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Children's Bureau's Young Adult Consultant and National Youth in Transition Database Reviewer Programs

The Children's Bureau (CB), within the Administration for Children and Families of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, focuses on child welfare-related matters, including foster care, family preservation and support, child abuse and neglect, and preparing young people for a successful transition to adulthood. For CB, it is absolutely critical to continue strengthening our efforts to listen to the families and youth served by the system and integrating their voices into all aspects of child welfare planning and improvement.¹ To support this vision, CB developed two programs through which young adults provide technical assistance (TA) to States about child welfare issues.

¹ See [Information Memorandum ACYF-CB-IM-19-03](#) for guidance and suggestions from CB about engaging, empowering, and utilizing family and youth voice.

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YOUNG ADULT CONSULTANT PROGRAM

The Young Adult Consultant (YAC) program involves youth who were previously in foster care in a variety of activities in support of CB's mission. It was launched in 2006 through the National Resource Center for Youth Development (NRCYD), which was funded by CB and operated by the University of Oklahoma.² One of the NRCYD goals was to involve young adults in all CB meetings and activities, often as staff members, interns, meeting planners, presenters, panelists, and facilitators. When CB transitioned in 2014 from multiple resource centers to a single provider of TA (the [Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative](#)), the YAC program continued under the auspices of the [Capacity Building Center \(CBC\) for States](#), which is one of the Collaborative's three centers. The CBC for States utilizes the YAC program to build the capacity of States and jurisdictions to meaningfully and authentically engage youth and families in systems improvement.



YACs at their annual training

Since 2015, YACs have contributed to nearly 100 CBC for States and other Federal projects. YAC engagements include developing products and publications, serving on expert panels and presenting at national meetings, and providing direct support to States and jurisdictions. While YACs specialize in youth-related work, CB continues to promote YAC involvement in all aspects of child welfare improvement.

YAC RECRUITMENT

YACs are young people between the ages of 18 and 26. When selecting YACs, the CBC for States weighs a variety of factors and has flexible expectations for applicants based on age (e.g., those in their mid-20s may already be in professional careers, whereas an applicant who is 18 may just be beginning to seek employment). YACs are diverse in terms of gender, ethnicity, culture, geographic location, and other factors. The group also has a wide-ranging set of experiences—both personal and professional. They have a mix of expertise in providing analysis, recommendations, feedback, and training to the child welfare field. In addition, each YAC is proficient in one or more child welfare topical areas, including, but not limited to, youth engagement, youth development, independent living services, extended foster care, congregate care, the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD), maintaining family and sibling connections, and developing or sustaining youth advisory boards.

² The other CB program described in this brief (for data collection) was initially included as part of the National Resource Center for Youth Development funding but was later moved to a separate contract. The original program was referred to as the Young Adult Training and Technical Assistance Network.

The CBC for States has a dedicated YAC coordinator responsible for the recruitment of YACs. They also are responsible for assessing, developing, training, and coaching the pool of YACs as well as identifying opportunities for YAC engagement and responding to YAC requests from CB, States, and jurisdictions.

The CBC for States regularly assesses the pool of YACs to identify gaps that necessitate the need for recruitment. Gaps may include areas of expertise, experience, availability, and geographical location. YACs are expected to transition out of their role when they reach the age of 26, and the CBC for States recognizes that YACs may experience life changes before that age that could affect their availability and ability to continue engagement in the CBC for States' work.

Because of this, the CBC for States conducts ongoing recruitment efforts to maintain a pool of 10 to 15 YACs at any time. It continues to develop relationships with a group of outreach partners, including national advocacy organizations, foster care associations, and State and county service providers, to ensure a steady stream of applications. The CBC for States also utilizes former YACs to recruit potential consultants since they can be one of the best referral sources for applications. YACs serve on the recruitment team and take on roles such as cofacilitating the preapplication orientation webinars, scoring applications, and conducting interviews. At the end of each recruitment phase, YACs—as well as the applicants themselves—participate in a debrief and provide critical feedback on ways to improve the recruitment process and how to best prepare, engage, and support other YACs in the future.

PROJECT MATCHING AND ONGOING SUPPORT

When a State or jurisdiction—or the CBC for States itself—requests a YAC, the YAC coordinator reviews the request; clarifies the roles, responsibilities, and scope for the work; and identifies the YAC—or multiple YACs—who would be the best fit for the project. The YAC's interest, availability, skill level, areas of expertise, and geographical location are all considerations when identifying the most appropriate YAC. The CBC for States works to ensure the identified YAC understands their role, responsibilities, and expectations associated with the project through planning calls and regular check-ins with the coordinator and CBC for States requestor or project lead. The level of support the YAC coordinator provides to the YAC depends on the type of request, the level of engagement, and the complexity of the work.



YACs at their annual training

According to the CBC for States, the following are the five levels at which a YAC can be engaged on a project:

- **Inform.** YACs may be utilized as panelists or speakers to provide information to a wide audience about an issue, practice, or policy.
- **Consult.** YACs may be asked to share their expertise to inform or develop priorities as well as to help conceptualize products, publications, or tip sheets.
- **Involve.** CBC for States staff work directly with a YAC to develop a scope of work, plan, and/or inform the design of a specific project. This may include engaging a YAC as a member of a planning committee.
- **Collaborate.** YACs partner with CBC for States staff. This may include engaging the YAC as a cofacilitator or copresenter on a specific project.
- **Empower.** Some decision-making authority may be placed in the hands of a YAC. A YAC may lead a planning team, lead the development of a training or curriculum, or serve as a subject-matter lead on an intensive, tailored service project.

Each of the levels of engagement may be appropriate at different times, depending on the outcome and impact the requestor and CBC for States seek to achieve.

YAC PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Debriefings, performance evaluations, and trainings are the three key tools used to aid in the professional development of YACs as well as contribute to ongoing efforts to improve the success of engagements. After a project has concluded, YACs debrief with the entire project team and participate in a separate one-on-one debrief with the YAC coordinator.

“YACs have been instrumental in planning, developing, and facilitating the Child Welfare Virtual Expo. Providing their expertise and experiences to the Virtual Expo is critical in providing content that is impactful, informative, and resonates with audiences. Year after year, Virtual Expo attendees rave about the YACs and the value that they bring to the event and the field at large.”

—CBC for States staff

The team debrief allows each member, including the YAC, to assess the impact of their involvement, discuss barriers and challenges, and share successes related to the project. The one-on-one debrief provides the YAC an opportunity to dive deeper into any challenges experienced related to the project. This may include discussing their level of comfort with the project, current personal and professional challenges, and any areas requiring additional support. The CBC for States may identify additional opportunities to coach, train, and develop the YAC in preparation for similar future projects.

As part of the CBC for States’ efforts to ensure quality service provision, the project uses a 360-degree project feedback process to continuously monitor and assess consultant performance. The process utilizes feedback from multiple sources, including the YAC, CBC for States staff directly involved with the consultant’s work, and relevant ratings from satisfaction surveys administered to officials



YAC and CBC for States family consultant at a training

in States and territories receiving TA services. The deidentified, aggregate 360-degree feedback data are shared with CBC for States staff, CB, and the consultants themselves to help showcase the quality of the services the consultants provide across the country.

In addition to the 360-degree project feedback process, the YACs complete an annual self-assessment survey to assess their own performance, identify any changes or growth to their subject-matter knowledge and expertise, and provide feedback about the CBC for States' internal processes and structures for work completed during the fiscal year. These assessments and debriefs help the YAC coordinator and other CBC for States staff identify and celebrate the successes and accomplishments of the YACs.

The combination of the 360-degree project feedback process, annual self-assessment survey, and debriefs help to inform the development of trainings for YACs. Whenever possible, YACs are engaged to help improve, design, and cofacilitate the trainings. All YACs also receive foundational training on the CBC for States' capacity-building approach and tailored services practice model, consultant competencies, strategic consulting, and youth engagement principles and strategies.

Peer learning circles, which are often conducted via conference calls, provide YACs with the opportunity to learn from one another about what to expect when delivering services and share ideas about how to best approach different projects. The objective of the learning circles, which are facilitated by seasoned YACs, is to provide YACs who have not been involved on a project with the opportunity to learn about the project, hear how the work has progressed, and gain a better understanding of the CBC for States' approach to capacity building. Additionally, this allows YACs who have been working on CBC for States projects to share their work and seek input, feedback, ideas, and other perspectives on how to approach the work.

“It is exciting to see YACs in leadership roles as a part of a consultant team. The perspective they bring to the table can really change the course of a conversation that gets at the heart of the issue. . .YAC leadership helps open the eyes and minds of child welfare staff. . .For my projects, not only having the YAC perspective and experience, but being able to be onsite and in a service delivery role, the YAC has been able to role-model the possibilities of futures for youth in the system and helps create a path of success. . .”

—CBC for States staff

NATIONAL YOUTH IN TRANSITION DATABASE REVIEWERS

[NYTD](#) is a Federal reporting system that collects information on youth transitioning out of foster care. States administering the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood must report on the services provided to young people and also conduct a survey using a cohort methodology at ages 17, 19, and 21. States should use NYTD data as part of the assessment of their operation of services that support youth in making a successful transition from foster care to adulthood. Recognizing the integral role of young adults in successfully designing services and implementing a survey for young people, CB has engaged groups of young adults through the NYTD Reviewers program to guide this work.³

In December 2017, CB formally implemented the [NYTD Review Process](#). NYTD reviewers are between the ages of 18 and 26, have lived experience with the child welfare system, and are interested in the use of data to inform system improvements.⁴ Three to four NYTD reviewers participate as members of the Federal monitoring team for each onsite review.



NYTD reviewers with Jerry Milner, Associate Commissioner of the Children's Bureau

TRAINING NYTD REVIEWERS

Given the highly technical nature of the NYTD Review process, the program contractor hosts an annual, in-person training that lasts for 2.5 days and is generally held on a weekend. The training includes activities and scenarios that simulate multiple aspects of a real NYTD Review. The training structure is based on a “tell, show, practice, do” model. During the training, the reviewers hear about the activity, see trainers or other young professionals demonstrate the skills or activity, practice it in a supportive environment, and complete the activity independently. The trainers then praise the trainees and coach them on the next steps in growing their skills. The training also focuses on developing critical-thinking skills that are important during the NYTD Review.

Trainees also practice tasks that Federal NYTD team members are expected to participate in, such as reviewing a case, conducting stakeholder interviews, taking notes during stakeholder interviews, and reporting on case-record reviews. Trainees receive real-time feedback throughout the training—as well as an assessment of their work after each NYTD Review—to improve practice and inform ongoing coaching needs. The NYTD Reviewers program manager also coordinates regular virtual trainings and has shorter videos readily available for ongoing refresher trainings. Project staff also write quarterly newsletters that cover aspects of the review process identified by NYTD reviewers, Federal partners, or project staff as areas that require additional support or training.

³ The NYTD Reviewers program is currently operated under contract with JBS International, Inc.

⁴ During the onsite NYTD Review, all team members are referred to as “NYTD reviewers.” For the purpose of this brief, however, “NYTD reviewer” refers to the young adult reviewers in the NYTD Reviewers program.

The annual NYTD reviewer training is led by two experienced former or current NYTD reviewers. Trainers are compensated for their preparatory work, which typically begins 3 to 4 months in advance of the training, and develop curricula that reflect improvements to the NYTD Reviews or emerging training needs. To further incorporate peer-to-peer learning strategies, one of the prior year's trainers helps prepare and train one of the new trainers.

COACHING NYTD REVIEWERS

The NYTD support coach role is a unique opportunity offered to the more experienced NYTD reviewers who are transitioning out of the NYTD reviewer pool due to the maximum age requirement or to focus on professional growth. Coaches support the NYTD reviewers throughout the various phases of each review, including planning (e.g., preparation activities, participation in planning calls), the onsite review (e.g., role preparation, debriefs), and postreview activities (e.g., finalizing stakeholder interview notes). The coaches also ensure the reviewers are professionally dressed, on time, and prepared for each day's activities. They provide additional information on expectations of changing roles during the review, answer questions reviewers may have about NYTD, and help them practice asking questions or preparing remarks for debriefs and formal exit conferences. Coaches can help the reviewers manage any biases, cope with any trauma that is triggered by reviewing case records, and resolve any logistical issues that arise during the review (e.g., travel, school or work responsibilities). Furthermore, coaches reinforce the reviewers' work using positive feedback and suggest ways in which the youth can grow professionally, which will help them in future endeavors.

Lastly, coaches attend the annual NYTD training to practice and develop their coaching skills and knowledge. Their presence during the training also helps show the reviewers how the coaching relationship may be utilized during the onsite reviews.



NYTD reviewers

KEY YOUTH ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES ACROSS THE PROGRAMS

The YAC and NYTD Reviewer programs have used several strategies to engage youth, including maintaining ongoing contact; providing compensation and logistical support, peer leadership, and professional development; and being upfront and transparent.

ONGOING CONTACT

Program managers and coordinators use regular formal and informal contact with the youth to develop stronger relationships, create opportunities to acknowledge successes, obtain and provide feedback, and increase their professional capacity. During regular group check-ins, staff use icebreakers to promote group cohesion and foster relationships among the young professionals. Additionally, each program uses social media to support communication, collaboration, participation in activities, and celebration of successes.

COMPENSATION AND LOGISTICAL SUPPORT

In alignment with CB's belief that fair compensation is a signal to young adults that they are valued as professionals, both contracts provide monetary compensation to YACs and NYTD reviewers in addition to paying for their lodging and travel costs. Both organizations developed internal processes to determine the rate of pay, and they pay for as many items (e.g., hotel, airfare) in advance as possible to limit upfront costs to young adults.

The program coordinators also highlighted the importance of providing logistical support to the young adults. YACs and NYTD reviewers

may not have the same access to email, company credit cards, printers, office supplies, and the internet as full-time professionals. Additionally, the coordinators and program managers may need to communicate or facilitate communication on behalf of the youth since they may not respond to an individual they do not know. The consultants and reviewers also may need additional

information about business travel. For example, programs ensured the young adults were aware of policies and practices regarding documents they may need for hotel check-in and boarding a plane, per diem, transportation options, purchase orders, charges that may appear during the trip (e.g., room service is in addition to the room rate), and how they can access the internet.



NYTD reviewers

PEER LEADERSHIP

The YAC and NYTD Reviewer programs emphasize peer-to-peer, peer-led, and near-peer support as key strategies for training, coaching, and providing other supports to participants. Usually, three or four NYTD reviewers and one support coach participate in each of the NYTD Reviews. One reviewer will be attending their first review, another will have moderate experience (two to three reviews completed), and another will be a skilled reviewer (four or more reviews completed). This model builds capacity within the reviewer pool. In the YAC program, the coordinator may pair newer YACs with more experienced YACs—or even professional subject-matter experts—to promote learning opportunities and provide other support. Additionally, youth transitioning out of the program can share their wealth of information with the remaining pool of consultants and reviewers.

“The [CBC for States] has been a major career-builder for me. I have learned so much, learned many skills, and have grown so much during my time with the center so far that I was hired for an amazing position with my state’s Office of Children and Family Services. I may have started by helping the center with my lived and professional experience around normalcy and congregate care, but I am now readily equipped to fight for children and families in many more capacities.”

—Brandon S., New York

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Both consultant pools receive significant amounts of training and other professional development through their programs to allow them to grow and develop as young professionals. In addition to training, the program coordinators, managers, and coaches provide supervision, coaching, support, advocacy, and a support system, all in an age-appropriate manner. One important role of the coordinators and managers is communicating expectations clearly, early, and often. They are clear about expectations regarding professionalism, timeliness, and conduct, as this can significantly impact the reputation of the program. Formal and informal feedback should be provided to the young professionals on an ongoing basis.

As the young people reach the end of their age eligibility, staff from CB and the programs work with them to honor their service, including providing formal recognition at

meetings and other events, certificates, and letters of appreciation. They also help them transition to other professional or career opportunities in relevant fields by, for example, helping them update their resumes, reviewing the skills they have learned and honed, and letting them know about other opportunities within the organization (e.g., becoming a “regular” consultant).

BEING UPFRONT AND TRANSPARENT

When trying to build and sustain meaningful relationships with youth, it is important to be upfront and transparent. From the beginning, program staff ensure youth have a clear understanding of role and task expectations, compensation, and nonnegotiable issues related to consultants’ and reviewers’ conduct and work products (e.g., being on time, being prepared for each engagement). Finally, it is important to be open about the selection process for youth engagement opportunities.

Lived Experience

A unique requirement of the YACs and NYTD reviewers is to have lived experience in foster care. Given the sensitivity that comes with that, each individual decides whether and when they share this experience as they work with States or as part of the Federal team. They receive specific training on [strategic sharing](#) principles, which help guide them about how much of their history they want to reveal in different situations.

For many YACs and NYTD reviewers, their roles on these projects empower them to utilize their experiences to improve services for those currently experiencing foster care. Given the complex dynamics that can emerge when young adults with lived experience partner with systems stakeholders, the YAC and NYTD Reviewer programs, including the coaches, ensure that the young adults have clear support before, during, and after their consultant work.

BUILDING ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY FOR YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Incorporating youth voice and participation into the culture and everyday practice of child welfare agencies requires organizational changes. Engaging young adults requires agencies to go beyond the work to which they are accustomed. To fully embrace and capitalize upon the knowledge and experience of youth, agency staff will need to take extra steps. Youth have not developed the workplace skills and professional practices of typical employees and may need assistance with what are often viewed as “givens.” For example, most agencies would not ask an employee if they ate breakfast, check in on an employee via text to ensure they woke up, or follow-up with an employee to ensure they submitted all their expenses on an invoice. These types of actions, however, may be beneficial when working with youth. Providing these types of supports helps the youth build professional competencies, which in turn helps the agency to reap the benefits of the youth’s full potential.

It is also important to use a continuous quality improvement framework to measure the successes and challenges of youth engagement. This will allow the agency to change, improve, and adopt new processes, as needed, to adapt to changing dynamics and situations. Agencies should be flexible in their youth engagement approaches.

Additionally, agencies should also seek out partnering organizations and contractors that share their vision of youth engagement. They can also serve as youth engagement role

models to other organizations by imparting their knowledge and experience as well as discussing the value of this approach.

“Working with the [CBC for States] has promoted my professional development by showing me a world of career opportunities in child welfare that I didn’t know existed when I was an advocate (which has rekindled my interest in having a full-time career in child welfare). . . [An] important lesson the center has taught me is how powerful the combination of my personal life, advocacy, and professional experience is when it is put together.”

—Louie G., Maryland

CONCLUSION

The wave of youth engagement in child welfare provides an exciting opportunity to improve the services and work that we do. CB acknowledges the agencies, individuals, and other stakeholders who have made this work possible over the years. More importantly, we recognize the countless youth and young adults who gave us the ideas to create these programs and opportunities, participated in them, and challenged us to develop additional opportunities to continue improving child welfare.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Strategies for Authentic Integration of Family and Youth Voice in Child Welfare: This tip sheet outlines key tasks in engaging families and youth at the system and agency levels and provides child welfare managers with tips, strategies, and stories from the field.

Youth Engagement Blueprint (YEB) Series: The YEB series comprises several documents describing how to build capacity in four component areas: viewing young people as organizational assets, having the right people engage young adults, implementing flexible and innovative programs and practices, and using science and technology effectively.

"Engaging Youth in Foster Care": In this podcast for child welfare caseworkers, a YAC with the CBC for States shares his perspectives on using social media to support youth in care and ways to help youth in foster care recognize and build relationships with supportive adults in their lives.

National Youth in Transition Database Video Series: This six-part video series provides an overview of NYTD, including its review process.

Federal NYTD Reviewer Opportunity: This webpage includes resources for recruiting and training young people to serve as reviewers on the Federal review team for the NYTD Reviews.

State NYTD Reviewer Opportunity: This webpage includes information to help States identify, recruit, engage, and support youth and young adults (ages 18 to 25) in participating in a NYTD Review, the continuous quality improvement process, and capacity building within their State. It also provides information about how they can remain involved in ongoing NYTD efforts.

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