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Youth Engagement in Child Welfare Service Planning

The Children's Bureau, within the Administration for Children and Families (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services), is funding a multi-phase grant program referred to as Youth At-Risk of Homelessness (YARH) to build the evidence base on what works to prevent homelessness among youth and young adults who have been involved in the child welfare system. To date, there is very little evidence on how to meet the needs of this population. Eighteen organizations received grant funding for the first phase of YARH, a two-year planning grant (2013 – 2015). Six of those organizations received funding for the second phase, a three-year initial implementation grant (2015 – 2018).

YARH focuses on three populations: (1) adolescents who enter foster care between 14 and 17, (2) young adults aging out of foster care, and (3) homeless youth/young adults with foster care histories up to 21.

During the planning phase, grantees conducted data analyses to help them understand their local population and develop a comprehensive service model to improve outcomes in housing, education and training, social well-being, and permanent connections. During the initial implementation phase, grantees are refining and testing their comprehensive service model. They will conduct usability testing to determine the feasibility of specific elements of the model, and conduct a formative evaluation to understand what supports and structures are needed to implement the model with fidelity. Finally, they will develop a plan to test their comprehensive service model in a summative evaluation. A third YARH grant phase, if funded, will involve conducting summative evaluations designed to add to the evidence base on how to support older youth with child welfare involvement and prevent homelessness.

In this issue brief, we discuss methods YARH grantees used to engage youth in the development of new comprehensive service models intended to reduce homelessness for youth in or formerly in foster care. This brief is based on our work with 18 Phase I and 6 Phase II grantees from 2013 – 2017.

For more information on YARH, please see https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/building-capacity-to-evaluate-interventions-for-youth-with-child-welfare-involvement-at-risk-of-homelessness.

In their work to develop new comprehensive service models through the YARH grants, the 18 grantees engaged current and former youth in foster care during the planning process. The YARH grantees used a variety of strategies, from needs assessments to active roles in service planning, to integrate youth perspectives in service planning. Engaging youth helped ensure the proposed interventions—and the data analyses and assumptions underlying them—reflected the reality of the experiences youth have with the child welfare system.

Integrating youth input into planning youth services can result in more successful services. First, incorporating youth perspectives can lead to offering services that are more likely to appeal to youth, which can improve enrollment and participation. Second, involving youth in planning can improve the quality of services proposed. Current participants and recent alumni of care have a unique perspective. They understand the range of challenges youth in foster care face—and the strengths they possess—in ways that professionals without personal experience may not. Youth and young adults might propose ideas to strengthen proposed services that planning teams might not otherwise consider (Gomez and Ryan 2015). Youth can also provide a reality check regarding the feasibility and appropriateness of planned services. Finally, offering an intervention young people helped design can increase its credibility with the target population.

YARH grantees used a variety of strategies to engage youth in the planning processes in grant Phases I and II. In this brief, we describe some of those efforts. In the next section, we summarize the most common strategies. The last section contains profiles that highlight three grantees' strategies for engaging youth.

Summary of strategies for youth engagement in planning services

Grantees engaged youth in two main areas of YARH planning activities: (1) collecting data from youth on risk factors and service needs, and (2) bringing youth into the YARH decision-making process. In this section, we provide examples of each strategy.

Data collection

The YARH grants required grantees to analyze data on their target populations to identify risk factors and service gaps. All grantees analyzed existing administrative data on youth. Many grantees augmented these sources by collecting new data directly from youth.

Surveys and focus groups were the most common methods grantees used to collect information from youth. Some grantees used surveys of youth to gather additional data on risk factors associated with homelessness. Staff at one grantee said the risk factors they identified from the administrative data analysis seemed incomplete. Adding responses from youth surveys provided what staff believed was a more complete picture of risk factors in their local youth population. Other grantees gathered information from youth about service needs. In one example, grantee staff used surveys of youth in care to measure independent living skills to gauge the need for additional services.

Community events

Some grantees used community events to gather information from youth. Two grantees convened charrettes to gather public input on the challenges youth in foster care face and to brainstorm ideas for overcoming them. Both grantees divided their charrettes into separate discussions by topic, generally adhering to the four YARH outcome areas (stable housing, permanent connections, education and employment, and social-emotional well-being). In addition to providing useful information to the planning team, the charrettes helped build community support for planning efforts.

> A charrette is a collaborative session during which a group of individuals come together to brainstorm and solve a problem. Charrettes are frequently used in urban planning as the meeting format is conducive to engaging a large number of stakeholders in thinking about an issue and potential solutions.

Another grantee encouraged youth input through speak out sessions with youth in foster care assessed to be at risk of homelessness. At these sessions, grantee staff administered surveys and moderated discussions with participants on service needs. Afterward, grantee staff combined survey responses with qualitative data from the discussions to create detailed needs assessments for local youth targeted by the intervention. A fourth grantee held a "shark tank" activity as an engaging way to gather youth preferences for proposed intervention services (see Colorado profile, page 3).

Figure 1. Data collection and planning activities with youth in or formerly in foster care in YARH Phase I, number of grantees

Source: Site visits conducted for Phase I process study

Data collection challenges

Some grantees experienced challenges collecting data from youth. One grantee sought input from homeless youth formerly in foster care but had trouble recruiting them for surveys and focus groups. Staff at another grantee initially faced similar challenges recruiting youth for focus groups, but increased youth participation by enlisting peers in the recruiting process and scheduling focus groups at times and places more convenient for their target population. A third grantee experienced the opposite problem: after offering financial incentives for completing an online survey, an unexpectedly strong response from youth strained the grant planning budget.

Decision making

Many grantees went beyond engaging youth through data activities. They brought young people into the planning team's decision-making process.

> **Half of grantees had youth representatives on their planning teams.**

For some grantees, youth participation in service planning was already routine (incorporating youth input in child welfare service planning is a requirement in at least one grantee's county). For others, the YARH grant process encouraged new ways of involving youth in the process. One grantee enlisted local youth in foster care to help the staff interpret results from data analysis into risk factors associated with homelessness, gaining a valuable perspective and reality check on the data results (see King County profile, page 4).

Several grantees used youth advisory boards to gather input on planning decisions. For one grantee, the youth advisory group formed for the YARH planning process developed into an independent youth support and advocacy nonprofit organization (see Westchester County profile, page 5).

The next section contains profiles of three grantees that used particularly innovative strategies to engage youth in service planning.

Colorado

During the YARH grants, Colorado conducted a large-scale effort to incorporate views of youth in foster care across the state into intervention planning and used innovative techniques to solicit youth feedback on early ideas for intervention services.

Colorado has 16 youth advisory boards throughout the state. In Phase I, a youth and adolescent specialist employed by the state met with the youth advisory board coordinator every

two months to gather youth feedback for the project leadership team. The specialist communicated youth perspectives to the project team and took youth to steering committee meetings to share their opinions in person. The specialist also helped youth prepare to speak at summits.

In addition to soliciting input from youth advisory boards, Colorado organized focus groups for youth to provide their opinions, feedback, and expertise on the foster care system and the services available. The focus groups included youth in foster care ages 14 to 17 as well as those aging out of care. The focus groups were organized around specific topic areas. For instance, one focus group gathered input from youth on what they supposed were the reasons youth run away from placements—and what factors might make them choose to stay.

In an innovative attempt to engage youth in foster care and stakeholders in determining the services the new model would include, Colorado created the "shark tank" activity. This activity, modeled on the television show, encouraged counties, nonprofits, and state staff to present 12 to 13 ideas of services they would like to provide to youth. Youth voted on the ideas by putting different sums of "money" on the services to rank their preferences. Figure 2 shows the results of the shark tank game; safe and stable transitional housing and long-term mentoring were the services most desired by youth.

In Phase II, Colorado formalized the process of obtaining youth feedback on intervention services and other areas of interest. In Phase I Colorado formed a project steering committee to focus on intervention planning. In Phase II, the steering committee changed course, focusing instead on creating a formal structure for soliciting youth feedback and opinions from the advisory boards. Colorado also included a youth representative on the project leadership team and invited youth to participate in grantee conferences and site visits.

Figure 2. Service needs for current and former youth in foster care, prioritized by youth and stakeholders
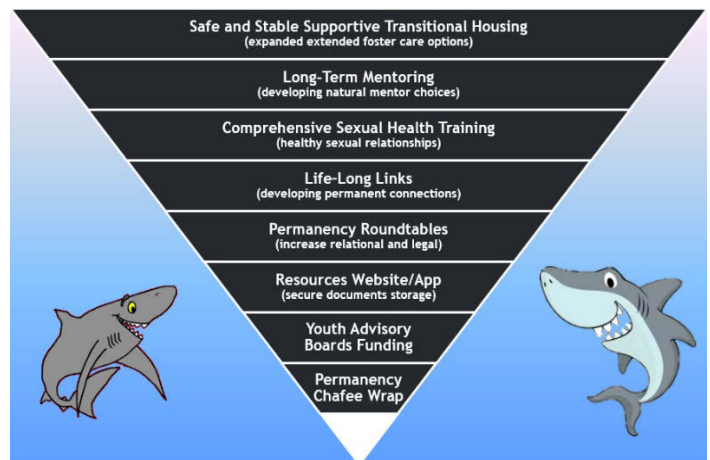
Source: Colorado Department of Human Services

United Way King County

During Phase I, United Way of King County (UWKC) worked with the Mockingbird Society, a leader in Washington State child welfare reform, to engage youth in foster care in the initial stages of creating a new comprehensive service model. Youth from the Mockingbird Society, which supports every child's right for a safe and stable home, assisted with data analysis and participated in focus groups to inform UWKC's needs assessment. The contributions of these youth gave the data an extra measure of authenticity, and ensured the narrative reflected the reality of life for youth aging out of foster care.

During Phase I, UWKC developed a model to predict the risk of homelessness for youth aging out of foster care. The evaluation team generated the predictive risk model using statewide data from child welfare, education, homeless services, public assistance, and health administrative systems. Once the research identified factors associated with the risk of homelessness, youth from the Mockingbird Society provided their thoughts on the results (see Figure 3). For instance, they objected to one risk factor, "Youth

Figure 3. Youth provided feedback on the predictive risk model

is African American," being a focal point of a presentation on the risks that should inform service delivery because race cannot be altered through service provision. Consistent with this comment, the research team focused its key findings in the published report on "actionable factors" associated with homelessness. At a summit to present the predictive risk model, youth shared their life experiences with and reactions to the highlighted risk factors, helping to put the findings into a human context. Researchers also created hypothetical cases to help explain the predictive model. Mockingbird Society youth reviewed the cases before the summit to ensure they were realistic. Summit attendees noted that incorporating youth perspectives resonated with them and strengthened UWKC's summit presentations.

To assess the existing service landscape in King County, UWKC conducted focus groups with youth from the Mockingbird Society. For each group, the Mockingbird Society recruited 10 youth to discuss their experience with the service environment and any gaps they had identified. The assistance of the Mockingbird Society in youth recruitment for the focus groups was essential for identifying respondents who would be open to sharing their opinions and experiences. From these groups, UKWC learned that youth were more likely to engage in a service if it had been recommended by a peer. This information helped inform plans for future services, such as including peer navigators— youth with foster care experience who can engage youth with services.

Westchester County

Westchester County Department of Social Services' (DSS) engagement with youth in or formerly in foster care through Phases I and II helped launch a local youth movement and led to sustained collaboration with local alumni of foster care. Westchester County's YARH intervention, the BraveLife Initiative (BLI), resulted from substantial input from local youth with foster care history.

During Phase I, Westchester County's research team conducted extensive qualitative data collection with youth in or formerly in foster care. Team members conducted multiple waves of focus groups and surveys to identify service gaps and risk and protective factors.

In October 2013, a partner organization, Family Ties, connected Westchester County grantee staff to a group of youth with foster care history to solicit their input on how best to engage youth when implementing a service intervention. This group of four or five youth met monthly to discuss their thoughts and concerns about DSS's evolving intervention plans. Over time, the group met more frequently and invited other alumni of care to join them. As the group continued to expand, group members adopted a mission statement for themselves as well as a group name: The Bravehearts.

Bravehearts M.O.V.E. New York is a chapter of Youth M.O.V.E. National, a youth-led organization that advocates for youth involved in such systems as child welfare or juvenile justice. (M.O.V.E. stands for Motivating Others through Voices of Experience.) The Bravehearts grew out of early engagement with Westchester County

DSS during Phase I but quickly expanded and developed an independent mission of empowering youth with child welfare experiences to become active leaders of their own lives. They provide a community and a supportive network for youth in or formerly in foster care, ages 14 to 26. By spring 2015, they had grown to over 100 members.

The Bravehearts hold weekly motivational meetings. They publically advocate for youth, encouraging service providers to increase their expectations of youth and the ability of young people to change their own lives. They work to educate service providers locally and nationally on the effects of trauma and how resiliency and empowerment can help overcome it. The Bravehearts developed a formal leadership structure, and in October 2016 officially registered as a nonprofit organization.

Figure 4. Bravehearts M.O.V.E. logo

Source: Bravehearts M.O.V.E. New York

Westchester County DSS continues to benefit from its relationship with the Bravehearts. The early core group of youth that provided input developed into a formal youth leadership BLI planning subcommittee of 8 to 10 youth. This subcommittee and the Bravehearts provided input as the BLI evolved, ensuring the planned intervention would appeal to the target population. A central element of the intervention is assigning youth Peer-2-Peer (P2P) navigators to help them advocate for the services they need. The P2P navigator role formalizes the types of support the Bravehearts provide to their members. DSS hired its three P2P navigators and the BLI coordinator who oversees them from the ranks of the Bravehearts. The Bravehearts and the BLI evolved together through the YARH planning process and continue their mutually supportive relationship.

Conclusion

Youth engagement in service planning can take a variety of forms. As the YARH grantees' examples demonstrate, youth can contribute to service planning by offering their perspectives on youth service needs, identifying services that appeal to youth, and making sure data analysis and service offerings reflect the reality of their lives and experience.

Reference

Gomez, R., and T. Ryan. "Speaking Out: Youth-Led Research as a Methodology Used with Homeless Youth." *Child Adolescent Social Work,* vol. 33, July 2015, pp. 185-193.

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