

INCREASING WORKER SKILLS TO SUPPORT YOUTH

THE ENHANCED YOUTH TRANSITION PLANNING (E-YTP) MODEL
AS A PROMISING APPROACH FOR SUPPORTING TRANSITION AGE YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This brief is part of a series on the E-YTP model, and includes a brief introduction to the model and discusses the specific strategies that supported installation and implementation of the model with the public child welfare workforce. Data come from Maryland's federal Children's Bureau-funded Youth At-Risk of Homelessness Implementation Grant, known as Thrive@25.

THRIVE@25 IS A FEDERALLY FUNDED PROGRAM¹ IN MARYLAND DESIGNED TO DEVELOP, IMPLEMENT, AND TEST A MODEL TO PREVENT HOMELESSNESS AMONG YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS WITH FOSTER CARE HISTORIES IN MARYLAND'S RURAL MID-SHORE.

Homelessness is a potential concerning outcome for this population. Youth and young adults with foster care histories are vulnerable to experiencing homelessness within three months after leaving the child welfare system.² They also are at-risk for several other poor outcomes including low rates of post-secondary degree attainment and low rates of employment.³ Youth and young adults who are currently or have been formerly involved with Maryland's child welfare system have reported to Thrive@25 researchers that they did not want more adults or new interventions in their lives. Instead, they wanted the adults who are already in their lives to have access to better information and resources. These youth wanted the adults in their lives to both see them as individuals and be able to support them to obtain services and resources that address the youth's specific needs and that build upon their strengths, interests, and vision for themselves.⁴

These findings led to the development of Thrive@25's model: The Enhanced Youth Transition Planning (E-YTP) Model.⁵ E-YTP puts youth at the center of their transition planning process. It is highly individualized, youth-driven, and strengths-based, and it includes comprehensive, team-based support from child welfare foster care workers (workers) and youth identified supports for youth ages 14-21 in foster care. It reinvents transition planning for Transition Age Youth in foster care to improve the key outcomes identified by the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness⁶ as necessary to prevent and end youth homelessness. E-YTP is grounded in research, best practice, and implementation science.⁷ Its values and principles align with the efforts currently underway to redesign public child- and family-serving systems to improve outcomes for the people these institutions serve. E-YTP focuses on building capacity within the child welfare workforce to support a youth-driven transition planning process that:

Is grounded in a strong partnership between a youth and their worker;

Brings together a team of supportive adults, identified by the youth, who will help the youth through their transition out of foster care and into adulthood;

Includes the development and maintenance of a comprehensive and collaborative Youth Transition Plan that is both meaningful and relevant to the youth and that exceeds State of Maryland and federal transition planning requirements; and,

Provides youth with opportunities to develop and practice the skills needed in adulthood (self-advocacy, effective communication, task management and follow through), through more frequent, intentional, and youth-driven meetings

The core of the E-YTP model is authentic youth engagement, which is embedded throughout all aspects of the model.

All E-YTP foster care supervisors, workers, and meeting facilitators are trained in Achieve My Plan (AMP),⁸ a youth engagement framework that provides workers with youth engagement skills, techniques, and youth-designed resources. These skills and resources are integrated and used throughout the E-YTP process. The E-YTP youth engagement tools, including a comprehensive Youth Transition Planning Template, are designed to help the worker build an authentic partnership with the youth and to convene the youth's team together around a common set of youth-identified goals.

E-YTP trained foster care workers are responsible for four categories of activities: engagement, preparation, collaborative planning, and transition planning. These activities are designed to increase contacts with biological and chosen family, improve the quality of assessments, and result in a comprehensive, strengths-based transition plan that is written in the youth's voice.

RESULTS OF WORKER E-YTP ACTIVITIES

Increased contacts with family and other natural supports

Assessments completed with greater efficacy

A comprehensive, strengths-based transition plan written in the youth's voice



TRAINING MUST FOCUS ON OPERATIONALIZING THE PRINCIPLES, PROCEDURES, AND TOOLS AVAILABLE TO TRAINEES TO DEVELOP THEIR SKILLSET.

IMPLEMENTATION SUPPORT STRATEGIES

Four strategies are used to install and implement the E-YTP model: skills-based training and coaching, ongoing peer learning sessions, implementation team meetings, and a data-informed continuous quality improvement (CQI) process. These strategies support agency leadership, foster care supervisors, and foster care workers in implementing E-YTP.

SKILL-BASED TRAINING & COACHING

E-YTP training elements provide an orientation on the model's components, values, and expectations of the foster care supervisors, worker's and E-YTP Meeting Facilitators. This supports foster care workers in the development of new skills, which are then reinforced through the other support strategies.

Foster care supervisors, workers, and E-YTP meeting facilitators participate in both an E-YTP orientation and AMP youth engagement training was adapted specifically for use within public child welfare. These trainings provide both the "how" and the "why" of the E-YTP model. Workers practice their new skills in recorded sessions with a youth and then receive feedback from the Transitional Planning Coach (TPC).

Foster care supervisors participate in monthly coaching with the TPC. E-YTP model coaching is concrete and focuses on building supervisory skills in order to increase quality practice.⁹ This supports fidelity to the E-YTP model and developing competency in four different areas: knowledge, skill, understanding, and interaction. Coaching supports and guides supervisors in understanding their role in E-YTP implementation, identifying skills that need to be strengthened, and celebrating the practices that they and their supervisees are doing well. The coaching process includes observations with structured feedback to support ongoing worker and supervisor skill development and attainment.

We discuss ways to do E-YTP and bounce ideas off each other, which is very supportive.

FOSTER CARE WORKER



To be taught or reminded of how to ask youth things differently has been helpful.

FOSTER CARE WORKER

PEER LEARNING SESSIONS

Peer learning sessions are held monthly for foster care supervisors, workers, and E-YTP meeting facilitators. These sessions provide a safe space (in-person or virtually) to address challenges and concerns around E-YTP model implementation. The TPC and participants work through challenges, discuss specific components of the model, and strategize ways to improve fidelity and engagement with youth. Peer learning sessions also provide an opportunity to address any initial increase in worker stress, emotional exhaustion, or feelings of burnout that may be present during implementation.

Peer learning sessions provide an additional opportunity to address challenges that have been identified by the TPC and Implementation Team.

CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT (CQI) PROCESS

CQI is important to support data-informed decision-making and implementation. The E-YTP CQI process includes collection of process, fidelity, and outcomes data. The data are reviewed by the Implementation Team regularly. The Implementation Team uses the data to identify barriers and potential solutions to increase fidelity and ensure desired outcomes. The data also are reviewed with the local leadership of the individual local department of social services (LDSS) to ensure that implementation to fidelity is monitored and supported at both local and regional levels.

IMPACT OF E-YTP ON CHILD WELFARE WORKFORCE

Workers and youth benefit from E-YTP when it is implemented well and with fidelity to the model. This model promotes the role of youth in their own transition planning process, and youth become more comfortable with taking on additional responsibility around the planning and leading their E-YTP meetings.

As workers became comfortable with the E-YTP process and developed the skills needed to engage youth authentically, they expressed an increase in job satisfaction. Workers reported appreciating that E-YTP allows them to have freedom to work with youth on "things that matter." Workers did not have to "just get things signed" and could use the more frequent meetings with youth to talk to youth about their lives and their dreams for the future. Supervisors reported seeing their workers prioritize transition planning and develop stronger youth engagement skills, including interacting with youth in a more authentic manner. Initial observations during implementation showed that workers who implemented E-YTP with greater fidelity saw more positive outcomes for the youth they were working with than workers who implemented E-YTP with less fidelity.

During the initial implementation of E-YTP, workers and supervisors reported slight increases in emotional exhaustion, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress (STS).¹⁰ This was not unexpected because of the significant change being made to work practices.¹¹ However, those supervisors, and workers who implemented E-YTP as it was designed

(i.e., with greater fidelity) found that they had stronger relationships with youth and that the work felt more natural and rewarding. Workers who did not initially embrace the E-YTP model and implemented it with less fidelity did not report the same increase in work satisfaction and personal accomplishment. When the directors of the LDSS set the expectation that E-YTP is the work of the agency, not in addition to the work, the supervisors and workers were more likely to implement the model with fidelity. The support provided by leadership helped to moderate the emotional exhaustion, stress, and burnout experienced by the workers.

Supervisors reported that coaching helped them understand priority areas for work with youth and how they can support workers in meeting these priorities. They also reported that coaching supported them in identifying worker skills to develop and how to provide feedback to workers in a way that leads to skill attainment. Coaching also supported supervisors to have in-depth discussions on topics including youth engagement, model tools, challenges with worker performance, and achieving a culture shift that focuses on quality practice over compliance. Coaching functioned as an additional accountability mechanism for implementing E-YTP with fidelity and was the most effective arena for developing solutions for challenges with model adherence. Supervisors reported that they were more likely to focus on E-YTP components with their workforce when they knew they had an upcoming coaching session with the TPC. The supervisor and TPC would address specific issues contributing to barriers and create a detailed plan for overcoming them.

Child welfare agency leaders strongly encouraged supervisors, and workers to participate in peer learning. In focus groups, foster care supervisors, and workers expressed that the monthly peer learning sessions were beneficial to their work with the youth.

I see the benefit to having the meetings more frequent to keep everyone accountable.

FOSTER CARE WORKER



ONGOING SUPPORT FOR THE WORKFORCE

The ongoing use of implementation supports continue to prevent drift in practice and to reinforce appropriate utilization of E-YTP processes, strategies, and tools. These supports also provide important feedback loops that maintain accountability to model fidelity. The E-YTP model leverages lessons learned from implementation of other evidence-based and -informed practices and service delivery models, including MultiSystemic Therapy and Wraparound. Both models use ongoing, rigorous fidelity monitoring (including document reviews); coaching; and external model purveyor support to maintain fidelity to the model and reduce drift from the approach.¹² All of these strategies support key implementation drivers related to competency of supervisors, and workers, organizational support and capacity, and leadership. When those drivers are integrated and compensatory, they will lead to fidelity of the intervention which will, in turn, lead to consistent use of the intervention and, ultimately, to the desired outcomes.¹³

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In September 2013, the Children’s Bureau (CB), within the Administration for Children and Families (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), funded 18 grantees to develop a plan to reduce homelessness among older youth with child welfare involvement. These projects conducted data analysis to determine which youth were the most at-risk of homelessness, reviewed the service array to identify gaps in services and supports, and developed comprehensive service models to better meet the identified needs. This work, known as Youth At-Risk of Homelessness Phase I (YARH-1), served as the foundation for a second phase in which six grantees refined and tested their comprehensive service models and developed intervention tmanuals to support the continued implementation and possible replication or expansion of their models. 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 developed during the planning process. CB awarded 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 progress toward desired outcomes was achieved. YARH-2 grantees also developed intervention manuals to support the continued implementation and possible replication or expansion of their service models.

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