



The Creative and Collaborative Progression of YARH

This brief describes the factors that supported creativity and collaboration across the three phases of YARH, and learnings from the process. This brief is informed by written and verbal responses to questions we posed to YARH federal funders, YARH-2 grantee project directors, YARH-2 local evaluators, and the cross-site evaluation team. We also incorporated feedback from youth and young adults who participated in the YARH-2 comprehensive service models, including findings from the YARH-2 process study report and data collected for the YARH-3 implementation study.

As a multiphase project with each phase building on the previous one, YARH required collaboration, creativity, and transparency among federal funders, grantees, local evaluators, the cross-site evaluation technical assistance (TA) team, and youth and young adults with lived experience (see Exhibit 1 for the YARH key partners and their roles). This brief summarizes the close engagement of these partners and describes challenges and lessons learned over the first 10 years of YARH (2013–2023).

We start with the perspective of the federal funders, who laid the groundwork for the grant programs and emphasized the importance of engaging youth and young adults involved in the child welfare system throughout all phases of the project. Next we describe the collaboration between grantees and local evaluators and their engagement of youth and young adults involved in the child welfare system. We also describe how the TA team helped grantees and local evaluators build evidence about their comprehensive service models (hereafter referred to as “interventions”) throughout YARH-1 and YARH-2. Lastly, we include the perspectives of youth and young adults who received services developed and provided by YARH grantees.

To inform this brief, we obtained input from YARH collaborators, specifically federal funders, YARH-2 grantee project directors, and YARH-2 local evaluators. Members of the TA team who provided evaluation support to grantees and are conducting the YARH-3

federally-led summative evaluation also reflected on their experiences and observations throughout YARH.

About this Project

The Children’s Bureau in the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is funding a multiphase grant program to build the evidence base on what works to prevent homelessness among youth and young adults involved in the child welfare system. This program is called Youth At-Risk of Homelessness (YARH). YARH focuses on three populations:

1. Adolescents who enter foster care between ages 14 to 17,
2. Young adults aging out of foster care, and
3. Homeless youth and young adults up to age 21 with foster care histories.

Eighteen organizations received funding for the first phase (YARH-1), a two-year planning grant (2013–2015). Grantees used the planning period to conduct data analyses to help them understand their local population and develop a comprehensive service model to improve youth outcomes related to housing, education and employment, social-emotional well-being, and permanent connections. Six of those organizations received funding to refine and test their comprehensive service models during the second phase (YARH-2), a four-year initial implementation grant (2015–2019). During the third phase (YARH-3, 2019–2028), Mathematica is continuing to support the YARH-2 grantees (also known as sites) in building and disseminating evidence related to grantees’ comprehensive service models. In addition, Mathematica designed and is implementing a federally-led summative evaluation of the state of Colorado’s Pathways to Success comprehensive service model.

For more information on YARH, please see <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/project/building-capacity-evaluate-interventions-youth/young-adults-child-welfare-involvement>.

Exhibit 1. YARH key partners and roles

Partner	Role
Federal funders (OPRE and CB)	Awarded grants and contracts; provided guidance and requirements for designing and implementing interventions.
Grantees	Led the design and implementation of interventions to reduce homelessness among youth and young adults involved in the child welfare system. Also referred to as “sites” in YARH-3. Some grantees provided direct services and others worked closely with external service providers to implement the interventions.
State of Colorado (Colorado)	Grantee in the first two phases of YARH and selected as the summative evaluation site in YARH-3 to build evidence about the Pathways to Success comprehensive service model.
Local evaluators	Provided evaluation support to grantees throughout intervention design and implementation.
Cross-site evaluation team (Mathematica)	Provided evaluation TA to grantees and conducted the process studies in YARH-1 and YARH-2. Conducting the summative evaluation in YARH-3 and providing evaluation TA to Colorado.
Youth and young adults with lived experience	Provided feedback and participated in designing and implementing interventions. Received services from grantee interventions.

CB = Children's Bureau,
OPRE = Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation

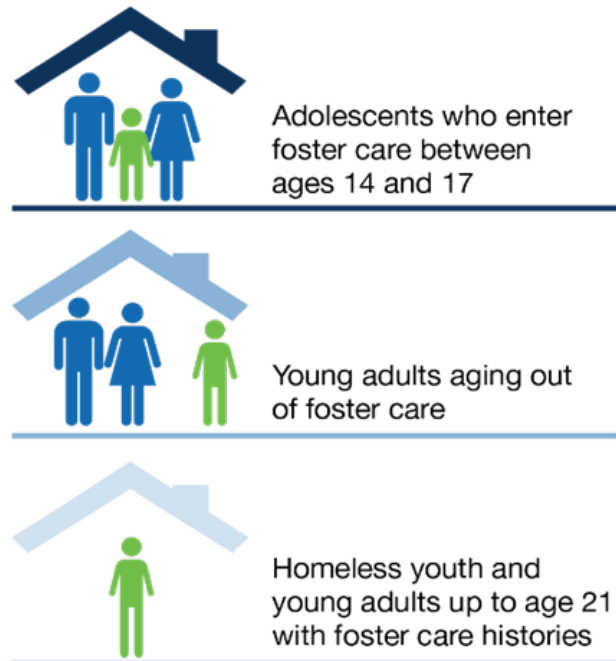
Federal funders provided a clear framework

The Children's Bureau (CB) designed YARH to align closely with the [U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness \(USICH\) Framework to End Youth Homelessness](#). CB wanted grantees to contribute new evidence about how to address youth homelessness and other learnings to the field. YARH mirrors the USICH framework's focus on achieving positive outcomes related to housing, permanent connections to caring adults, education, employment, and social-emotional well-being. YARH also reflects the framework's emphasis on using data to specify risk and protective factors for youth and young adults, identifying and implementing strategies to mitigate risks and

enhance protective factors, and using monitoring and evaluation to improve services.

CB oversaw YARH in partnership with the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE). Together, CB and OPRE identified priorities for each phase of YARH, with a central focus on building readiness for evaluation, and the three primary populations (Exhibit 2) outlined in the Funding Opportunity Announcements (FOAs) for YARH-1 and YARH-2.^{1,2}

Exhibit 2. YARH primary populations



YARH-1 consisted of two-year “planning grants” with 18 grantees, in which CB and OPRE placed emphasis on partnerships and using data to design an intervention. For YARH-2, CB awarded cooperative agreements to six grantees to refine and conduct formative evaluations of their interventions to assess intervention fidelity and trends in youth and young adult outcomes.

CB, OPRE, and Mathematica conducted two meetings at the start of YARH-3 to determine which YARH-2 grantee(s) were best positioned for summative evaluation in YARH-3. People with child welfare expertise and individuals with lived experience who were not involved with YARH provided feedback on grantees' readiness for summative evaluation. For more information about site selection for YARH-3, please see

¹ “Planning Grants to Develop a Model Intervention for Youth/Young Adults with Child Welfare Involvement At-Risk of Homelessness” (HHS-2013-ACF-ACYF-CA-0636)

² “Implementation Grants to Develop a Model Intervention for Youth/Young Adults with Child Welfare Involvement At-Risk of Homelessness” (HHS-2015-ACF-ACYF-CA-0961)

Federal funders encouraged and provided time for creativity in the field

Through YARH, federal funders introduced unique processes and approaches to designing and implementing interventions in the child welfare field.

Ongoing engagement of youth and young adults. Starting with the planning phase in YARH-1, CB strongly encouraged and supported grantees to invite youth and young adults to attend and actively engage in grantee meetings.

Extended planning time for design. CB supported grantee efforts to include youth and young adult voices in the design of their interventions by providing a longer planning period at the start of the grant than is typical for CB grant programs. This planning period is usually spent designing intervention components, hiring staff, implementing the intervention, developing an evaluation plan, and recruiting participants. These activities require time. YARH offered grantees two years (the span of the YARH-1 grant) to plan their interventions. This extra time helped grantees figure out how to involve youth and young adult voices and incorporate their feedback to refine the service components of their intervention.

“Having seen through YARH how long it can take for programs to plan and implement until they’re set up for evaluation and all-in on program delivery ... providing a longer timeline than just a 10-month planning period was a really big gift, and a unique one.”

— *Federal funder*

Early emphasis on the importance of evaluation in developing interventions. In the FOA for the YARH-1 planning grant, CB required each YARH grantee to identify evaluation capacity within its organization or to partner with a local evaluator. CB saw evaluation capacity as a key aspect of a grantee’s ability to refine its proposed theory of change and logic model and to design interventions that could feasibly be evaluated in YARH-2 (formative evaluation) and YARH-3 (summative evaluation), and included evaluation as a requirement for funding.

In YARH, engaging the local evaluator during the extended design and implementation period helped programs prepare their interventions for a rigorous evaluation. For example, local evaluators supported YARH grantees to consider what comparison or control groups might look like in a summative evaluation. Moreover, local evaluators helped grantees develop documentation—such as their theory of change, logic model, and program manual—to prepare for program expansion.

Supports to grantees for continuous refinement of interventions. Through cooperative agreements with grantees, CB worked directly with grantees and local evaluators as needed. CB and OPRE also contracted with Mathematica to provide evaluation TA to grantees throughout all YARH phases. This was a unique opportunity for grantees to use data to develop and improve their interventions while planning for potential summative evaluations. Further, the federal funders wanted all contributors involved in YARH to learn from one another.

Encouragement of diverse program and evaluation expertise. The YARH FOA described requirements for applicants to demonstrate a range of expertise on their teams. After award, federal funders explained that grantees needed to revise their program and evaluation teams in real time to incorporate input from relevant staff and partners and make progress. Program leaders learned to consider *who* needs to be at the table *when*. Exhibit 3 shows examples shared by YARH federal funders of the diverse expertise that strengthened each phase of YARH.

Exhibit 3. Expertise that strengthened each phase of YARH

Phase	Program expertise	Evaluation expertise
YARH-1 (planning)	Individuals who could champion the work and understand planning processes	Individuals who were comfortable working with data, research, and interventions
YARH-2 (initial implementation)	Individuals with intensive involvement with implementation and who could help solve problems	Individuals with continuous quality improvement experience
YARH-3 (summative evaluation)	Individuals who were familiar with a variety of communities or program settings to help scale up interventions	Individuals who could provide technical support to help scale up intervention implementation

Flexibility to address varying levels of grantee readiness for implementation and evaluation. YARH-1 grantees had different levels of experience using data to understand who to serve and how to assess their needs. Some grantees had prior experience using administrative data from their communities or incorporating youth and young adults in program design work. Other grantees found it challenging to learn how to understand the data and/or how to incorporate youth and young adult voices into these conversations. Transitioning to YARH-2, grantees began to understand gaps in their readiness for summative evaluation and the benefits of planning for evaluation early, rather than waiting to figure it out after implementation. During both phases, federal funders provided time and extra guidance so grantees could achieve project goals regardless of their levels of readiness.

Grantees and local evaluators collaborated intentionally, early, and often

Strong relationships between grantees and local evaluators were key throughout YARH. In conversations with YARH-2 grantees and local evaluators, they highlighted their shared experiences related to collaboration and intentional engagement. Because of the length, scope, and primary populations of YARH, grantees and local evaluators inevitably ran into challenges throughout the first two phases but also learned how they could improve future efforts.

“The more transparency everyone can have, the better. No one owns the problem or the solution individually as agencies or people. Everyone needs to come to the table continuously and collaboratively ... and remember it’s about doing better for young people as a whole.”

— YARH-2 grantee

Grantees and local evaluators deliberately met regularly and worked as a team. Grantees incorporated local evaluators on project teams and steering committees, and generally viewed the local evaluator as another member of their intervention teams. Grantees emphasized the need for ongoing and consistent communication with their local evaluator to build transparent and trusting relationships. Local evaluators participated in design and implementation phases through weekly or biweekly meetings with grantees. Communication spanned emails, text messages, phone calls, and meetings. Local evaluators who were in-house or located near grantees often met in person.

Local evaluators provided expertise on evaluation and data throughout the work. In addition to early design efforts during YARH-1, local evaluators continued their involvement after intervention implementation and evaluation began in YARH-2. Examples of local evaluator involvement included:

- Developing analytic plans and data collection protocols that aligned with intervention implementation.
- Helping to identify and measure youth and young adult outcomes.
- Developing usability tests (small tests of specific program elements to confirm they work as intended).
- Providing summary reports, data dashboards, or presentations to monitor enrollment or data collection.

Grantees intentionally engaged the TA team, local child welfare caseworkers, and service providers. Engaging multiple partners with diverse roles and expertise ensured grantees had buy-in from relevant parties while meeting grant expectations.

Examples of grantee engagements with partners included:

- Gathering feedback from experienced local child welfare caseworkers while refining the intervention

to ensure the grantee’s program and its services would add value to local caseworkers in their work.

- Bringing diverse partners to the table, such as people from state and local child welfare agencies, youth and young adults, and others from related service systems.
- Working with the TA team and local evaluators to develop and select instruments to collect outcome data and to determine the length of time needed for follow-up.

Grantees and local evaluators creatively engaged youth and young adults involved in the child welfare system in intervention planning and implementation.

Grantees invited youth and young adults—some of whom were participating in comparable interventions—to contribute on steering committees, project management teams, or youth advisory boards. Other examples of grantee and local evaluator engagement with youth and young adults included:

- Co-writing the grant application for their YARH grant.
- Compensating and supporting youth and young adults for their participation.
- Designing interventions to hire young adults with lived experiences to provide peer support services.
- Hosting focus groups and interviews and fielding surveys to collect feedback to refine interventions.
- Integrating youth and young adult feedback to redesign recruitment materials to increase service enrollment.

For more information on youth and young adult engagement in YARH, please see [Alameda County's Youth Transitions Partnership Program: Lessons on Program Material Design](#) and [Youth Engagement in Child Welfare Service Planning](#).

Grantees and local evaluators took a variety of approaches to resolve challenges. Exhibit 4 describes some challenges grantees and local evaluators experienced and examples of how they resolved them by creatively refining their interventions or implementation materials.

Exhibit 4. Examples of grantee and local evaluator challenges and solutions

Topic	Identified challenges	Examples of solutions
Staffing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff hiring and retention across programmatic or implementation roles • Supports for implementation staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed new positions or training to address gaps in implementation • Refined interview questions used to hire staff who would provide services • Used training and coaching to support staff throughout implementation • Local evaluator served as consistent team member during grantee staff turnover
Enrollment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate program staffing and complex intake processes that hindered enrollment of youth and young adults in interventions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hired an enrollment specialist specifically focused on boosting enrollment • Added referral sites to increase the number of referrals and the number of eligible and enrolled youth and young adults • Refined enrollment scripts used to determine youth and young adult eligibility for the intervention
Buy-in and uptake of interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited buy-in to the interventions from service providers and/or grantee organization staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused on trust and relationship building • Educated service providers about the unique services offered to youth and young adults through the YARH intervention
Grant requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Misalignment of YARH grant requirements with existing or planned interventions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Created multiple interventions within one program to meet YARH grant requirements • Created a multi-step graduation system for a program embedded within the child welfare system to ensure that youth and young adults could remain in foster care as needed • Local evaluators and grantees had many conversations with frontline program staff, the TA team, and ACF to resolve the misalignment between YARH grant requirements and interventions

The cross-site evaluation team tailored TA activities and the summative evaluation to support evidence building

Federal funders contracted with Mathematica to provide a range of evaluation TA activities to support evidence-building throughout all phases of YARH.

The TA team partnered with grantees and local evaluators to build evidence related to interventions. Examples of the TA team's support to grantees in building and using evidence included:

- Hosting grantee meetings and group webinars on topics such as institutional review board approval, measurement, and logic models.
- Hosting monthly TA calls, conducting site visits, and leading peer learning sessions.
- Leading two evidence-building meetings to recommend one YARH-2 intervention to be the focus of the YARH-3 summative evaluation.

The TA team also met regularly with federal funders to discuss grantees' progress and how best to meet their needs to help achieve the federal funders' goals. TA team members shared that developing strong relationships with grantee and local evaluator staff supported efforts to move toward a rigorous summative evaluation in YARH-3.

The TA team helped identify a need for more time to build evidence. In the early stages of YARH, TA team members acknowledged that evidence-building takes time and flexibility, and what constitutes evidence varies across people, situations, and intervention phases. During YARH-1, federal funders and the TA team discussed the advantages of ensuring adequate preparation for the summative evaluation and shifting to a federally-led (rather than locally-led) evaluation. This change enabled collaborating partners to identify and address challenges in designing and implementing interventions, which supported creative innovations and documenting learnings at all stages.

“The beauty of YARH is the desire to learn more about how to reduce the risk of homelessness for youth with experience with the child welfare system—and not being wedded to any one way to learn.”

—Cross-site evaluation TA team member

The TA team was nimble and transparent to address enrollment challenges, especially in the face of COVID-19. The TA team, federal funders, and Colorado, a YARH-1 and YARH-2 grantee that was selected as the focus of the YARH-3 summative evaluation, designed the summative evaluation – including recruitment targets -- based on state program data prior to 2019. This planning occurred prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and recruitment started in September 2021, slightly after the height of the pandemic. As of fall 2023, the Pathways intervention struggled with recruiting and enrolling youth and young adults into the summative evaluation.

To address the slow pace of enrollment, the TA team closely collaborated with federal funders and Colorado, including program workers, to brainstorm solutions. In May 2023, federal funders confirmed the decision to drop a 24-month follow-up survey and replace it with child welfare administrative data, extend the study enrollment window by six months, and conduct an additional round of qualitative data collection.

The cross-site evaluation TA team is working to be as transparent and forthright as possible with federal funders and the public on the status of the summative evaluation. The TA team updated the data collection approach with the Office of Management and Budget and is publishing a series of analytic plans. These plans detail the most up-to-date information about available data, sample sizes, and data analysis procedures. The foundational analytic plan and future analytic plans with updated methods are being published to [OPRE's website for YARH](#).

Youth and young adults responded positively to YARH interventions

The voices of youth and young adults with lived experiences were incorporated in all phases of YARH and supported by all key partners. Centering youth and young adult voice focused the interventions on appropriately defining and understanding the needs of the primary populations they intended to serve. Once the interventions were designed, the TA team conducted focus groups to understand the experiences of youth and young adults participating in the interventions and how the creativity and collaboration employed in YARH affected them. Focus group participants reported positive experiences with YARH-2 interventions, with the main challenges stemming from YARH workers who did not implement the interventions with fidelity.

Youth and young adults valued their interactions and relationships with their YARH workers³ and maintained ongoing engagement with them. Many youth and young adults connected well with their YARH workers, enjoyed regular contact with them, and appreciated the investment that these workers put into supporting their goals. They found them to be engaging, authentic, and professional, even viewing them as role models. Youth and young adults appreciated that their YARH workers helped them find solutions, provided a wraparound support system, adapted to their busy schedules, and celebrated their successes.

“I can tell that [my YARH worker] is very authentic. She’s a strong woman. I can look to her and ask for advice.”

“I like the fact that I can talk to [my YARH worker] without her telling me what choice to make. She listens, and she’s just there and I respect and appreciate that.”

— Youth and young adult focus group participants

Youth and young adults felt heard in youth-driven interactions. YARH interventions primarily used youth-centered approaches that focused on the specific situation and circumstances of each youth or young adult, rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach. In one intervention, YARH workers encouraged youth and young adults to self-advocate and decide the topics of their meetings. As a result, youth and young adults felt their YARH workers really listened to and cared for what they wanted.

“I started going to the [YARH intervention] classes...[They] made me start thinking about my spending habits, and all these more thoughtful mindsets that were legitimately promoting growth that I needed to learn in order to grow along the way of maturity.”

“I felt like for once now that I was getting settled down in my life, it felt good to write down goals and go over them because in my heart I knew that right now would be the time to actually complete those goals, which for the most part, I have.”

— Youth and young adult focus group participants

Youth and young adults experienced some challenges while participating in interventions.

Youth and young adults also highlighted difficulties that they experienced in the YARH interventions. In one intervention, youth and young adults felt meetings could be more youth-led. In another intervention, youth and young adults described inconsistent engagement from their YARH workers. One young adult described how the first YARH worker they met with did not set up meetings after an initial conversation, and another mentioned difficulty connecting with their YARH worker for advice or resources. Despite these challenges with individual YARH workers, the youth and young adults expressed that the intervention was still beneficial for them.

“If a kid can’t move past that one rough [YARH worker], then they are missing a bunch of opportunities that are open to them.

— Youth or young adult focus group participant

³ Each YARH-2 grantee had a unique name for the individuals who directly provided the YARH intervention services to the youth and young adult participants. For example, Navigator, Transitional Planning Coach, Facilitator, or Advocate. For the purposes of this brief, we collectively refer to these direct services providers as “YARH workers.”

Key takeaways from the progression of YARH

To date, the success of YARH has largely depended on creative and careful efforts from a close partnership (see Exhibit 1). Each partner’s experience in YARH demonstrated the importance of having the necessary time and a spirit of curiosity, creativity, and flexibility to resolve challenges while incorporating diverse voices and expertise throughout the process, including youth and young adults and community members. The process of YARH has demonstrated the value of building trust, effective communication, close collaboration, and authentic engagement of youth and

young adults with lived experiences while building an evidence base.

“It was helpful that everyone—[providers and partners], evaluators, intervention providers, TA providers, and [funders]—were very mission-driven to improve outcomes for current and former foster youth. This helped push everyone to think critically and creatively about how best to fulfill that mission.”

— YARH-2 local evaluator

This brief was prepared by Mathematica, under contract to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE). The Contract Number HHSP2332015000351/75P00119F37041. The Mathematica project director is M.C. Bradley.

This brief is in the public domain. Permission to reproduce is not necessary. Suggested citation: Kim, Joyce, Megan J. McCormick, and Nuzhat Islam. “The Creative and Collaborative Progression of YARH.” OPRE Report No. 2024-167. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2024.

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