants. Participants were recruited using purposeful sampling from a single government social service agency. This agency was the sole source of data collection. Purposeful sampling is appropriate when there is a specific phenomenon being studied and the participants share the same experience (Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton Nichols, &

Ormston, 2014). It is also known as subjective or selective sampling; as it is a non-probability form of sampling where the researcher depends on their sole judgment in the selection of individuals within the population to participate in their study (Ames, Glenton, & Lewin, 2019).

Social workers at the single government agency were invited to participate in the study. Recruitment techniques involved general solicitation through email-delivered recruitment flyers that identified the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the study, to the social workers at the single government agency. I conducted individual interviews with the social workers. Audio recordings with transcription were used for the data collection process and a thematic analysis conducted to identify themes in the data collected.

The Significance of the Study

The topic of aging-out of foster placement has been a topic of interest and study in academe for many years based on research ranging from 2014 to present; however, conducting research for this study yielded research on foster care as early as the 1900s. Foster care is a child welfare system that is overloaded and underfunded (Delgado, Carvalho, Pinto, & Oliveira, 2017). This study has the potential to contribute to an understanding of the process, as well as the associated service barriers, by exploring social workers' experiences with their clients who age-out of placement. The results of this study have the potential to make a positive contribution to the advancement of social work practice in the Virgin Islands. It may increase knowledge on the transition from aging-out of foster placement to adulthood on the micro-, mezzo-, and macrolevels for Division of Children and Family Services social workers in the Virgin Islands. My

research has not yielded any studies focused on the Virgin Islands. In fact, supervisor L. Johnson (personal communication, April 22, 2019) indicated that the single government agency lacks research in this area; that to her knowledge, a study has not been conducted to date and she would appreciate the results as it may influence practice and policy for the department. Therefore, this study is necessary as it may result in seminal literature for the Virgin Islands.

Additionally, this study may increase awareness of the service barriers unique to the social workers in the Virgin Islands, as opposed to those identified by social workers in the United States. Most of the research reviewed on adolescents aging out of foster placement focuses on the United States where there is a myriad of resources and interventions available to address those challenges experienced by social workers there. Those service barriers encountered by social workers may be vastly different from those encountered by social workers in the Virgin Islands.

Lastly, this study may positively impact permanency planning decisions for Division of Children and Family Services social workers. Permanency planning involves consistent assessment and preparation of an adolescent for long-term care, when in an out-of-home placement such as foster care (Lockwood, Friedman, & Christian, 2015). When planning for a supportive environment for aging-out foster adolescents, policy and practice decisions relative to this population are essential factors (Curry & Abrams, 2015). On the microsystem level, social workers may make changes in practice to improve the transition process, if changes on the microlevel are successful, there could be influence on the single government agency policy relative to foster care on the mezzo-

system level. Changes in practice and policy would positively impact the larger macrolevel system including the Virgin Islands community, resulting in positive social change.

A qualitative narrative approach to this study was built on the existing and growing body of research relative to adolescents aging out of foster care. Hamshire et al., (2017) informed that for centuries, narratives have been used to communicate experiences of individuals. These authors further explain that “narrative research is concerned with the construction, interpretation and depiction of storied accounts of lived experiences, and aims to organize a sequence of lived events into a whole” (Hamshire et al., 2017, p. 53). Per the authors, the methodology is set in the accounts of individuals’ experiences. The methodology for this study was set in the experiences of the Division of Children and Family Services social workers. In addition, but more specifically, this study is germane to the Virgin Islands.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework selected to frame this study is Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, which was developed in 1979 (Graves & Sheldon, 2017). This theory is best suited for this current study as it posits that interconnected social systems influence individuals and these systems are also influenced by individuals; both directly and indirectly (see Graves & Sheldon, 2017). As indicated by the model of this theory, interconnected social systems function in roles such as the microsystem, the mezzo system, and the macrosystem (Graves & Sheldon, 2017).

The microsystem is the social workers' immediate surroundings; these settings are inclusive of one-on-one close interactions of a personal nature, that social workers have (Graves & Sheldon, 2017). These interactions can be with a foster parent(s), a service provider, or with a researcher. Mezzo system relationships can exist between social workers and other professionals in the system. Lastly, the cultural environment with other systems comprises the macrosystem; social workers' interactions with other community agencies (Graves & Sheldon, 2017).

Per Becker and Todd (2018), "one of the most-broad and inclusive theories of human development, ecological systems theory posits that all human development is a process of interaction and interdependence between biology, social worlds, and the environment" (p. 1121). The ecological systems theory was the framework used to explore the interdependence of social workers and the child welfare foster care ecology system. For purposes of this capstone research project, the foster care ecology system consisted of social work practice as the micro system, the single government agency as the mezzo system, and other social service agencies as the macro system. The ecological systems theory served as the basis to understand the correlation between social work practice and the systems impacting foster adolescents aging out of care. This theory frames the exploration of barriers social workers encounter while working with their foster adolescent clients aging out of care. Exploring the system impact through narrative interview format to (a) exemplify the social workers' practice and personal experiences the microsystem; (b) understand the social workers' interactions with the single government agency depicted the mezzo system's engagement; and (c) identify the mezzo

system's (single government agency's) interactions with other social service agencies in the larger context of the community increased understanding at the macrosystem level.

Values and Ethics

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics has a set of values and ethics that form the foundation of the social work profession, but more importantly, the code of ethics guides professional practice (Pak, Cheung & Tsui, 2017). In social work practice, social workers strive to assist individuals in need and manage social problems as stipulated in NASW's value of service (NASW, 2017). The value of service directly impacts the Division of Children and Family Services. Their social workers' sole responsibility as helping professionals is to help serve persons in need as they are tasked with managing social problems (Pak, Cheung & Tsui, 2017). The value and ethical principle align with the study as it speaks to the functions foster care social workers perform. Foster care social workers consistently provide services to adolescent clients who are in need (Pak, Cheung & Tsui, 2017). Another NASW core value that is foundational to this current study is Dignity and Worth of a Person (NASW, 2017). The ethical principle of respecting the dignity and inherent worth of a person (NASW, 2017), reminds social workers at the Division of Children and Family Services to treat clients in a caring and compassionate manner, as well as to be mindful of diverse cultural and ethnic differences. The study's methodology and data collection process demonstrated dignity and worth of research participants following institutional review board (IRB) research standards and principles. Professional ethics, such as those indicated in the NASW (2017) are put into place to guide social workers' professional behavior.

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

Various articles that focus on adolescent foster youth aging out of care are discussed. The keywords searched are adolescents, teenagers, young adults, aging out, foster care, transition, and aging out in the databases SocINDEX, PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, ERIC, and Thoreau multidata base search. The content contained within the resources align with the problem of this study as all resources discuss the problem of foster adolescents aging out of placement without supportive resources, and their unsuccessful transition to adulthood as a result.

The literature review process identifies each step used to search the literature, as well as a synthesis of the literature relative to foster adolescents aging out of foster care and the barriers social workers encounter. The process for the literature review is detailed in the first section, while definition of terms comprises the second section, and the history of foster care is explained in the third section. A synthesis of current research is presented in section four. Limitations are identified in the fifth section, and a summary of the research comprises the last and sixth section.

The Social Worker's Role in the Foster Care System

The social worker functions in essential roles within the child welfare system, which offers protection to vulnerable children, promote permanency planning, and provide support for the wellbeing of children and families (Thompson, Wojciak, & Cooley, 2015). Social workers function as case managers within the foster care system. The case manager's role requires social workers to provide support to the foster family, collaborate with other agencies, conduct and employ research, and address policies

(Thompson et al., 2015). Also, a social worker in child welfare may advocate for as well as support legislation, investigate cases of child abuse and neglect, and function as an advocate for their clients (Thompson et al, 2015). Additionally, social workers also function in many roles in foster care within the child welfare system.

When removal and placement of an adolescent becomes necessary, the social worker provides supervision of foster parents the adolescent is placed with by providing support and monitoring of placement relationship (Jaggar, 2018). There are other roles social workers function in either as part of their daily duties and responsibilities or due to heavy caseloads and the need to identify placement options for their clients. Whatever the reason, social workers function as a recruiter in the foster care system. The social worker may be tasked with recruiting and selecting families for their clients. Additionally, social workers may also function as a screener and trainer for foster parents. Social workers may have to vet identified individuals selected for placement and provide them with training relative to how to function as foster parents to adolescents the foster care system placed in their care (Dhludhlu & Lombard, 2017).

How Foster Children Enter the System

Per Jedwab (2017),

On September 30, 2015, over 427,000 children were in foster care in the United States (AFCARS report, 2016). This represents a 3% increase from the previous year and the second year in a row that there has been an increase in the overall number of children in out of home care. (p. 177)

It is clear from the research that there is an increase in the number of adolescents entering the foster care system and there are specific ways in which they do so. Adolescents enter the foster care system by means of a report to a child welfare agency, or either by law enforcement (Pickover & Brown, 2016). Law enforcement is usually involved when the gravity of the report of abuse and/or neglect is such that it threatens the immediate safety and security of the adolescent (Pickover & Brown, 2016). Law enforcement is tasked with obtaining a court order for the removal of the adolescent, then removing the child, and contacting the child welfare agency for protective custody. The investigation into the allegations of abuse/neglect occurs once the adolescent is removed from the home (Pickover & Brown, 2016). It should be noted that a large number of these adolescents are from low-income communities and the removal from the home is usually due to physical, sexual, or emotional abuse; some form of neglect or abandonment; substance abuse by the parents; or death of the parents (Olson, Scherer, & Cohen, 2017).

An additional means by which an adolescent enters in the foster care system is by means of a state's protective services agency where a complaint of abuse and/or neglect is made (Pickover & Brown, 2016). The complaint of suspected abuse and/or neglect can be anonymous or made by a mandated reporter such as a physician, nurse, law enforcement personnel, teacher, or school counselor to the state agency. A social worker is assigned to investigate the allegation which must be conducted within 48 hours of the initial complaint/report of abuse and/or neglect. The social worker's investigation would consist of interviewing the child, the accused perpetrator of the abuse and/or neglect, the

individual who made the complaint/report, as well as other individuals in the adolescent's life such as teachers, neighbors, and parents (Pickover & Brown, 2016).

When the social worker's investigation is concluded, one of three recommended courses of action can be implemented: (a) the allegation can be dismissed based on the findings of the investigation, (b) the allegation of abuse/neglect can be substantiated and prevention services recommended, or (c) the allegation can be substantiated and removal of the adolescent is recommended (Pickover & Brown, 2016). The social worker drafts a petition for removal of the adolescent from the home once he/she determines prevention services to be futile or the risk for further abuse/neglect is too great for the adolescent to remain in the home with the parent/guardian (Pickover & Brown, 2016). When an adolescent is removed from the home, that adolescent can be placed in a residential facility or with a family in foster care (Vanderfaeillie, Van Holen, Carlier, & Fransen, 2018).

Reasons for removal from care. When adolescents are involved in investigations for abuse and neglect, approximately one-fifth of those investigated are placed in foster care (Testa, Woodruff, Bess, Milner, & Woolverton, 2019). Some adolescents quickly return to their families of origin; however, others remain in foster placement for many years, void of permanent families (Testa, Woodruff, Bess, Milner, & Woolverton, 2019).

Adolescents who can no longer be cared for by their birth parent(s) are usually placed in residential care, or more specifically, foster care (Konijn et al., 2019). Foster care promises to provide foster adolescents with a safe, nurturing, and consistent

environment when removed from their families of origin and homes (Leathers, Spielfogel, Geiger, Barnett, & Vande Voort, 2019). There are many reasons for the removal of these adolescents. In fact, Font, Sattler, and Gershoff (2018) indicated that “foster care is sometimes necessary when children have experienced abuse or neglect and the risk to their safety cannot be immediately resolved with a less intensive intervention” (p. 248). Moreover, foster placement becomes necessary when there is evidence of lack of appropriate parenting, parents engaging in substance abuse, parental abandonment, and death or incarceration of parents (Konijn et al., 2019). Adolescents have also been removed from the home due to parents suffering with a disability that impacts their ability to provide adequate care and supervision (Lightfoot & DeZelar, 2016).

Reasons why adolescents remain in foster placement. When foster adolescents remain in the foster care system without any opportunities for family reunification or permanent placement with an adoptive family, it is referenced as foster care drift (Gardner, 2018). Not all adolescents placed in care have this experience; in fact, Andersen (2014) stated that most adolescents placed in care outside of their home environment have a stable placement experience. However, there is a large number whose time in foster care resulted in multiple moves and a variety of adjustments to different family dynamics (Gillum, Lindsay, Murray, & Wells, 2016). These multiple moves have necessitated multiple educational setting changes which makes them more likely than their peers, who were not fostered, to be retained in a grade during their educational journey; they are more likely to have behavioral issues that can negatively hinder their academic progress (Olson et al., 2017). There are many reasons why

adolescents experience instability in their foster placements; and the reasons are not solely the responsibility of the adolescent.

Per Andersen (2014), one reason for unstable placement patterns of a foster adolescent is the dissatisfaction of the placement on the part of the adolescent, or the foster parent cannot manage the adolescent. Anderson provided an additional reason as family reunification may not be a viable option as the issues that influenced the removal may still be negatively impacting the biological parents, and/or the parents may be impacted by new issues. Lastly, there may have been administrative and political changes that may have influenced some positively functioning placements forcing termination (Andersen, 2014). It is for these three primary reasons that adolescents remain in placement until the age of transition, that being the age of 17.

Aging-Out of Foster Care Placement

Per Gomez, Ryan, Norton, Jones, & Galán-Cisneros (2015), nationally, 345,958 adolescents were in placement in foster care in 2011. The authors further indicated that since 2007, 25,000–29,000 adolescents experience aging out of foster placement into independence (Gomez et al., 2015). Additionally, Rome and Raskin (2019) added to this research as they posited that over 24,000 adolescents experienced aging-out or transitioning out of the foster care system in 2014. The term “aging-out” is used to explain the process by which an adolescent departs from the foster care system (i.e., the education system, housing, and financial components that provided support to them until they attained independence; Nsonwu, Dennison, & Long, 2015). Gomez et al., (2015) identified three significant developmental functions aging-out foster adolescents

encounter during this time: becoming solely responsible for themselves, making their own decisions, and financial independence. Per Nsonwu et al. (2015), this process usually occurs on the 18th birthday of the adolescent, which is the legal age of adulthood.

Many foster adolescents are forced into adulthood at the age of 18 and are expected to function independently despite their lack of preparation for adulthood and a healthy, supportive family environment (Nsonwu et al., 2015). These foster adolescents who grow up in residential care settings, separated from their biological family members, and forced to leave their placement at the age of 17 or 18 do not have the option of gradually transitioning to adulthood (Refaeli, Mangold, Zeira, & Köngeter, 2017). Nsonwu et al., (2015) further described that these adolescents experience many problems that are quite normal for adolescents such as peer pressure, self-doubt, achievement expectations, and tension; however, these problems are exacerbated when adolescents are impacted by the foster care system. Some of the problems experienced by foster adolescents are inclusive of early pregnancy, poverty, homelessness, lack of education, lack of employment, and legal issues and/or incarceration (Nsonwu et al., 2015). Their history of caregiver maltreatment and unstable living situations associated with multiple placements place foster adolescents at greater risk of potential poor outcomes in adulthood (Thompson, Greeson, & Brunsink, 2016). There is a large subgroup of foster adolescents who experience repeated disruptions to their social networks due to multiple foster placements especially as it relates to non-relatives, residential placement, and group homes (Blakeslee & Best, 2019). This is an example of one of the risks of poor

outcomes as referenced by Thompson et al. (2016). Add summary and synthesis to fully conclude the paragraph.

Le Claire and Lanterman (2017) conducted a study to determine if there were risk factors amongst a sample of aged-out foster adolescents and the impact of said risk factors. A comparison of state and national risk factor averages was made and it was concluded that aged-out foster adolescents are more vulnerable than their peers who have not been in placement and that they disproportionately experience crime as a risk factor Le Claire and Lanterman (2017). In fact, Lee and Ballew (2018) reported high rates of incarceration by former foster adolescents subsequent to their exit from the foster care system. Lee and Ballew (2018) indicated that there are studies that suggest that involvement in the legal system as a juvenile may influence social exclusion whereby educational achievement is hindered and there is a great possibility of adult criminal behavior. Gomez et al., (2015) highlighted the problem of homelessness as they stated homelessness is a risk factor that correlates with multiple foster care placements and can correlate with physical and mental health issues. The authors also brought attention to housing as an issue for aging-out foster adolescents, noting that it is augmented by lack of employment, financial resources, and education. Liu, Vazquez, Jones, and Fong (2019) expounded on the reasons for education being a barrier for aging-out foster adolescents which are inclusive of being retained in a grade(s), disruption to the school year by changing schools, and high rates of enrollment in special education programs that is higher than the general population of students.

In addition to educational barriers, foster adolescents are void of a family support system when aging-out are confronted with a housing and/or economic situation Curry and Abrams (2015). These adolescents experience worse outcomes when they make their adult transition alone, as opposed to those adolescents who have a support system Curry and Abrams (2015). Curry and Abrams (2015) noted the need for social supports for a successful transition. Neves, Dias de Carvalho, Serra, Torres, and Fraga, (2019) referenced a similar type of support for a successful transition to adulthood known as social capital, which encompasses overall well-being, educational attainment, as well as social mobility; this type of support are resources that can be attained as needed and are embedded in social networks. Gomez et al., (2015) as well as Rosenberg and Kim (2018) both confirmed previously indicated challenges foster adolescents experience during placement that may impede their success in adulthood such as instability in placements, various forms of trauma, and mental health challenges; all of which places adolescents at risk for adverse outcomes as young adults. For example, there may be some foster adolescents who suffer from mental and health issues as well as behavioral and socialization issues; this would require them to have multiple services to address their needs as one issue may hinder their ability to seek services for another, thus posing additional challenges (Malvaso, Delfabbro, Hackett, & Mills, 2016). Powers, Fullerton, Schmidt, Geenen, Oberweiser-Kennedy, Dohn, Nelson, Iavanditti, and Blakeslee (2018) drew attention to aging-out foster adolescents diagnosed with disabilities and/or mental health challenges, noting that they are more likely to be diagnosed than their peers in society. Kang-Yi and Adams (2017) cited studies that posited that about 80% of

adolescents in foster care present with considerable emotional and behavioral health issues. Per the authors, the diagnoses are more likely related to multiple school changes, separation from the biological family, and a history of maltreatment and trauma (Powers et al., 2018).

Greeson and Thompson (2017) also confirm the same challenges as the authors note foster adolescents are at a heightened risk for many adverse outcomes as young adults such as (a) lack of employment, (b) little or no education, (c) dependence on governmental financial programs, (d) unmet behavioral health needs, (e) unmet medical health needs, (f) lack of housing, involvement in the legal system, and (g) early pregnancy. Schelbe and Geiger (2017) confirm early pregnancy as an adverse outcome as the authors posit increased levels of parenting among foster adolescents aging-out of care. Early pregnancy and parenting present a significant challenge for social workers as well as for their foster adolescent clients. In fact, Radey, Schelbe, McWey, Holtrop, and Canto (2016) also confirm this as they inform us that there are high rates of pregnant aging-out females, those who gave birth, as well as those who have repeated births during the aging-out process; all of which add to the existing challenges aging-out foster adolescents experience. Per Gomez et al., (2015) these challenges encountered by foster adolescents hinder their ability to attain positive outcomes in adulthood.

Literature Review on the Current State of the Foster Care System in the VI

An interview was conducted with Mrs. Lovine Johnson who serves as the supervisor of the partner organization for the single government agency on the island of St. Croix, in the Virgin Islands of the United States. It should be noted that the single

government agency is the child welfare agency for the Virgin Islands. To gain a full understanding of the foster care process, Mrs. Johnson explained how cases are referred to the partner organization.

There are four social workers and one supervisor providing services to the community, in the partner organization, on the island of St. Croix and one social worker in the same partner organization on the island of St. Thomas. It is agency policy that a report of abuse and/or neglect can only be made to the division responsible for such reports within the single government agency. When the report is made, a social worker investigates; if a determination of abuse and/or neglect is made, the social worker takes the adolescent into protective custody, per Mrs. Johnson (personal communication, July 22, 2019).

A child may be placed in emergency custody with a family member or foster family, both of which must be investigated and deemed a safe environment for the child; or placement may be at a residential facility if the child meets the requirements for same, per Mrs. Johnson (personal communication, July 22, 2019). Within 48 hours, the social worker must prepare a petition for temporary custody on behalf of the single government agency. Once the single government agency obtains custody of the child, the case is then transferred from the division responsible for such reports to the partner organization for further action. As the District Manager of the Division of Children and Family Services, Mrs. Johnson assigns the case to a social worker who ensures the provision of services are met per the court order (L. Johnson, personal communication, July 22, 2019).

Though most foster placements originate with a report of abuse and/or neglect, however, there are times when a parent may elect to have their adolescent in placement by means of a voluntary agreement, per Mrs. Johnson (personal communication, July 22, 2019). It should be noted that these cases are few, and there must be some form of abuse or neglect established. When abuse or neglect has been established, the department takes the child for six months. At any time during the six-month period, the parent of the adolescent can visit the Division of Children and Family Services to request the adolescent be discharged home. However, before the adolescent can be discharged, the social worker must conduct a home evaluation; then a determination is made as to the home's safety and security for the adolescent.

Currently, there are 44 adolescents in foster care; 13 are in residential care, 31 reside in private homes with foster families. One recently aged out of placement and two adolescents are currently engaging in the permanency process, per Mrs. Johnson (personal communication, July 22, 2019).

Interventions

Per Curry and Abrams (2015), “youth who exit the foster care system without having achieved a permanent placement are typically referred to as “emancipated foster youth” or “aged out youth” in order to distinguish them from the more general group of “former foster youth” (p. 143). The challenges social workers encounter while working with their aging-out foster adolescent clients are not new or unique to the Virgin Islands. However, social workers must develop strategies and implement evidence-based

interventions to address the challenges they experience while working with this population.

To assist child welfare agencies address challenges encountered during the aging out process, and support/assist adolescents in out-of-home placements during their transition to adulthood, the Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA) of 1999 was enacted in the United States; which provided states with additional funds and increased flexibility to support these adolescents in their placements as they transition to adulthood. The act required services to be evaluated to decide as to program effects, per the policy (Greeson & Thompson, 2017).

One strategy that consistently gains attention on the national level as well as increased momentum is mentoring, per Thompson et al., (2016). The authors further explain that it is normal for nonparental adults who are caring and supportive to establish positive relationships with adolescents; especially with those adolescents deemed marginalized and at-risk for later adverse outcomes (Thompson et al., 2016). Per Thompson et al., (2016), there is increasing research that suggests having an adult function as a natural mentor may be one strategy whereby aging out foster adolescents can experience a successful transition to adulthood. Greeson and Thompson (2017) suggest natural mentors as a means of a supportive relationship for aging-out adolescents. Foster adolescents select an adult from their social environment to function in the capacity of a natural mentor; an adult such as a neighbor, teacher, coach, or religious figure in their church. These relationships function quite differently than relationships where biological or foster parents mentor adolescents, as natural mentors are in the

position to provide needed support and advice void of the responsibility of being a disciplinarian; therefore, foster adolescents will be more open to trusting the natural mentor completely without reservations (Thompson et al., 2016).

Greeson and Thompson (2017) further inform us of a theoretically supported and research-based intervention that supports foster adolescents in establishing supportive relationships. Per the authors, Caring Adults 'R' Everywhere (CARE) is a child welfare-based intervention. The program provides direct services to adolescents with a focus on addressing the lack of adequate networks of social support and relationships with adults who demonstrate the ability to be compassionate and supportive (Greeson & Thompson (2017). It is designed such that it fosters the natural facilitation of mentor relationships among adults and adolescents who are transitioning out of foster placement (Greeson & Thompson, 2017).

In addition to mentor relationships, Rutman and Hubberstey (2016) discuss the importance of social supports inclusive of emotional, practical/instrumental, advisement and information-sharing, as well as the opportunity to conduct self-evaluations or have appraisals completed. Per the authors, having a supportive caring relationship with an adult is crucial in facilitating adolescents' transition to adulthood and these relationships serve as a form of protection in improving positive outcomes for vulnerable adolescents (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). The authors further inform that it has been documented in US literature that access to formal and informal supports can have a positive impact on the lives of foster adolescents aging out of placement; especially as it relates to their educational attainment and obtaining housing (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016).

An additional intervention to address the challenges social workers encounter while assisting their foster adolescents during their transition to adulthood is an act passed in 2008. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act was enacted as a means of improvement relative to aging-out foster adolescents transitioning from placement to adulthood in the United States. This act came about when it was determined that the Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA) of 1999 was not adequately addressing the poor outcomes aging-out foster adolescents were experiencing. As a result of this act, states are permitted to provide foster care services to adolescents until they are twenty-one years of age, however, the adolescent must be matriculating in a vocational or academic program, maintaining employment, or not able to meet these stipulations (Woodgate, Morakinyo, & Martin, 2017).

A successful intervention for aging out foster adolescents referenced by Woodgate et al., (2017) is an employment-focused program; also, the authors further reference training that is employment-oriented. The authors posit there are studies conducted that confirm aging-out foster adolescents had positive outcomes as a result of taking advantage of this intervention.

An additional intervention to assist in promoting positive outcomes for aging-out of placement foster adolescents is engaging in an independent living program (Liu et al., 2019). These programs are intended to prepare foster adolescents to be self-sufficient in their adulthood upon exiting foster placement. This is done by addressing various areas of life and skills that are necessary for aging-out foster adolescents to be successful during their transition to adulthood (Liu et al., 2019).

Summary

Every year, adolescents begin the transition from adolescence to adulthood as they approach the legal age of 18. When this process takes place, these adolescents leave state-supervised homes and residential facilities where they have been placed in foster care, whether they are prepared to do so or not. They are expected to live independently upon discharge, but most are ill-prepared to do so and encounter numerous barriers that preclude their successful transition to adulthood, as noted in the literature review.

Service barriers present great obstacles for social workers and the foster adolescents on the cusp of adulthood, as these barriers hinder social workers' efforts and aging-out foster adolescents' successful transition from foster placement to adulthood. This results in social workers maintaining these cases on their caseload expending time and resources/services that would otherwise be reserved for foster cases requiring those resources/services. Social workers are tasked with ensuring their foster clients are prepared to transition to their new phase of life; when aging-out foster adolescents fail to do so, it confirms that social work interventions employed are not successful. This study explored those experiences with social workers, examined data collected by narrative interviews and provided implications for program practice as well as policies. In section 2, I described the research design, methodology, data analysis, and ethical procedures related to the study.

Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

Every year, approximately 23,000 adolescents age-out of foster placement; most of whom encounter many challenges as they make the transition to adulthood (Shah et al., 2017). Adolescents on the cusp of the transition from adolescence to adulthood, usually make a successful transition, as they have support from their family members (Shah et al., 2017). However, foster adolescents are not as fortunate. Adolescents aging-out of foster placement experience significant issues as they transition to adulthood, more than their peers who are not in placement (Shah et al., 2017). This population is considered vulnerable and ill-prepared to make the successful transition to adulthood, per Miller, Paschall, and Azar (2017).

Social workers encounter many barriers while working with this population that preclude their clients' successful transition to adulthood in the community as they age-out of placement. The problem relative to aging-out of placement is not unique to the United States as it also impacts the Virgin Islands as well. The primary problem for both Division of Children and Family Services social workers and their aging-out foster clients is the barriers encountered, that non foster clients do not encounter, which precludes foster adolescents' successful transition to adulthood as they approach the age of 18. Social worker D. Hicks and supervisor L. Johnson of the partner organization both inform that a study with a focus on the single government agency has not been conducted to date (personal communication, January 13, 2019).

Given this information, in this qualitative research project, I sought to understand what service barriers social workers at the single government agency encounter relative

to their foster adolescents aging out of placement. The results of this research project are intended to positively impact permanency planning decisions for the partner organization social workers and influence department policy for the single government agency.

On the microlevel, social workers may make changes in practice to improve the transition process, and if those changes are successful, this may influence the single government agency policy relative to foster care (mezzo-level). Changes in practice and policy will positively impact the Virgin Islands community (macro-level) which will result in positive social change.

Section 2 of this study presents the research design and how it was applied to address the research questions as well as uncover the research participants' experiences in their practice setting, the methodology, and how the collected data was analyzed. Lastly, a description of the procedures employed to protect the study participants was thoroughly discussed.

Research Design

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the service barriers social workers encounter, while working with their foster adolescent clients, as they begin aging out of foster placement, in the Virgin Islands. I sought to provide an understanding of this problem and provide seminal literature that may warrant further study in the future. To date, a study with a focus on foster care has not been conducted in the single government agency, per social worker D. Hicks (personal communication, January 13, 2019). District Manager L. Johnson also confirmed the lack of research in this area for the single government agency (personal communication, January 13, 2019). Therefore,

this study is necessary and important to the Virgin Islands as the results may address the problem of aging-out foster adolescents. The results may provide implications for professional social work practice as well as policies for the single government agency relative to foster adolescents approaching adulthood.

The primary problem for the partner organization's social workers is the service barriers they encounter while working with their foster adolescent clients, as they begin aging out of foster placement in the Virgin Islands. The research questions of this capstone research project are as follows:

RQ1: What service barriers do social workers, at a single government agency, encounter while working with adolescents aging out of foster care in the Virgin Islands?

RQ2: How do the challenges that social workers experience, at the partner organization, impact their practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro system levels in the Virgin Islands?

To explore the service barriers that social workers at the partner organization encountered while working with their clients, a narrative research methodology was used. Per McAlpine (2016), narratives are consistently used to construct a plot relative to one's own life. The author further posits that narratives are a good way to integrate experiences from the past into meaningful learning experiences (McAlpine, 2016). Per Taylor, Bogdan and DeVault (2016), when conducting a qualitative study, the researcher's primary role is to capture how the participants define their world as well as how they construct their own reality. This is the goal of this current study.

A narrative research approach was employed for this study, which may build on the existing and growing body of research relative to adolescents aging out of foster care. For centuries, narratives have been used to communicate experiences of individuals (Hamshire et al., 2017). These authors further posit that “narrative research is concerned with the construction, interpretation and depiction of storied accounts of lived experiences, and aims to organize a sequence of lived events into a whole” (Hamshire et al., 2017, p. 53). The design involves narrative research using a qualitative design. This occurred through the lens of social constructivism where a researcher in the community interacts with individuals, to construct knowledge through those interactions, and rely heavily on the individuals’ point of view (Mercadal, 2018). This attempted to uncover the research participants’ experiences, as well as the meaning participants ascribed to those experiences.

A qualitative design using a narrative approach was applied to address the research questions and uncover the research participants’ experiences in their practice setting. This design is influenced by the purpose of the study, which is consistent with the research questions posed, as it prompts the participants to narrate their experiences, which is the focus of this study. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the service barriers social workers encounter while working with their foster adolescent clients as they begin aging out of foster placement in the Virgin Islands. The purpose influenced the research questions which ask, what service barriers do social workers encounter and how do the resulting challenges from doing so impact practice. Therefore, the purpose influenced the research questions and research design as it aligned with the

problem, the overall goal of the study, the population under study, as well as the knowledge that was garnered from the study.

This problem cannot be counted or expressed in numbers. It is a naturalistic inquiry related to human experience that poses a question of a social nature (Beuving & Vries, 2015) which makes it ideal for a narrative approach. A quantitative method may not produce the data needed to appropriately respond to the proposed research questions. Since this study conforms to most of the features of a qualitative approach such as incorporating human experiences, understanding experiences as they occur, the design is flexible, and it facilitates participant-researcher interactions, a qualitative design was selected (Beuving & Vries, 2015).

Methodology

A qualitative approach to research is a general concept of conducting a qualitative inquiry. When thinking about conducting a qualitative inquiry, there are many considerations such as the purpose of the research, what role of the researcher will function in, the different stages of research, and what the method of data analysis will be (Beuving & Vries, 2015). There are five qualitative research approaches, they are ethnography, phenomenological, grounded theory, case study, and the narrative approach (Coule, 2018). Each was discussed and the best suited identified for use in this study.

The ethnographic approach is a method where the researcher is observing and/or interacting with the study's research participants in their natural environment; the emphasis in this approach is studying an entire culture to describe the behavior of a cultural group (Haynes, 2018). This approach was not ideal for this current study as the

social workers' behavior was not the focus of this study; rather it was the experiences of the social workers which they provided an account of during their individual interviews.

A phenomenological research approach is a subjective approach to qualitative research that investigates a phenomenon. The researcher goes deep into the perceptions, perspectives, understandings, and feelings of the research participants who have experienced the phenomenon under study (Coule, 2018). A phenomenological approach seeks to identify and produce an analysis of the phenomenon under study (Coule, 2018). This approach could not adequately capture the experiences of the research participants in this current study as the focus was a phenomenon shared by a group as opposed to a problem. Additionally, this approach did not allow an opportunity for a participant's story to be narrated.

A grounded theory approach does not begin with a hypothesis, rather it begins with the collection of data as a means of using inductive and deductive reasoning to formulate the hypothesis (Schroth, 2019). A grounded theory approach was not appropriate for use with this current study as I did not seek to construct a theory from the data it collected. Rather, this study was conducted to address the research questions.

A case study methodology examines a system over a long period of time. The system can be a program, an individual, an event, or activity (Range, 2019). This approach seems like a narrative approach; however, the types of data are different, hence why this approach was not ideal for use with this current study. Usually, in case studies, there is more than one case where feedback is given as a group; while a narrative

approach allows for participants to be interviewed individually and provide their own experience (Range, 2019).

The narrative approach focuses on the lives of individuals as told through their individual experiences or stories (Gabriel, 2018). The narrative approach was best suited for this study as the focus of the research problem was the barriers or challenges social workers experienced. This information was best narrated in detail by social workers through their experiences. The methodology selected for this study was set in the narratives of social workers' experiences at a government social service agency in the Virgin Islands. Therefore, the methodology selected for this capstone research project was a qualitative design using structured narrative interviews for data collection purposes. Structured interviews were selected for use as it is best for capturing the information relative to the specific issue the study is focused on. Structured interviews produced social workers' experiences relative to the focus of the study. The questions for the interviews were structured to allow social workers to share their responses in a uniform manner.

Participant Selection

The sample for this study was selected from the social workers employed at a single government social service agency on both islands. The government social service agency was the primary source of contact information for the potential research participants. Government social workers at the agency were invited to participate in the study.

Recruitment techniques involved general solicitation through hand-delivered recruitment flyers. The inclusion criteria for this study, required that each participant have the experience of having worked with adolescent clients who have aged-out of the foster care system. The selection criteria for the government social workers included current employment as a social worker at the government social service agency, Bachelor of Social Work or Master of Social Work degree or related field, employment at the agency for more than one year and a willingness to participate in the study.

Telephone calls were made to potential participants detailing the scope of the study as well as to determine interest. Follow-up telephone calls were made and an email with the informed consent form forwarded to those participants who are amenable to and selected for participation; to ensure they fully understood the scope of the project as well as to obtain informed consent (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Research participants responded to the email containing the informed consent form indicating their consent by replying as directed with, "I consent."

Participants were recruited using purposeful sampling from a single government social service agency, which was the sole source of data collection. This strategy is appropriate when there is a specific issue being studied and the participants share the same experience (Ritchie et al., 2014). It is also known as subjective or selective sampling; as it is a non-probability form of sampling where the researcher depends on their sole judgment in the selection of individuals within the population to participate in their study (Ames et al., 2019). The social workers identified at the government social service agency work in the same division and shared the same client experiences. The

primary goal of this study is to gain a better understanding of the problem under study, which is the social workers individual experience. This can only be understood by hearing their viewpoint of what it is like to be a government worker involved in the foster care system. Their practice experiences specifically addressed the research questions being posed.

Currently, there are four social workers employed in the division including the district manager on the island of St. Croix, and one social worker in the entire division on the island of St. Thomas (personal communication, July 22, 2019). The district manager further explained that the agency is severely understaffed due to the single government agency experiencing difficulties in identifying and hiring social workers with the appropriate degree(s) and licensure. The district manager added that this is the sole reason the division is solely comprised of four social workers and herself as the supervisor on St. Croix and one social worker in the entire division on the island of St. Thomas (personal communication, July 22, 2019). This information confirms the significant limitation as to the number of social workers employed at the partner organization. This limitation directly impacts the number of social workers available to recruit from, for the research sample, for this current study. Therefore, due to the limitation of staff, the participant sample was limited to the available five social workers and one supervisor on the island of St. Croix, and one social worker on the island of St. Thomas, for a total of six research participants. Several researchers have posited that the use of 10 research participants is an ideal method for data collection to capture detailed information, and the minimum is five research participants (Creswell, 2013). It should be

noted that there are six social workers in total within the Division of Children and Family Services; therefore, if there was an absence or unwillingness to participate of one social worker, there were five remaining social workers, which was the minimum number possible for the research sample. Additionally, it is important to note that absences would not negatively impact data collection as the research participant interviews were scheduled according to the research participants' availability. A "no-show" situation was addressed with a rescheduled day and time until the research participant is able to attend the scheduled interview session. In qualitative research, samples are purposeful and are usually small to support case-oriented analysis which is essential to qualitative inquiry (Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe, & Young, 2018).

Instrumentation

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the problem under study, a combined method of data collection will be used to obtain required information in the most appropriate way. Data will be collected by conducting structured interviews. In a structured interview, there is a predetermined set of questions prepared by the researcher in advance; the researcher poses the questions to the research participants to find out how they experienced the problem under study (Atkinson & Sampson, 2019). The authors further inform that in the field of social science, interviews are the most widely utilized forms of collecting data and is usually the primary, if not the only, form of data collection. Per Clark and Vealé (2018), the researcher is the primary instrument in data collection and data analysis in qualitative research. In addition to the researcher conducting interviews, a 10-question interview format was developed for use with the

research participants during the interview process to elicit narrative data. Lastly, the researcher used a reflective journal to document plans for data collection, thoughts, observations, and personal experiences.

An instrument was constructed to guide the interview process. An interview format was constructed with open-ended questions for interview facilitation in response to the proposed research questions. This interview format allowed participants to provide a narrative response. The questions identified for the interview process were developed based on the research questions and the literature reviewed for this study. The questions for the interviews covered social workers' experiences with adolescents aging out of foster care, as well as the barriers they encountered as they tried to assist their foster adolescent clients in making a successful transition to adulthood and how these barriers impacted their practice on each social work practice area (micro level, mezzo level, and macro level). To be specific, questions such as "what do you see as your greatest challenge as a social worker in the single government agency and why; also, "what types of service barriers have you encountered while working with your clients during their transition to adulthood, were identified to be included in the interview format. To establish content validity, I invited my committee members as well as three former professors from Walden University who have extensive experience in foster care and/or the field of social work, to review the interview format questions to establish content validity.

The interview format was comprised of 10 open-ended questions. Open-ended questions will allow for the participants to express themselves as they convey their

personal experiences. Francis (2018) discusses a study that was conducted where the interview format was that of open-ended questions that encouraged research participants to convey their story. Therefore, this method of data collection was best to obtain information relative to the experiences of the participant sample. The data collected from the interviews was used to frame the problem of the service barriers social workers encountered while working with their adolescent foster clients aging out of placement in the Virgin Islands.

Individual interviews were the method to facilitate data collection. Interviews were scheduled and conducted based on the availability of the selected participants. Each interview did not exceed an hour. The data produced from these interviews, was in the form of words; this is consistent with the research noted by Bansal, Smith, and Vaara (2018) who inform us that qualitative data is usually in the form of words and visuals.

Audio recordings were used for the data collection process during the interviews. All recordings were digitally stored on a flash drive, that is password protected, in a locked file cabinet, at the University of the Virgin Islands in the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences in room number 509A, where it will remain for a minimum of five years. The researcher has sole access to the office and file cabinet. Audio recordings were transcribed in a timely manner and also deleted once transcription was completed.

Data Analysis

In this section, I discuss how data was managed, organized, and analyzed. Each individual interview, with the research participants, was audio recorded and checked for quality. For transcription purposes, the audio recordings were professionally transcribed.

Each recorded interview was reviewed and compared with the transcription for accuracy. Edits were made to the transcript as necessary for an accurate representation of the interviews. Once this process was completed, each participant received a copy of their transcribed interview data for review to comment whether their perspectives were accurately portrayed, this process is referenced as member checking (Lawrence, 2015). Once each participant gave confirmation or submitted edits and the final documents were completed, phase two of the analysis process began with labeling.

As the researcher, I conducted a thematic analysis when all interviews were completed and transcribed. Per Butina (2015), when a researcher makes sense of the data they have collected, this is referred to as data analysis. When I conducted the thematic analysis for the study, I consolidated the data collected and paid particular attention to those segments that offered insight into the study's research questions, as suggested by Butina (2015). Per Clark and Vealé (2018), when conducting a thematic analysis, it involves identifying and recording patterns in the data collected. I made comparisons of the data while I identified patterns or themes in the data (see Butina, 2015). I also interpreted and made meanings of the patterns/themes that I identified, as posited by Butina (2015). Lastly, I used the thematic content in a table where I looked for themes and codes. The understanding gained from this process then became the findings of my study (Butina, 2015).

After I reviewed and transcribed the data, words, phrases, and sentences determined to be relevant were labeled; this process is referenced as coding (Butina, 2015). During coding, analytic questions are asked of the data and segments of it are

placed in categories with short names (coding); the codes are then used to gain a comprehensive understanding of what is happening in the social situation being studied (Maher, Hadfield, Hutchings, & de Eyto, 2018). When coding was completed, the data was placed into categories which is the next step in the process.

The codes were reviewed to determine which ones were most important. Some codes were combined to develop new ones and then placed into categories. These categories were referred to as themes. This method of identifying, analyzing, and providing an account of themes is referenced as a thematic analysis (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). The authors further posited that themes emphasize important parts of the data relative to the research questions and demonstrates a response pattern within the data. It is at this level of analysis that a thematic map was developed which gave a visual representation of codes, themes, and their connections. As I consolidated the data for this study, I paid special attention to segments that gave insight into the study's research questions.

When the categories were identified, each were labeled and the connections between them were described. The identified categories and connections were the core results of the study which were discussed in detail. Categories were reviewed to determine hierarchy among them.

In qualitative research, validity refers to the appropriateness of the tools, processes, and data (Lawrence, 2015). To increase confidence in the results of the study, member checking was employed. Member checking is also known as respondent validation where research participants confirm results to establish credibility in

trustworthiness (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014). Each research participant conducted a transcript review of their respective transcription to check for accuracy and resonance with their experiences (Carter et al., 2014). In addition to member checking and transcript review, coding and themes was discussed with my committee member who functioned as a reviewer of this content. Clarifying one's own biases as a researcher was used to ensure validity as the preconceptions and/or biases the researcher has may inevitably influence the study's conclusions.

In qualitative research, rigor is established through various means to include credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability. Credibility is focused on truth value; whether confidence can be placed in the findings of the study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Credibility was established through member checking, by asking the participants to review their transcribed interview for accuracy. Transferability exists when the findings of a study can be related to other situations and a larger population (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The content of this study was documented in detail in such a way that the study can be replicated. When future researchers replicate prior research, dependability is attained (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Other researchers can replicate this study as the entire inquiry process was detailed and tangible deliverables recorded and stored. The extent to which the results of a study can be confirmed or corroborated by other individuals is confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). As the researcher, remaining objective and ensuring the results of this study are the direct results of the data demonstrates confirmability.

Ethical Procedures

It is the obligation of all researchers to refrain from doing harm to research participants. Participants provide researchers with first-hand insight into their lived experiences making interviewing a fragile process (Voltelen, Konradsen, & Ostergaard, 2018). There are several ethical issues relevant to this study to include informed consent, confidentiality, and Institutional Board Review (IRB) approval.

This study may pose minimal risks to the research participants. Per Jordan and Gray (2018), minimal risk is defined as “the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests (p. 6).” The minimal risks this study may pose to the research participants is that of anxiety and/or exhaustion.

Prior to conducting this study, application was made, and permission obtained from my committee members, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), as well as other authorities at Walden University. The source of data collection was contacted to seek their cooperation and participation and the informed consent form read and explained to each research participant. Confidentiality measures were explained to the research participants related to management and storage of their audio recordings and transcripts.

The research participants were informed that audio recordings would be utilized for the data collection process during their interviews. The recordings are digitally stored on a flash drive, that is password protected, in a locked file cabinet at the University of the Virgin Islands in the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences in room number

509A and will remain there for a minimum of five years. The research participants were assured that the researcher has sole access to the office and file cabinet and the recordings and transcripts will be destroyed after five years.

Summary

The intended research design for this study is a qualitative design. The methodology selected are interviews, using an interview format developed by the researcher, to produce narrative data in the form of experiences of the study participants. Using thematic analysis, the data was analyzed which was the findings of this study. Section three is comprised of three sections. The first section describes the data analysis techniques. The second section details the study's findings, while the third section provides an overall summary.

Section 3: Presentation of the Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the service barriers social workers encounter while working with their foster adolescent clients, as they begin aging out of foster placement in the Virgin Islands. The study provided an opportunity for social workers to explore the challenges, strategies, and interventions used while working with foster adolescents aging out of placement to adulthood. The study also provided an opportunity for social workers to share their experiences while working with their foster adolescent clients. The results of this study could inform social work practice and policy as well as provide seminal literature that may warrant further study in the future.

To gain a full understanding of the service barriers social workers encounter while working with adolescents aging out of foster care in the Virgin Islands, a qualitative research design was applied to address the study's research questions and uncover the research participants' experiences in their practice setting.

The following research questions used in this qualitative study were addressed:

RQ1: What service barriers do social workers, at a single government agency, encounter while working with adolescents aging out of foster care in the Virgin Islands?

RQ2: How do the challenges that social workers experience, at the single government agency, impact their practice at the micro-, mezzo-, and macro-system levels in the Virgin Islands?

The research questions provided a framework to understand the service barriers social workers encounter while working with adolescents aging out of foster placement in the Virgin Islands. The social workers' goal while working with adolescents aging out of

placement is to make the transition from placement to adulthood a successful one (Powers et al., 2018). The methodology selected for this capstone research project was a qualitative research design using structured narrative interviews for data collection purposes. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants from the single government agency. This agency served as the single source for data collection. Individual interviews were scheduled, conducted, and recorded with each social worker from the single government agency. Audio recordings with transcription were used for the data collection process. With data collection and transcription completed, the next step that followed was data analysis.

In the following section, I discuss the recruitment process of research participants, time frame for data collection, the procedure used for data analysis and coding, validation procedures, and limitations of the study. The findings of the study are also provided, where I link the findings to the body of literature, evaluate whether and how the data highlighted answers the primary research question, as well as how the secondary question of the study was answered.

Data Analysis Techniques

In this section, I discuss the process used to obtain IRB approval, recruitment of research participants, data collection and data analysis procedures, validation procedures, as well as limitations encountered while conducting the study.

The study protocol was given conditional approval by Walden's IRB, pending the letter of cooperation from the agency. Once received, the letter of cooperation from the agency was forwarded to Walden University's IRB. When the study protocol was

granted full official approval by Walden University's IRB (05-01-20-0478071), I contacted the agency and was granted permission to email the recruitment flyers to the social workers at the single government agency.

Social workers who were interested in participating in the research study indicated their interest to me by telephone and email contact. I explained to each social worker that the interview would be recorded and transcribed then forwarded to them for transcription review to determine accuracy of their responses. A total of six social workers responded who met the research criteria and agreed to participate in the narrative interview. I scheduled all interviews via email and forwarded a link for the Zoom meeting to each social worker to participate in the interview on their scheduled day and time.

Prior to conducting each interview, the informed consent form was forwarded by email to each social worker for review. I reviewed and explained the contents of the form to each social worker. The informed consent form provided an introduction, background information inclusive of the goal and purpose of the study, along with the procedures, voluntary nature of the study, and risks and benefits of participating in the study. The form also included information relative to a "thank-you" payment, guarantee of privacy, as well as contact information for the researcher and Walden University's IRB should the participants have any questions. The informed consent form directed the social workers to respond to the email with "I consent" to indicate their consent to participate in the study's interview process.

Upon receipt of their consent, an additional email was forwarded to each participant, requesting that they choose the name of a local fruit as a pseudonym for them to be referenced as throughout the study. This was done to guarantee anonymity of the research participants. This is an ethical requirement of research. Allen and Wiles (2016) posited that it is a typical practice for researchers to assign pseudonyms, numbers, or aliases to research participants to ensure the anonymity of participants, as anonymity is the responsibility of the researcher. Each participant responded with their chosen pseudonym via email. All interviews were conducted between May 25, 2020 and June 5, 2020 with each interview lasting less than one hour.

I functioned in the role of data collector during the interview process. Each participant was encouraged to share their opinions, thoughts, and experiences openly as all responses were vital to the study. At the beginning of each interview, I provided a brief introduction. I used open-ended questions to allow each participant to express their opinions and thoughts as well as to share their perspective and experiences in response to each research question. Weller et al., (2018) explained that open-ended questions can be used alone or can be combined with other techniques in an interview to understand a process or explore topics; and that these questions may produce a short answer or a narrative. Each participant responded to each question posed and could provide additional clarification if necessary.

At the conclusion of each interview, I thanked each participant for their participation in the research project and reminded them of my contact information for questions or clarification. I also forwarded an email to each participant after their

interview was completed notifying the participant that their “thank-you” payment had been forwarded via their chosen mode of delivery (check/money order by USPS or PayPal).

Each interview recording was professionally transcribed and forwarded to the respective participant for review to ensure their responses were accurately captured. I spent three days exploring and analyzing the interview data which is the first step in data analysis referred to as preliminary exploratory analysis. Per Carlesso, Cairney, Dolovich, and Hoogenes (2011), it is appropriate to use this approach when the researcher seeks first-hand knowledge of the participants’ experiences when there is not much knowledge about the topic. I read each of the participants’ responses to each question. I listened to each audio recording, comparing it to its respective transcript to ensure I captured each participants’ correct responses. Once this process was completed, I moved forward to the thematic analysis of the transcribed data.

Thematic Analysis

This section describes how I managed the thematic analysis process for all interviews conducted with the research participants on the issue of service barriers social workers, at a single government agency, encounter while working with adolescents aging out of foster care in the Virgin Islands. Thematic analysis is a common form of analysis in qualitative research which identifies, analyzes, and interprets patterns in qualitative data (Miller, 2020). I employed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) method of thematic analysis which is comprised of six distinct steps – familiarizing myself with the qualitative data; generating initial codes; identifying, reviewing, and defining the themes, as well as

documenting the findings. I will describe my experience relative to each of these steps during the process of thematic analysis.

Step 1: Familiarization of Data

The first step I took in thematically analyzing the qualitative data was familiarizing myself with the data that emerged from the interviews. It is important to begin by becoming familiar with the data collected. As a part of this initial step, I tried to focus on getting an overview of all the data collected before I started analyzing individual items.

This process involved reading through the professionally transcribed interviews and taking initial notes. That was followed by a second read through of the data to become familiar with it. The second reading and marking of the transcriptions was done via computer in a Microsoft Word document. I also wrote notes on any issues or incidents from the interviews which stood out or were interesting.

Step 2: Initial Codes

In this second step of the thematic analysis, I organized the data in a systematic manner. The main goal of coding was to reduce the data into small manageable pieces that have meaning. It is important to note that there are numerous ways to code the data. While I was concerned with addressing the research questions, I chose the inductive thematic analysis rather than the theoretical thematic analysis. I wanted to see what the data would reveal; therefore, I did not choose to frame it under any theoretical framework.

I coded every piece of text - I adopted line-by-line coding for each line of data to see what would be revealed in the process. Open coding was used for the thematic analysis which means I did not have pre-set codes, but I developed and modified the codes as I worked through the coding process. The coding process of the six interview transcripts was carried out using Microsoft Word.

Step 3: Generating Themes

The third step I used during the analysis process was turning the codes into themes. A theme is a pattern that captures something significant about the data (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019). Once the coding process for the transcripts was completed, the codes were examined; and it was discovered that some of the codes clearly fit together into a common theme.

For example, there were several codes that related to various factors regarding lack of housing for adolescents transitioning out of placement. The codes were collated into themes, such as lack of housing. In addition, there were quite a few codes about lack of involvement of the adolescent's family in planning for their future; this became lack of family support.

At the conclusion of this step, the codes were organized into broader themes that seemed to say something specific about the challenges faced by social workers assisting their adolescent clients transitioning out of foster care into adulthood. The themes were predominately descriptive - they described patterns in the data relevant to the research question.

Step 4: Validity and Reliability of Themes

Step 4 of the thematic analysis involved reviewing the themes developed in step three. At this point in the thematic analysis process, I gathered all relevant data or codes under the correct theme. I did this using the cut and paste function in Microsoft Word.

The data associated with each theme was color-coded in Microsoft Word. I read and re-read the data associated with each theme, then considered whether the data really supported the theme. I then did an overview of all themes, ruminating about whether the themes worked in the context of the entire data set.

The following are what I considered while reviewing the themes:

- Are the themes coherent and distinct?
- Do the themes make sense?
- Does the data support the themes?
- Are the themes too broad or too narrow?
- Are there themes within themes (subthemes)?

Step 5: Defining and Naming Themes

In this fifth step of the thematic analysis process, I looked at the final processing of managing the created themes – defining the themes. This step involves looking at each theme and thinking:

- What is each theme about?
- What can the reader tell after reading about the theme?
- What does the theme convey to the reader?
- If there are subthemes, how do they interact and relate to the main theme?

- How do the themes relate to each other?

Step 6: Writing up the Analysis

Step 6, the final step of the thematic analysis process, is documentation of the findings derived from the qualitative data (Miller, 2020).

Validation Procedure

The strategy I employed to establish validity of the participants' responses was member checking. "Validity is broadly defined as the state of being well grounded or justifiable, relevant, meaningful, logical, confirming to accepted principles or the quality of being sound, just, and well founded" (Cypress, 2017, p. 256). I conducted this step to ensure validation of the responses, as it is imperative to check for accuracy and resonance with the participants' experiences.

Each participant received their respective transcription to review for accuracy, which is referred to as member checking. This process increases the credibility of the study by ensuring the participants' thoughts were adequately captured. It ensures the coding process is a true reflection of the participants' thoughts. Per Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, and Walter (2016), "the method of returning an interview or analyzed data to a participant is known as member checking, and also as respondent validation or participant validation" (p. 1802). If there were suggested edits by the participants, those edits were incorporated in the transcripts.

My chair functioned as a reviewer of the content. Codes and themes were reviewed and discussed with my chair. Lastly, as the researcher, I clarified my own biases to ensure validity as any preconceptions and/or biases I had could have influenced

the study's findings. I remained objective and ensured the results of the study were the direct results of the data, which demonstrated confirmability.

Limitations

The interpretation of the findings of this study should take into consideration a few limitations. There were possible limitations to this study which included the use of purposeful sampling. In qualitative research, the use of purposeful sampling to select research participants as well as having a small sample size, potentially places restrictions on the findings (Ravitch & Carl 2016).. This type of sampling could have influenced selection bias of research participants. Additionally, there is only one government agency in the Virgin Islands that is licensed to manage foster cases, and this agency was selected for the recruitment purposes. There are six social workers who manage foster care cases there. The participants were selected for the study using specific criteria. This criterion was inclusive of possession of a BSW or MSW or closely related degree and more than 1-year employment at the agency managing foster cases. It should also be noted that the sample size was small; it was inclusive of six participants. Lastly, all participants were female and Afro-Caribbean; there were no males in the study. In the following section, the findings from the narrative data, generated from the interviews, will be explored.

Findings

This study employed a qualitative design using a narrative approach to address the study's research questions. The research questions were as follows:

RQ1: What service barriers do social workers, at a single government agency, encounter while working with adolescents aging out of foster care in the Virgin Islands?

RQ2: How do the challenges that social workers experience, at the single government agency, impact their practice at the micro-, mezzo-, and macrosystem levels in the Virgin Islands?

This section provides the findings from the analysis of six participant interviews to address the study's research questions. This section begins with a description that appropriately characterizes the sample, then an analysis of the findings is provided organized by the study's research questions, as well as how the findings answer the research questions.

Characteristics of the Sample

This qualitative research study was conducted to explore the service barriers social workers, at a single government agency, encounter while working with their adolescent clients aging out of foster care in the Virgin Islands. This was done using a purposeful sample of social workers, who manage foster care cases, at a single government agency in the Virgin Islands.

The island community is very small and one where the saying – “everyone knows everyone” is true. Social work professionals consistently shop, go to church, party, and attend many community activities where clients and other agency professionals are in attendance. Therefore, to ensure anonymity of the research participants, pseudonyms

were substituted for names and definitive descriptive statistics were intentionally avoided as the information presented in this section was provided using ranges.

All research participants were female. All six participants were of Afro-Caribbean descent. Three of the participants hold degrees on the master's level while the other three participants hold degrees on the bachelor's level. The number of years working in foster care ranged from less than five years to over twenty-three years of experience. Lastly, the ages of the participants ranged from less than thirty years of age to over fifty years of age. In the section that follows, I provide a detailed review of the study's findings organized by the research questions.

Research Question 1

This section provides a summary of the research findings, analysis of the data, and the responses of the participants to each research question. In qualitative research, themes are phrases that result from coding and categorizing of data, which give meaning to the research data (Saldaña, 2015). During the data analysis process, several themes emerged from the data that answered the following research question.

RQ 1: What service barriers do social workers, at a single government agency, encounter while working with adolescents aging out of foster care in the Virgin Islands?

The data was explored, and six themes emerged in response to the first research question. They are as follows: (a) lack of family support/community involvement, (b) lack of housing, (c) adolescents' lack of intellectual capacity/independent living skills, (d) lack of training/employment opportunities for adolescents, (e) services not suited for

adolescents, (f) other - uncooperative and combative clients, clients feel agency does not understand their situation, lack of mentorship program, issue with leadership, language barriers. The participants' responses that answered the first research question are as follows:

Theme A: Lack of family support/community involvement.

Sugar Apple: *"Another thing is support. Whether it's family support or community support. I try my best to have them be engaged or re-engaged with family members or friends or for instance a godmother, a godfather, and extended family member."*

Gooseberry: *"I don't even think we have that network anymore. Everybody is into themselves, the foster homes, we don't have foster homes. Generation has changed, people are not into servicing children any longer because of all the shooting or whatever in school and stuff and the community has changed. They don't have that community outreach coming out."*

Passion Fruit: *"Consistent family involvement to help support the client's transition."*

Theme B: Lack of housing.

Gooseberry: *"Housing. If somebody were aging out today you go on a waiting list and I don't even think agency to agency we have that network anymore. Before, you could do letters from one agency to another requesting assistance, even though they have a waiting list, preference will be given to the situation."*

Guava: *“Housing is one.”*

Sugar Apple: *“I mentioned housing. For housing, I usually do the application, get the application to Housing so the client can be familiar with the application.”*

Theme C: Lack of intellectual capacity/independent living abilities.

Gooseberry: *“The young people I'm dealing right now with I see that their intellectual level is not there for them to live in on their own.”*

Passion Fruit: *“Low motivation from clients who feel defeated based on their previous life experiences. A belief from these clients that the independent living skills are a low priority to their survival after foster care.”*

Theme D: Lack of training/employment opportunities for adolescents.

Guava: *“Employment is another. What I find with many of my aging out kids is that they can get into Plaza or to McDonald's. It's very hard for them to get something else different because everyone wants them to have experience, but they can't get experience because nobody will hire them. A lot of them are stuck at McDonald's and not even Wendy's because Wendy's is 18 and above, those Pizza Hut for Wendy's and Plaza is where you will meet many of the foster children trying to get employment.”*

Sugar Apple: *“formal mentorship program to help you train someone transition into adulthood. However, we try to build the bridges as best as we can. For the financial part...to ensure that the client have a job.”*

Theme E: Services not suited for adolescents.

Gooseberry: *“They are aging out and services are not there for them. There is no Home Economics program.”*

Mango: *“Finding services that suit the client's needs in the Virgin Islands depending on what career path they want to go on.”*

Sugar Apple: *“DHS does not provide adequate financial assistance.”*

Theme F: Other.

Uncooperative and combative clients.

Clients feel agency does not understand their situation.

Lack of mentorship program.

Issue with leadership.

Language barrier.

Star Fruit: *“Some of the barriers I encounter are children, who do not accept resources offered, who are very combative, and sometimes feel that the department does not understand their situation and view things totally different from other person’s perspective. I also have kids and parents who speak different languages. We have language barriers as well and use a translator to assist with the communication with my clients.”*

Lack of mentorship program.

Sugar Apple: *“We don't have a mentorship program. That would be ideal because when you turn 18, you're leaving us, but you need somebody to-- We don't have a program. I think a program would be ideal to do it.”*

Issue with leadership.

Passion Fruit: *“Another barrier is leadership. Leadership is a barrier as it pertains to micromanagement.”*

Several service barriers reported by participants as those encountered while working with their adolescent clients aging out of placement, are indicated in the study’s literature review. For example, Ahmann (2017) identified obtaining employment, lack of finances, and housing as barriers; while Pryce et al., (2017) identified not completing high school as a barrier. Ahmann (2017) stated critical needs are not being met such as medical/mental health. Liu (2019) explained how adolescents being void of a family support system results in their facing a housing and/or economic situation.

The themes (service barriers) generated from the research data appropriately answered the first research question as the five themes (lack of family support/community involvement, lack of housing, adolescents’ lack of intellectual capacity/independent living skills, lack of training/employment opportunities for adolescents, services not suited for adolescents) were the reported service barriers that participants encountered while working with adolescents aging out of foster placement in the Virgin Islands. These service barriers are the challenges that preclude the participants clients’ successful transition to adulthood.

Research Question 2

The data analysis process also produced several themes that answered the second research question as follows:

RQ 2: How do the challenges that social workers experience, at the single government agency, impact their practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro system levels in the Virgin Islands?

The second research question sought information about how challenges experienced by the participants impacted practice, at each level of social work practice. The first level of social work practice that was explored is the micro-level. The participants responses, as to how the challenges impacted their ability to provide practice with individual clients, were coded and produced one theme. That theme is as follows: (a) difficult to provide services. The participants' responses that answered the micro-level practice section of the second research question were as follows:

Theme G: Difficult to provide services.

Star Fruit: *"One of the things that I see as one of the greatest challenges is designing a plan that best suits the child's needs."* (challenge)

"It makes it difficult because the majority of the time the child has to be a part of the planning and I would not know which direction to take or explore if the child doesn't show some type of interest in their life or future goals." (impact to micro level practice)

Sugar apple: *On a micro-level, coming up with a plan, and getting the adolescent to--- To develop a plan with the adolescent. To develop a plan that would work for them, just to develop the plan. I say it's difficult to develop the plan because their focus is on, "I'm turning 18 and I'm done." For the*

clients that I have seen, their focus is, "I'm turning 18, I'm leaving DHS."

(challenge)

"It takes a little bit more explaining the rationale as to why I am doing the transitional plan with them. It makes me have to reiterate the reasons why I need them to do certain tasks or responsibilities. It forces me to explain a little bit more to be clear to them." (impact to micro level practice)

Mango: *"Sometimes the clients might not be interested in doing anything.*

Sometimes I have to guide them." (challenge)

"Sometimes they feel they just can't wait to turn 18 and get rid of us and they don't need any help but I try to give them advice...at least finish school, maybe you can go to the department of labor to look into what services they have or you'll qualify for. If they are willing to get the help it makes it easier, if they're refusing it makes it a little more difficult."

(impact to micro level practice)

Fostering familial relationships.

Passion Fruit: *"Permanent relationships with their family members or other persons with whom they have a trust relationship."* (challenge)

"It impacts my ability to help the client plan for transition into an environment that will provide a stable, nourishing setting". (impact to micro level practice)

Allocating housing

Guava: *“My greatest challenge is housing, and again because we have no memorandum of understanding with HA. An example is that we have one child that has been aging out that is completely in the custody of the Department of Youth Services which means she has no family that has come forward or no family out there. We're right now trying to find a foster home that will keep her until she's 19 years old.”*

“Makes it difficult to provide practice.” (impact to micro level practice)

Gooseberry: *“I think it's their intellectual levels at this point. Some of them don't have the foundation.”* (challenge)

“They say the things that you want to hear but really and truly all they're focusing on is sex, boys, girls, I'm sorry.” (impact to micro level practice)

The participants responses, as to how the challenges impacted their ability to provide practice with groups, were coded and produced one theme. The theme is as follows: (a) difficult to provide services. The participants' responses that answered the mezzo level practice section of the second research question were as follows:

Theme H: Difficult to provide services.

Passion Fruit: *“My greatest challenge is the limited information the agency has on the client's family and background history to help understand what the client and their family has previously experienced.”* (challenge)

“This impacts the rate of interventions with the clients and their families.”
(impact to mezzo level practice)

Mango: *"I think the greatest challenge sometimes is getting families to be a part of their lives."* (mezzo level challenge)

"It might be difficult because sometimes parents or the families might not want to be involved." (impact to mezzo level practice)

Star Fruit: *"One of the challenges I face is that the parent or parents might not agree with some of the things that DHS, the department would like to explore for the child. In some cases, they become very combative or violent to some degree."* (challenge)

"It complicates things a bit, because at the end of the day I have to provide the services that are needed for the child. I have to work with the family or with the families to ensure that services are provided." (impact to mezzo level practice)

Sugar apple: *"Availability of families to take them."* (challenge)

"Again, it takes more phone calls in order to explain the importance of them being engaged with a child. It takes more conversation, one-on-one conversations. If they do say no, I might have to call back and say, "Have you thought about it?" It takes one-on-one conversations." (impact to mezzo level practice)

Gooseberry: *"I think that they despair at the point where they get stuck at blaming why they (foster adolescent) are part of the system, blaming each other, "If you did this, you wouldn't be in this situation." They have a lot of*

resentment in the family because of family dynamics - blaming.”

(challenge)

“I mean, I provide this consult but with some of them it's so ingrown. I don't know how else to say, it's a very ingrown situation.” (impact to mezzo level challenge)

Guava: *“What I find is that many parents were very reluctant to become a participant in transitioning their children back into their home.”*

(challenge)

“Non-compliance by the parents, when the parents are not compliant, it makes it very hard for the children to be compliant with any programs that you offer. That factors into....the children.....depression and the fact that they feel helpless and worthless, and that nobody is there to fight for them, so yes, that's how I see their non-compliance impacting the children and making it harder for us to deal with these kids.” (impact to mezzo level practice)

The responses as to how challenges they experienced impacted their practice, when collaborating with other social service agencies were coded and produced three themes. The responses were as follows: (a) difficult to provide services and (b) precludes agency collaboration. Two participants indicated there was no impact to practice. The participants' responses that answered the macro level section of the second research question are as follows:

Theme I: Difficult to provide services.

Passion Fruit: *“The greatest challenge is the coordination of services. (challenge)*

“This challenge impacts my ability to provide wraparound services for the clients.” (impact to macro level practice)

Mango: *“Some of them have an age requirement when they can provide services*

that clients sometimes have to be, actually 18. Say for example, to apply for housing, apply for food stamp or MAP and stuff like that.” (challenge)

“I won't have a concrete plan for them until they actually turn 18 when those services can be provided.” (impact to macro level practice)

Gooseberry: *“I have a problem when good service provider funding is cut off or is*

no longer funded. (challenge)

“That impacts the person I am servicing to meet goal to help support the family and the individual. I think that the lack of funding with nothing to replace anything is impacting the individual and the community on a whole. It limits what I can do.” (impact to macro level practice)

Theme J: Precludes agency collaboration.

Star Fruit: *“One of the biggest challenges is actually obtaining resources that I'm asking for.” (challenge)*

“The lack of resources impacts my ability to provide social work practice in collaboration with other social service agencies in the island community. Although the agency receives general and federal funding for programs, it is impossible to procure services for every client without collaborating with different agencies. (impact to macro level practice)

Theme K: No impact to practice.

Guava: *“The greatest challenge is trying to work with the agencies to find out what is in the best interest of my children.”* (challenge)

“The agencies really don't give me a hard time.” (impact to macro level practice)

Sugar Apple: *“None. “There's no challenge.”* (challenge)

No impact. (impact to macro level practice)

As stated earlier in this section, the second research question asked participants to identify how the challenges experienced, impacted the participants' ability to provide practice, at each level of social work practice – micro level, mezzo level, and the macro level. The data garnered by this research question produced responses that adequately answered the second research question. On the micro and mezzo levels, the common theme produced was that the challenges experienced by the participants impacted their practice by making it difficult to provide services to their adolescent clients. On the macro level of practice, the common themes produced were challenges experienced by the participants impacted their practice by making it difficult to provide services, precluded agency collaboration, as well as no impact to their practice.

Unexpected Findings

The data produced a few unexpected findings. One finding was several service barriers encountered by the participants in the Virgin Islands mirror some of those encountered by their mainland counterparts, as indicated in the literature review.

Moreover, other unexpected findings were service barriers that appeared to be unique to the participants in the Virgin Islands such as uncooperative and combative clients, language barriers, and lack of a mentorship program. These service barriers were not discovered in the review of literature as barriers to a successful transition. An additional unexpected finding was that the same theme was discovered for both micro and mezzo levels of practice.

Summary

The interviews conducted with the research participants explored their perception as it relates to the research questions. During the coding process, six themes were discovered that adequately addressed the first research question: what service barriers do social workers, at a single government agency, encounter while working with adolescents aging out of foster care in the Virgin Islands? The themes were inclusive of: lack of family support/community involvement, lack of housing, adolescents' lack of intellectual capacity/independent living skills, lack of training/employment opportunities for adolescents, services not suited for adolescents, and other - uncooperative and combative clients, clients feel agency does not understand their situation, lack of mentorship program, issue with leadership, and language barriers. Moreover, during the coding process, three themes were discovered that addressed the second research question: how do challenges that social workers experience, at the single government agency, impact their practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro system levels in the Virgin Islands? The themes included: difficult to provide services on the micro and mezzo levels of practice; and difficult to provide services and preclude agency collaboration, on the macro level of

practice. The findings of this study produced robust data that adequately answered the research questions posed. This capstone research project will be concluded in the following section.

In section four of this document, the application for professional ethics in social work practice, recommendations for social work practice, as well as implications for social change will be discussed.

Section 4: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the service barriers social workers encountered while working with their foster adolescent clients, as they began aging out of foster placement in the Virgin Islands. Service barriers are those challenges that foster adolescents experience that hinder their ability to successfully transition to adulthood such as lack of finances/employment, lack of housing, and education Pryce et al., (2017). This doctoral capstone research project focused on a single government agency social workers' practice with their clients in the area of foster care in the Virgin Islands.

This qualitative study was conducted to explore the service barriers that social workers at the single government agency encountered while working with their clients; as well as how those challenges impact practice on all three levels of social work practice. Understanding how the challenges encountered by social workers impact their practice on all levels of social work practice draws attention to the need for strategies and interventions as well as program and agency policy to address the barriers and ensure a successful transition to adulthood for aging out adolescents.

Factors that serve as barriers to foster adolescents' successful transition to adulthood have been consistently identified in research. Therefore, the mitigation and eventual elimination of service barriers should be a primary goal of foster care social workers as well as the single government agency. The findings of this study add to the growing body of research that exists relative to aging out of foster care; but more importantly, it provides seminal literature for the Virgin Islands from which further

research can be conducted. Additionally, the findings contribute to (a) professional knowledge; (b) advances in social work by bringing awareness to the those factors that can serve as a barrier, as well as the importance of addressing those service barriers to improve the transition process for foster adolescents aging out of placement; and (c) providing a framework to improve practice and inform policy, as it relates to aging out of placement in the Virgin Islands.

There is a need for change in the transition process for social workers and their clients who age out of placement in the Virgin Islands. The single government agency, as well as social workers, are in a unique position to provide services and improve the transition process for foster adolescents aging out of placement. The participants suggested that service barriers and the impact they have on social work practice, relative to the aging-out transitional process, could be addressed by: advocating for their clients, advocating to upper management to develop inter-agency compacts, having the agency provide services and financial assistance for the adolescent clients, establish effective collaboration with community agencies, as well as having participation from parents and adolescent clients in the transitional process.

Application for Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice

NASW Code of Ethics

The focus of the first part of this section is the social work practice problem in relation to two core values in the NASW Code of Ethics. In this section, I discuss how the NASW Code of Ethics guides social work practice in relation to service barriers and

aging out foster adolescents. Lastly, in the third part, I describe how the study's findings will impact social work practice, especially as it relates to professional ethics.

It should be noted that the NASW Code of Ethics serves as a roadmap for social workers to guide their professional behavior (NASW, 2017). The code is divided into two sections which is inclusive of ethical principles and ethical standards (NASW, 2017). The ethical principles section discusses six values and ethical principles (NASW, 2017). I will discuss two values in relation to the social work practice problem of service barriers and aging out of foster placement. The two values selected for this study are service and importance of human relationships (see NASW, 2017).

In daily social work practice, it is the goal of social workers to strive to assist individuals in need and manage social problems as stipulated in NASW's value of service (NASW, 2017). The value of service is the foundation of all levels of social work practice in foster care. Foster care social workers are tasked with providing services and meeting the needs of their adolescent clients as they age-out of placement. An example of this core value in relation to the study's practice issue is the social workers' ability to meet the needs of their aging-out adolescents and families they serve by obtaining housing for them to preclude homelessness, and/or obtain employment opportunities or training. These are just a few services and resources that will ensure a successful transition to adulthood.

An additional core value is the importance of human relationships. Per the Code of Ethics, the value of importance of human relationships speaks to social workers being self-aware of how important it is for them to promote, restore, maintain, as well as

enhance the well-being of their clients (NASW, 2017). Social workers in foster care must establish and maintain professional relationships with community agencies to seek services for their aging-out clients (Sulimani, 2018). Additionally, social workers must develop relationships and maintain good rapport with foster families and at times, the biological parent(s) throughout the course of placement. In addition to professional relationships, social workers should maintain good rapport with the biological and foster families as well as encourage and support relationships between the foster adolescent and biological family. Sulimani, (2018) indicated there is research that suggests there is a correlation between such contact and family reunification. Professional relationships with agencies and families are a reminder to social workers that the core value of importance of human relationships is vital to a successful transition to adulthood for aging-out foster adolescents.

NASW Code of Ethics and Foster Care Practice

The NASW Code of Ethics provides guidelines for social workers with ethical principles and standards that guide professional conduct. The social work profession's core values are reflected in the NASW Code of Ethics ethical principles which guide social work practice. Foster care social workers' daily practice is guided by these principles and standards as they work with clients and families to meet their needs and promote their overall well-being. The code influences professional practice and behavior in ethical decision making.

Impact to Social Work Practice in Foster Care

The findings of this study are vital to developing and implementing strategies to address the barriers to service that preclude foster adolescents' successful transition to adulthood. When social workers have knowledge and a better understanding of the barriers that preclude adolescents' successful transition to adulthood, they are then able to be more effective as they assist their aging-out clients through the transition process. The results of this study may influence new practice strategies for foster care social workers as well as influence policy at the single government agency. In the following section, I will discuss recommendations for social work practice.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice

This section discusses recommendations for social work practice in the area of foster care in the Virgin Islands. I discuss action steps as it relates to the service barriers impacting aging-out adolescents' transition to adulthood as indicated in Section 3. I will also discuss how the study's findings impact personal practice as well as the transferability of the findings to social work practice. The usefulness of the study's findings to the broader field of social work will be discussed, also any limitations that may impact its usefulness. Next, I will explore the need for further research and conclude this section with ways to disseminate the findings from this study.

Action Steps for Social Work Practice

A system of support is necessary, for aging-out foster adolescents, to navigate the transition process from placement to adulthood. Participants identified several areas void of supports that created barriers to service delivery. These barriers are inclusive of: (a) a

lack of family/community involvement, (b) a need for services and programs, and (c) a lack of finances/employment opportunities as service barriers social workers encounter while working with their foster adolescents aging out of placement. These barriers impacted their practice by making it difficult to provide services on the micro-, mezzo-, and macro-levels as well as precluded agency collaboration on the macro level. Per the participants, these service barriers should be addressed by the following: advocacy efforts on behalf of clients and to upper management for agency collaboration, agency provision of services and financial assistance, and client/parent participation in the transition process.

Given the findings of this study, action step recommendations are suggested for practitioners who practice in the area of foster care.

Action Step 1: Social workers should include clients in decisions that directly affect them. Foster adolescents have a story to tell that has not been heard and they want to be able to make choices for their future. It is important for social workers to listen to these adolescents to gain knowledge and use it to inform practice and policy that will influence transitioning adolescent lives.

Action Step 2: Social workers advocate for financial assistance and resources to meet the needs of their aging out foster adolescent clients as well as their families.

Action Step 3: The agency develops and maintains a program that builds and supports biological and foster families. There is research that demonstrates a correlation between parent-foster adolescent contact and family reunification and; that consistent

involvement of parents results in family stability as well as family continuity (Sulimani, 2018).

Action Step 4: The agency develops and maintains a young adult transition program with the Department of Labor, that supports aging out foster adolescents' transition to adulthood, which addresses independent living skills, employment readiness, and mentorship. Collins (2019) discussed the importance of mentors and skills-based programs as critical components in the successful transition of aging-out foster adolescents, that also create opportunities for relationships, which is a critical social support for this population.

Action Step 5: The agency develops and maintains a transitional housing program in partnership with Housing Authority and HUD housing that supports different levels of independence and would offer a "safety net" in the event an issue arises.

Impact on Personal Social Work Practice

As indicated earlier in the document, the findings of this study will have an impact on foster care social workers' practice. Additionally, the findings will also have an impact on my current role as the Director of Field Education for the Master of Social Work program at the University of the Virgin Islands. The findings helped me understand what service barriers present challenges for social workers in foster care and how the barriers impact practice on all social work practice levels. One of the findings, lack of family/community involvement, reinforced for me the importance of human relationships which is a core value of the NASW Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017). This finding reminds me that I must emphasize the importance of human relationships, in

every aspect of field instruction to my students, as it relates to clients and their families, community agencies, social supports and networks. It is my position that the best preparation for future foster care social workers is social work education.

Transferability of Findings to Clinical Practice

The findings from this study can be generalized to other islands in the Caribbean, and possibly the states as well. The findings are significant to developing strategies and interventions to address service barriers, that social workers encounter when working with their aging-out foster adolescents, that hinder their successful transition from placement to adulthood. The results from this study may have the possibility of being applied to other islands and states, with a Division of Children and Family Services, that provide services to aging-out foster adolescents. In the following section, I discuss the usefulness of the findings to the broader field of social work practice.

Usefulness of the Findings and the Broader Social Work Practice

Per the data, there was a key finding in this study that could have potential impact on the macro-level of social work practice in the area of foster care. Participants indicated there is a lack of services and programs for aging-out foster adolescents and suggested that there is a need for agency provision of services and financial assistance for their clients. This finding suggests there is a need for amendments to existing policy and/or a need to create new policy that speaks to agency development of transitional housing programs in partnership with the Housing Authority as well as agency-sponsored independent living programs.

The usefulness of the findings from this study to the broader field of social work practice is awareness of challenges social workers face that create service barriers, which preclude the successful transition to adulthood, for aging-out foster adolescents. It is important to have an understanding to address barriers such as lack of family/community involvement; lack of services and programs; and lack of finances/employment opportunities; as there is an increasing need for policy.

Limitations That may Impact Usefulness

There were possible limitations to this study which included the use of purposeful sampling. In qualitative research, the use of purposeful sampling to select research participants as well as having a small sample size, potentially places restrictions on the findings. This type of sampling could have influenced selection bias of research participants. Additionally, there is only one government agency in the Virgin Islands that is licensed to manage foster cases, and this agency was selected for the recruitment purposes. There are six social workers who manage foster care cases there. The participants were selected for the study using specific criteria. This criterion was inclusive of possession of a BSW or MSW or closely related degree and more than one-year employment at the agency managing foster cases. It should also be noted that the sample size was small; it was inclusive of six participants. Lastly, all participants were female and Afro-Caribbean; there were no males in the study. Of the identified limitations, there was one identified limitation that may impact the study's usefulness which is the sample size. A larger sample size should be used in future research, if possible.

Recommendations for Further Research

This section will explore recommendations for further research. This study explored the service barriers social workers encountered while working with adolescents aging out of placement. The study also looked at how the identified service barriers impact social work practice on the micro-, mezzo-, and macro-levels of practice. Given the limitation of this current study, future research should include a larger sample to include social workers in the Protective Unit who may manage some foster care cases due to the shortage of staff.

This current study focused on the narrative of social workers in foster care who provided their experiences. Future research should include current and former foster adolescents to convey their experiences of aging-out of placement while transitioning to adulthood.

Dissemination of Information

The information produced by this research project will be shared with the single government agency that served as the sole source of data collection. The findings of this research study can be disseminated in two different ways. The first mode of dissemination would be to schedule a meeting with the agency administration to discuss the findings of the research study. This would include a PowerPoint presentation to guide the presentation and discussion.

The second mode of dissemination of the research findings is the preparation of a two-page report that would be shared with the agency administration and social workers.

Implications for Social Change

The information produced from this research study has the potential to influence practice at all levels of social work practice – micro-, mezzo-, and macro-levels of practice. Improvement on the micro-level of practice can include more effective efforts in encouraging consistent relationships with the biological and foster family and the adolescent client as well as advocacy efforts for additional resources and services to meet client and family needs. An additional improvement on the mezzo-level would include interdisciplinary collaboration and planning with various community agencies essential in obtaining resources and services. On the macro-level of practice, improvement could include changes to existing policy and the creation of new policy to fund and develop programs to meet the needs of the clients and families. These improvements have the ability to influence positive social change as improvement on all levels of practice would decrease the number of adolescents aging out of placement and produce young adults who are prepared to live independently and be productive citizens in their communities.

Summary

When a foster adolescent transitions from the formal control of the foster care system towards independence it is known as “*aging-out*” of placement (Greenson, Garcia, Tan, Chacon, & Ortiz, 2020). This study explored the service barriers social workers encounter while working with their foster adolescent clients, as they begin aging out of foster placement in the Virgin Islands. A qualitative design using a narrative approach was applied to uncover the research participants’ experiences in their practice setting. The results of this study identified lack of family/community involvement, need for

services and programs, and lack of finances/employment opportunities as service barriers social workers encounter while working with their foster adolescents aging out of placement; that these barriers impacted their practice by making it difficult to provide services on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels as well as precluded agency collaboration on the macro level. The participants offered suggestions to address these barriers which included advocacy efforts on behalf of clients and to upper management for agency collaboration, agency provision of services and financial assistance, and client/parent participation in the transition process. The findings from this research study contributed to the existing literature on aging out of foster placement, but most importantly, it provided seminal literature as no other research relative to foster care has been conducted to date in the Virgin Islands. The results also informed and advanced professional social work practice for the single government agency relative to interventions. The findings have implications for social change by assisting those involved in providing services to aging-out adolescents such as social workers, mental health practitioners, communities, education and judicial systems, and social service and housing agencies to understand the critical role of relationships, services/resources, and transitional programs in bringing about positive outcomes for aging-out adolescents.

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Appendix A: Demographic questionnaire

Please be advised that no unauthorized individuals will have access to the information contained on this form and that the information will be kept confidential. The identifying personal information will not be shared with any individual or published in any form. Thank you for your participation in this study.

1. What race/ethnicity do you identify with? _____

2. What is your highest degree in social work? _____

3. What gender do you identify with? _____

What is your level of social work licensure? _____

6. How many years have you worked in your current position? _____

Appendix B: Script for Narrative Interviews

Introduction:

Good day, my name is Anna M. Clarke and, I am a doctoral student at Walden University conducting interviews relative to foster care service barriers and social work practice in St. Croix, VI. During the interview, I will pose several open-ended questions to you to generate narrative data. The entire interview will be recorded. All responses are important to this study, so please feel free to share your experiences, opinions, and thoughts openly. The interview will last for about one hour. Your name or other identifying information will not be included in the final report. If you are not clear about anything relative to the interview, please ask questions now. If you have a clear understanding of the process, then let us begin.

Service barriers are those challenges social workers encounter while working with their foster adolescent clients aging out of placement. The single government agency assists aging-out foster adolescents make their transition from foster placement to adulthood a successful one. The goal of this interview is to explore your role and experiences during the transition process.

What do you see as your greatest challenge as a social worker in the Division of Children and Family Services and why?

What types of service barriers have you encountered while working with your clients during their transition to adulthood?

What do you usually do to address each barrier?

Which of these service barriers are you able to address and which ones are you not able to address and why?

Micro level: What do you see as your greatest challenge, when working with foster adolescents aging out of placement? How does this impact your ability to provide social work practice with individual clients?

Mezzo level: What do you see as your greatest challenge when working with the single government agency client families of those foster adolescents aging-out of placement? How does this impact your ability to provide social work practice with groups?

Macro level: What do you see as your greatest challenge when collaborating with other social service agencies on behalf of foster adolescents aging-out of placement? How does this impact your ability to provide social work practice in collaboration with other social service agencies in the island community?

What do you think you can do to address these challenges?

What do you think can be done to improve the transition process for foster adolescents aging-out of the foster care system?

Based on your experiences, what improves the transition process for adolescents aging out of the foster care system? How did _____ improve the process?

We have concluded our interview. If you have a need for clarification or additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me at the following telephone number at the number provided to you. I would like to thank you for your contribution and participation in this study.