In The SPOTLIGHT

By Rosalind Keith, Nuzhat Islam, Rumin Sarwar, and M.C. Bradley

Mathematica

Designing Services for Youth and Young Adults At-Risk of Homelessness

Key components of YARH grantees' comprehensive service models

The Children's Bureau (CB), within the Administration for Children and Families (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), is funding a multiphase 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 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 spotlight is part of a series that summarizes high-level themes from a process study of grantees' activities and accomplishments during the implementation grant period. Additional details are available in the full process study report. The information in this spotlight comes from grant applications, semiannual progress reports submitted by grantees, and site visits with each grantee in 2019.

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

What are the components of the grantees' comprehensive service models?

The grantees' comprehensive service models consisted of 13 individual components, with some overlap across grantees. For example, all grantees incorporate youth practitioners in their models. Table 1 describes the 13 components. Most grantees included components 1 to 9. The inclusion of components 10 to 13 varied across grantees.

Table 1. Components of grantees' comprehensive service models

Component	Description
1. Screening and assessing risk factors to identify eligible youth and young adults	Grantees accessed administrative data through an information management system or used a risk screening tool completed by a child welfare worker to screen for youth and young adults ages 14 to 24 who had a history of or were currently in foster care.
2. Recruiting and enrolling eligible youth and young adults	Youth practitioners, caring and supportive adults who served as the primary contact for youth and young adults, often engaged them during recruitment and enrollment, and then served as the youth or young adult's primary contact for the intervention services.
3. Supporting youth and young adults' connection to comprehensive service model services	In most comprehensive service models, youth practitioners were hired and trained to (1) help youth and young adults identify and achieve goals intended to help them prepare for the future and (2) support youth and young adults in crisis situations.
4. Regularly engaging youth and young adults one-on-one	Youth practitioners and youth and young adults were required to meet weekly or biweekly, at least during the first few months of services. One-on-one meetings were to promote trust between the youth and young adults and the youth practitioner.
5. Supporting youth and young adults to identify and achieve goals	If youth and young adults had not established goals in their transitional plan, they worked with their youth practitioner to identify and work toward achieving goals. The transition plan is a federal legislative requirement for youth and young adults exiting foster care. Child welfare professionals collaborate with youth and young adults and other supports to develop plans for specific elements including housing, education, and employment.
6. Supporting youth and young adults to strengthen relationships with natural supports	Youth practitioners and youth and young adults discussed potential connections with immediate and extended family, peers and friends, or other adults with whom youth and young adults felt a connection and helped them build and strengthen these relationships.
7. Helping youth and young adults connect with formal supports	Youth practitioners helped youth and young adults understand and identify formal supports available in the child welfare system, such as law guardians and therapists.
8. Convening or participating in meetings to support youth and young adults in achieving their goals	Youth practitioners supported youth and young adults during meetings in two ways: (1) leading meetings or (2) participating in meetings. Youth practitioners prepared youth and young adults to self-advocate and interact with meeting participants appropriately.
9. Supporting youth and young adults in using community resources and services	Youth practitioners connected youth and young adults with local resources and community services to help them meet basic needs or achieve goals.
10. Using assessment tools to gather information about youth and young adults	Youth practitioners used formal or informal assessments of youth and young adults to inform their work and provide support based on their needs.
11. Connecting youth and young adults to housing	Youth practitioners supported youth and young adults in applying for a state housing voucher, obtaining housing as it related to their goals, developing independent living skills, becoming good tenants, and maintaining their home.
12. Providing therapy	Youth practitioners delivered therapeutic models or used a trauma-informed approach to provide youth and young adults with insight into their potential trauma triggers.
13. Graduating youth and young adults	Grantees were at various stages of finalizing the process and timeframe for graduating youth and young adults from the comprehensive service model services.

What supported or hindered grantees' efforts to implement the components of their comprehensive service model?

Screening and assessing risk factors to identify eligible youth and young adults.

Grantees that were child welfare agencies said they needed to engage partners, such as homeless shelters and child welfare workers, to identify, recruit, and engage youth and young adults. Therefore, it was important that these partners understood and supported comprehensive service model services and communicated the benefits of services to youth and young adults.

Grantees found that using automated reports from an information management system to assess youth's risk factors and identify eligible youth and young adults offered efficiencies, compared to manually reviewing data or relying on referrals from partners.

Recruiting and enrolling eligible youth and young adults.

Using a simple enrollment process allowed youth practitioners to immediately focus on developing a relationship with the youth and young adults. Examples of a simple enrollment process included hiring an enrollment coordinator to conduct all screening and enrollment tasks and establishing clear timeframes for enrollment activities to ensure outreach to eligible youth and young adults was conducted quickly. Grantees often solicited youth and young adults' feedback and revised their processes to make them more receptive to youth and young adults' needs.

Grantees found it beneficial to include the youth and young adult's child welfare worker in enrollment discussions during which the youth practitioner introduced services to the youth and young adult. This helped convey how the services intended to support them and establish the relationship between youth and young adults and the youth practitioner.

To support enrollment, youth practitioners held a series of meetings with the youth and young adults to help them feel comfortable, gather personal information, assist with enrollment paperwork, and

support their understanding of the comprehensive service model's goals and services.

Unstable partnerships and turnover and resistance among staff at partner organizations created challenges during enrollment. These challenges required grantees to continuously reeducate partners about model services and the importance of their role in recruiting and enrolling youth and young adults, to gain and maintain their buy-in.

Grantees described struggles with staying informed about the location of eligible youth and young adults and maintaining contact with them. Three factors contributed to grantees losing contact with youth and young adults: (1) lack of direct access to eligible youth and young adults for models that were not based in a child welfare agency, (2) youth and young adults moved out of the grantee's geographic jurisdiction, and (3) youth and young adults not owning or having access to a phone.

Supporting youth and young adults' connection to comprehensive service model services.

Youth and young adults' general wariness of child welfare services and focus on their immediate needs created challenges to building a trusting relationship with their youth practitioner. Youth and young adults with foster care histories can be suspicious of supports that come in and out of their lives, and many have system-connected trauma.

Youth practitioners' personalities were key to building trusting relationships with youth and young adults. Grantees noted the importance of being patient and flexible with youth and young adults, sensitive to experiences in the youth and young adult's life that might be influencing current behaviors, and focused on being a role model to youth and young adults. Youth practitioners with lived experience were often able to engage with youth and young adults earlier and on a deeper level by sharing their experiences and how they overcame challenges, which facilitated building trusting relationships. However, some youth practitioners with lived experience found it challenging to share their experiences because this involved reliving their own trauma.

A consistent connection with the same youth practitioner over time was important for keeping youth and young adults engaged. Turnover among youth practitioners impeded this consistency.

Regularly engaging youth and young adults one-on-one. Youth practitioners emphasized the importance of access to resources that helped motivate youth and young adults to participate in comprehensive service model services, such as meals, coffee, snacks, and gift cards. Grantees that did not have resources to motivate youth and young adults to participate depended largely on their intrinsic motivation to engage with the youth practitioner and participate in comprehensive service model services. Youth practitioners suggested that the comprehensive service models that provided resources to support goal achievement put youth and young adults at ease, because they could receive help with personal expenses.

Supporting youth and young adults to identify and achieve goals. Flexibility by the youth practitioner was required when helping youth and young adults identify strategies for achieving their goals. Youth practitioners avoided judging youth and young adults' goals or discouraging them when their goals were not realistic. Instead, youth practitioners helped youth and young adults develop a plan to achieve their goals and discussed the best- and worst-case scenarios to help them understand the realities of their goals.

Grantees observed that youth and young adults reacted differently to identifying goals based on how they viewed their future. Youth and young adults who were eager to move forward tended to engage in identifying goals, whereas youth and young adults who had experienced significant trauma might not believe they would achieve goals or might not believe the youth practitioner would support goal achievement.

Youth practitioners faced a tension between addressing a youth and young adult's immediate needs, which were often crisis-related, and their long-term goals. Youth practitioners found it challenging to focus on both crisis-related needs and long-term goals, particularly early on, when youth and young adults were more likely to be in crisis.

Supporting youth and young adults to strengthen relationships with relatives, peers, or adults with whom the youth feel a connection. The most common challenge youth practitioners faced in strengthening youth and young adults' relationships with natural supports (such as extended family, peers, and friends) was identifying appropriate contacts. Youth formerly in foster care often are separated from family and friends or experience turnover of people in their lives. Therefore, they have very few, if any, reliable natural supports and were resistant to building these relationships.

Helping youth and young adults connect with formal supports. Grantees found that professionals in the child welfare system were often not able to prioritize youth and young adults' needs. This fueled youth and young adults' resistance to collaborating with formal supports, since they were predisposed to distrusting formal supports based on prior negative experiences. Youth practitioners modeled ways to handle frustrating situations, shared strategies for effective interactions, helped them understand the role and perspective of the formal supports, and gave youth and young adults time to warm up to these supports.

Convening or participating in meetings to support youth and young adults in achieving their goals. Youth practitioners used various strategies to keep these meetings focused on the youth and young adult. These strategies included understanding the youth and young adult's perspective before the meeting, preparing them to effectively communicate and advocate for their needs, and supporting the youth and young adult's voice during the meeting.

Youth and young adults' formal and natural supports were often unable to prioritize the meetings. Despite youth practitioners' efforts to engage supports, there were many challenges in getting youth and young adults' supports to attend meetings.

Supporting youth and young adults in using local resources and community services. A few grantees noted that youth and young adults were easily discouraged from pursuing community services, because these services were not always

responsive to their needs. For example, employment services are generally designed for adults and not for youth or young adults.

Using assessment tools to gather information about youth and young adults.

Youth practitioners expressed different perceptions of the utility of assessment tools, which influenced the extent to which they used the tools to inform their work with youth and young adults. Youth practitioners who found the assessment tools helpful noted that they provided a framework to guide conversations with youth and young adults and highlighted where they needed support. Youth practitioners who did not find the assessment tools helpful viewed them as a comprehensive service model requirement and did not use the information from the tools. They said it was challenging to engage youth and young adults in completing the assessments because they included questions that made the youth and young adults uncomfortable.

Connecting youth and young adults to housing.

Youth and young adults faced challenges when they moved into apartments without having had opportunities to develop skills to maintain a home. For example, youth and young adults struggled to build positive relationships with landlords. Youth practitioners coached youth and young adults to improve communication with their landlords and helped them understand how to decrease the chance of eviction.
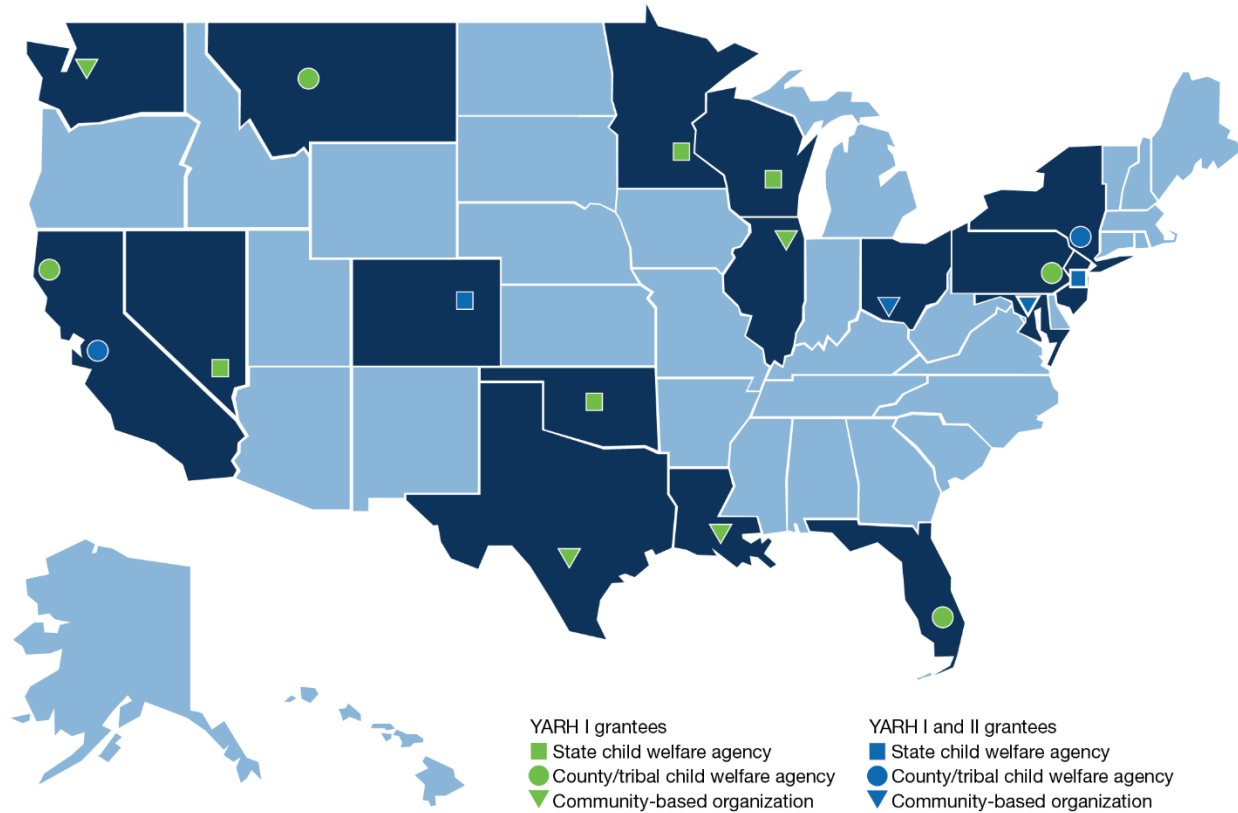
Providing therapy.

Training youth practitioners to deliver therapy was a challenge. Youth practitioners reported that they felt most prepared to deliver group therapy sessions after they had observed another youth practitioner delivering a session. Youth practitioners suggested that the curriculum used to provide therapy to youth and young adults could be more culturally responsive to help Black and Latino youth relate to the content.

Graduating youth and young adults.

Youth and young adults often looked to the youth practitioner for continued support when transitioning out of the comprehensive service model. Reducing youth and young adults' dependence on the youth practitioner after achieving their goals and graduating from the comprehensive service model was a challenge. Grantees highlighted the importance of helping youth and young adults build relationships with natural supports, relatives, peers, or adults with whom they have a connection, to facilitate the transition out of the comprehensive service model.

Reference

Keith, R.K., N. Islam, R. Sarwar, and M.C. Bradley. "Reducing Homelessness Among Youth with Child Welfare Involvement: Phase II Implementation Experiences in a Multi-Phase Grant." OPRE Report 2020-129. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020. Available at https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/yarh_2_process_study_2020.pdf.

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/tribal child welfare agencies, and community-based organizations. The Phase II grantees are located in 6 states and include state child welfare agencies, county/tribal child welfare agencies, and community-based organizations.

YARH I grantees
■ State child welfare agency
● County/tribal child welfare agency
▼ Community-based organization

YARH I and II grantees
■ State child welfare agency
● County/tribal child welfare agency
▼ Community-based organization

This publication and other reports sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation are available at https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre.

DISCLAIMER: The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, the Administration for Children and Families, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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