

**A Study of Best Practices in Youth Engagement
and Leadership Development**

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A Study of Best Practices in Youth Engagement and Leadership Development

Introduction

The developmental period of adolescence through young adulthood is critical across many life domains. For most youth it is a time of great change, whether in physical, emotional, intellectual, or social processes, and it is a time when many qualities and abilities that will define the adult emerge from the possibilities in the child. It is a period that intermingles potential with risk, and the developing person can be strongly shaped by impulsive decisions and their experienced consequences.

Within a developmental framework, the pre-adolescent stages (before age 11) are focused on developing autonomy and initiative – learning that one is separate from the rest of the world and that one’s actions can have an impact on the world. Many life competencies develop prior to adolescence, such as learning to trust that life events can be predictable and follow patterns, that self-regulation is possible, that decisions have consequences, and that behaviors can be goal-directed. In particular, childhood years (through most elementary grades) are important for beginning to achieve mastery, with successes and failures, and accepting mistakes and responding with self-correcting behaviors. As adolescence begins, each youth begins to determine “Who am I? What is my identity in the world?”

All of this development takes place within the context of adult guidance and direction. At first, adults are necessary for safety and survival – few beings are as helpless as a human infant. As the developing child learns autonomy and initiative she becomes more capable of independent actions and thought, and as simple skills are mastered he may take over certain survival activities for himself. But survival is not the same as development into a successful, well-functioning, independent, contributing member of society. The latter requires much more from the adults surrounding a child than assuring that they survive – it requires a steady flow of interactive engagements through which the developing child gains increasing self-sufficiency while learning about self, others, and society as a whole.

Our society organizes many of those learning engagements through public schools, with an expectation that all children will spend the bulk of their time in structured educational programming. In the school context, children interact with adults who teach them, supervise their activities, structure their experiences, and create relationships that become models for how they will relate to others in their future. In addition to schools, children participate in the ongoing lives of their families and in other socially-organized activities through which they relate to each other and other adults, such as in faith communities, clubs, teams, play groups, etc. In almost all of these settings, adults define and shape the experiences.

Further, society has created a number of ways for responding to special needs or challenges that may emerge in the developing child, whether through the health care system, treatment/intervention systems, special educational programming, protection and safety systems, or rehabilitative justice systems. In all of these systems adults again define and shape the experiences of children and youth,

from the direct one-to-one relationships that may be formed to the higher decisions about policies and resource allocations.

Youth engagement has emerged over the past three decades as a philosophy that guides all of those interactions between the developing youth and the adults in their lives in ways that best prepare the youth for successful, satisfying adulthood. The youth engagement philosophy is grounded in the belief that children and youth are best served when they are active participants in their relationships and activities with adults and other youth, when their input influences decisions made about them, appropriate to their age and maturity, and when they can shape those relationships as much as they are shaped by them. Youth engagement moves the philosophy from “children should be seen and not heard” (children are a blank slate on which adults write who the child will become) to “children benefit by actively participating in their own development.”

This report offers an explication of the youth engagement philosophy and presents strategies to achieve youth engagement that reflect a current understanding of best practices. This report is a companion to “A Study of Best Practices in Parent Engagement and Leadership Development” prepared for the New Hampshire Department of Education and the Endowment for Health. The report begins with discussions of *resilience* and *positive youth development* to set the foundation for understanding best practices in youth engagement, followed by a presentation of best practices.

To be clear, the best practices discussed in this paper do not automatically exclude younger children from access to engagement strategies: as a system policy position, all the practices discussed herein should be open to all children, youth, and young adults. However, realistically and generally, younger children have lesser abilities or readiness to participate actively and need parents/caregivers and other adults to advocate with and for them. Therefore, the majority of the practices discussed here are really designed for older children, adolescents, and young adults but can be applied to younger children according to their abilities.

Foundations of Youth and Young Adult Engagement

Resilience

Resilience is a key concept in understanding how the child makes the passage through adolescence and emerges into adulthood. In the public health context, resilience is *the capacity for individuals or populations to endure, adapt, and generate new ways of thinking and functioning in the context of change, uncertainty, or adversity*. Said differently, resilience describes the ability of the developing child to experience life’s realities, which normally include stressors, challenges, and hurts, both big and small, and still maintain well-being, still travel toward adulthood with a healthy sense of self and abilities that allow him/her to function effectively in society.

In general, everyone faces change, uncertainty, or adversity in their lives, at various times and in various forms. Certain children and youth, and therefore their families, face more serious or chronic adversity when they manifest health, behavioral health, developmental, educational, social, or other challenges.

Understanding how to promote resilience helps public systems better understand the ways in which children and youth, and their families, can be supported to successfully face those types of challenges.

A stakeholder group in Ohio, composed of government and private agency staff and many parents/caregivers and youth with behavioral health challenges, defined resilience and identified the key principles behind the definition.¹ That definition is offered here as an example of how resilience is perceived by families and youth: *“Resiliency is an inner capacity that, when nurtured, facilitated, and supported by others, empowers children, youth, and families to successfully meet life’s challenges with a sense of self-determination, mastery, and hope.”*

The principles provided with this definition describe the needs of children and youth which, when met, build the strength and impact of resilience in the individual.

1. Validation and Valuing: unconditional acceptance; ability to be safely vulnerable
2. Basic Needs, Safety, Supports, and Services: community support for the family
3. Sanctuary: a safe place of refuge, a place to feel calm
4. Justice (Rights, Voice, Respect, and Dignity): no matter a child’s circumstances or challenges, treatment with dignity and respect; advocacy when needed
5. Competencies (Skills, Abilities, Talents): recognition of unique strengths, belief that every child can learn
6. Self-Wisdom and Self-Acceptance: children and families are experts in their own experiences, knowing what is best for them; they are accepted where they are
7. Courage, Confidence, and Self-Determination: belief in positive possibilities for any child/youth
8. Supportive Connections: family, friends, and community all contribute and are needed
9. Expectations and Accommodations that Maximize Success: meeting resiliency needs must be within reach of all children and youth, irrespective of circumstances or challenges
10. Contribution and Participation: everyone is capable of and wants to contribute to society
11. Hope and Optimism: all children need hope; hope is different for each individual
12. Sense of Meaning and Joy: a chance for satisfaction and quality in life

These resiliency needs apply to all children and youth, and they apply irrespective of any challenges, disorders, or conditions a child or youth may face. This is important in considering how to support youth and young adult engagement in their own education, services, and supports. The processes of engagement require that society, through public systems, validate all children and youth, ensure basic needs are met for all children and youth, support and protect the rights of all children and youth, develop competencies in all children and youth, etc. The processes of engagement are fundamentally important for all children and youth and must be established in ways that also ensure that children and youth facing educational, health, emotional, legal, and/or safety challenges are included in the opportunities available to all. In addition, special accommodations in the processes of engagement may be needed for certain children and youth to match their abilities and needs.

This list of resiliency needs also begins to define guidelines for essential strategies to ensure that youth and young adults have opportunities for engagement in their own care (when it is needed) and in the

¹ “Resiliency Consensus Statement”; Resiliency Leadership Ohio and the Ohio Department of Mental Health (2008). Found at http://resiliencyohio.org/resiliency_ohio_consensus_statement.php

policies and practices implemented through the education and service systems operating in society which directly, or indirectly, impact them.

Positive Youth Development

This Study of best practices in youth and young adult engagement is appropriately grounded in the field of Positive Youth Development (PYD). “The positive youth development approach is a way of thinking, living, and acting as individuals and as a community. As adults and youth, we should expect more from young people and provide them with opportunities to give more and become more. It is important to remember that even though youth involvement promotes positive youth development, involving youth is not only a way to help them to develop positively, but also to utilize their expertise in enhancing systems transformation. The youth development movement was created to emphasize the positive outcomes that youth can create, rather than the negative outcomes that society hopes to prevent.”² In other words, we need to support youth engagement strategies because youth can give us vital and important ideas, energy, and information, not because we find something to be “wrong” with them that needs to be “fixed.” When needs or challenges are expressed, they can best be addressed within a PYD context that affirms them first as valuable people and gives them hope, not just because their challenges can be addressed but because they are alive and their lives have worth.

The principles of PYD³ provide excellent guidance for youth engagement strategies in New Hampshire:

- Positive youth development is an intentional process. It is about being proactive to promote protective factors in young people.
- PYD complements efforts to prevent risky behaviors and attitudes in youth, and complements efforts that work to address negative behaviors.
- Youth assets are both acknowledged and employed through PYD. All youth have the capacity for positive growth and development.
- PYD enables youth to thrive and flourish in their teen years, and prepares them for a healthy, happy and safe adulthood.
- PYD involves youth as active agents. Adults may set the structure, but youth are not just the recipients of services. Youth are valued and are encouraged to bring their assets to the table. Adults and youth work in partnership.
- Youth leadership development is a part of PYD, but youth aren’t required to lead. Youth can attend, actively participate, contribute, or lead through PYD activities.
- PYD involves civic involvement and civic engagement – youth contribute through service to their communities.
- PYD involves and engages every element of the community – schools, homes, community members, and others. Young people are valued through this process. PYD is an investment that the community makes in young people. Youth and adults work together to frame the solutions.

The Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs⁴ (IWGYP), applied those principles and defined the following elements of effective PYD programs⁵:

² Matarese, M., McGinnis, L., & Mora, M., Youth Involvement in Systems of Care: A Guide to Empowerment; 2005. Technical Assistance Partnership, Washington, DC; page 3.

³ Accessed at youth.gov, a resource-rich site for PYD information provided by a collaborative partnership of 12 U.S. Government departments and 6 federal agencies; <http://youth.gov/youth-topics/positive-youth-development/key-principles-positive-youth-development>

⁴ For more information see: <http://youth.gov/feature-article/federal-collaboration>

- Youth participation and involvement in program design, implementation and evaluation. Although adults may set the structure, youth are involved as active agents in the program and are not just the recipients of services. Adults engage youth in creating a respectful and inclusive program environment.
- Positive environments and safe and structured places. Programs provide appropriate youth-to-adult ratios for supervision, a system for ensuring youth are welcomed when they arrive, and a balance for different learning styles in programmatic activities. Programs respect diversity and different cultures.
- Skill and asset development opportunities. Programs develop, acknowledge and employ youth assets. Programs engage youth in exploring career and workforce opportunities and provide occasions for goal setting. Programs provide opportunities to master and apply skills, and engage youth in determining choices that help them progress toward new levels of learning.
- Opportunities to serve others. Youth have opportunities for civic involvement and civic engagement. Youth contribute to their communities through service. Programs create opportunities to make a difference through service learning or peer support.
- Positive relationships with adults. Adults and youth work in partnership through the program. Adequately trained, caring staff members who understand and respect the developmental needs and contributions of young people are essential.

These somewhat repetitive principles and elements for PYD offer a set of clear components that are relevant to the structuring of youth and young adult engagement strategies:

- Be intentional and proactive.
- Promote protective factors (resilience) in all youth.
- Healthy adulthood is built upon healthy adolescence.
- All youth benefit from positive, supportive relationships with adults.
- All youth have strengths and assets on which to build.
- Youth need multiple opportunities to build life skills and other assets.
- Youth need to be active agents with support and guidance from adults.
- Supportive adults can be helped to further develop skills in youth engagement.
- Youth can and want to positively engage in community activities.
- Youth learn civic involvement through service to others.
- All parts of society need to be involved in promoting and supporting youth.

Inherent in all of this information is the grounding of PYD in all of the connections formed between a youth and the community. “It is through the connection with the community that young people gain a sense of personal power. All young people need to feel a connection and a sense of belonging and will seek out ways in which they can meet their basic physical and social needs, as well as build competencies that they feel are necessary to participate in society.”⁶ Youth engagement activities directed toward any and all children and youth are simply efforts by adults to create multiple, safe, positive opportunities for young people to find and explore this critical connection between themselves and society.

⁵ IWGYP Develops Common Language on Positive Youth Development, IWGYP (2015). Retrieved from: <http://youth.gov/feature-article/interagency-working-group-youth-programs-develops-common-language-positive-youth>

⁶ Matarese et al (2005); page 4.

It is also necessary to understand that some young people are disconnected from their community for a host of possible reasons: stigma associated with behavioral health issues; chronic health issues that limit physical activities and contact; placement in foster care, group homes, treatment facilities, or juvenile detention centers; school failure; family crises; and even poverty, issues with gender identity, or sexual orientation. For any youth with one or more of these experiences, stigmatization and discrimination may negatively impact their connection to the community, leading to a sense of isolation and risk-taking behaviors in an effort to lessen those feelings. Youth engagement strategies purposely aimed at children and youth facing these kinds of issues not only work toward restoring some sense of “normalcy” in their community connections, but they also may serve therapeutic purposes in addressing some of the needs that cause the separation in the first place.

Built upon the foundations of PYD, youth engagement strategies will foster that sense of connectedness, allowing opportunities for youth to communicate about the barriers they may be facing and helping them to move forward toward adulthood in productive, positive ways. In the process, they may also allow the adults supporting these engagement strategies to experience benefits from the contributions youth are capable of making when presented with opportunities. In particular, those adults responsible for designing and implementing the education and service systems may learn from young people about better, more effective ways to deliver such programming. “The PYD approach requires that the community view youth contribution and partnering as an important investment in the future of the community. The youth development/community empowerment approach engages youth in activities that give them the opportunity to learn new skills and grow while simultaneously encouraging positive relationships that root them in the community.”⁷

Organization of Best Practice Information

Compared to the robust information that is available to describe models and strategies for achieving parent and family engagement in education and services, the best practice information available to support youth and young adult engagement is very limited. In fact, whereas the national education and early childhood fields lead the way in providing theories and practices for parent and family engagement, those fields offer almost no information about engaging youth and young adults in those same processes. As a result, much of the best practice information that follows comes out of the treatment fields related to behavioral health and/or developmental disabilities.

The information that follows is presented under two main headings: best practices for youth engagement in their own services; and best practices for youth engagement in agency/system decision-making. The first category includes direct, one-to-one strategies for ensuring that a youth’s voice has a meaningful impact on the services provided to them to address a range of needs; the second category describes group-oriented approaches to engaging youth in community and state system decision-making processes. The latter category is divided into sections describing different areas of system functioning in which the youth and young adult voice can be meaningful.

Best Practices in Youth Engagement in Their Own Services

Achieve My Plan – AMP

⁷ *Ibid*, page 5.

The Research and Training Center on Family Support and Children’s Mental Health (RTCFCMH) at Portland State University spent the past decade researching and designing a practice approach specifically aimed at achieving meaningful involvement and engagement by youth and young adults who are the subjects of care or service plans (including IEPs, wraparound, permanency planning, out of home placements, and others). That approach was named Achieve My Plan – AMP – and it is designed to apply to all types of plan development in education and service systems.

AMP⁸ is structured to help in three critical areas of team-based plan development: 1) organizational support for youth participation; 2) preparation of youth for participation; and 3) support during the planning meeting.

1) Necessary *organizational support* for plan development can be separated into two major areas, each requiring policy and practice changes within current education, treatment, protection, and justice systems. First, it is important to create and promote an *organizational culture* that sees youth participation as valuable and possible. System and agency leaders need to signal that this culture is important by calling attention to it and dedicating resources to making it happen, through training, supervision, job descriptions, evaluations, and quality improvement processes. System staff, parents/families, and youth all need to receive information that validates the importance of youth involvement in their own planning and offers tools and specific practices to support involvement. Second, system staff at all levels need to ensure that *youth are always present* when decisions that impact them are made. It is especially important that youth not feel that decisions are being made for them by someone else and then given to them with an expectation that they will accept those decisions. Staff need to be empowered to create an environment that invites youth participation and prevents decisions from being made when the youth is not participating.

2) *Helping a young person prepare* for a team planning meeting prior to the meeting may be the most critical area for ensuring meaningful engagement in the process. The youth needs to understand the process: why the meeting is happening; how it fits into the larger educational or service process; the rights, protections, and supports built into the process; and how the planning outcomes will impact the youth. When preparing for a specific meeting, the youth needs to have a chance to review what will be discussed (based on system requirements) and add items for discussion important to the youth. This discussion should take place far enough before a meeting that the youth has time to think through the meeting agenda and even work with a “coach” or mentor to talk through his/her feelings and responses to the various agenda items. In this discussion it is especially important to help the youth think through and describe plan goals most important to him/her. This discussion should also cover the ways in which the youth might feel most comfortable expressing their ideas – adults in the process cannot assume that every youth will be comfortable just talking about their ideas to a roomful of adults. They may wish to bring others to support them or help them articulate their ideas; they may want to bring music or poetry that says what they feel; or they may want to prepare notes ahead of time and even ask someone else to give voice to those ideas. Finally, it may be helpful to strategize about who in the meeting they may want to turn to for support at a moment of difficulty, or to help explain a particular feeling or idea. The better a young person feels prepared, the greater the likelihood their involvement will be meaningful.

⁸ Information in this description is adapted from Best Practices for Increasing Meaningful Youth Participation in Collaborative Team Planning – Achieve My Plan; (2012). Research and Training Center on Family Support and Children’s Mental Health. Portland State University, Portland, OR.

3) For support during a planning meeting, two broad types of support are helpful, and it may be primarily up to the adults on the team to ensure that those supports take place. First, the meeting environment has to feel *safe* to the youth. It will not feel safe if the youth is ignored, or lectured, or harshly criticized. It is usually helpful for the team to begin by setting groundrules, including ideas such as: all voices are equally respected; stay strengths-based and solution-focused; stick to the agenda the youth helped to create; no questions are “wrong” or “stupid”; and avoid jargon and deficit-driven language. Then everyone on the team holds each other accountable to follow the groundrules that are set up. Second, the team always behaves in ways that *affirm that the youth is part of the team*. Many opportunities may need to be given for the youth to contribute; s/he may need multiple direct invitations to give input, even if s/he does not always offer a response. When the youth does contribute, it must be heard and s/he must feel that his/her input impacts the discussion and decisions that are made. The team may need to be patient to ensure everyone agrees about the “problem” before moving to solutions, and as solutions are considered it is important to acknowledge that solutions may take many forms. The meeting should be structured to include acknowledgement of and discussion about the youth’s strengths, capabilities, and accomplishments, and proposed solutions should strive to make use of those strengths. As decisions get made and a plan is created, extra effort may be necessary to ensure that the youth and everyone else at the table understands the decisions and necessary next steps that the team, including the youth, has agreed to.

At the end of every meeting, or soon after, feedback from the youth and others should be sought to see what worked and what did not work, and that information should be seen to impact the process from that point forward.

One of the assets of the AMP approach is that all of the above strategies follow common sense. There is nothing complex about these practices and most are not hard to implement. However, historic practices in care or service planning have tended to ignore or minimize the ability of young people to participate actively; the AMP approach reminds everyone to do the work necessary to elicit the youth’s cooperation and input using obvious, common engagement strategies. One outcome is that the youth who is meaningfully involved will be learning skills s/he can continue to use to positively direct their life. And, somewhat ironically, when this work is done and the youth’s participation in the plan is meaningful, they are more likely to try to do their part to make the plan work. Respect and patience can go a long way.

RTCFSMCH has developed an AMP self-assessment tool for schools and agencies to assess the degree to which the organization supports meaningful youth participation in collaborative team planning, called the AMP Self-Assessment Quiz. That quiz asks questions about the practices just described and may be found at: <http://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/pdf/pbAMPQuizBrochure.pdf>.

Transition to Independence Process – TIP Model

The TIP Model⁹ is more broadly designed than the AMP approach and includes participation by youth in their own care planning and in the delivery of developmentally appropriate and appealing services and supports. It is designed to assist youth experiencing behavioral health challenges as they transition to adulthood by facilitating increased self-sufficiency and successful achievement of their goals. This work

⁹ This information adapted from the Transition to Independence Process Model found at <http://www.tipstars.org/OverviewofTIPModel.aspx>

is organized across five transition life domains: employment and career; education; living situation; personal effectiveness and well-being; and community life functioning.

A few observations about these transition life domains may be helpful. First, although the model was created to support young adults facing behavioral health challenges, the domains are not built around treatment interventions. In fact, work with a youth using this model may introduce “treatment” services long after the young person is engaged in developing specific work skills, earning his/her own income, and settled into a stable, long-term living situation. While these other domains are being addressed, the young adult may develop an understanding of how treatment services might improve their well-being and enter them willingly, with a goal of finding mastery over the challenges they face. Second, TIP puts common young adult goals first: a stable living situation; a plan towards answering the question, “What will I do as an adult?”; personal well-being; and positive, rewarding engagement in the community in ways of that person’s choosing. Third, these domains describe a holistic, or “whole person” approach, recognizing that a youth with behavioral health challenges is more than those challenges or behaviors, and that they need to achieve progress in life areas which may only be impacted by those challenges, not defined by them. This same approach applies to youth facing other types of challenges, beyond or instead of behavioral health.

To implement this model, TIP also offers 7 specific practice guidelines¹⁰ that demonstrate the model focus on youth and young adults making the transition to adulthood:

1. Engage young people through relationship development, person-centered planning, and a focus on their futures.
2. Tailor services and supports to be accessible, coordinated, appealing, non-stigmatizing, and developmentally appropriate – build on strengths to enable the young people to pursue their goals across the relevant transition domains.
3. Acknowledge and develop personal choice and social responsibility with young people.
4. Ensure a safety-net of support by involving a young person’s parents, family members, and other informal and formal key players.
5. Enhance young persons’ competencies to assist them in achieving greater self-sufficiency and confidence.
6. Maintain an outcome focus in the TIP system at the person, program, and community levels.
7. Involve young people, parents, and other community partners in the TIP system at the practice, program, and community levels.

For the purposes of this Study, it should be noted that the very first practice guideline is explicitly focused on engagement with the young person through building a relationship with them that places that young person’s future well-being at the center of the relationship. Further, the second, third, fifth, and seventh guidelines remain highly focused on the positive inclusion of the young person and his/her choices at the personal, program, and community levels. In different words, this model asks that helping adults (and the systems they represent) engage with each young person in a relationship that respects them as a unique, valuable individual with values, preferences, and capabilities, and all the helping that takes place grows out of that respectful relationship.¹¹

¹⁰ Clark, H.B., *Transition to Independence Process (TIP) System: A Community-Based Model for Improving the Outcomes of Youth and Young Adults with EBD*; Stars Behavioral Health Group, Long Beach, CA. (2010).

¹¹ The TIP Model and evidence for its effectiveness is fully articulated in Clark, H.B. & Unruh, D.K. (eds), *Transition of Youth and Young Adults with Emotional or Behavioral Difficulties*; Brookes Publishing, Baltimore, MD. (2015).

Wraparound Team-Based Care Planning

The wraparound approach to team-based care planning is detailed in “A Study of Best Practices in Parent Engagement and Leadership Development,” the companion report to this report. However, for the purposes of youth and young adult engagement, it is important to note that both the AMP and TIP models just described are often implemented employing the tool of wraparound, with a special focus on assisting a youth to participate actively in his/her care planning process. A major goal in this application is to help the transitioning youth become more competent in not only participating actively but in taking a lead on his/her own planning team. As a youth becomes more able to take the lead, s/he is learning the skill set that will enable him/her to take charge of decisions for his/her own life, eventually reducing or eliminating the need for formal system supports, thus developing independence and autonomy.

Person-Centered Planning

A similar approach designed to engage a young person in their own care planning is articulated in the Person-Centered Planning (PCP) model. The PCP approach has been developed and primarily employed in the developmental disabilities field; thus, it is intentionally designed to elicit the preferences and wishes of persons with cognitive challenges, ensuring that plans are developed with those preferences in mind. “PCP is an ongoing problem-solving process used to help people with disabilities plan for their future. In PCP, groups of people focus on an individual and that person’s vision of what they would like to do in the future. This PCP team meets to identify opportunities for the focus person to develop personal relationships, participate in the community, increase control over their own lives, and develop the skills and abilities needed to achieve these goals. . . The individuals [on the team] take action to make sure that the strategies discussed in planning meetings are implemented.”¹²

Although this model is primarily designed for persons with cognitive or intellectual difficulties, note that these goals – develop personal relationships; participate in the community; increase control over their own lives; and develop the skills and abilities to achieve these goals – are highly consistent with the goals for independence described in the previous models.

Informal Youth Supports

Youth and young adults facing a variety of challenges, but especially those manifesting behavioral health challenges, may experience isolation from the community and from same-age peers as one result of their challenges. For this reason, engagement with other peers who have faced similar kinds of experiences can often be a key to engaging the young person in other services and supports offered by the education and service systems. Those systems can play a role in facilitating contacts with other peers with system experience through informal, flexible group settings. Such opportunities may allow a youth to engage in a manner that feels more natural or comfortable to them, while also reducing stigma that may be attached to their behavioral health challenges or involvement with the treatment system.

Host agencies or advocacy groups may create the supporting structure for such groups and get the word out about them among youth in the population of focus. Space, adult supervision/support, transportation, and food/snacks/drinks may be provided by a host entity to help create a safe environment within which informal support can be provided. “Structured group settings can also

¹² This information taken from the PACER Center’s National Parent Center on Transition and Employment and may be found at <http://www.pacer.org/transition/learning-center/independent-community-living/person-centered.asp>

expand opportunities for youth to acquire social skills and develop supportive peer relationships in an informal context. As an example, participants in these groups are able to regularly “check in” regarding each other’s wellbeing. As a result, when concerns are identified, participants can readily communicate them to program staff, averting potential crises. In addition, because participants include youth at all levels of functioning and developmental stages, there are ample opportunities for modeling positive peer interaction. This provides opportunities to shape and reinforce individual strengths, and to facilitate acquisition of adaptive social behaviors in an “informal” and safe setting.”¹³

It is imperative that host entities involve youth and young adults in every step of planning and implementing this type of informal support, allowing the young participants to “own” such a group and shape it in ways most conducive to engagement and participation by youth in the population of focus. The adults providing support to such a group may need to develop non-directive, non-intrusive skills to ensure that the young people remain in control of the experience but have access to adult guidance and support as it is needed.

Peer-to-Peer Supports

Youth MOVE National, a youth-run advocacy organization focused on improving the care and involvement of youth and young adults facing mental health challenges, published a literature review¹⁴ of youth peer-to-peer supports that describes well what is known about the use of youth and young adults as peer supports for other youth and young adults experiencing behavioral health challenges. That review provides the background and historical development of peer-to-peer approaches in many fields, and it reveals the paucity of knowledge about effective peer-to-peer programming for youth and young adults. Among the significant findings about youth peer-to-peer supports in that report:

- The 1999 “Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General,”¹⁵ prepared by the Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, validated the effectiveness of peer support in the mental health field, stating, “Consumer organizations have had measurable impact on mental health services, legislation, and research. One of their greatest contributions has been the organization and proliferation of self-help groups and their impact on the lives of thousands of consumers of mental health services.” (page 95) It should be noted that this statement reflected the work of adult-to-adult peer-to-peer programming; youth peer-to-peer programming was not yet being implemented.
- In 2006, SAMHSA identified peer supports as one of ten fundamental components of “recovery,” a term describing decreasing behavioral health disorder symptoms and increasing the ability of persons with those disorders to function effectively and with self-satisfaction.
- In 2011, the International Association of Peer Supporters specifically identified youth in their definition of peers supports as “casual, intermittent, volunteer and informal support from one who has had the same or similar experiences.”
- Models for youth and young adult peer-to-peer supports were identified in the fields of education (non-“disabled” youth supporting a “disabled” youth, or peer counseling programs), health, juvenile justice (youth peer courts), foster care (often young adults previously in care mentoring youth in foster care), and mental health (transition-age models).

¹³ “Youth Involvement in the Arizona Behavioral Health System: A DBHS Practice Tool”; Arizona Department of Health Services, Division of Behavioral Health Services (2015).

¹⁴ Ansell, D.I. & Insley, S.E., Youth Peer-to-Peer Support: A Review of the Literature. YouthMOVE National, Jackson, MS. (2013).

¹⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999.

- The review identified four research studies reporting on outcomes achieved by peer-to-peer supports and found mixed, but generally positive, results.
- In 2007, the Center for Medicaid and State Operations issued guidance for including peer-to-peer supports in state Medicaid programs and set specific supervision, care coordination, and training/credentialing requirements that have to be met before such a service can be approved within a State Medicaid Plan. That guidance did not specifically recognize or address youth or young adult peer-to-peer programs.
- In 2012, the Center for Health Care Strategies identified Alaska as the only state that included youth peer support services as a possible Medicaid service.

A number of states have begun to implement peer-to-peer support programming for youth and young adults; the entity identified by many sources as the most successful in this type of programming is Youth MOVE Oregon (YMO)¹⁶. YMO peer support specialists (PSS) offer help, advice, guidance, and support from “someone who has been where they are.” PSSs have lived experience with a variety of youth-serving systems, such as mental health, addiction recovery, special education, foster care, and juvenile justice systems, and use that experience to guide their interactions with other youth who are in need of support. The PSSs engage youth and young adults actively in their own care, working with them to identify their strengths, needs, possible supports, and community resources, and then helping them plan their next steps. Their stated purpose is to “help youth and young adults gain control over their own lives and create change in their communities by role modeling competency in recovery and coping skills.” PSSs are now available in Oregon’s six largest counties. PSSs participate in a 40-hour training course that enables them to obtain state certification as a PSS, which allows YMO to bill the state for services they provide.

Best Practices in Youth Engagement in Agency/System Decision-Making

There are many different roles that engaged youth might play in system design, planning, implementation, and monitoring. In all of these different roles, a single set of principles can guide or support the engagement strategies employed. This set of principles is articulated in “Core Principles for Engaging Young People in Community Change,”¹⁷ published for the Forum for Youth Investment. A brief discussion about the principles follows.

The Forum for Youth Investment principles are built upon a belief that youth who are actively engaged in social change efforts bring three core strengths to the process: 1) *capacity* (knowledge and skills); 2) *motivation* (awareness of issues and root causes, commitment, and sense of responsibility); and 3) *opportunity* (chances to act on passions through relevant, sustained actions). These strengths naturally emerge in youth who have had opportunities in their life development to interact with adults and entities in their community beyond their home, and the set of principles makes use of these strengths.

Principle 1: Design an Aggressive Outreach Strategy – outreach strategies must be strong and continuous; youth must feel invited to participate; intentionally create a “revolving door” of youth leaders, and continuously groom and prepare new leaders to step forward.

¹⁶ Information in this description obtained from <http://www.youthmoveoregon.org/peer-support/>

¹⁷ Pittman, K., Martin, S., & Williams, A. (July 2007). *Core Principles for Engaging Young People in Community Change*. Washington, DC: The Forum for Youth Investment, Impact Strategies, Inc. Retrieved from http://forumfyi.org/files/FINALYouth_Engagment_8.15pdf.pdf

Principle 2: Create a “Home Base” – young people need to operate from a base with strong connections to guiding adults and ongoing opportunities to interact purposely with peers; a home base is a physical “safe” space equipped with whatever resources are needed to do their job.

Principle 3: Convey an Intentional Philosophy – define an intentional philosophy of change, including short- and long-term goals set with meaningful youth involvement; demonstrate how the youth can make an impact; ensure that their involvement is valued in all public representations and explain why it is valued.

Principle 4: Identify Core Issues – ensure youth are involved in selecting and articulating core focus areas; once articulated, make sure youth understand the focus and bring their passion to it; focus areas should be related to the community and described in concrete terms, rather than philosophies.

Principle 5: Create Youth/Adult Teams – youth need to be part of youth/adult teams that are interdependent, sharing common purpose and goals; youth need to be equal to adults on such teams; adult team members need to be flexible and able to be equal partners with youth.

Principle 6: Build Youth and Adult Capacity – be intentional about building awareness, knowledge, and skills; youth may need to build basic, team, and leadership skills; adults may need to build those, as well as skills related to mentoring and supporting; all team members need communication skills and knowledge about the core focus areas.

Principle 7: Provide Individual Supports – each person on the team is unique, with strengths and needs; youth must be responded to in the context of a professional development approach – start where they are and help them build the competencies they need; personal supports, crisis supports, and concrete supports (transportation, food, time management, etc.) may all be needed by some.

Principle 8: Sustain Access and Influence – cultivate demand for their efforts, link their work to other community efforts and initiatives, and link to influential adults in the community; recognize achievements and communicate them to the community; involve youth in all presentations and communications; use adult influence to open additional doors and opportunities.

These principles succinctly express the need to be deliberate and intentional in planning for youth engagement in agency, system, and community level processes. Inviting a youth or two to a meeting to “give input” shows little planning or serious desire for that input. Rather, youth recruitment, engagement, and support require a complex set of interrelated activities, beginning with ongoing recruitment, support and development, competency building, and access to necessary information; youth must have access to mentoring adults, influence on the process itself, individual supports, and responsibilities that match the interests and abilities of each youth. It is also clear that youth must be at the table from the beginning, helping to shape the very processes in which they will be asked to participate.

In effect, acting on these principles requires education and service systems to orient themselves to be supportive and accepting of youth self-advocacy. This means ensuring that opportunities exist for young people to: tell adults what they need in a straight-forward way; speak up; express their strengths, weaknesses, needs, and wishes; take self-responsibility; know their rights and have them affirmed; and ask questions and receive answers to those questions. “Self-advocacy is a key step in becoming an adult. It means looking out for yourself, telling others what you need, and knowing how to take

responsibility. No one is born knowing these skills. Self-advocacy skills are needed over a lifetime, and everyone has to learn them.”¹⁸

Any aspect of this engagement process may become messy and challenging for adults leading the process, as the youth may not come to the team with the same competencies leaders expect from adults who are “qualified” by their education and past work experiences. Youth cannot just be punished or excluded because they lack those competencies; rather, the systems seeking their involvement need to set in motion all of the support and development activities that will help youth build those necessary competencies. And, as emphasized in Principle 1, these support and development activities will have to be constantly repeated as the experienced youth move on to other things and fresh, less-prepared youth are recruited to move into the process. This feature is unlike adult job recruitment, where a reasonable tenure can be expected from most employees – by definition, engaged youth will be changing during the process and changed by the process, leading to steady and predictable turnover.

These principles set the stage for the work necessary in each of the following opportunities for youth and young adult engagement.

Participation on Boards, Committees, and Work Groups

“Young people are taking on roles within systems of care as voting members on governing boards and committees. Significant roles in the community must be given to youth to engage them and develop their leadership skills. Involving young people can be a tremendous asset to the community and the organization if it is well done.”¹⁹ Today’s reality includes strong expectations that consumers will be actively involved on agency and system boards, and in the youth-serving systems that involvement will necessarily include youth and young adults, some of whom will come with relevant personal experience. As stated by Matarese, young people “can be a tremendous asset . . . if it is done well.”

In order to do this type of engagement well, entities/systems need to be clear about how and why they are trying to include the youth voice, involved adults need support and preparation to accept and make good use of that voice, and young people need support and training to be able to bring that voice. The responsibilities to accomplish those three purposes rests primarily with the adults involved in the process. Matarese *et al* offer five simple strategies to support and develop meaningful youth voice in boards, committees, and work groups.

1. **Identify youth and adult support.** Recruit multiple youth who have some understanding of their expected role; give them preparation and information about that role; offer adult mentoring; seek youth input into the time and location of the meeting to assure access.
2. **Ensure preparatory support.** Give the youth plenty of lead time; offer information about each specific meeting and set up an opportunity to speak directly with the youth prior to each meeting; identify and address any cultural and linguistic needs any youth may have.
3. **Clarify roles and responsibilities.** The recruited youth and mentoring adults need to talk prior to active involvement to discuss and clarify role expectations and all associated expectations; discussions about specific meeting roles and expectations must continue over time, offering meeting-specific coaching prior to each meeting, and follow-up to each meeting, as needed.

¹⁸ “Your IEP Meeting: A Great Place to Practice Self-Advocacy Skills”; Action Information Sheet (PHP-c149a); PACER Center, Minneapolis, MN. (2015).

¹⁹ Matarese et al (2005). Page 41.

4. **Ensure logistical support.** Identify and address meeting needs related to transportation, compensation for time, food, associated expenses (i.e., child care); offer the youth early access to the meeting space to acclimate, if desired.
5. **Orient youth on location.** Offer orientation prior to any meeting to address questions and assure that necessary information and indicated supports are available.

As referenced in the principles presented earlier, constant attention to recruitment, development, and succession strategies is necessary to sustain youth voice on these groups. Several (or many) youth should be prepared to participate at any specific meeting, and additional youth who may move into those active roles might be monitoring or observing meetings to prepare for their future participation, possibly mentored by current youth and their adult mentors.

Not mentioned in this list of strategies is the attention adults may need to give to meeting practices, traditions, and routines that may need adjustment in response to youth involvement. For example, many adults have become acculturated to sitting in chairs around a table for long meetings, perhaps occasionally working on other products in their minds or on their computers or smart phones; youth may not have the patience to sit through lengthy meetings. In this example, one result of youth involvement may be shortening meetings for everyone and ensuring that they are focused to stay on point.

As an alternative, some groups recommend that youth not be expected to sit through regular meetings following a formal structure (such as Robert's Rules). Instead, "consider using 'youth panels.' Essentially, youth are customers of the services and their perspectives [as customers] can paint the clearest picture. Youth panels are a good way for youth to talk about services they have received."²⁰ Several youth with similar experiences would be invited to attend specific meetings when the issues to which they want to speak are part of the agenda. A member of the group would work with them ahead of time to discuss the agenda item, the information that would be helpful to the group, and the ways in which the meeting is run. The youth would be helped to prepare their information, including safe opportunities to practice speaking. They would then come to that specific meeting, be introduced, and have the chance to present their information and answer questions. Group leaders can use this approach strategically to engage youth around specific issues of interest or importance to them, without requiring them to regularly attend meetings that may, or may not, be of interest to them. Obviously, including youth in the discussion about which issues are of interest or importance to them is critical.

Participation in Program Evaluation

Youth and young adults active in system of care programs across the country have expressed a particular interest in participating in system evaluation processes. The appeal to youth of evaluation processes may rest in their intentional purpose of identifying what works, what does not work, and why processes work or not. Whatever the motivation, youth and young adult involvement has included designing evaluation processes, gathering data through surveys and interviews, analyzing collected data, and reporting out the results of evaluation processes. In the latter function, the ability of youth to present evaluation results interspersed with their own personal, lived experiences has proven effective in swaying elected officials and other community leaders on whatever subject is being evaluated.

²⁰ Youth Engagement, from Youth Leadership Toolkit; National Resource Center for Youth Development (NRCYD), prepared by the National Network of Young People in Foster Care (2011).

Soundout Educational Consulting has developed supportive materials for education systems to use in efforts to develop and sustain meaningful youth engagement and offers a toolkit²¹ that includes a focus on enlisting students in evaluation processes. It should be clearly noted that, while this information is presented using education language, all of this information can be just as applicable to other specific systems and broader community efforts to improve health and well-being.

“Meaningful student involvement engages students as evaluators delivering purposeful assessment of their classes, teachers, and whole school. Students can also evaluate themselves or . . . present their learning as partners with teachers and parents. Meaningful student involvement in education evaluation gives students and educators the impetus to establish constructive, critical dialogues that place common purpose and interdependence at the center of the discussion. . . When educators strive to engage the hope students have for schools, they can foster student growth as effective evaluators who actually impact the processes of learning, teaching, and leading.”

Applying the Soundout information more broadly to public education and service systems, there are a number of roles within evaluation processes in which youth can serve effectively.

At the *individual level*, youth can be asked to evaluate their own performance or functioning. This might include giving evaluation input about teachers, curricula, or expectations in the educational process, or assessing the impact of agency-delivered services or supports in response to their own identified needs.

At the *program level*, youth can be engaged in the process of assessing program effectiveness, analyzing the possible meaning of outcome indicators and assessing policy and program decision-making.

At the *cultural level*, youth might be particularly effective in identifying unique or unheard cultural perspectives within the school or agency community.

Finally, at the *community, state, or systemic level*, youth can give input about the impact of specific policy and resource allocation decisions that impact how entire systems work with youth.

Again, it should be noted that all of the practices identified in the principles presented at the beginning of this section apply to this type of youth engagement and involvement. Careful recruitment strategies, preparation and support of youth participants, attention to their needs during participation, access to peers, support from mentoring adults, development of relevant competencies, providing necessary information – all of these areas must be considered and addressed in bringing young people into the evaluation process. In all likelihood, the contributions they make to that process will be more than worth the resources invested in these strategies.

Communication and Social Marketing

One point of focus in the System of Care grant projects (SAMHSA) over the past 12 years has been the development of creative, effective social marketing strategies to a) educate communities about mental illness and its treatability, b) decrease stigma about persons experiencing mental illness, and c) increase outreach to engage youth, young adults, and families who may benefit from behavioral health services. A key strategy in many of the successful marketing initiatives associated with those projects has been the active engagement of youth and young adults in creating and implementing those initiatives, across a number of specific roles.

²¹ *The Guide to Student Voice*, Soundout Educational Consulting; Olympia, Washington (2015). Retrieved from <https://soundout.org/students-as-learning-evaluators/>

Designing communications: Young people in any community have their own culture, complete with expected behaviors, unique language, and unofficial dress codes. Young people in that culture know best how to shape and present messages to attract the attention of other members of that culture and can be asked to write text and design symbols to be associated with community messaging.

Reviewing and vetting communications: When agencies, schools, or systems are preparing information aimed at youth and young adults, they need to ask a group of young people to review the language and give feedback about whether it will reach the intended audience and if the language is appropriate for that audience. Adults rarely write in terms and phrasing that catch the attention of youth.

Designing and implementing special events: Young people most eagerly engage in activities that are concrete and that they can shape with their own ideas. Activities like community health fairs or stigma-reduction events appeal to youth and they can successfully fulfill responsibilities in planning and implementing such events. As an example, The Community Family Partnership in Grand Rapids, Michigan, invited an active youth support group to design an anti-stigma event. The result is a now-annual UP2U Mental Health Festival,²² a day-long community event providing fun family activities and multiple opportunities to learn about mental health issues among youth and families. The youth could not implement this activity on their own – adult support has been essential – but the youth bring the energy that makes it work. UP2U won ECCO awards from SAMHSA three years in a row.²³

Presenting system evaluation information: As pointed out in the previous section of this report, young people serving on a system evaluation group can function well as spokespersons to present evaluation findings interspersed with their own personal stories to bring evaluation data to life. In this role, youth may need help in understanding the data, preparing for a particular audience, and practicing their presentations.

Strategic Sharing

As part of their engagement in advocacy and other system change activities, and even in the initial processes of receiving services and supports, youth and young adults are often called upon to “tell their story.” These stories will provide useful information to system staff but they also reflect hard-earned and sometimes emotionally-charged experiences for the youth. Therefore it is appropriate to think in structured ways about how to seek that sharing and how youth and young adults provide that sharing. Strategic Sharing is a model for guiding this sharing developed by the Foster Care Alumni of America, with support from Casey Family Programs.²⁴

Strategic Sharing can be implemented as a training program for a group of youth and it can be implemented in the context of a one-to-one mentoring relationship between a young person and a supportive adult. It is designed to a) keep the youth safe, revealing only the information and stories the

²² Information available at <http://www.cfpsystemofcare.org/partners/up2u>

²³ See a video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f3uBOJRI8Dk>; more information available at <http://www.samhsa.gov/programs-campaigns/children/ecco-recognition-program/2015-finalists>

²⁴ See Strategic Sharing at <http://www.fostercarealumni.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/StrategicSharing.pdf>

youth is comfortable sharing, and b) provide information that is most useful or relevant to the particular situation. The approach focuses on three primary strategies for achieving these goals.

1. **Choose.** A youth needs information about why they have been asked to share, and it is their choice whether or not to do so. Second, each youth has a choice about what they share. Third, the youth can and should choose to put healthy boundaries around their sharing. These three considerations support not sharing every detail of one's life story, but rather sharing limited details that feel okay and that address the reason for the sharing.
2. **Connect.** Sharing a personal story works in most situations because it promotes a connection to the listener. Therefore, youth can be supported to know the audience before they are asked to share, including expectations the group may hold. That allows the youth to better understand what information will help the listeners connect to the story that is shared. This strategy helps the youth establish credibility and shows respect for the audience.
3. **Claim.** Youth are encouraged to claim or own the experiences they share and the emotions that may be attached to those experiences. This strategy is really about acknowledging the emotions and accepting that it is okay to have those emotions. When that ownership of the emotions is communicated to the audience, it evokes stronger sympathy and understanding from the listeners. When the youth owns the experience s/he can feel more in control of the sharing and the associated emotions.

Youth and Young Adult Leadership Development

Youth and young adult leadership development has gained attention in public service sectors as more young people who have faced a variety of challenges in their lives find their voices and carry their advocacy to broader audiences. Society has for many decades offered a number of leadership development opportunities for youth who represent “the best and the brightest,” selecting those youth from each community who seem to hold the most potential to be societal leaders as they mature into adulthood, and giving them additional opportunities to develop skills, confidence, and connections to the adult world.²⁵ These programs often focus on future civic, business, and/or military leadership. However, young people facing health, educational, or behavioral health challenges may have had less access to such programs due to either the realities associated with managing their challenges or errant perceptions about managing their challenges in the structured group learning environment. Youth facing these and other life challenges may not have been viewed as among “the best and the brightest” and therefore not have been invited as readily to participate in these development opportunities.

As a result, public education and service systems are turning more attention to understanding how to create and offer leadership development opportunities to youth in ways that are not hindered by challenges they face and even in ways that make use of the learning that accompanies living life facing challenges. The National Alliance for Secondary Education and Transition (NASSET) describes youth leadership development as “supporting the young person in developing: (a) the ability to analyze his or her own strengths and weaknesses, set personal and vocational goals, and have the self-esteem, confidence, motivation, and abilities to carry them out (including the ability to establish support

²⁵ For example, see <http://www.ohiobuckeyeboysstate.com/> - This program offered by the American Legion annually brings together 1200 high school junior men to participate in an 8-day experience that promotes the development of “leadership and management skills to serve you in any career path you choose.”

networks in order to fully participate in community life and effect positive social change); and (b) the ability to guide or direct others on a course of action, influence the opinions and behaviors of others, and serve as a role model.”²⁶

There are many important concepts embedded in this concise description:

- Leadership development begins with self-understanding.
- Setting personal goals is part of leadership development.
- Self-esteem, confidence, and motivation are important necessities for life and leadership and can be supported and developed in young people.
- Establishing and maintaining a support network is necessary to participate fully in community life.
- With the development of self-understanding and personal life skills comes the chance to guide, direct, or influence others, and to serve as a role model.

This language is directly applicable to young persons who are not challenged by health, educational, or behavioral health issues, but it is also highly inclusive of young people who do face such challenges. It is easy to recognize that individual youth who have grown up dealing with challenges may have less confidence, less motivation, and less of a social support network. Therefore, it is possible to see that, by offering youth who face special challenges the opportunities to participate in leadership development activities, public systems might assist them to become future leaders while also more directly addressing some of the challenges they face. Advocates working within the System of Care movement have long observed that even youth with the most severe impairments can make substantial personal and therapeutic gains through participation in system advocacy activities.

Youth MOVE Massachusetts prepared a special Youth Report, “Pointing the Way to Leadership,”²⁷ in which they reported on youth perceptions about the qualities of leadership and how to develop and support them. Focus groups composed of youth from across Massachusetts were held to develop their understanding of leadership – what it is, and how it is developed. Participants included youth in locked treatment facilities, residential treatment homes, foster care, and their own homes, as well as homeless youth. All faced challenges and all had received services from one or more of the public service systems in that state (including special education services through schools).

In describing the traits or characteristics of leaders, these young people emphasized perseverance, loyalty, respect, the ability to communicate well, self-management, patience, knowing yourself, and valuing yourself. The youth then described youth leadership this way: “It gives youth opportunities to develop partnerships with adults and other youth, connect with the community, develop and practice skills, make decisions, and act on their ideas.” This is a direct and simple description of what best practices in youth leadership development must accomplish.

²⁶ Transition Toolkit; developed by National Alliance for Secondary Education and Transition (NASSET); hosted by the University of Minnesota (2010). Retrieved from: <http://www.nasetalliance.org/youthdev/index.htm>

²⁷ Frohock, H. & Viano, M., Pointing the Way to Leadership (2012). Youth MOVE Massachusetts, a subsidiary of Parent/Professional Advocacy League (PPAL).

NASET has developed a set of National Standards and Quality Indicators,²⁸ which they define as “research-based benchmarks that articulate quality secondary education and transition services for all youth,” and those standards include a specific set of four standards to guide Youth Development and Youth Leadership programming.

3.1 Youth acquire the skills, behaviors, and attitudes that enable them to learn and grow in self-knowledge, social interaction, and physical and emotional health.

3.2 Youth understand the relationship between their individual strengths and desires and their future goals, and have the skills to act on that understanding.

3.3 Youth have the knowledge and skills needed to practice leadership and participate in community life.

3.4 Youth demonstrate the ability to make informed decisions for themselves.

These standards each include a subset of quality indicators that can be used to track and measure the degree to which programming is meeting these standards.

The primary element that is reflected in the descriptions, perceptions, and national standards reviewed above is that the development of youth leadership begins with and focuses on self-understanding, self-awareness, and self-confidence, and then builds specific life skills upon those strengths. This is true for youth whom we regard as “healthy” or “typical” or “normal” and it is not different for youth we identify as facing health, educational, or behavioral health challenges.

Extensive information about the foundations for youth leadership development is presented here because this is a relatively new area in the public education and service systems. Extensive research for this Study did not reveal any specific curricula or leadership development programs, developed expressly to include youth and young adults facing challenges, that are regarded as “best practices.” Specific curricula from several programs were reviewed for this Study²⁹ – each is highly individualized to the group that developed it, the people expected to lead it, and the specific youth with whom it is expected to be implemented. Therefore, no specific “best practice” is cited in this Study.

Rather, an example of a typical curriculum is referenced and briefly described. The Young Adult Leadership Curriculum³⁰ was developed in the State of Utah within a System of Care implementation project funded by SAMHSA; development of the curriculum was led by a youth advocate and included the input of a group of youth experiencing behavioral health challenges. The contents are organized around five categories: Leadership; Communications/Leading a Meeting; Advocacy; Public Policy; and Sharing Your Story.

The training program built around these five areas is highly experiential. Very limited didactic and written information is provided about each subject, and the information presented has been laid out to attract youth attention and keep everything very simple. Tip sheets for activities, such as conflict

²⁸ Transition Toolkit; NASET (2010). Found at <http://www.nasetalliance.org/youthdev/index.htm>

²⁹ See for example the Young Advocate Leadership Program designed to develop young, Black, servant leaders committed to advocacy and social justice at <http://www.childrensdefense.org/programs/YouthDevelopment/>

³⁰ Retrieved from http://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/HTItoolkit/files/07-Young_Adult_Leadership/2-Job_Descriptions_and_Training/B.Young_Adult_Leadership_Curriculum.pdf

resolution, consensus-building, communicating emotional issues, and meeting with public officials, are provided. The only in-depth written material in the curriculum discusses youth public policy advocacy, including why it is important, the primary tools of advocacy, and how to train and support youth advocates. The training itself incorporates a series of exercises intended to open communication, develop self-awareness, and explore the content areas, all with an assumption that a youth who has or develops a special interest in particular content will be motivated to seek additional information on their own.

Youth Advisor Model

An innovative practice likely to be identified in the future as a best practice is reflected in the Youth Advisors program being implemented in the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment and described in the document “The Value of Youth Advisors: Promoting Promising Practices to Help Youth and Young Adults Reach Their Full Potential.”³¹ Under this practice, youth advisors have been hired by state departments as part-time employees to actively participate in the development, implementation, and evaluation of programs and policies affecting youth and young adults in Colorado. “Hiring young people as employees of the department allowed the youth to have a greater influence on decision-making and created more opportunities for them to represent youth needs and perspectives.”

Youth advisors work 20 hours per week, sitting in on program and policy meetings and reaching out to youth across the state to obtain input and feedback about Colorado service programs in health and youth-serving systems. They also established regular “office hours” so that anyone in the department could access their ideas and input when they saw an opportunity to do so. Several components had to be put into practice to support the youth advisors and make effective use of their input. 1) The department needed to provide supportive, youth-friendly supervisors and mentors, roles described as “time-intensive and intentional.” 2) Logistics specific to the tasks of youth advisors were necessary, such as office space, access to social media, and integration into the state’s human resources system. 3) Experiential, or on-the-job training, opportunities were necessary for the young people to learn about how to do their jobs. 4) The need for peer support led to the conclusion that a minimum of two youth advisors needed to be hired and work together to provide mutual, shared support.

The report also identifies key areas in which the department needed to make changes or adaptations in order to support the work of the youth advisors. 1) Policy changes were needed to create a youth-friendly work environment. 2) Budget support, initially from a grant, needed to be developed to achieve sustainability of the role. 3) A culture shift within the organization had to be created to help staff identify when and how to make best use of the youth advisors.

Evaluation of this unique role revealed several interesting findings. First, based on ratings completed by other department employees, existing staff were more committed to the idea of hiring youth advisors than they were prepared to use them effectively. These roles were ground-breaking and staff needed time and experience to learn how to take advantage of them. Second, the youth advisors needed

³¹ “The Value of Youth Advisors: Promoting Promising Practices to Help Youth and Young Adults Reach Their Full Potential.” Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. CO9to25 (<http://co9to25.org/>). For more information see <https://www.governmentjobs.com/careers/colorado/jobs/1226509/youth-advisor-05150>

specialized training about departmental functioning, as well as individualized mentoring regarding some basic job skills. Third, the evaluation identified that staff working directly with the youth advisors made the most gains in learning how to share decision-making authority with them (or to include them in meaningful ways in decision-making). Overall, the evaluation of these positions was very positive and led to the creation of additional positions within the Colorado Department of Human Services (in child welfare).

Youth-Run Advocacy and Support Organizations

As the voices of youth become sought more often and stronger, organizations to support and develop that support have emerged, especially including youth-run organizations. In many cases, such organizations have emerged with the support of other organizations, especially family advocacy organizations that recognize that their children sometimes have different, but still important, viewpoints that need to be heard by the education and service systems. Two examples of this type of organization at the national level are the Foster Care Alumni of America and Youth MOVE National.

1) The Foster Care Alumni of America³² has as its mission “to connect the alumni community and to transform policy and practice, ensuring opportunity for people in and from foster care.” The group’s vision is “to ensure a high quality of life for those in and from foster care through the collective voice of alumni. We intend to erase the differences in opportunity and outcomes that exist for people in and from foster care compared to those who have not experienced foster care.” This national group is built upon and supports a network of state-level chapters presently active in 19 states. The obvious driver is that young people who have experienced foster care possess a knowledge unique and important in understanding how to change and improve foster care for the children currently in care and those who will come into foster care in the future. To be clear, there are no upper age limits on foster care alumni and there are some very experienced (not so young) persons serving on the board and as staff. However, the majority of members of this organization are relatively young, especially in the many state chapters.

2) Youth M.O.V.E. (Motivating Others through Voices of Experience) National³³ “is a youth led national organization devoted to improving services and systems that support positive growth and development by uniting the voices of individuals who have lived experiences in various systems including mental health, juvenile justice, education, and child welfare.” Youth MOVE “will work as a diverse collective to unite the voices and causes of youth while raising awareness around youth issues. We will advocate for youth rights and voice in mental health and the other systems that serve them, for the purpose of empowering youth to be equal partners in the process of change.” This group is also built upon and supports a network of state- and local-level chapters active in 36 states. In many states and communities these chapters are organized and/or supported by state or local chapters of the Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health (a family-run advocacy organization focused on families that have children with behavioral or emotional disorders).

³² Information retrieved from <http://www.fostercarealumni.org/mission/>

³³ Information retrieved from <http://www.youthmovenational.org/Pages/mission-vision-purpose.html>

Each of these organizations provides a pathway for youth and young adults with lived experience facing educational, health, or behavioral health challenges (or others) to obtain support and acceptance for what might be painful life experiences (and might also be healthy, supportive experiences), as well as to become actively engaged in advocacy to improve the functioning of those systems. Association with such organizations gives individual youth and young adults access to organized training and development opportunities, support from peers with potentially similar experiences, and a platform from which to promote changes or improvements based upon their experiences.

State systems that want to have a youth advocacy organization be an active partner in system activities have to recognize the need for ongoing support to such organizations. In one model (i.e., Foster Alumni of America) some active staff and leadership are accomplished and experienced as youth advocates, often having earned immense respect for their advocacy, but such persons are no longer youth. Therefore, their credibility speaking for youth perspectives may be questioned, especially by some of the youth they try to represent. In the other model (i.e., Youth MOVE National), staff and leadership are all youth and young adults and, by definition, potentially have limited work experience and skill sets in influencing systems and therefore may have limited credibility among system leaders. The second model especially requires state organizations to support skill development, especially in some areas of organizational management that may be new to staff, as well as to help such organizations gain access to the youth and young adults for whom they are providing advocacy services.

The Relationship between Family Advocacy and Youth Advocacy Organizations

The simultaneous implementation of parent and family engagement strategies and youth and young adult engagement strategies, whether in planning and implementing individual care or in system decision-making at the highest levels, requires some planning with respect to how they will interact: 1) how parent engagement and youth engagement strategies will interact, and 2) how the agents of those activities will interact, most especially the lead advocacy organizations for parents and for youth. There are potentials for great strength and challenging conflicts in these interactions, depending upon how they are handled by all involved stakeholders. A brief discussion about youth and family development will help to articulate the complexity of this relationship, as well as to suggest guidance regarding how to handle these similar but separate roles.

Every family aims toward a time when their “child” is no longer a child but has reached a level of independence and self-care. Every child, especially through adolescence, yearns for the day when they can be their own boss, no longer controlled by the decisions of adults. At the same time, most parents harbor some anxieties or fears about whether or not their “child” will reach that point and succeed, and many young people approach independence with anxieties and fears about whether or not they will succeed. All of these feelings are part of typical youth and family development.

When families have children who face serious challenges, whether health, behavioral health, educational, developmental, or other, this process of ushering the child toward maturity includes additional dimensions and worries. Particularly when the growing child behaves in ways described as “immature,” or with repeated behaviors reflecting poor judgment and decision-making, the anxieties

and fears of parents deepen. Commonly, but certainly not always, parents in these circumstances may exert higher levels of control over their child, maintaining more decision-making responsibilities in an effort to keep them safe and counter tendencies by the child toward risk-taking behaviors. And one potential consequence of these parental actions is that the youth arrives at the end of adolescence with fewer skills, less experience at making good decisions for him/herself, than might “typically” occur. This is a conundrum faced by many families with children facing special challenges and there are no easy answers.

In individual care planning processes, best practice information indicates that parents need to be actively involved on the care planning team as an equal partner with system representatives, supported by informal agents (friends, family, and others not representing service systems); best practices also indicate that youth and young adults need to be actively involved on the care planning as, if not an equal partner, a partner whose preferences and choices strongly influence the decisions made by the team. What happens in circumstances when the parent and the youth make different or opposing choices?

Integrating best practice information for both parent and youth engagement, it is very clear that both perspectives are critically important to the success of the care planning team. As the youth approaches or reaches the legal age of majority, the team needs to work with both the parent and the youth around shifting roles and responsibilities. Care strategies implemented for the youth need to gradually aim at increasing life skills, increasing the capabilities of the youth to understand choices and make decisions for him/herself, and decreasing the potential risks that frighten both parents and system staff. Team care strategies also need to gradually aim at helping parents shift their role from primary decision-maker over an incapable child to ally and supporter of a nearly-independent adult.

The end goal for care planning strategies for most young adults will be to enable the youth to run their own lives while still having parents and other family members available to them to provide supports. Youth may need just as much help to see that possibility – parents supporting them rather than making their decisions for them – as some parents may need help backing off and allowing their children to make their own decisions (and live with the consequences when mistakes are made). On each side of this partnership there may be competency development needs that can be addressed through educational classes and/or therapeutic interventions, and system partners need to balance the help offered to each side of the partnership, individualized to each specific family.

To be very concrete, young adults who reach their 18th birthday sometimes immediately assert their legal right to bar their parents from receiving any information about their services. This decision may reflect any number of dynamics that have developed between the youth and their parents over time. Except in a very small subset of circumstances in which complete separation may indeed be best for the youth, system staff will need to a) work with parents to accept the reality and legality of the youth’s choices, while seeking new ways to continue to support their child, and b) work with the youth to find other options for their relationship with their parents, perhaps defining specific information that can or cannot be shared, or defining the circumstances in which information might be shared or withheld. As such agreements are negotiated in the care planning team, both parents and youth are helped to see options and to develop negotiating skills that can serve them well in the future.

In system advocacy and system decision-making processes, best practice information about parent engagement and youth engagement strategies points in similar directions: parents need to be actively involved in system planning and decision-making activities as an equal partner with system representatives, supported by peers and by service systems; youth and young adults need to be actively involved in system planning and decision-making activities as, if not an equal partner, a partner whose preferences and choices strongly influence the decisions made in the systems. What happens at this level when parent advocacy and youth advocacy argue for opposing positions or decisions?

Again, both of these perspectives are important to collaborative system decision-making processes. A planning or decision-making body that includes both perspectives needs to honor both, even if they are opposed, and work through the very same negotiation and consensus-building processes that different system partners need to employ when they disagree. In the end, the answer usually is not that one perspective is “right” and one is “wrong,” but rather that each perspective has merit and the best answer is one that respects the merit within each perspective. As with individual care planning decisions, system stakeholders may need to help both parent and youth advocates negotiate to a place of compromise, finding ways to maintain strong parent/family advocacy while creating the space to inject the values expressed in youth self-advocacy. Any system approach that makes one advocacy voice “right” and the other “wrong” is unlikely to lead to a workable, sustainable solution.

At the system level, one more dimension must be explored – the hosting and/or supporting of a youth/young adult advocacy organization by a parent/family advocacy organization. In reality, most of the youth advocacy organizations within the behavioral health field have been organized and/or nurtured by family advocacy groups, as parents themselves have recognized that the youth advocacy position is sometimes distinct from the parent advocacy positions. The organizations that have stepped forward in this way deserve credit for this viewpoint and active work. However, finding the proper line between giving helpful support and giving too much support (too directive) is difficult and hard to maintain once it is found – with organizations, just as in individual families.

To be clear, youth and young adult advocacy groups are very likely to need assistance in managing organizational functions, such as budgeting, tracking, and reporting funds, and implementing proper employment policies and practices. In addition, such groups are likely to experience a high and steady rate of turnover in leadership and staff, making the build-up of corporate knowledge and experience difficult. A successful family advocacy organization may be able to provide this kind of organizational assistance, but, because of the potential for complex relationship dynamics, this assistance might be more easily provided by one of the stakeholder systems in support of both advocacy voices.