



In The SPOTLIGHT

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Lessons Learned from the Planning Phase

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 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 referred to as Youth At-Risk of Homelessness (YARH). Eighteen organizations received funding for the first phase, 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, a three-year initial implementation grant (2015 – 2018).

This spotlight is part of a series that summarizes high-level themes from a process study of YARH grantees' activities and accomplishments during the two-year planning grant period. Additional details can be found in the full process study report. The information in this spotlight comes from grant applications, semi-annual progress reports submitted by YARH grantees, and two-day site visits with each grantee in January – March 2015

The YARH planning grant phase (Phase I) generated several critical lessons that helped to shape the subsequent phase of YARH focused on implementation and preliminary testing of grantees' comprehensive service models (Phase II). These lessons can also inform other multi-phase grant initiatives, and support similar efforts to prevent youth homelessness. The lessons below are based on information from semi-annual progress reports submitted by Phase I grantees, grantees' descriptions of their experiences in presentations or meetings with evaluation technical assistance providers, and site visits with grantees.

- **Data integration and analyses were challenging.** A critical lesson with implications for many stakeholders is how difficult it was for grantees to gather and analyze needed data from multiple systems. As part

of their planning period, grantees were expected to conduct analyses to better understand the incidence of homelessness among the target populations in their communities, the risk and protective factors associated with youth homelessness, and unmet needs. However, accessing and integrating administrative data was a struggle. One grantee spent nearly nine months developing data-sharing agreements, and others were never able to access some or all of the data as originally proposed.

- **Partnerships were critical.** Grantees learned that the relationships with partners they had—or built—were critical to doing the work of the planning grant. Grantees needed time to explore and support visioning and team-building, and they benefited when this took place early in the planning process, especially for

those in new partnerships. Some relationships required time, discussions, and facilitation to develop into true partnerships based on shared values and outcomes.

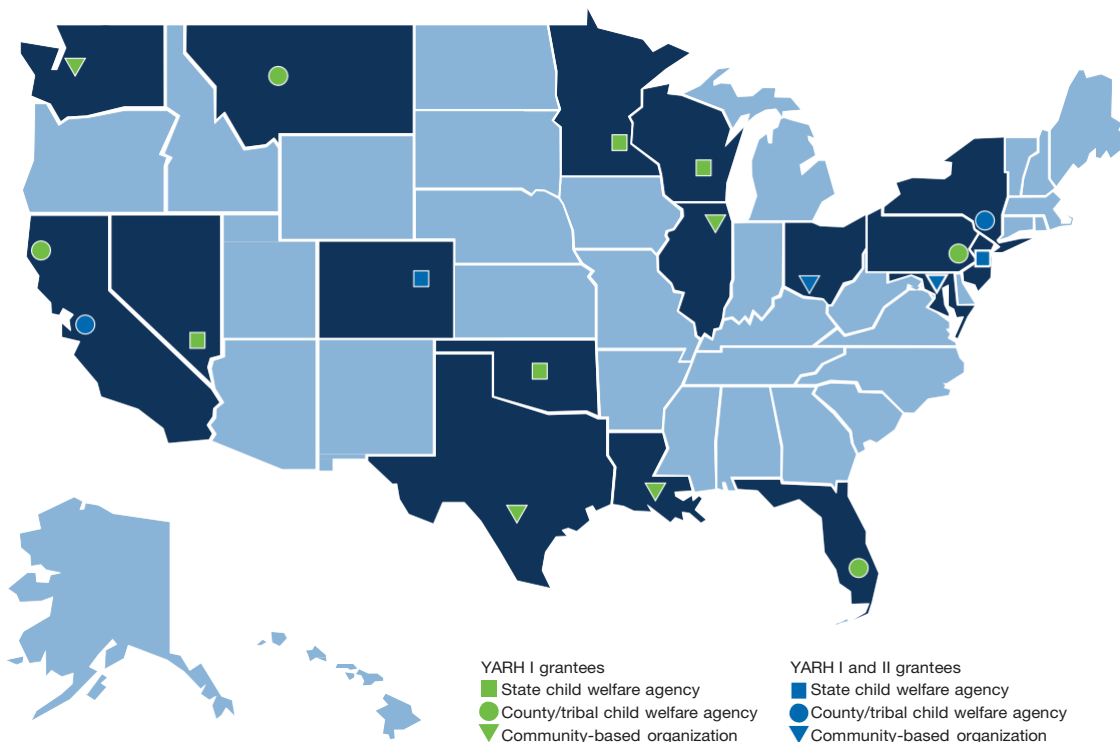
- **Creating comprehensive service models that were innovative was difficult.** Grantees were urged to propose comprehensive service models that would deliver innovative services to address unmet needs. They required time and programmatic support to create something significantly different from the existing services in their community or the larger child welfare community. In addition, the interplay between quality services, federal and state requirements (or law), and innovation was critical to understanding innovation. Some grantees considered changes that were already in place in other communities but would improve practice in their community.
- **The prolonged planning period was both a blessing and a curse.** The use of a multi-phase grant was new to the Children’s Bureau (CB) and its grantees. The shift from grants for *providing* services to grants for *planning* services, including planning for a rigorous evaluation, was challenging. The planning grants emphasize thinking and articulating and delay doing, which was a challenge to grantees who were used to planning and implementing a program more quickly. Some partners became impatient with the delay in providing services to address the critical needs of youth in their community. However, there were distinct advantages to a multi-phase effort; for example, it enabled grantees to develop a more nuanced, and data-supported, understanding of the issue and to build broader support while also enabling the CB to focus implementation dollars on grantees that showed a capacity to continue the work.
- **All grantees require continued support.** Many grantees found it took significant skill to balance competing demands of the grant. Grantees benefitted from support offered by ACF. Not all of them required the

same level or type of support, nor did they require it at the same time. The grantees selected for Phase II of YARH were the applicants that showed a capacity to continue the work, but they still needed structure, guidance, and support. Having the ability to provide individualized programmatic and evaluation support may help grantees meet complex implementation challenges.

- **Fund grantees with the capacity for the work of each phase.** Traditional processes of funding grants may need to shift to support the success of a multi-phase grant initiative. Particularly in areas where a strong evidence base does not exist and new interventions need to be developed, consider using application criteria that demonstrate the *capacity* to complete the work required at each phase (including working with the population of interest). For example, given the considerable time and energy needed from Phase I grantees to build partnerships, letters of commitment from partners may not be sufficient. Instead, applicants may need to include signed memoranda of understanding that articulate the staff and resources that will be brought to bear at different phases. Second, applicants may need to demonstrate access to the necessary administrative data or at least a clear understanding of the process for obtaining access. This includes demonstrating they have the capacity to integrate and analyze the data from different systems. Lastly, transparency in the process can assist grantees in understanding what resources, skills, and staff may be needed to do the work required in the next phase.
- **Go slow to go fast.** Grantees’ experiences with YARH reinforced a lesson from the Permanency Innovations Initiative (PII) grant work: go slow to go fast.¹ The planning phase is not a race to the finish. Complex efforts and capacity building require time to build innovations, create a strong foundation, and take thoughtful and deliberate steps toward implementation.

¹ For more information on the PII grantees, see <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/pii-project-resources>.

The YARH grantees represent a diverse array of geographic areas and organizations. The Phase I grantees are located in 17 states across the nation. They include state child welfare agencies, county child welfare agencies, and community-based organizations. The Phase II grantees are located in 6 states and include state child welfare agencies, county child welfare agencies, and community-based organizations.



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