



IssueBRIEF

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Sustaining Efforts to Reduce Youth Homelessness Without Additional Federal Funding

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. Currently, there is very little evidence on how to meet the needs of this population. 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). 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 (Figure 1).

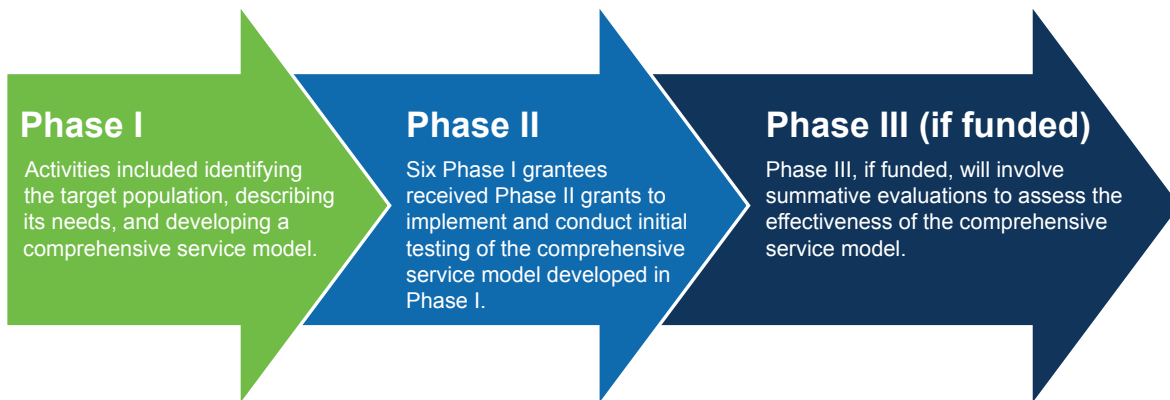
During the planning phase, grantees conducted data analyses to help them understand their local population and develop a comprehensive service model to improve outcomes in housing, education and training, social well-being, and permanent connections. During the initial implementation phase, grantees 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 (Figure 2).

This brief discusses how 7 of the 12 Phase I grantees who were not awarded Phase II grants are working to sustain efforts in their community to prevent homelessness based on the planning accomplished during Phase I. Sustainability efforts were discussed in individual phone calls with the Phase I project director and/or project manager in November and December 2015, as most Phase I grantees were preparing to submit their final Phase I grant report.

Figure 1. YARH target populations



Figure 2. The YARH multi-phase structure and activities



This brief offers insight into the important questions of whether and how interventions continue without federal funding after a planning period, and presents lessons learned about the types of support grantees participating in multi-phase efforts need. Mathematica spoke with non-awardees about their plans for sustaining their efforts to prevent homelessness among the three target populations and about the successes and challenges they experienced as they moved ahead.

Highlights

- Grantees made both system-level changes and service-level changes during Phase I, and they planned to sustain the changes after Phase I ended. These changes included changes to referral and data systems, changes to assessments, integrating Phase I services into existing efforts, and modifying existing services to reflect the knowledge gained during Phase I.
- Grantees identified supplemental funding to help support efforts beyond Phase I. This included foundation support for a service identified by one grantee.
- Grantees found that the work of Phase I helped to inform and focus the larger community on the issue of youth homelessness.
- Sustainability after Phase I has also been affected by challenges encountered during Phase I, including data issues, the need to focus on three populations simultaneously, and the task of engaging partners.

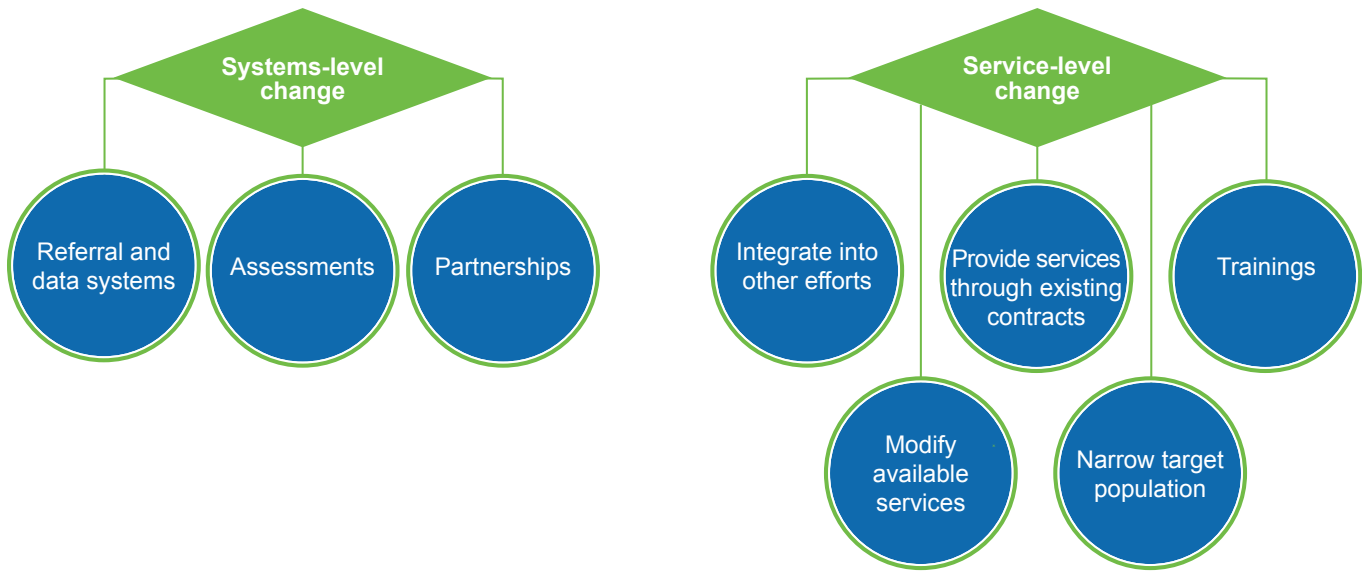
Non-awardee approaches to sustainability

All seven non-awardees with whom we spoke were intending to continue the Phase I work to some degree. Non-awardees talked about system-level changes and service-level changes they hoped to implement (Figure 3). Systems-level changes were of three types: (1) changes to processes related to referrals or data captured; (2) changes to assessments used to identify youth; and (3) using new partnerships to better serve youth at risk of homelessness. Additionally, non-awardees were working to (1) integrate elements of Phase I into other initiatives in their community; (2) provide services identified in Phase I through existing service contracts; (3) provide training that was identified as needed in Phase I; (4) change the services provided generally; and (5) better serve a narrower subpopulation based on the Phase I work. Challenges related to the breadth of the YARH target populations, data analysis, and community engagement prevented some non-awardees from sustaining their Phase I interventions, and likely affected their Phase II application and selection.

Sustaining system-level changes

For five of the interviewed Phase II non-awardees, their participation in Phase I was a catalyst for system-level change, or changes to how organizations in a community interact to address the risk of homelessness among youth with child welfare involvement in their state or community. For example, three non-awardees

Figure 3. YARH non-awardee plans for sustainability



plan to change their referral or data systems. One non-awardee’s efforts prompted the governor of its state to recommend linking the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) to an integrated data warehouse that contains data from TANF, SNAP, and other public assistance programs. This change will allow the state to conduct analyses that can support decisions about how providing services to currently or previously homeless youth who were at one time involved with the child welfare system. Two non-awardees initiated changes within their local child welfare agencies. The state child welfare agency associated with one of these non-awardees will implement an assessment to inform case planning that the non-awardee developed during Phase I. Specifically, case workers will assess the youths risk for homelessness when they enter foster care or when they turn 14 years old and periodically throughout their stay in care. Another non-awardee initiated system change by working with local housing authorities to implement a local-area preference prioritizing youth at risk of homelessness for public housing.

Sustaining interventions

To advance the work they completed during Phase I, three Phase II non-awardees have integrated, or plan to integrate, their efforts into other programming. One of these non-awardees received a Performance Partnership

Pilots for Disconnected Youth (P3) grant in FY 2014. This funding supports the development and testing of approaches to improve outcomes for disconnected youth and allows discretionary funds to be used across different federal programs. The non-awardee’s P3 work will draw on its Phase I accomplishments, including information about risk factors generated through the Phase I data analysis and efforts to identify evidence-based practices related to education interventions.¹

At the request of the state child welfare agency, another non-awardee will provide a scaled-down version of its planned intervention, including mentorship and other supportive services, to transition-aged youth in one target community. These services will be incorporated into existing programs offered to transition-aged youth to the extent possible given current funding. This non-awardee is hopeful that this opportunity will lead to a chance to expand its planned intervention services into other communities. A third non-awardee’s local trauma-informed care provider group integrated aspects of the intervention models that were researched and developed during Phase I.

Six Phase II non-awardees interviewed have implemented or plan to implement aspects of their YARH interventions. One of the six developed a statewide network for regional services and an accompanying blueprint that maps these

services to target populations. The non-awardee plans to share this blueprint with local service providers. After identifying variation in the extent to which staff at the child welfare agency are prepared for interacting with youth who have experienced trauma, another non-awardee developed a training curriculum for the staff. The non-awardee plans to implement the training throughout these child welfare agencies. Three non-awardees focused on improving and expanding the independent living services for youth; two of these non-awardees contracted with a national service provider to provide intensive independent living services.

To sustain their Phase I intervention plans, four Phase II non-awardees will narrow their target populations. Only one of the four plans to continue targeting youth who are 14 to 17 years old and currently in care, and it will do so through an assessment for identifying youth at risk for homelessness. At the request of the state, this non-awardee will also offer a scaled-down version of its planned intervention in one community only to youth who will age out of care within three to six months. The other three decided to focus on youth preparing to transition out of care and on homeless youth with past child welfare involvement; they will do this by sustaining the housing and independent living services developed during Phase I. One of these non-awardees is continuing the housing-first pilot program developed during Phase I. The program has housed 60 homeless youth to date, and it offers independent living services, case management, and comprehensive supportive services.

Factors that facilitate sustainability for non-awardees

Success in sustaining Phase I work was supported by three factors: (1) leveraging YARH funding to obtain supplemental funding, (2) increasing community engagement in preventing youth homelessness, and (3) establishing strong partnerships (Figure 4).

Supplemental funding

The Phase II non-awardees experienced different levels of success in obtaining funding to sustain their Phase I planned interventions. Two interviewed non-awardees sustained their Phase I work by leveraging private, state, or federal funding to continue their planned independent

Figure 4. Facilitating factors impacting sustainability



living services for transition-age and homeless youth. One grantee received funding from a foundation to bring in a particular independent living services provider. A second grantee intended to leverage state funding to modify existing services. At the time of the interviews, the other five of the interviewed non-awardees had yet to receive additional funding after Phase I or were actively searching for funding by, for example, monitoring upcoming funding opportunities from child welfare agencies.

One Phase II non-awardee did not obtain additional funding to sustain its Phase I housing pilot but learned that implementing the pilot cost less than expected. This non-awardee is hopeful that this information will encourage future efforts to obtain funding for housing interventions with the target population and it is using its remaining Phase I funds to temporarily sustain the housing pilot while seeking funding.

Community engagement and partnerships

Strong collaborations cultivated with other community organizations during Phase I made it easier for some Phase II non-awardees to sustain their intervention plans to one degree or another. For one non-awardee, a close partnership between an organization and an individual on the non-awardee's staff allowed the planned Phase II programming to continue. As a result, the organization offered more programs than were developed during Phase I. To sustain its planned independent living services, another non-awardee worked with its child welfare partner to re-allocate existing funding and bring it into alignment with a private funder's matching requirement.

For two non-awardees, Phase I increased awareness of and attention to the target population among their partners and the broader community. By maintaining this level of interest, these two non-awardees helped the local community to prioritize services for youth at risk of homelessness and helped secure supplemental funding needed to serve this population. The data analysis completed in Phase I alerted the child welfare agency and state legislators linked to one non-awardee to the needs of youth at risk for homelessness. The analysis also persuaded the child welfare agency to re-align its services. The other non-awardee found that its YARH planning efforts taught teachers and school counselors about their responsibility to provide resources to homeless or at-risk students. After Phase I, the school staff reached out to the non-awardee for information on services for homeless students or those at risk for homelessness. The non-awardee referred the staff to state-level resources, and as a result, the staff now provide additional supportive services to these students.

Challenges to sustainability for non-awardees

Though many Phase II non-awardees are continuing aspects of their Phase I efforts, the breadth of the target populations, the data analysis, and partnerships posed numerous challenges in achieving the goals of Phase I, successfully applying for Phase II funding, and sustaining Phase I efforts after the grant ended.

Breadth of the target populations

Several Phase II non-awardees found that the requirement to serve multiple populations under the Phase I grant made it more difficult to accomplish their goals and activities. After Phase I ended, one non-awardee was relieved about being able to focus on the two populations most relevant to the local community. Given the limited time and resources, another non-awardee felt that it could have developed a stronger intervention and had more success during Phase I had it been given the flexibility to focus on one or two target populations. The non-awardee also perceived the needs of youth about to age out of care and youth who have experienced homelessness as more immediate than the needs of youth who are 14 to 17 year old and currently in care. This non-awardee will continue its efforts to support youth who

are preparing to age out of the child welfare system and those who have already done so.

Data analysis

The Phase II non-awardees' experience with data analysis in Phase I varied substantially. For some Phase I grantees, the data analysis helped to secure not only buy-in from the organizations that became their partners but also success with their Phase II applications. Many non-awardees, however, faced significant challenges in acquiring data and conducting the analysis. Community concerns about the previous misuse of data and the historical mistreatment of the community prevented one non-awardee from accessing data at the individual level. The non-awardee therefore relied on less informative aggregate data that could not be linked to other data systems. For another non-awardee, the inability to access complete data led to a lack of confidence in the predictive risk model developed by its contractor during Phase I. As a result, the non-awardee could not use this as a tool to prioritize youth for services based on their needs.

Community engagement and partnerships

Although some Phase II non-awardees were able to maintain public interest and partner buy-in, keeping the attention on youth at risk of homelessness has challenged others. Without interest and buy-in, support for Phase I planned interventions within some communities has faded.

Two examples in particular stand out. A high-profile death of a child in foster care shifted public attention and legislative priorities from homelessness to the safety of children in the child welfare system. The Phase II non-awardee, whose department worked in parallel with child protective services, struggled to bring the community's attention back to youth at risk for homelessness. For the other non-awardee, the absence of federal funding prompted the child welfare agency to redirect its attention to other priorities within the agency.

Some non-profit and state-level Phase II non-awardees struggled to build partnerships with local child welfare agencies during Phase I, which in some cases posed a significant challenge to sustaining Phase I efforts. One non-awardee found it difficult to obtain buy-in from the

local child welfare agency and faced many challenges that it believed could have been mitigated by a stronger partnership with the agency. But subsequent changes in the child welfare agency leadership that was engaged in the Phase I work led to a better relationship. Another non-awardee, which operated within a county-administered child welfare system, had a generally positive experience working with local child welfare agencies, but experienced challenges obtaining buy-in from local service providers on one aspect of their planned housing intervention. During Phase I, case managers felt uncomfortable placing youth who were about to age out of the child welfare system but were not yet 18 years old in a pilot site that housed youth in apartments. As a result, the non-awardee struggled to compare services received and outcomes across pilot sites.

Conclusion

Through the YARH Phase I planning grant, Phase II non-awardees conceived of different services for youth and young adults with the goal of preventing homelessness. Factors that affected their progress in Phase I and application for Phase II funding also shaped their ability to sustain the work without Phase II funding. Some non-awardees sustained YARH work through integrating efforts into ongoing services and modifying target populations or services already available. Challenges, such as the breadth of the target populations, conducting data analyses, and engaging partners, also impacted the ability of non-awardees to continue Phase I work without additional funding. All non-awardees continued at least some aspect of their Phase I planned interventions, but sustainability looks different across the group, and it varies substantially by the ability to obtain additional funding.

The Phase II non-awardee experiences provide several important insights into the technical assistance needs of

grantees engaged in multi-phase grant processes. First, ongoing community engagement and strong partnerships are crucial to grantee success planning for and implementing successful interventions. Partnerships with strong leadership, consistency in membership, buy-in, and shared goals have more success moving forward even when faced with challenges or lack of sustained federal funding. This experience suggests that technical assistance for grantees could include a focus on identifying strong partners and approaches to maintaining those relationships long-term.

Additionally, the extent to which grantees were successful in obtaining and analyzing data about the target population impacted their ability to build relationships, plan services, and sustain their efforts. Evaluation technical assistance efforts could therefore focus on planning for data sharing, understanding the constraints of available data, and planning for analysis as early on in the planning process as is feasible. Technical assistance could also include consideration for alternate approaches to data analysis when data that ultimately becomes available does not meet grantee expectations.

More broadly, evaluation technical assistance efforts for multi-phase efforts could support future planning and sustainability from the outset. Technical assistance focused on activities such as partnership building and data analysis could challenge grantees to think forward to future grant phases and consider how accomplishments can be leveraged to sustain efforts even in the absence of federal funding.

Endnote

¹ “Reconnecting Youth, Performance Partnership Pilots for Disconnected Youth (P3).” Available at <http://youth.gov/youth-topics/reconnecting-youth/performance-partnership-pilots>. Accessed December 23, 2015.

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