



Lessons from the Field

Molly Van Drunen and Amy Dworsky
Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago

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Alameda County's Youth Transitions Partnership Program: Lessons on Program Material Design

In September 2013, the Children's Bureau (CB), in the Administration for Children and Families (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services), funded 18 grantees for two years. Each grantee developed a plan to reduce homelessness in three specific populations of older youth that had been involved with the child welfare system. Over those two years, the projects conducted a detailed data analysis to determine which of these youth were at the greatest risk of homelessness. Based on the risk and protective factors of the populations, the grantees also reviewed the service array to identify gaps in services and supports and structured an approach to best meet the needs of each population. Grantees identified or developed comprehensive service models to address the gaps in services and supports. This work, known as Youth At-Risk of Homelessness Phase I (YARH-1), was the foundation for the next four years of effort on the project.

In September 2015, CB invited the 18 YARH-1 grantees to compete for a second phase of funding to refine and implement the models they had developed during the planning process. CB awarded funds to six grantees for the second phase of YARH (YARH-2). YARH-2 grantees refined their comprehensive service models and conducted usability tests and a formative evaluation to determine whether they could implement their model as intended and whether they had achieved progress toward desired outcomes. YARH-2 grantees also developed intervention manuals to support the continued implementation and possible replication or expansion of their service models.

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

The Youth Transitions Partnership (YTP) in Alameda County, California, blends service coordination, intensive case management, and dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) to help transition-age youth in foster care engage with available support systems and improve their outcomes. Throughout the program, practitioners and evaluators have worked to increase enrollment and promote early engagement among YTP participants. With these goals in mind, the YTP evaluation team at Chapin Hall revised the program's enrollment materials in 2020 with input and feedback from young people to highlight important information, improve reader friendliness, and increase visual appeal. This brief details the methods the team used to revise the materials, its approach to assessing the revised materials, the results of that assessment, and recommendations for developing enrollment materials in the future.

Despite remarkable resilience and high aspirations, many youth in foster care still struggle to complete their education, secure steady employment, build connections with supportive adults, develop critical life skills, and remain stably housed. One manifestation of the challenges these young people face is a high rate of homelessness. The link between foster care and homelessness is well documented. One recent study found that one-quarter of California youth making the transition from foster care to adulthood had been homeless for at least one

night between ages 19 and 21, and nearly 20 percent had experienced homelessness at some point while in extended foster care.¹ Another recent study found that 29 percent of youth experiencing homelessness had ever been in foster care.²

As a grantee under the Children's Bureau's Youth At-Risk of Homelessness (YARH) grant program, the Alameda County (California) Social Services Agency (SSA) developed and implemented the Youth Transitions Partnership (YTP). YTP is

¹ Courtney, M.E., N.J. Okpych, K. Park, J. Harty, H. Feng, A. Torres-Garcia, and S. Sayed. "Findings from the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CaYOUTH): Conditions of Youth at Age 21." Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2018.

² Dworsky, A., E. Gitlow, B. Horwitz, and G.M. Samuels. "Missed Opportunities: Pathways from Foster Care to Youth Homelessness in America." Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2019.

an innovative model of service coordination, intensive case management, and individualized supports, including dialectical behavior therapy (DBT)³, for transition-age youth in foster care. The aim of YTP is to increase young people’s ability to engage with available support systems and thereby improve their outcomes.

YTP has two core components: intensive case management and DBT. What makes YTP unique is the pairing of support from coaches with skill development through weekly DBT group sessions. Youth use the strong relationships they develop with their coaches to access services, achieve their goals, and gain the skills needed to persist in these endeavors even after their YTP participation ends. The program currently serves 14- to 20-year-olds who have multiple risk factors for experiencing homelessness and are placed in out-of-home care in Alameda County.⁴

Rationale for Redesign Efforts

The YTP formative evaluation, which was conducted from March 2016 to May 2019, found that, on average, only half of the youth who were eligible for YTP enrolled in the program.⁵ Interviews with coaches and focus groups with youth enrolled in YTP pointed to a lack of effective communication about YTP during the enrollment process as a possible reason more youth did not enroll. Focus group participants reported that they did not have a clear idea of what the program was about until after they had enrolled. Many of these youth wished they had received more information about DBT or felt that the information they had initially received about the program was too ambiguous. Coaches echoed this sentiment, voicing concern that youth did not necessarily understand what the program entailed when they enrolled and suggested that the enrollment materials be redesigned to highlight important information and make them more youth-friendly and visually appealing.

Methods

In fall 2020, the YTP evaluation team at Chapin Hall collaborated with Alameda County SSA and YTP staff to make three major changes to the YTP enrollment materials. These included:

- Creating one flyer for child welfare staff and one for youth to address their different needs and perspectives
- Incorporating more information about the YTP program and more visual elements such as pictures, graphic designs, and bright colors
- Adding quotes from YTP participants to capture the experiences of youth

Several collaborators reviewed drafts of the revised YTP flyers, including the YTP supervisor, YTP coaches, the YTP enrollment specialist, Alameda County SSA, Chapin Hall, and the Youth Advocate Program fellows (young adults who were previously in foster care in Alameda County). Their feedback and insights were incorporated in the final version of the flyers.

Chapin Hall provided PDFs of the enrollment materials to Alameda County SSA, and an image version of the youth flyer that could be sent and viewed via text. YTP integrated the revised flyers into the enrollment process beginning in December 2020.

In July 2021, a member of the YTP evaluation team gathered feedback about the revised enrollment materials through an interview with one current YTP participant and a focus group with eight Youth Advocate Program fellows, two of whom were former YTP participants. The focus group was conducted during a regularly scheduled Youth Advocate Program meeting. In the interview and focus group, the YTP evaluator showed participants the original YTP enrollment flyer and asked them to share their initial impressions, including whether they found it visually appealing, whether it contained all the necessary information about the program, and whether any important information about the program was missing. The evaluator then showed participants the revised flyer for youth and asked the same set of questions. The feedback from the

³ Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) is an evidence-based cognitive behavioral psychotherapy that teaches people how to live in the moment, develop healthy ways to cope with stress, regulate their emotions, and improve their relationships with others. It was originally developed to treat adults but has since been adapted for use with adolescents with a variety of mental disorders. For more information about DBT, see *DBT Skills Manual for Adolescents* at <https://dl.uswr.ac.ir/bitstream/Hannan/140496/1/9781462515356.pdf>

⁴ Packard Tucker, L., A. Dworsky, and M. Van Drunen. “Alameda County’s Youth Transitions Partnership Program – A Promising Model for Supporting Transition-Age Youth in Foster Care.” Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2020. Available at <https://www.chapinhall.org/research/ytp-alameda-county/>.

⁵ Packard Tucker, L., A. Dworsky, and M. Van Drunen. “Formative Evaluation Lessons Learned: Evaluating the Implementation of the Youth Transitions Partnership in Alameda County.” Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2019.

nine participating youth is summarized below. The responses from current and former YTP youth and non-YTP Youth Advocate Program fellows were similar; therefore, their responses are combined in the findings summary.

Findings

The focus group and interview asked youth about the enrollment materials, including first impressions, visual appeal, presentation of essential information, and usefulness of the materials. Participants were also asked to share ideas for disseminating program information. The following sections discuss findings related to those key pieces of feedback, about the original flyer (Figure 1) and revised flyer (Figure 2).

First Impressions and Visual Appeal

Participants generally did not find the original YTP flyer particularly appealing. They described it as “blank” and “bland.” Some participants liked the way the text had been broken up into bullet points. However, at least one participant thought the flyer was still “kind of wordy and long, [and it] might lose youth attention.” Participants wanted the colors and images to draw them in and to make the program seem like something in which they would want to participate.

“Instead of, like, just using some form images, there should be something that [would make us think], ‘Okay, so I want to do this, I want to participate in this program. It seems like fun probably.’ In my opinion. It might sound a little bit funny, but it might need like memes. That’s something that many teenagers, especially me, ... use for coping, and it helps teenagers get a smile on their face and like, ‘This seems like fun.’”

“[The colors and images should convey], ‘Okay, so they’re not using me. They’re not haters; they are giving me support on what I need, and [this] seems like something I will want to participate in.’”

Participants concurred that the original flyer was *not* visually attractive. They liked the colors but felt the overall look was unexciting. One suggested that adding a border might make it more appealing. Another would have preferred for the text to be broken up into more digestible bullet points. A third participant thought the gift cards youth receive for attending DBT groups should have been mentioned sooner because “incentives grab attention.” Finally, one participant found the flyer to be too formal.

Impact of COVID-19 on enrollment and enrollment material integration

Since March 2020 when COVID-related shutdowns began in California, YTP enrollment numbers have been lower than they were during the pre-pandemic period. Thirty-three youth enrolled in YTP between March 2019 and February 2020, an average of 2.75 youth per month. By comparison, 23 youth enrolled between March 2020 and February 2021, an average of 1.92 per month. In part, this reduction in enrollment reflects the shift to 100 percent virtual enrollment meetings and program activities. Enrollment meetings and some program activities remain virtual as of this publication.

YTP revised the enrollment materials during fall 2020 and rolled them out during winter 2021 with plans to compare enrollment data during the six months before and after the revised YTP materials were used. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting decline in enrollment meant that the effects of the revised enrollment materials could not be assessed as planned.

“It will make me think that it’s something very formal... something like the handshake [symbol is] just being very formal to a teenager... [The images] don’t seem like it’s as fun, and I guess, that it’s just going to be a formal program.”

Participants’ initial impressions of the revised flyer were much more positive. They liked it “a lot more” and thought it “looks good.” One described the quotes from program participants as “impactful.” Many of the participants’ comments focused on the flyer’s visual appeal. They described it as “a lot more eye-catching” and noted that “the bolded sentences really pop.”

“I think it looks a lot more appealing for us to want to read since it’s, like, broken up. And I like the picture. So yeah, look it just looks like a lot more appealing to read.”

When asked why participants found the revised flyer more visually appealing, they pointed to the colors, the use of quotes from program participants, the placement of pictures, and the general layout. One participant remarked that the flyer struck a balance between being “eye-catching” and looking “official,” which made the program seem legitimate.

“I actually don’t have anything bad to say about it. I would just say I like how, like, the first page has that big photo.”

“Each topic is just a small little paragraph on the page, so even though it’s two pages, it doesn’t really look like it’s two pages, and with all the colors, actually, those really work well.”

“To be honest, it really did catch my attention. I know that is something for us, like seeing the girl right there. My mind just reacts to it and be like, ‘Oh, it’s something for you, for us,

something that will benefit us.’ And, like, the color coding used in here and symbols aren’t that formal, so it is something that [would] cause my attention to be, like, ‘Oh, what is this about?’ and be interested in reading the facts and paying attention to it and be like, ‘Okay, so where can I get an application?’”

Presentation of Essential Information

The participants agreed that the original flyer included all the information a young person would need to know before enrolling in YTP. Participants identified several important pieces of information that the flyer contained, including the population the program serves, its eligibility criteria, and the services available; the free meal and gift cards provided to youth who attend the DBT group; and whom to contact in case youth have questions or want to know more. One participant noted that the most important piece of information is the detail about how to enroll.

“I think, like, what’s most important is the component about what youth and young adults need to do, like, in order to be part of the program, because sometimes it might not be clear. Like, specifically what is needed in order to be part of a program, so I think that’s pretty good, because it can be pretty important to make that clear.”

Youth suggested that the information about the Department of Children and Family Services on the original flyer was unnecessary and might be confusing. However, all participants agreed that the revised flyer includes all the information a young person would need to know when considering enrolling in YTP.

“Yes, [it] has all the information, and it says, like, ‘in care in Alameda County,’ ‘tell your caseworker you’re interested.’ The way you put the exclamation mark, it’s something that gets to let us know that it will benefit us in many ways.... The little handshake, it’s not a formal handshake; it doesn’t seem, like, very formal.”

Participants emphasized the importance of the information about incentives highlighted on the first page. They also noted that although the original flyer contains much of the same information, the revised version is easier to read and is laid out in a more digestible way.

Usefulness of Flyers and Ideas for Future Improvements

When asked which flyer would make them more likely to consider enrolling in YTP, all the participants agreed on the

revised flyer. In particular, they noted that they would be more likely to read the revised flyer. Once again, they noted the revised flyer’s visual appeal.

“The first one is boring. I’d probably toss it.”

“To be honest, that one (the second) is one that would intrigue me to like reading the information.”

“The second one—it’s good. It’s something that will give them, like, the tapping thing in the mind that is like, ‘Okay, this is for me, so I should read it and see if it’s gonna be a good fit.’”

“[The revised version is] visually appealing and has a lot of different parts that make it seem like you’re not reading a whole page. The way it’s broken up works well for short attention spans! But it has all the info.”

Participants agreed that it is useful to have a flyer about a program before deciding whether to enroll, even in an increasingly digital age.

“I think this context flyer is pretty useful because you want to know why you’re joining and also, like, what is expected. What are you guys going to be part of, what are you going to be doing inside of this. You know, for group and things like that. So yeah, I feel like it’s most definitely pretty important.”

“It’s useful. [It can] become a conversation starter for the youth and social worker to start talking about the program.”

“Also, I think it’s good because flyers can be, like, passed along pretty easily through, like, email, social media. I think that’s also a bonus. Like social workers can send it out ... things like that.”

At the conclusion of the focus group and interview, participants shared their ideas for making sure young people have the information they need about the program before deciding to enroll, and they recommended developing electronic enrollment materials to increase accessibility.

“I would say most definitely electronically is easier to get to people nowadays, especially with COVID and now certain people not working from home and all that. It’s easier to get it over email or text message.”

However, electronic enrollment materials would not work for all youth. In response to the suggestion that the program use electronic enrollment materials, one youth noted, “If I don’t know what it is, I’m not looking at the subject, or just will pass by. I don’t open a lot of my emails.” Three participants agreed that they would be more likely to look at electronic enrollment

materials if they came from a trusted source such as a social worker or friend.

Participants also offered several recommendations for improving the revised enrollment materials. A few suggested slight modifications such as adding a link to a website that would provide more information and enlarging the contact information. Other recommendations included distributing the flyer by text, including the flyer in an email with a pop-up function, giving social workers and other service providers a script to help them review the flyer with youth, hosting online or in-person information sessions, and producing a promotional video.

“I think the info session idea is a pretty good idea. Because it could be a spot where people could ask questions, and also there can be, like, a video kind of just centered around the role of the group and, like, the vision. And what is going to be expected and all of that. And also to get a sense of, like, who they’re going to be working with. Yes, I think the info session is a good idea to spread the word, and you know, so [they] kind of get a sense of what they’re getting themselves into and who they’re going to work with.”

“A video about the experience—maybe both with people from the program and staff as well. Both perspectives would be helpful.”

Revisions to the Flyer

According to the feedback received from young people, the content of the flyers did not differ drastically. Youth agreed that both flyers contained the key information to learn about and make an informed decision about participating in the program. The key differences were in the presentation and appeal of that information. The redesign process focused on layout, presentation, and stylistic elements, such as colors, pictures, and graphics. The primary changes to the flyer (see Figure 3) were as follows:

- Adding photos to increase visual appeal
- Using updated graphics

- Distinguishing sections of the flyer and drawing attention to important information with placement, headers, and bolded text
- Including quotes from youth

Figure 4 displays a comparison of youth feedback about the original and revised flyers.

Lessons Learned

Overwhelmingly, participants found the revised flyer to be more engaging and visually appealing than the original. The revised flyer included all the information participants thought youth would need when deciding whether to enroll in the program. The following recommendations for developing enrollment materials for youth programs in the future are based on the feedback received from participants.

- **Focus on first impressions.** Create visually appealing materials that are colorful and include photographs or carefully designed graphics.
- **Highlight important information.** Use bold text or distinct colors and position information strategically on the page so it catches the eye.
- **Present information in an accessible way.** Keep text to a minimum and break it up so that it is easier to consume.
- **Design enrollment materials in partnership with youth.** Involve youth early on when developing program materials.
- **Gather feedback directly from youth before rolling out new enrollment materials.** Conduct focus groups with potential or current program participants.
- **Consider other creative ways to disseminate information to youth.** Think about using memes (alone or in combination with other materials), hosting information sessions, or creating a video about the program that features youth and staff.

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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.mueggenborg@acf.hhs.gov.

Appendix

Figure 1. Original Youth Transitions Partnership flyer



How can youth & young adults benefit from a new service?

Alameda County Youth Transitions Partnership

What is the Alameda County Youth Transitions Partnership (YTP)?

The project helps young people set and meet goals for stable housing, education, employment, well-being, and permanent connections. YTP is a countywide effort to improve outcomes for current and former foster youth who need extra support as they transition to adulthood. The YTP model is the result of a two-year community planning process that included input from more than 100 youth and other community stakeholders. Funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the project is led by the Alameda County Social Services Agency's Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), in partnership with First Place for Youth.

Who can participate?

Alameda County current and former foster youth who need extra support in their transitions to adulthood and meet one of the following criteria may be selected to participate:

- Youth & young adults ages 14-21, currently in foster care in Alameda County.
- Young adults, ages 18-21, in foster care in Alameda County (NMD's).
- Youth and young adults, ages 14-21, currently homeless or receiving services from housing service providers in Alameda County who were formerly in foster care in Alameda County.



What do youth and young adults get?

YTP participants are assigned a one-on-one YTP Coach who works with them intensively to set and meet goals for housing, education, employment, well-being, and connecting to caring adults. The YTP Coach, a staff person at First Place for Youth, works with you and other members of your support team to help facilitate and coordinate all the services you may be eligible for. In addition, YTP participants take part in a weekly Skills Coaching class, where you meet with one of the coaches and a group of young people to learn and practice skills to help you focus, become aware of your emotions, control your impulses, and nurture relationships with other people.



Youth will receive a \$20 gift card and a free meal at each of the weekly groups along with other incentives for participating.

What do youth and young adults need to do?

YTP participants will be asked to participate actively in the coaching and skills groups. They will most often continue in their current placements or living situations and continue to work with the same service providers. YTP adds an additional layer of support for the young people as they navigate schools, employment, housing, and other kinds of services and programs. YTP Coaches help make sure they get the full benefit of all the services and support they are eligible for.

We are working to learn about how coordination of supportive services and specific skills coaching can help young people achieve better outcomes. Participants will be asked to consent to releasing some personal information to a small group of staff at DCFS and the partnership team so that we can better understand what works well for youth and young adults.

Eligibility is limited, and potential participants are invited to participate by DCFS.

How do I get more information? If you would like to know more, please contact Connie, Alameda County Youth Transitions Partnership Coordinator, at 510-780-8899 or 510-207-8738 (cell, text or call) or Linasc@acgov.org



Figure 2. Revised Youth Transitions Partnership flyer



What is the Youth Transitions Partnership?

The Youth Transitions Partnership (YTP) program is the result of a two-year planning process that included input from more than 100 youth in foster care in your community. **YTP combines one-on-one coaching with weekly skills groups** to help youth access services, gain skills, and achieve goals.

You may be eligible for YTP if you are 14 to 20 years old and currently placed in out-of-home care in Alameda County. Contact your child welfare worker if you're interested!



Individualized Coaching

You will be assigned a YTP coach who will help you use the skills you learn in the weekly skills groups to set and achieve *your* goals for housing, education, employment, well-being, and connecting to caring adults. Your YTP coach will also work with other members of your support team to help coordinate all the services you may be eligible for.



Weekly Skills Groups

You will take part in weekly skills groups led by two YTP coaches. During the groups, you and other young people will learn and practice skills to help you focus, become aware of and manage your emotions, control your impulses, develop relationships, and communicate effectively.



“They really wanna see you flourish. They wanna see you have a good future. I think the whole point of this program is to help people build a life worth living.” – Youth in YTP



What can I expect if I enroll in YTP?

- ❖ You will have **weekly face-to-face meetings with your YTP coach**, typically in your home or in the community. Your coach will offer you **practical and emotional support** and work with you on **developing goals and plans to achieve them**.
- ❖ You will take part in **weekly skills groups** that are run like a class. YTP coaches will teach skills and assign homework to help you practice using the skills in your everyday life. As much as possible, groups are scheduled so as not to conflict with your school or work schedule. Skills groups are typically held at First Place for Youth in downtown Oakland but may also be held at other locations that are more convenient for some young people. **You will receive a gift card and a free meal at each of the weekly skills groups**.
- ❖ If you enroll in YTP, you will probably remain in your current living situation and continue to work with the same service providers. YTP just **adds an extra layer of support** to help you achieve your education, employment, housing, or other goals.



▶ YTP is the result of a two-year community planning process that included input from more than 100 youth, child welfare staff, and service providers.



▶ An evaluation of the YTP program found that participating youth experienced gains in employment, financial literacy, and connections to caring adults. They also experienced gains in their acquisition and use of positive coping skills.



▶ If you are eligible for and choose to participate in YTP, **you will be asked to consent to releasing some personal information** (such as your age, gender, foster care history, and contact information) to the YTP providers and program evaluators to help them learn more about how YTP is helping young people achieve better outcomes.

To learn more about YTP, contact your child welfare worker or YTP's Enrollment Specialist:



Email:
Chris.Speed@accgov.org

"It's just, like, when you're emotional you just want to figure out ... what could you do to go back to being normal. And that's wise mind. The skills that you learn during the weekly groups [give] you another way to deal with it. And it's helpful." – Youth in YTP

Figure 3. Methods to improve readability and visual appeal

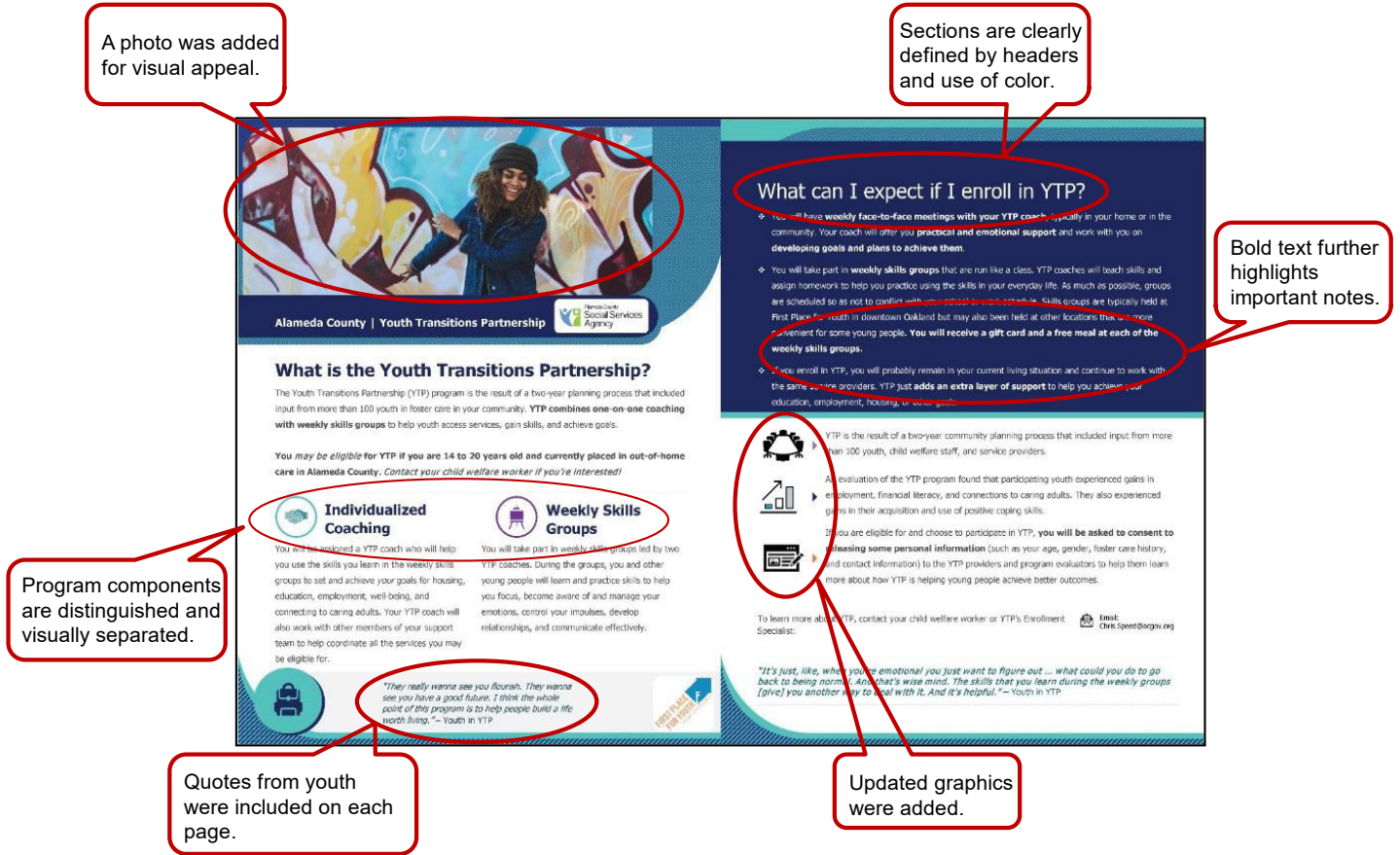


Figure 4. Youth comparison of original and revised flyers

