Youth At-Risk of Homelessness

Lessons from the Field

By Nathan Mix, Elizabeth Clary, and M.C. Bradley

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Youth Engagement: Lessons Learned

The Children's Bureau, within the Administration for Children and Families (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), is funding a multiphase program 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. This program is called Youth At-Risk of Homelessness (YARH). YARH focuses on three populations: (1) adolescents who enter foster care from ages 14 to 17, (2) young adults aging out of foster care, and (3) homeless youth and young adults up to age 21 with foster care histories.

Eighteen organizations received funding for the first phase (YARH-1), a two-year planning grant (2013–2015). Grantees used the planning period to conduct data analyses to help them understand their local population and develop a comprehensive service model to improve youth outcomes related to housing, education and training, social well-being, and permanent connections. Six of those organizations received funding to refine and test their comprehensive service models during the second phase (YARH-2), a four-year initial implementation grant (2015–2019). During the third phase (YARH-3), Mathematica will continue to support the YARH-2 grantees (also known as sites) in building and disseminating evidence related to their comprehensive service model (2019–2024). In addition, Mathematica will design and implement a federally-led evaluation of at least one intervention implemented by a site.

This brief describes grantees' experiences engaging youth in YARH interventions, including the methods they used to engage youth in services. The brief should be of interest to individuals who work with youth in similar circumstances, including service providers, program administrators, program evaluators, and funders.

For more information on YARH, please see https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/project/building-capacity-evaluate-interventions-youth/young-adults-child-welfare-involvement.

To learn more about YARH grantees' experiences, challenges, and solutions related to engaging youth, Mathematica hosted a peer-learning experience in summer 2020. Six YARH grantees shared their experiences engaging youth and young adults at risk of homelessness in services. The YARH grantees responded to prepared questions to help guide the discussion (see questions at the end of the brief). This brief summarizes lessons learned from YARH grantees regarding youth engagement in the initial implementation of interventions.

Engagement should be early and creative

Grantees discussed the importance of understanding timing when working to engage youth. Timing matters with respect to engaging the youth when they are present, both physically and mentally. It also matters in terms of what subjects are brought up and when.

Youth engagement in services.
This brief defines youth engagement as youth actively communicating with professional staff. This can mean initiating or responding to calls and texts, attending meetings, and leading discussions to plan for their future.

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One grantee shared that engaging youth from the point of intake was an important step for sustained engagement. Upon first meeting, practitioners take youth out to eat to describe the program and see if they are interested in joining. If so, the practitioners will invite them to future meetings. Practitioners continue to engage youth through introductory planning meetings, during which practitioners explicitly tell youth that the youth is the lead team member.

The same grantee's practitioners typically wait two to three months into the program before asking youth to develop their goals. Doing so allows practitioners to build trust and rapport with youth. A second grantee echoed this approach; this grantee's practitioners do not begin the goal-setting process until they have established trust with youth and youth feel empowered, which might take several months. The grantees found that this makes discussions less transactional and more authentic.

Youth's interest in services, and ability to participate in services, might vary over time. For example, youth might move out of the area during the intervention or become bored with or distracted from services. One grantee addresses this by allowing youth to reenter the program seamlessly when they move back into the area or want to reengage in services.

Youth engagement takes time

- Start early
- Expect ebb and flow
- Make the most of each interaction with youth
- Raise sensitive topics as relationship and engagement deepens

Building rapport sets the stage for sustained engagement

According to YARH grantees, building rapport between practitioners and youth involves creating an inclusive and mutually respectful partnership with shared power. Frequently, grantees build rapport before starting the goal setting process or discussing sensitive topics.

Using mindfulness techniques can help practitioners be aware of their implicit biases and how those play out in their interactions with youth; however, mindfulness techniques alone may not be enough. A more holistic approach would also include role play, education, and training. Practitioners with one YARH grantee "give youth the space to tell it like it is" to avoid the tendency of labeling youth and their language. This enables practitioners to build a positive relationship with youth. When a practitioner "listens with an open mind," it allows youth to be "100 percent themselves." Practitioners feel that this enables youth to be more honest about their needs.

Creating the time and space for youth to share their thoughts and feelings about their future is essential to meaningful transition planning. One grantee builds rapport with youth by encouraging practitioners to model emotional regulation and reflect on their own experiences. This enables youth to better understand, relate to, and communicate with practitioners. Another grantee embraces practitioners' nontraditional appearance (tattoos, dyed hair, or facial piercings similar to those youth might have) so that practitioners are more relatable to youth. One grantee incorporates trauma-informed practices by conducting activities outside of typical institutional settings. An initial engagement meeting is typically conducted at an inexpensive restaurant selected by the youth so that the conversation can flow naturally rather than mimic clinical interviewing.

Ideas for building rapport with youth and young adults:

- Create an inclusive and mutually respectful partnership where power is shared.
- Use mindfulness techniques to be aware of implicit biases related to youth.
- Avoid labeling youth and their language.
- Listen with an open mind to allow youth to be 100% themselves.
- Give youth permission, encouragement, and space to voice their feelings and to "tell it like it is."
- Accept nontraditional appearances (tattoos, dyed hair, and facial piercings) in staff and youth.
- Incorporate trauma-informed practices.
- Model emotional regulation and reflect on your own experiences.
- Use incentives to maintain participation and build rapport.

Grantees can use incentives to maintain participation and build rapport. For example, one grantee uses funds to cover driving lessons, health club memberships, or other activities for youth included in their care plans. Several grantees build initial and ongoing rapport by using flexible funds for food, concrete supports, state housing vouchers, and transportation.

Goal setting is an opportunity to encourage youth voice and youth choice

Most grantees highlighted the importance of helping youth think through how to identify and accomplish their goals, rather than having practitioners set the goals. One grantee noted that youth and practitioners should focus on setting and achieving goals that have meaning for the youth's life rather than checking boxes on a checklist.

One grantee emphasized the benefit of breaking down each goal to be "realistic and digestible for youth," so that youth can succeed at meeting their goals and learn from the process. For example, a practitioner helped a youth to create a goal to get a tattoo. The practitioner partnered with the youth to plan forgetting the tattoo. The work included addressing subjects of well-being, self-advocacy, financial empowerment, and accessing community support.

Another grantee's practitioners work to ensure that goals are mutually agreed upon and reflect the direct input of youth. The practitioners coach youth by asking supportive questions to help them clarify their goals. One grantee also allows youth to "fail forward," just like youth not in care. It is important to allow youth the opportunity to make developmentally appropriate mistakes, which promote learning and ultimately prepare youth for adulthood. Youth can also learn that failing is not an end point but a learning experience from which they can regroup and try again. At the same time, practitioners discuss alternative plans with youth in case their initial plans and goals do not work out.

Fail forward. "Failing forward" means purposefully learning from failure in order to grow. This process might be difficult for adults and practitioners as it goes against the innate desire to avoid risk and protect children and youth. But when adults and practitioners do not allow youth in care to experience failure, youth do not have opportunities to learn and grow. When practitioners allow youth in care to "fail forward" and experience the same developmentally appropriate risk as youth who are not in care, youth learn to see failure as a single event rather than a personal characteristic.

Use multiple methods to know if, when, and to what extent youth are engaged

Gut instinct and perception are not the only way to know if youth are engaged, and often the observations of practitioners alone do not provide the data needed to support ongoing program improvement.

YARH grantees assessed youth engagement using tools such as assessments and surveys based on provider perceptions and youth actions as there is no one way to measure engagement. Two grantees used established instruments or adaptations of existing instruments that measure important aspects of engagement: the Wraparound Fidelity Index and Youth Efficacy/Empowerment Scale-Mental Health and the Empowerment and Engagement Scale.

Multiple grantees combined information sources to understand the mutually reinforcing relationship of engagement and experience. Alongside other tools, most grantees use surveys of youth containing items on the youth's experiences in the interventions and the youth's self-reported engagement. The surveys and tools assess engagement through indicators related to recruitment and enrollment. Alternatively, another grantee's practitioners reported that they know youth are engaged when youth use the skills learned in the intervention or ask to practice those skills.

Others voiced that youth are engaged when they can identify their own unmet needs and develop a plan to get those needs met. This can mean youth reach out to practitioners for help or just to stay connected. Practitioners also rate youth's engagement level during conversations. If youth are comfortable enough to discuss personal details and goals, they consider the youth to be fully engaged. One grantee identifies engaged youth as youth who prepare for their transition planning meetings by setting agendas and invitee lists, engaging in brainstorming, and following up on tasks for themselves and other members of the team.

Considerations for practitioners to support youth engagement in services

Individuals who work with youth can benefit from examining their expectations of youth and their engagement in services. Youth at risk of homelessness often have experienced trauma, racism, gender-based violence, and other systemic problems. How do these experiences affect youth and their perceptions of services and staff? Do youth of all ages engage with services in the

same way? Or is youth engagement shaped, in part, by the program, its expectations, and the youth's age?

In reflection of the thoughts that grantees shared, youth engagement looks different for individual youth at various ages and developmental levels, and as new needs and goals are identified. Youth engagement might not look the same across all ages, and it is important to understand the typical level of youth engagement at various ages or developmental stages. Individuals who work with youth can achieve authentic and ongoing youth engagement but might need to be flexible and creative in how they engage youth. It is important for practitioners to view youth engagement as a process rather than an outcome.

Individuals who work with system-involved youth should try to give them the same opportunities as youth who are not involved in the child welfare system, as appropriate. This means allowing youth to fail forward and supporting them through learning experiences. At the same time, it is important to discuss alternative plans with youth in case their initial plans and goals do not work out. Individuals who work with youth often fault youth for lack of engagement but blaming youth for not engaging perpetuates a deficit-based outlook on youth in care and does not encourage innovations in engagement strategies and processes.

Guiding questions for discussion with YARH grantees on youth engagement

- Which activities or processes of your intervention are critical for engaging youth?
- How do you know if you have fully engaged youth?
- How do you measure youth engagement?
- How do you promote youth engagement in setting and attaining goals?
- What youth engagement barriers have you had to overcome? How did you overcome those barriers?
- What youth engagement strategies have worked best for your team?

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For more information about this project, please contact M.C. Bradley at cbradley@mathematica-mpr.com or Mary Mueggenborg at mary.muggenborg@acf.hhs.gov.