In The SPOTLIGHT

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

Building from Success

Perceived benefits and implementation challenges of comprehensive service models for youth and young adults at-risk of homelessness

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 benefits did respondents perceive youth and young adults received from the comprehensive service models?

All YARH grantees incorporated youth practitioners in their models. Youth practitioners are caring and supportive adults who serve as the primary contact for youth and young adults, establishing trusting relationships and acting as role models. Grantees perceived that these trusting relationships with youth practitioners supported youth and young adults in many aspects of their lives, including making good decisions, expressing their needs, and working toward their goals.

Youth practitioners gave youth and young adults time and attention and learned youth-centered approaches to empower

them to advocate for themselves and create solutions to their challenges. Youth practitioners perceived value in their previous experiences, because those experiences helped them appreciate that, under the comprehensive service models, they were better able to provide youth and young adults with consistent, one-on-one support. They used different communication approaches compared with their previous work with youth and young adults and perceived they could better relate to them. For example, rather than employing prescriptive approaches to engaging youth and young adults and putting strict expectations on them, youth practitioners were flexible with youth and young adults and encouraged them to actively participate in planning and setting expectations for achieving their goals.

Youth practitioners prioritized establishing a trusting relationship with youth and young adults. Youth and young adults with a history of foster care often lack opportunities to develop relationship-building skills. Youth practitioners perceived that developing trusting relationships with youth and young adults increased their ability to develop relationships with natural and formal supports.

Youth and young adults enjoyed regular contact with their youth practitioner because they received support and perceived investment in their goals. Youth and young adults appreciated youth practitioners' flexibility in finding a time and a place to meet and support in helping them achieve their goals, which motivated ongoing engagement.

The comprehensive service models supported youth in expressing their needs and requesting services according to their preferences and goals. In the past, youth and young adults' voices might have been limited because they were generally required to engage in services that had been selected for them. Youth and young adults felt that their youth practitioner really listened to them, cared about what they wanted, and gave them individualized support in achieving their goals.

Model services helped youth and young adults advocate for themselves in their interactions with formal supports. Youth practitioners coached youth and young adults on how to effectively communicate with formal supports to make sure their needs were met.

Convening meetings with the different supports in the youth or young adult's life helped align supports behind their goals. Youth practitioners used these meetings to keep supports accountable to the youth or young adult, by following up on whether the support completed tasks agreed upon during a prior meeting. These meetings provided a platform to facilitate conversation for collaboratively identifying and coordinating services that would help the youth or young adult achieve their goals.

Over time, the model services appeared to empower youth and young adults and increase their self-advocacy skills. Youth practitioners supported youth and young adults in expressing their needs and articulating their goals during program-specific or transition-planning meetings and in court. Program staff felt youth and young adults were learning to hold people accountable, including their child welfare worker, which grantee staff felt increased youth and young adults' confidence and engagement in the services.

How did the comprehensive service models result in perceived changes in how youth and young adults receive services within the child welfare system?

Grantee staff thought the models resulted in stronger relationships and learning among local child welfare entities and changing conversations within the child welfare system. Entities involved in those conversations included public housing departments, community service providers, local businesses, and runaway and homeless youth

providers. Stronger relationships among these entities facilitated sharing information about challenges experienced by youth and young adults, the model's services and goals, resources available to youth and young adults, and best practices among local child welfare entities.

Child welfare agency staff increasingly appreciated and recognized model services provided by youth practitioners as an extension of existing child welfare services. The comprehensive service models, and youth practitioners who supported implementing the models, helped address challenges child welfare workers faced related to large caseloads and limited resources. Child welfare agency staff increasingly appreciated how the models focused on building relationships between youth and young adults and youth practitioners and the youth practitioners' ability to provide youth and young adults with immediate, consistent, and individualized support.

Recommendations for future implementation of comprehensive service models

Table 1 describes strategies stakeholders can consider for enhancing implementation and suggestions for addressing anticipated challenges.

Table 1. Recommendations for strengthening success and overcoming implementation challenges

Recommendations	Rationale
Strengthening successes	
Prepare leaders for success	Implementing the models required leadership oversight and coordination of a range of activities, including documenting an implementation plan, hiring and preparing staff, establishing processes to support service delivery, and refining service delivery as challenges emerged.
Engage stakeholders in planning	Grantees that established a committed coalition of program staff and partners during the YARH-1 planning phase began enrolling and delivering services to youth and young adults more quickly and consistently than grantees that had not successfully engaged these stakeholders before implementation.
Document an implementation plan	Grantees found grant activities to support comprehensive service model implementation and summative evaluation helpful for establishing agreement on intended model outcomes, identifying target populations, defining model components, and assessing the scope of model-related changes. Documenting these activities helped grantees and their partners achieve a shared vision of the model, program goals, and implementation strategies, and facilitated communication during implementation.
Establish continuous quality improvement (CQI) processes	Grantees used CQI to quickly identify and resolve implementation challenges. They also used CQI measures and benchmarks to engage partners by demonstrating the program benefits and facilitating discussions about challenges and potential solutions.
Hire youth practitioners committed to engaging youth and young adults	Youth practitioners used various methods to support youth and young adults to address past trauma, build life skills and confidence to self-advocate, engage natural and formal supports, and access community resources. Characteristics of youth practitioners that were important for building trusting relationships with youth and young adults included being patient, flexible, sensitive to their past experiences, committed to providing consistent support to the youth and young adults until they graduate from the comprehensive service model, and having lived experience.

Recommendations	Rationale
Access funding to encourage youth and young adults to participate	Having access to resources to motivate youth and young adults to participate in services, specifically meals and gift cards, was important during initial engagement when they were assessing whether and how the program would be helpful.
Addressing challenges	
To minimize the effect of staff turnover, educate partners often	Staff turnover in referring entities reduced referrals. Grantees continuously reeducated these entities and promoted buy-in to model services and the potential benefits to youth and young adults.
To encourage initial youth engagement, focus on the individual and immediate needs of youth and young adults and support them in developing long-term planning skills	By design, youth and young adults were eligible for the comprehensive service models because they were in crisis or facing challenges in their lives. In addition, youth and young adults were hesitant to trust youth practitioners, particularly if they had system-connected trauma. Therefore, from enrollment, engaging youth and young adults was challenging. Youth and young adults would agree to participate in model services and then become discouraged when services were not responsive to their needs.
To encourage ongoing engagement, anticipate challenges to youth and young adults' engagement and validate their frustrations	Youth and young adults who seemed to be engaged in services would become disengaged because of other things going on in their lives. Youth and young adults could become discouraged when they were not achieving their goals or when formal supports and services were unresponsive to their needs. Reassuring youth and young adults that it was okay that they were not achieving their goals—and coaching them through interactions with formal supports—was effective for setting their expectations and validating their frustrating experiences.

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.