Dear Colleague Letter

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Date: February 12, 2024

To: State, Local, Territorial, and Tribal agencies administering ACF Programs

Subject: Strengthening Support for Adolescents and Young Adults in ACF Programs

Dear ACF Partner:

ACF continually strives to improve our programs by reducing barriers and increasing equitable access to services and supports for all people we serve. Young adults[1] face unique obstacles when accessing some programs, often because programs attempt to reach and serve them the same way as older adults despite important differences in needs and development. This letter highlights youths' unique developmental stage and suggests approaches with resources for incorporating best practices into programs to better serve young adults. ACF programs are embedded nationwide in communities that reach young adults in authentic and youth-centered ways to connect youth to multiple services that address many areas of well-being. Through these approaches and shared information, ACF's goal is to continue and improve how we connect young adults to critical services that can support their path to success.

Adolescent and Young Adult Development

As described in the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine's 2019 publication "The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth," adolescence or young adulthood – typically between the ages of 12-25 – is a period of rapid and significant physical, cognitive, psychosocial, and emotional growth, second only to infancy. Connections within and between brain regions become stronger and more efficient, and unused connections are pruned away. This marks a time of plasticity that makes adolescents' brains adaptive and responsive to environmental demands. It also means adolescent brains are neither simply "advanced" child brains nor "immature" adult brains – they are specifically customized to meet the needs of this stage of life.

This critical developmental period presents amazing opportunities to support youth and young adults as they explore, grow, and learn. We know now that this important life stage requires youth to have scaffolding and support, including environments that bolster opportunities to thrive, and the absence of that support can have a lasting impact. This scaffolding includes stable

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[1] The terms "youth," "young adults," and "adolescents" are used interchangeably in this letter to describe individuals between the ages of 12-25.

access to emotional support, food, housing, health care, affirming and accepting environments and systems, and income during their transition into adulthood. While some young adults receive this stability from their family or support networks, some will look to our programs and resources for supportive connections and partnerships. Our services and provider networks must be able to address their developmental needs through policy and practice to help provide connections to supportive adults who are respectful and give them agency to ensure we account for their key developmental drivers during these years.

Several factors contribute to the challenges young adults face in program participation:

- **Misunderstandings about adolescent development:** Adolescent brain development is sometimes thought of as "set in stone" when important skills, such as self-regulation, are still developing. Adolescence is a unique developmental stage where brains continuously grow and are particularly sensitive to environments and experiences.
- **Biased narratives about adolescence:** Narratives about adolescents are often negative in perception and portrayal, leading to an unfounded devaluation of youth and young adults' experiences and input and furthering unequal power dynamics. These negative perceptions and biases may lead programs to miss opportunities to incorporate the unique experiences and needs of young adults and lead to increased barriers to participation and access.
- **Lack of relevant data and research:** Participation data and research can be critical in discerning patterns of behavior and areas where support is most needed. However, little information is disaggregated by age, and while there may be state and local-level data sources, data is often not shared between agencies or sectors.

Recommendations for Strengthening Support for Adolescents and Young Adults

ACF programs and grant recipients offer important services and supports young people may need to gain and maintain stability. However, as reflected in the Urban Institute's Young People and the Safety Net project, young adults may face specific barriers in accessing key safety net programs that provide the critical support they may need. Adapting programming and environments to meet the needs of youth and young adults can help programs serve youth proactively and more effectively.

Below are strategies and resources to help address the challenges named above and to ensure youth-focused programming is designed for and accessible to the unique needs of young adults.

1. Increase Focus on Co-Regulation Practices

Adolescence is a critical time for developing core life skills, which ACF programs and youth-serving organizations can help facilitate and promote. During adolescence, young people also develop decision-making skills and learn to regulate emotions. A core life skill is self-regulation, which refers to the act of managing one's thoughts and feelings to engage in goal-directed behaviors. It involves the interaction of the systems in the brain that process emotion and reward, as well as those that manage behavior. The development of self-regulation skills, sometimes called executive function, depends on predictable and supportive environments and social

relationships and can be hindered by chronic stressors, such as maltreatment, family instability, poverty, experiences of racism or discrimination and inequality, intergenerational trauma, and unequal access to food.

Youth who have experienced chronic and acute stressors may understandably struggle with goal-oriented behaviors, such as envisioning a future and goal setting around life decisions like educational or career aspirations. Adolescents are also uniquely sensitive to many types of stress and may experience long-term negative consequences if they do not receive adequate support. Interventions that interrupt the physiological stress response and help adolescents learn coping skills are critical to the development of self-regulation skills. This is especially true because the continued work of eliminating entrenched disparities and systemic barriers to opportunity, which is necessary to facilitate the development of self-regulation skills most effectively, is a longer-term process.

Caregivers, parents, and people working in youth-serving programs can facilitate a young adult's ability to self-regulate through co-regulation, in which support, coaching, and behavior modeling methods are used to buffer against environmental stressors. Youth-serving programs should acknowledge both that these skills are in development *and* that they have an opportunity to facilitate this development through co-regulation. By incorporating co-regulation into services and programming, youth-serving programs can better reflect the warm, responsive relationships and safe, supportive, and affirming environments young adults need for engagement and success.

The ACF Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) has studied co-regulation strategies in the context of ACF programs. This research has shown that co-regulation practices can be strengthened by:
- Increasing the intentionality of adult relationships with youth.
- Working collaboratively with youth to create supportive environments and routines.
- Promoting skills and competencies within day-to-day interactions and through opportunities for normalcy.

OPRE has produced a range of resources that practitioners can use to support co-regulation, including a short video that explains what co-regulation is and why it matters, a guide for child welfare professionals on how to support older youth through co-regulation, a series of videos and associated tip sheets for practitioners working with youth who would like to help develop youth's self-regulation skills, and an observation tool for supervisors to support co-regulation practices by staff in youth-serving programs, among many others.

Additionally, the ACF Office of Family Assistance (OFA) partnered with OPRE to implement these strategies as part of a nationwide initiative to promote healthy relationships in adult individuals, couples, and youth. OFA, which funds comprehensive healthy marriage and relationship education services, worked with OPRE on the Self-Regulation Training Approaches and Resources to Improve Staff Capacity for Implementing Healthy Marriage Programs for Youth (SARHM) project. Together, they conducted evaluations to develop and refine co-regulation strategies by pilot-testing them, providing data about their implementation, and refining them in the field without changing their curricula. SARHM's guide for practitioners offers guidance for implementing these strategies in your programs. Additional resources from

SARHM and other OPRE co-regulation projects are available on the project page on OPRE's website.

2. Authentically Partner with Youth with Lived Experience

ACF defines people with "lived experience" as youth, parents, caregivers, and adults who have direct personal experience and involvement with societal and/or economic challenges that inform the services and benefits of ACF programs. Youth and young adults with lived experience are uniquely positioned to advise on programs and interventions intended for them. Engaging youth can benefit organizations by improving their research and program quality and strengthen organizational policies, and help youth develop skills for adulthood. Ensuring youth and young adults are leaders in decision-making processes creates autonomy and ownership, critical aspects of positive youth development and healthy adolescent brain development.

> *We really need to open the floor for youth and break down barriers instead of just expecting them to always be the one who speaks up in an environment that has not previously been welcomed to them. –* Theo Schwartz, Youth Empowered Solutions to Succeed (YESS) Program, Office of Substance Use and Mental Health, State of Utah

ACF offices and grant recipients have been working to engage youth and young adults in various ways, such as creating advisory boards like the National Runaway Safeline Youth Advisory Board, creating programs through which young adults can provide technical assistance to states about child welfare issues, hiring youth with lived experience, and adapting language in Notices of Funding Opportunity to include requirements for partnering with young people. Additionally, in August 2019, the ACF Children's Bureau (CB) released an Information Memorandum (IM) that includes a call to action to integrate family and youth voices into child welfare processes and, in early 2024, the ACF Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) will release an IM entitled "Leading in Partnership with Youth and Young Adults with Lived Experience," which makes it clear that young people with lived experience are subject matter experts and that they provide important feedback to programs and service providers. The FYSB IM also underscores the critical value of fair compensation in ensuring equitable and meaningful engagement of youth in all aspects of program design and service delivery. The IM will be available on FYSB's website.

In addition to compensating youth for their time, other core values for incorporating youth and young adults' innovative ideas and input into programs include engaging them in multiple youth-centered ways and incorporating their expertise throughout the entire process – from program design through program evaluation. For example, OPRE engages youth with lived experience as integral research team members to test promising practices in programs serving youth transitioning out of foster care. Guides from CB, UCLA, Youth.gov, and the Youth Collaboratory outline additional best practices for engaging youth with lived experience.

Lastly, a key part of authentically and meaningfully partnering with youth and young adults is ensuring organizational and staff readiness. It is important to examine internal structures and supports at the outset and throughout the engagement with the intention of continuous quality

improvement. Youth-serving programs can demonstrate organizational and staff readiness for partnering with youth and young adults through several indicators, including ensuring strong youth-adult partnerships. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's Center for Coordinating Assistance to States developed a tool in partnership with young adults that outlines strong staff readiness practices.

3. Incorporate Peer Support Programs

Youth and young adults often turn to one another first for support and resources, making structured peer support programs an important tool for engaging and authentically serving youth.

Youth peer support involves youth and young adults receiving and giving encouragement to others who have gone through similar lived experiences. Peer support is based on the idea that individuals who have experienced and overcome adversity can serve as a source of support, encouragement, and hope to others experiencing similar situations and may be in a unique position to endorse engagement in services. This can be particularly true for youth who are part of communities that are marginalized and face systematic barriers to program participation, such as LGBTQIA2S+ youth, Tribal youth, or youth of color. While peer support activities can vary, a critical component involves helping adolescents and young adults seek out developmentally and culturally appropriate information. While research on the effectiveness of peer support is ongoing, we know that providing peer support can increase satisfaction with programming, and we also know that youth supporting one another can have a positive impact on youth mental health. Additional information about the benefits of incorporating peer support into programming is available on Youth MOVE National's (YMN) web page on youth peer support.

> *A core component of this work is honoring autonomy and self-determination, which also means honoring accessibility and flexibility -* Shayn McDonald, Youth Programs Coordinator, Youth MOVE National

For concrete recommendations on designing and incorporating peer-based strategies into youth-serving programs, OPRE recently released this tip sheet focused on FYSB's Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) program and similar programs. The tips are drawn from input from SRAE programs implementing a peer-based strategy, experts in the field, and literature on peer-based strategies for adolescents.

There are various ways organizations can utilize existing sources of funding and resources to support this type of programming. In addition to grants and partnerships, states are exploring other ways of financing, such as utilizing Medicaid. In May 2013, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) issued a joint informational bulletin that highlights parent and youth peer support as important services. In 2016, the Center for Health Care Strategies and YMN released a Youth Peer Support Medicaid Guide, which discusses how states can establish Medicaid coverage for youth peer support through state plan amendments or waivers. More information about funding youth peer support is available in YMN's Operationalizing and Funding Youth and Parent Peer Support Roles in Residential Treatment Settings.

<u>Conclusion</u>

Adolescence is a time of significant growth and development in a person's life. Young adults have the agency, ability, and desire to be active participants in the supports and services they receive. ACF staff, grant recipients, and other youth-serving partners must have the knowledge and commitment to consider the needs and input of young adults in their programming to increase participation, strengthen services, and improve outcomes. As you continue your critical work, we urge you and your partners to consider ways you can strengthen your processes to incorporate the ideas, resources, and suggestions described in this letter into your programs, services, and everyday interactions with youth to make the greatest difference possible in the lives of the young adults you partner with and serve.

/s/
Jeff Hild
Acting Assistant Secretary

Appendix: Resources

Below is the list of resources mentioned throughout the letter. We encourage you to utilize the tools and resources to benefit your programs and services.

Adolescent and Young Adult Development
- [Young People and the Safety Net](#) – A series of resources from the Urban Institute detailing key safety net programs and the specific barriers young adults face in accessing programs they need. Which includes the fact sheet, [Understanding the Challenges Young People Face in Navigating the Safety Net](#).
- [The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth](#) – A report examining the neurobiological and socio-behavioral science of adolescent development that outlines how this knowledge can be applied to institutions and systems (1) to promote adolescent well-being, resilience, and development and (2) to rectify structural barriers and inequalities in opportunity.
- [Key Developmental Needs of Adolescence](#) – A resource developed by [UCLA's Center for the Developing Adolescent](#), which works to make the science of adolescent development useful and accessible to policymakers, youth-serving professionals, parents, and young people themselves, and to advocate for equitable policies, programs, and practices based on that science.

Co-Regulation Practices
- [Co-Regulation in Human Services](#) – OPRE's website detailing their work to promote co-regulation in human services, which includes co-regulation practice resources, blogs, and research and evaluation projects. Their website includes a [short video](#) that explains what co-regulation is and why it matters.
- [Promoting Self-Regulation in Adolescents and Young Adults: A Practice Brief](#) - This brief describes the importance of self-regulation for adolescents and young adults and provides guidelines for supporting self-regulation development for 14-25-year-olds.
- [Child Welfare Professionals Guide: How to Support Older Youth with Foster Care Experience Through Co-Regulation](#) – A guide designed for use by child welfare professionals that gives specific examples of conversations to illustrate how co-regulation can be applied in everyday experiences with youth.
- [Co-regulation in Action Videos and Tip Sheets](#) - These videos and tip sheets are designed for practitioners working with youth who would like to help develop youths' self-regulation skills.
- [Measuring Co-Regulation: A Draft Tool for Observing Educators in Youth-Serving Programs](#) – A tool designed as a part of the SARHM program to measure educators' co-regulation during group sessions, including their use of specific, theory-based co-regulation strategies.
- [Self-Regulation Snap Shot #5: Focus on High-School-Aged Youth](#) – A resource focused on developing self-regulation skills in high-school-aged youth.
- [Building Staff Co-Regulation to Support Healthy Relationships in Youth: A Guide for Practitioners](#) – A guide explaining how integrating co-regulation approaches into youth service delivery may improve program implementation and youth outcomes.

- [Co-Regulation in Practice: Strategies for Facilitators in Youth-Serving Programs](#) – A guide for implementing co-regulation strategies for practitioners who serve youth aged 14-24.
- [Self-Regulation Training Approaches and Resources to Improve Staff Capacity for Implementing Healthy Marriage Programs for Youth (SARHM): Final Report](#) – This report shares strategies and resources for practitioners and researchers interested in enhancing adult-youth co-regulation in real-world settings to promote youth self-regulation and boost program implementation and effects.

Engaging Youth with Lived Experience
- [Youth Engagement in Research and Evaluation](#) – Two guides created by The Center for the Developing Adolescent and The Annie E. Casey Foundation to help youth-serving organizations and those who fund them to invest in and build the type of meaningful, effective youth engagement programs that help young people and those who work with them succeed.
- [National Youth Advisory Board](#) - The NRS Youth Advisory Board (YAB) adds the valuable perspective of youth with lived experiences to our work and helps elevate the national discussion about the impact of runaway incidents and homelessness among young people.
- [Children's Bureau's Young Adult Consultant and National Youth in Transition Database Reviewer Programs](#) – Information about two programs through which young adults provide technical assistance (TA) to States about child welfare issues.
- [Engaging, Empowering, and Utilizing Family and Youth Voice in All Aspects of Child Welfare to Drive Case Planning and System Improvement](#) – IM to demonstrate how family and youth voice are critical to a well-functioning child welfare system and to encourage all public child welfare agencies, dependency courts, and Court Improvement Programs to work together to ensure that family and youth voice are central in child welfare program planning and improvement.
- [Leading in Partnership with Youth and Young Adults with Lived Experience](#) – An IM that provides guidance to FYSB funded programs, including Runaway and Homeless Youth grant recipients, Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention grant recipients, technical assistance providers, and other youth-serving programs on how to meaningfully and authentically partner and collaborate with youth and young adults who have lived experience and subject matter expertise.
- [Chafee Strengthening Outcomes for Transition to Adulthood](#) – This project engaged experts in child welfare systems and program issues, evaluation methodology, and relevant specialized topics (e.g., education, employment, homelessness), with a focus on meaningful involvement of young adult partners with lived experience
- [Youth Engagement at the Federal Level: A Compilation of Strategies and Practices](#) – A compilation of briefs on the youth engagement efforts of 12 agencies and departments, describing the accomplishments and basic mechanisms of the strategies they used as well as barriers, challenges, and vision for the future.
- [Engaging People with Lived Experience: Resources from Division X Technical Assistance](#) – Resources and webinars produced as part of the Division X TA contract by youth and young adults with lived experience and expertise who worked alongside a

robust team of writers, project managers, Center for States consultants, and other partners.

- [A Tool for Youth Engagement and Empowerment](#) – A publication offering child welfare agencies, programs, and organizations resources, checklists, and strategies for youth engagement and empowerment along a youth and young adult involvement continuum, beginning with case-level engagement and ending with participation in systems-level decision-making and advocacy.
- [Youth Engagement in Evaluation: A Guide for Youth-Serving Organizations](#) – A guide from UCLA's Center for the Developing Adolescent to help organizations partner with young people to evaluate and improve their programs, policies, and services.
- [Assessing Youth Involvement and Engagement](#) – This online assessment tool can assist organizations and community partnerships in determining how they involve youth in programs, whether youth are becoming more engaged in the community, and if certain strategies are helping to retain youth.
- [Guide to Authentic Youth Leadership and Collaboration](#) – A guide created by the Youth Catalyst Team for youth and young adult leaders, catalysts, and advocates, as well as the adult collaborators that support this work, to serve as a template for developing and sustaining youth and young adult leadership groups. This guide can be applied across the youth services field and is meant to be adapted to meet the needs and goals of each unique group.
- [Toolkit For Implementing Authentic Youth Engagement Strategies Within State Advisory Groups](#) – This toolkit includes an assessment for State Advisory Groups to evaluate current efforts, as well as strategies for enhancing youth engagement.

Peer Support Programs

- [Youth Move National: Youth Peer Support](#) – YMN's website for resources and training on youth peer supports.
- [Peers Supporting Youth and Young Adult Recovery](#) – A resource from SAMHSA that defines youth peer supports and highlights the differences they can make.
- [Tips for Incorporating Peer-Based Strategies in Sexual Risk Avoidance Education Program](#) – This tip sheet provides tips for SRAE and similar programs that seek to design and implement peer-based strategies.
- [Coverage of Behavioral Health Services for Children, Youth, and Young Adults with Significant Mental Health Conditions](#) – An informational bulletin intended to assist states in designing a benefit that will meet the needs of children, youth, and young adults with significant mental health conditions. Includes information about the importance of family and youth peer support services.
- [Providing Youth and Young Adult Peer Support through Medicaid](#) – A resource discussing how states can establish Medicaid coverage for youth peer support through state plan amendments or waivers.
- [Operationalizing and Funding Youth and Parent Peer Support Roles in Residential Treatment Settings](#) – A brief focusing principally on the operationalizing and funding of youth and parent peer support.