



## **MY-CIL Practice Brief #12**

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### **Lessons from the MY-CIL Learning Collaborative: CIL strategies to engage and empower out-of-school youth with disabilities from minority backgrounds**

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**About the MY-CIL Project.** Minority Youth and Centers for Independent Living (MY-CIL) is a collaborative effort of Hunter College; the Center for Independence of the Disabled, New York; Independent Living Research Utilization; and Mathematica. The Administration for Community Living's National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research and the Office of Independent Living Programs funded MY-CIL to improve outcomes for out-of-school youth and young adults (ages 14 to 24) with disabilities. Specifically, the project seeks to produce and share knowledge that empowers Centers for Independent Living (CILs) to improve outcomes for youth and young adults with significant disabilities from nationally recognized racial and ethnic minority groups who have completed or otherwise left secondary education.

#### **Clarifying terms**

**Youth from minority backgrounds.** MY-CIL uses the term *youth from minority backgrounds* to refer to transition-age youth and young adults (ages 14 to 24) from nationally recognized racial and ethnic minority groups.

**Out-of-school youth with disabilities (OSY) from minority backgrounds.** MY-CIL uses the term to refer to transition-age youth and young adults with disabilities (ages 14 to 24) who have completed or otherwise left secondary education.

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## **Introduction**

A learning collaborative is an interactive group process meant to improve programs and performance through progressive learning, action, and planning. The Minority Youth and Centers for Independent Living (MY-CIL) project offered focused learning collaboratives to help CIL staff understand and discuss strategies to serve out-of-school youth with disabilities (OSY) from minority backgrounds. Independent Living Research Utilization facilitated three seven-month learning collaboratives from 2020 to 2022. Facilitators helped Centers for Independent Living (CIL) staff plan programs and activities to support minority youth. Each session began with a two-day virtual kickoff meeting, followed by monthly Zoom workshops in which participants explored strategies for implementing ideas, shared best practices, asked questions, identified barriers, and brainstormed solutions. Participants also used Slack, a live web-based discussion platform, for networking and peer learning.

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In fall 2023, Mathematica conducted 10 informal virtual interviews with CIL staff who completed the learning collaborative. In these interviews CIL staff discussed their challenges, solutions, and accomplishments since the learning collaborative ended. They shared steps their CILs are taking to be better equipped to improve outreach, services, and outcomes for OSY consumers. These interviews also sought to understand key lessons from the learning collaborative. This practice brief highlights ways CILs staff are strengthening their efforts to engage and empower OSY from minority backgrounds with innovative and responsive program offerings. Staff from the following CILs participated in these interviews:

**Table 1. Learning collaborative CILs interviewed**

<b>CIL Name</b>	<b>Location</b>
Able South Carolina	Columbia, SC
Berkeley Center for Independent Living	Berkeley, CA
Boston Center for Independent Living	Boston, MA
Center for Independence	Grand Junction, CO
Disability Action Center	Chico, CA
Disability Network Southwest Michigan	Kalamazoo, MI
RAMP	Rockford, IL
Southern Illinois Center for Independent Living	Carbondale, IL
Suncoast Center for Independent Living	Sarasota, FL
Tri-County ILC	Akron, OH

## **Findings**

In this section, we highlight how CIL staff used information from the learning collaborative to create innovative and responsive programs to include, engage, and empower OSY from minority backgrounds. In the key takeaway’s summary, we link to helpful resources for further reading and guidance.

### **Engaging and Empowering OSY from Minority Backgrounds**

CILs devised creative strategies to expand current programs to be more inclusive or launch new tailored programs. To boost youth participation and growth opportunities in CIL programs, staff adapted programs, solicited and acted on youth’s feedback, and created youth leadership opportunities.

**Innovative programs.** CIL staff applied strategies from the learning collaborative to innovate existing programs to be more inclusive to OSY from minority backgrounds and to launch new tailored programs. One CIL prioritized serving OSY in its existing Fast Track program for transition-age youth, which provides career development support through mock interviews and help with resumes and job applications. Another CIL started offering family nights with dynamic keynote speakers to engage OSY. These events include information and resources, motivating discussions, and opportunities for youth and families to socialize and learn from each other.

One CIL established a tribal youth program for three age groups of Native American youth: 10 to 13, 14 to 19, and 20 to 30. The tribal youth program focuses on strengthening Native American cultural values and traditions as well as targeted vocational and educational preparation. This CIL has taken numerous measures to ensure Native American youth and

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leaders feel welcome in the space, such as hiring a respected tribal spiritual leader to lead program activities and allowing tribal groups to perform ceremonial blessing in the CIL space on weekends.

**Youth feedback.** Because youth's interests change, CIL staff actively collect youth's feedback to adapt program offerings. CILs polled youth on their preferences for program content as a strategy to drive youth participation. One staff member observed that by distributing an informal survey to youth at social club meetings or having a quick debrief for them to invite thoughts and suggestions during events, youth can feel more ownership over their group, practice communication skills, and grow their confidence. Youth-driven programming also ensures that activities are age-appropriate and avoid infantilizing youth.

Importantly, CIL staff acted on the suggestions youth provided. One CIL responded to youth's feedback requesting activities in the community by partnering with a free local bus system to take youth to an outdoor market on Saturdays. The youth learn how to use accessibility features of the bus system and experience a fun community outing.

**Leadership opportunities.** In addition to creating youth-driven programming, many CILs encourage transition-age youth to participate in and lead CIL activities. Staff from one CIL shared that older transition-age youth take on a mentoring role in youth groups at their CIL, or act as discussion leaders. According to CIL staff, youth are less likely to experience social barriers or be reluctant to participate when they can share ideas with peers and a youth leader than when they speak with adult authority figures. One staff member highlighted the transformative nature of pairing youth with young adult mentors, explaining that, for youth, "the nervousness of talking to someone who is older in an authority position really comes down when they're talking to someone their age...and was in the same kind of position to them not that long ago."

To address unemployment among OSY, one CIL described how it directly hires OSY as peer mentors in its programming. The peer mentor position serves as a stepping-stone for youth to build experience for their resume after they exit school and before their next job. This program gives youth work experiences and pathways to independence whether they obtain a high school diploma or not.

CILs also provide leadership opportunities to school-age youth. One CIL staff member said that the CIL trains student officers to teach their peers advocacy skills, disability rights, and community engagement. In addition, CIL staff discussed their efforts to involve youth in confidence-building programming such as advocacy workshops or state-level youth leadership forums for high-school-age youth. These initiatives are designed to build youth's confidence, advocacy skills, and leadership experience.

### **Key takeaways:**

- Try new activities in different settings to keep youth engaged and give them hands-on experiences in the community.
- Directly ask youth for input and use this feedback to [shape](#) programming.
- Incorporate [leadership](#) positions into programming to build transferrable professional skills for transition-age youth and help make youth more comfortable sharing in group discussions.

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## **Discussion**

Staff from 10 CILs who completed the MY-CIL learning collaborative shared what they have learned about specific strategies to engage and empower OSY from minority backgrounds. CILs can begin by exploring ways to engage OSY from minority backgrounds in existing programs, including programs traditionally geared toward students. CILs can take steps to make programs more inclusive and adaptable by learning about the communities that youth belong to and youth's preferences and interests using simple polls, surveys, or debriefing discussions. Those suggestions can help CIL staff tweak program structure, content, and settings. Demonstrating responsiveness to youth's feedback could help them feel more comfortable sharing ideas and be more willing to stay engaged in CIL programs. Finally, CILs can create leadership opportunities for youth to gain experience and build their confidence. Youth-led discussions and activities could spark more fruitful and comfortable engagement for participating OSY from minority backgrounds who might feel mistrustful of authority figures and prefer interacting with peers.

## **Sources**

Office of Disability Employment Policy. (n.d.). Cultivating leadership: Mentoring youth with disabilities. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/odep/program-areas/individuals/youth/mentoring-youth-with-disabilities>

Youth.gov. (n.d.). Involving youth in positive youth development. <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/involving-youth-positive-youth-development>

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### **Interested in learning more about reaching and serving OSY from minority backgrounds?**

Check out Practice Brief #11: Lessons from the MY-CIL Learning Collaborative: CIL practices to improve readiness to reach and serve out-of-school youth with disabilities from minority backgrounds.

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## **To learn more about MY-CIL**

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To learn more about MY-CIL, please visit <https://minorityyouthcil.com/>

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## **About the Authors of This Brief**

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