

**Organization Name:** Route 21

**Date of Interview:** April 14, 2026

**Organization Interviewees:** Rick Newell, Executive Director, Rebecca Newell, HR Director, and Kyle Martinez, Mentor

**Impact 100 GRT Interviewers:** Hue Dao, Susan Hester

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**Organization mission:** Route 21’s mission is to recruit, train, and employ young adults who have experienced foster care as paid professional mentors to high school students currently in foster care in the Greater Seattle area. Route 21 exists to change the trajectory of young people impacted by foster care by investing in the power of lived experience, consistent relationships, and economic opportunity.

**What does the organization do?** Route 21 serves youth for up to seven years — throughout high school and into college and/or the establishment of a career. A long-lasting community of near peers helps fill the gaps created when a foster youth exits the child welfare system of supports, such as foster families and caseworkers. The Route 21 model includes:

1. **Paid Near-Peer Mentorship:** 100% of their professional mentors have personally experienced foster care. Lived experience is not an advisory element — it is the professional qualification for the role.
2. **Trauma-Informed Training:** Mentors are trained throughout the year in Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI) and youth development best practices.
3. **Life Skills Development:** Through their W.H.E.E.L.S. curriculum (Wealth, Health, Education, Emotions, Life Skills, Spiritual well-being), youth build practical tools for adulthood.
4. **Dual-Generation Impact:** By compensating mentors, Route 21 creates workforce pathways for foster alumni while strengthening outcomes for current youth in care.
5. **Route 21 does not replace public services.** They complement them by adding relational continuity and lived-experience leadership at a critical life stage.

**Who does the organization serve?** Route 21 serves two interconnected underserved communities: 1) high school students currently in foster care, and 2) young adults who have aged out of foster care and serve as professional, trained, well-paid Route 21 mentors. 100% of Route 21’s professional mentors have lived experience in foster care. Route 21 intentionally recognizes lived experience as expertise and compensates it accordingly. They are intentional about ensuring that staff demographics reflect the racial and gender diversity of youth in foster care in King County. They also prioritize voice and choice in mentor matching and recognize that representation extends beyond that shared experience. It is important that young people see themselves reflected in their mentors not only through foster care history, but also through race, gender, and other aspects of identity that shape belonging and trust.

Route 21 cares about their mentors just as much as the youth they serve. Route 21 surrounds each mentor with a dedicated “Pit Crew” that provides relational support, professional coaching, and guidance around financial stewardship and long-term career direction, so they are strengthened personally and equipped for their own future as they invest in the next generation.

**What inequity is the organization addressing and how does the organization address it?** Youth aging out of foster care are among, if not the most, underserved young people in our country. These outcomes are not the result of personal failure or lack of effort from public systems. They reflect structural realities: disrupted attachments, frequent school changes, abrupt transitions to independence at 18–21, and limited access to long-term adult support. As a result, youth aging out of foster care experience disproportionate risk in nearly every long-term outcome:

- Approximately 55% graduate from high school. These graduation rates are lower than for youth of any race, and even lower than for youth experiencing homelessness (68%).
- Only about 7% complete a college degree.
- Nearly one-third experience homelessness by age 26.
- Roughly one in four experience incarceration within a few years of aging out.
- Youth with foster care histories are significantly overrepresented among survivors of human trafficking.
- Foster care alumni report PTSD at rates greater than those of combat veterans.

**What are the compelling reasons to support this organization? How is this organization doing transformative work?** Route 21’s model is based on a nonprofit started by the same leaders in 2012, M.U.S.T (Mentoring Urban Students and Teens - <http://www.mentoringisamust.org/>) which continues to operate successfully and sustainably today. Rick and Rebecca Newell left the M.U.S.T. mentoring program ) to launch Route 21. From its inception, M.U.S.T. was built with representative leadership as a goal — not as an evolution. The Newells founded M.U.S.T., raised up representative leadership and handed off all aspects of executive control and eventually exited that program before launching Route 21. That same principle is also embedded in Route 21 from day one. Within approximately 3-5 years, Route 21 will transition executive leadership to a strong candidate who personally grew up in foster care. Leadership transition is part of their organizational design, and they are intentionally building internal leadership pathways now to make that future possible. Route 21 is a specialty, boutique-style mentoring organization. There is no other organization in the country that combines: 1) professional mentors exclusively with lived foster care experience, 2) structured curriculum, 3) long-term relational commitment, 4) community-based model, and 5) dual-generation workforce development. When a young person exits foster care with housing stability, education, employment, and enduring support, the ripple effects extend to future families and communities. When a former foster youth becomes a professional mentor — and eventually an executive leader — the narrative shifts from survival to stewardship.

**What is the organization’s area of greatest need?** Route 21 has proven its model by successfully completing two cohorts. Their business plan now calls for them to start to scale the model. Route 21 is working to complete an MOU with Seattle Public Schools, and their goal is to put the infrastructure in place to serve every incoming freshman in Seattle Public Schools who is in foster care by Fall 2026. As an organization with annual revenue just over \$530K, a grant from Impact 100 Seattle would significantly expand their reach and stability.

**Highlight a story of impact:** The Newells shared stories with us as did Kyle, who is a mentor, and a success story himself. He has been a mentor for two years and has found his own life transformed by the training and education provided by Route 21 staff, even as he has followed his mentees in their journeys as far as Portland and a Job Corps program in Astoria. He is now ready to begin training to be an EMT and eventually either a firefighter or paramedic. Rick shared a story about a former juvenile detainee and a mentor with similar experiences. The staff were unable to really engage the youth during the summer program, but as soon as he was paired with a mentor with similar experience, everything clicked. The initial inspiration for Route 21 was a young boy in the first cohort of M.U.S.T. who also happened to be in foster care. Michael has since graduated from high school and has a stable career as an airplane machinist, thanks in part to the support he got from both of these amazing organizations.