Youth At-Risk of Homelessness

Lessons From the Field

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August 2017
OPRE Report # 2017-53c

Helping Youth at Risk of Homelessness: Success Stories

Creating and Maintaining Partner Buy-in and Commitment to Sharing Data

The Children's Bureau, within the Administration for Children and Families (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services) is funding a multi-phase grant program to build the evidence base on what works to prevent homelessness among youth and young adults who have been involved in the child welfare system. This program is referred to as Youth At-Risk of Homelessness (YARH). Eighteen organizations received funding for the first phase, 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 training, social well-being, and permanent connections. Six of those organizations received funding to refi ne and test their comprehensive service models during the second phase, a three-year implementation grant (2015 – 2018).

Oklahoma Department of Human Services, established in 1936, provides assistance, including food benefits, to the elderly and people with disabilities. The department's Office of Planning, Research, and Statistics led this project with the support of the state's Child Welfare Services office. To learn more about the Oklahoma Department of Human Services, visit www.okdhs.org.

This is one of several real-life stories about strategies used by organizations that serve youth and young adults who have been involved in the child welfare system and are at risk of homelessness. Collecting and sharing these lessons with organizations that have similar missions is the first step in developing evidence on how to meet the needs of this population.

What particular problem did you face during the planning grant period?

With our Road to Independence Project, we wanted to paint a broad picture of youth who had spent time in foster care, one based on robust data. We faced three issues in sharing and analyzing data from partner agencies. Partners involved in child welfare, mental health, health care, housing, criminal justice, and public aid shared data with us.

First, it was easier to create buy-in with some partners than with others. For many partners, compiling the data was time-consuming, and they were often understaffed. Furthermore, while the research team was confident there would be long-term gains from integrating this data, the absence of short-term gains often made it challenging to get partner buy-in.

Second, maintaining partners' commitment was difficult for the same reasons, especially the absence of short-term gains. In addition, the analyses did not always provide results that fully reflected the hard work of our partner agencies. Sometimes the results from our analyses did not measure up to our partner's expectations. When the results revealed outcomes that were less than positive, maintaining partner buy-in could be difficult.

Finally, when we did receive the data from partner agencies, the same case identifiers were not necessarily used across each of the partners' datasets. Matching an individual's data from multiple data sources can paint a broad picture of the individual's experiences and outcomes. It can be difficult to match data from differ-

ent sources if the sources do not use the same case identifiers.

How did you successfully address that challenge?

We found that keeping leaders from the partners well informed and active throughout the grant helped maintain their buy-in and commitment. This could be as simple as scheduling regular meetings to help our partners stay informed on the direction the project was headed in the long term and on the potential gains in the future. We also gave leaders advance notice of when reports were coming out—especially when there were outcomes related to their agency in those reports, and those outcomes were less than ideal. To keep agencies committed to the project, we also found ways to accurately report the findings while recognizing agency strengths that may not have been conveyed in the analyses.

When the data provided by partner agencies did not use the same case identifiers, we were still able to use the information they provided. We matched the data using Social Security numbers, agency IDs, or a combination of identifiers. Using programming files from statistical software packages to merge data, instead of using point-and-click menus, helped us keep a record that could be referred to when completing similar merges later. Also, using syntax files made complicated processes easier to think through and execute.

What advice do you have for other organizations that may be considering a similar strategy?

We recommend communicating early and often with leaders from partnering agencies to keep them involved throughout the process. We found that not every agency returned our calls, was willing to participate, or met our deadlines. But some very talented and persistent team members were able to get the vast majority of agencies to buy in and participate.

For more information on YARH, please see http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/research/project/building-capacity-to-evaluate-interventions-for-youth-with-child-welfare-involvement-at-risk-of-homelessness.

More stories in this series!

Read these other success stories:

- Using a Predictive Risk Model to Identify Youth at Fisk for Homelessness
- Using a Case Records to Understand Client Experiences

This publication was funded by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation under Contract Number HHSP23320095642WC/HHSP23337053T. The ACF Project Officers were Maria Woolverton and Mary Mueggenborg. The Mathematica project director was Matthew Stagner.

This publication is in the public domain. Permission to reproduce is not necessary. Suggested citation: C. Schlittler (2017). Creating and Maintaining Partner Buy-in and Commitment to Sharing Data. OPRE Report #2017-53c. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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