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### **Sokhom Mao, Graduate of Sunny Hills' Foster Youth Program, is Honored at White House**

San Anselmo, CA, May 20, 2015. Sokhom Mao, a former foster youth and 2005 graduate of Sunny Hills Services' "Real Alternatives for Adolescents" (RAFA) program, was presented with the "Champion of Change Award" at the White House yesterday. According to a recent White House press release, Mao and 11 other former foster youth from around the nation were honored for their "courage, resilience and contributions." The event showcased the stories and work of these inspirational leaders as a part of National Foster Care Month.

Foster youth face daunting challenges, and Sokhom Mao was no exception. When he was 9, his mother died and his father was unable to adequately care for Mao's five brothers and sisters, so they each entered California's foster care system. When Mao was in high school he learned of Sunny Hills' RAFA program, where he received extensive support, encouragement and the guidance needed to prepare him for college.

Mao attended San Francisco State University through their Guardian Scholars program, which provides housing, support and case management to foster youth. Sonja Lenz-Rashid, Sunny Hills' part-time clinical director and co-founder of the San Francisco State Guardian Scholars program, accompanied Mao to Washington when he received his award. "Without Sunny Hills' RAFA program and other programs like it around the country, none of the Champions of Change recipients would be here. The staff at Sunny Hills Services guided me every step of the way – making sure I stayed on track and reached my goals. I am forever grateful and will continue to do my best to ensure that every foster youth will have the same opportunities so generously extended to me," said Mao.

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Mao is a juvenile justice commissioner for Alameda County and a public education specialist for the California Social Work Education Center at the University of California, Berkeley, and serves on the National Council on Crime and Delinquency's Alameda County LGBTQ Task Force. For the past 13 years, Commissioner Mao has led policy campaigns in higher education and foster care reform across California and the nation. Thanks to intensive efforts by Mao and others, California passed its landmark foster care bill, Assembly Bill 12, giving foster youth opportunities and access to higher education, employment opportunities and stable housing until age 21. Commissioner Mao was appointed to the National Council on Crime and Delinquency's Alameda County LGBTQ Task Force. While in college, Mao majored in Criminal Justice and was a founding member of the Guardian Scholars Program supporting current and former foster youth in higher education. He is a resident of Oakland.

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### **About Sunny Hills Services**

The mission of Sunny Hills Services is to help vulnerable children, youth, and their families use their strengths to develop healthy relationships and fulfilling lives. The agency was founded in 1895 as an orphanage and farm. Today Sunny Hills operates distinct programs in Sonoma, Marin and Alameda counties and strives to address the needs of at-risk children to help them function productively in society. The agency serves youth from age 6 through 24 and their families, or more than 2600 people annually. [www.sunnyhillsservices.org](http://www.sunnyhillsservices.org)