

Scaling Effective Practices for Youth Transitioning Out of Foster Care
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Each year 26,000 young people age out of the foster care system in the United States, often with limited resources and relationships to ensure they successfully transition into adulthood. Providing the necessary supports and guidance so that these young people can navigate their own pathway to long-term success is critical. Research on the effectiveness of the Youth Villages YVLifeSet program of intensive, individualized, and clinically-focused case management has documented that the program achieves excellent results with young people transitioning out of foster care or with a history of involvement in the juvenile justice system. This forum featured a panel discussion of the YVLifeSet program, including an overview the MDRC evaluation currently underway and an explanation of its replication in various communities.

Dr. David Sanders, Executive Vice President of Systems Improvement, Casey Family Programs introduced and moderated the panel discussion. Dr. Sanders shared that in the United States, 55% of foster youth between the ages of 17 and 24 who have been involved in the child welfare system at some point are living in poverty, 45% have dropped out of high school, and 50% are unemployed. By age 26, more than half have been arrested and one-quarter suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome. Twenty-eight percent of all children in out-of-home care today are teenagers, and most of those teens entered care due to neglect or serious behavioral issues. Half have been in care for two years or longer and do not have a plan that supports permanency. Given this reality, we need to be seeking programming that promotes healthy youth development and permanency for foster youth.

Dr. Mark Courtney, Professor, School of Social Services Administration, University of Chicago discussed the YVLifeSet evaluation and broad evidence base supporting services for transition-age youth in care. Youth Villages' YVLifeSet Transitional Living program is undergoing a [rigorous study](#), both of its impact and implementation components, conducted by MDRC for which Dr. Courtney is principal investigator. Early results from the study show the YVLifeSet program is one of very few in the country to demonstrate a significant positive impact across many aspects of life outcomes for these vulnerable youth. The YVLifeSet evaluation is examining both the implementation and impact of the program. The [implementation study](#) is focused on services provided, service delivery, and implementation challenges. The [impact study](#) focuses on 1,322 youth randomly assigned to the YVLifeSet program and a control group between the years of 2010 and 2012. Overall, the study has found that after one year of random assignment, YVLifeSet program participants have increased earnings, reduced housing instability and economic hardship, improved health and safety outcomes, and reduced mental health issues. For example, among program participants, there was a 17% increase in earnings from work, 22% decrease in homelessness, and a 13% decrease in mental health problems. The study documents no significant impacts across subgroups in the areas of education attainment, social support, and criminal behavior or contact with the

criminal justice system. However, there are still important impacts. Although they are not particularly large in any one realm, that is not surprising because youth come to the program with different needs. The program's impact on housing and economic well-being are significant because this is not a program that explicitly provides support in these areas.

Critical questions remain about the evaluation's findings. Which populations can we expect the program to help? The YVLifeSet program is voluntary, and only 25 out of 100 youth initially identified for enrollment in the study ultimately enrolled. Additionally, what will the impact of the program be in states and localities with a different policy context vis-à-vis extended care? Finally, how will the YVLifeSet Specialist role fit with existing case management arrangements in other jurisdictions?

Mike Leach, Director of Independent Living, Tennessee Department of Children's Services reported that the Tennessee has 8,000 youth in its child welfare system, of which 2,000 are adjudicated delinquents. For four consecutive years the state has seen an uptick in youth accepting an Extension Of Foster Care Services beyond age 18. The state is proud of its high adoption rates and low use of alternative planned permanent living arrangements and is working hard to ensure that when youth leave the system they are enrolled in school, have graduated from high school, or are in a postsecondary program. Currently this is true for about 90% of young people leaving the system; Tennessee hopes to get to 95% soon. Overall, the state has worked very hard to improve their children's services.

Having made strides to improve education outcomes for youth, the Tennessee Department of Children's Services began coordinating with Labor and Workforce Development in an effort to improve employment outcomes. A flexible and consistent component of these efforts has been the YVLifeSet Transitional Living program, which served 625 youth across Tennessee in 2015. The YVLifeSet program collaborates with youth on reaching their goals. YVLifeSet program staff know employers and educators in the community, and the program offers young people who may not fit into a traditional service category the flexibility to get the services they need when they need them. With low caseloads, YVLifeSet program staff are able to offer more intensive services and truly engage with young people. Perhaps most important, YVLifeSet is a comprehensive system, rather than a set of separate systems requiring many different connections for youth.

Jeff Rainey, Strategic Advancement, YMCA of Greater Seattle described YMCA of Greater Seattle's significant role in the city's efforts to improve child welfare, youth justice, education, and youth homelessness. In addition, the YMCA provides mental health and substance abuse services directly out of their own facilities. Since 2001, the YMCA of Greater Seattle has offered independent living services to 250-300 young people transitioning out of foster care each year, including education transition planning, individual development accounts, housing supports, and workforce programming. These services have been funded by a blend of state, city, county, United Way, and philanthropic sources.

In 2013 the YMCA was awarded a federal planning grant through the Youth at Risk of Homelessness (YARH) program. This grant enabled a two-year study of youth transitioning out of foster care in King County and revealed significant problems for this population including those related to homelessness, mental health, school mobility, substance abuse, and unemployment. Based on this study, the YMCA decided to develop services for the most at-risk youth to address stable and affordable housing, education and employment, permanent connections, and emotional/social wellbeing. At nearly the same time, Youth Villages was looking for opportunities to work in Washington State, and their offerings fit perfectly with the needs the community had identified as critical. It was decided that Youth Villages would implement the YVLifeSet Transitional Living program through the YMCA. The YMCA of Greater Seattle and Youth Villages YVLifeSet program partnership offers 7-9 months of programming for young people ages 17-21 who are transitioning from foster care, with caseloads of 8-10 to 1, 24/7 availability, and weekly one-on-one meetings. The YVLifeSet program will tap into already existing YMCA housing, employment, and mental health services.

Justice Rutherford, a participant in Youth Villages' YVLifeSet program, described her experiences with the YVLifeSet program. Rutherford tried to run away after she was taken from her home because she did not think anyone was interested in helping her succeed. She attended six different high schools and was pregnant at age 16. She has a two-year-old daughter. She decided to take part in the YVLifeSet program when she turned 18 to help her daughter, capitalizing on the opportunity to use all the funding and support to improve her life. Rutherford reported that the support and assistance of the YVLifeSet program—including with how to get an apartment, how to create a resume, and how to enroll in college—has been great. She is currently in her third year of college and will be transferring to University of Memphis in spring. She has an apartment, a stipend (provided by Extension of Foster Care), and two jobs. She is happy to be an advocate for other children who are just like she was because she loves the YVLifeSet TL program. "This program should be used all over the world if possible so we can help children grow up," she said. "They push you to be somebody!"

Q&A

A question and answer period followed where Dr. Sanders posed questions to the panelists, and audience members raised additional questions:

What would you suggest policymakers consider as a next step?

Dr. Courtney answered that we have moved to think more critically about what the field needs and what we think will make a difference. When evaluating programs, he suggested we think about distinct areas, such as employment, education, and connections with adults. In addition, we should think about systems for minors in care and how they could be tweaked. In addition, we should consider what it means, for example, for young adults who desire to live on their own? There are things we need to do on the research side, but also on program development side, for this moment in time. The Fostering Connections Act mandates connecting young people with resources while in care as

minors, but also while moving into young adulthood, and we should pay attention to both age groups.

Many would say research you conducted in the past contributed to foster care legislation. Are there implications for future policy from the current YVLifeSet evaluation?

Dr. Courtney answered, as an idea for new policy, that providers need to be checking in with transition age youth more often than once a month to ensure that they are progressing on pathways to success.

Is there a role for the federal government in public-private partnerships like the one described in Seattle?

Rainey answered that at the federal level, the funding is siloed. We need to look at various funding streams and look at how we can blend those together for these kids, he argued. He reported being able to take city money directed to local homelessness and carve some of that out to use for kids without some of the funding restrictions of federal dollars. It takes more than federal dollars to serve this population; you have to get state, local, and philanthropic money to better serve these young people.

What have you done in Tennessee to spread and scale best practices across the state?

Leach explained that the Tennessee Department of Children's Services understood that the YVLifeSet program was effective and that they needed to be doing more for young people transitioning out of foster care. Once they saw the program was working, it was very attractive to spread it across the state. Youth Villages had the resources to go statewide, so they were able to make that expansion happen.

Justice, it is obvious you have been successful. Could you identify one or two things that you feel really helped change the course for you? Did you find case managers helpful?

Being able to call a case manager 24/7 through YVLifeSet is really helpful. As far as success, Rutherford shared that she feels successful, but she still wants to be more successful, to have a legitimate career and provide for her daughter. To this day, she keeps in touch with many of her case workers; they are all like family to her.

Was the effect of YVLifeSet on homelessness a result of funding or was it something else?

Dr. Courtney answered that they have not done a secondary analysis of this issue. But the difference in terms of material assistance was small. In other words, the funding support could have influenced housing and homelessness, but it is hard to believe that most of the effect came from material support. Rather, the impact more likely came from helping youth negotiate what they need in order find and keep housing. Rainey added that helping with money up front matters, but it is not sustainable. Young people need negotiation skills to find and keep housing.

What changes in federal policy would you suggest?

Dr. Sanders asserted that it is very important to continue to strengthen policy related to permanency. Dr. Courtney pointed out that we have bits of policy in various federal

legislation (e.g., Higher Ed, WIOA, SAMSHA), but we do not have a shared accountability for that. There should be an entity responsible for tracking various measures. Without that, we have a bunch of boutique programs outside of the child welfare system, with the welfare system alone accountable for outcomes. Leach said we should work hard to get various agencies to buy into focusing on this population in a way that is less of a patchwork and more comprehensive. Rainey suggested it would be helpful if various agencies could be mandated to do certain things, including talk to each other. Justice said everyone must help out because young people are the future and need to be supported and pushed, but also to feel loved.