

Excerpts from: Transitioning Youth with Mental Health Needs to Meaningful Employment and Independent Living

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Preface

Transitioning into adulthood is challenging for everyone. “Becoming an adult” typically demands a complex set of decisions and steps that an individual has never encountered before: leaving home; living independently; enrolling and succeeding in school; getting to and from home, school, and work; budgeting resources for basic necessities and recreation; making job and career choices; finding a place to live; and developing social and personal relationships. Every decision requires making one choice over another. For most young adults, this process relies on direction and support from family members or other caring adults, mentors, social networks, and other support systems. For the more than three million young adults diagnosed with serious mental health conditions, however, these choices can be enormously challenging.¹ Many experience higher than average academic, social, and employment failure. Although the precise clinical origins of their emotional disturbances can remain complicated and enigmatic, some promising approaches to reversing these negative trends are emerging.

The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) and the researchers/authors of this report carried out its study and writing as part of a series of research activities on successful strategies for assisting youth with mental health needs as they transition to postsecondary education, employment, and independent lives. Funding came from the Office of Disability

Employment Policy (ODEP) in the U.S. Department of Labor. The report presents the findings from case studies of five promising programs improve transition outcomes, look at young adult needs holistically, and incorporate strong career preparation and employment components sites, selected from a national scan of the field, and identifies program design features that appear to improve transition outcomes, look at young adult needs holistically, and incorporate strong career preparation and employment components.

This report uses the term “youth and young adults with mental health needs” to describe the population served by the programs highlighted in this study, in accordance with *Tunnels and Cliffs: A Guide for Workforce Development Practitioners and Policymakers Serving Youth with Mental Health Needs*, co-produced by NCWD/Youth and ODEP in 2006.² This term refers broadly to youth and young adults who have been diagnosed with serious mental health conditions and those who have such needs but have no formal diagnoses. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*,³ which four of the five programs use to determine eligibility for services, “psychiatric disabilities” include a wide range of diagnoses – from schizophrenia to learning disorders. Because the researchers did not want to limit the discovery of promising practices based on a narrow definition of the target population, the degree and severity of mental health conditions or needs were not criteria utilized for this study

It is the hope and intention of ODEP and NCWD/Youth that this report will add to the burgeoning body of knowledge around practices and policies that most effectively support youth and young adults with mental health conditions to leading independent and productive lives, gain access to the services and supports they need, make choices about work and career opportunities, build strong connections to their communities, and develop meaningful relationships.

Executive Summary

...Integration into society, including the workplace, is key to the recovery process.

Many youth with diagnosed mental health needs experience poor transition outcomes. It is estimated that up to 50 percent of incarcerated youth and young adults have an emotional disturbance, up to 20 percent have a serious emotional disturbance, and at least 10 percent have a specific learning disability.⁴ Sixty-five percent will drop out of school before obtaining their high school diploma.⁵ In comparison to other youth who drop out of high school, youth with emotional disturbances are three times as likely to live in poverty.⁶ They experience longer delays before obtaining employment, and have higher unemployment rates than youth with other types of disabilities who overall exhibit bleak unemployment rates of over 60 percent.

Against this dreary backdrop, historical changes in the treatment of mental illness overall, including deinstitutionaliza-

tion, community mental health services, and new developments in psychotropic medications, have productively informed the field in two critical ways: (1) Recovery is possible, and (2) Integration into society, including the workplace, is key to the recovery process. Promising interventions continue to emerge, resulting in the creation and implementation of recovery models that minimize and reverse negative outcomes. This includes interventions/practices that recognize youth with mental health needs are not the same as adults and, therefore, that their treatment should be youth oriented. The programs described in this report operate under this premise and have tailored their models to support youth in transition.

The researchers undertook a national scan of programs that indicated a dual focus on youth and young adults with mental health needs and on career preparation, work-based experiences, employment, and related services. The scan relied on input from knowledgeable sources in the fields of mental health intervention, education and training, and workforce development. During telephone interviews with promising program sites, five programs were selected for further study, which included site visits and structured interviews with mental health staff; education, training, and employment staff; case managers; youth and family members.

These five programs are:

- The Village Integrated Service Agency's Transitional Age Youth program in Long Beach, CA;
- Options in Vancouver, WA;
- Our Town Integrated Service Agency in Indianapolis, Indiana;
- Transitional Community Treatment Team in Columbus, OH;
- YouthSource in Renton, WA.

During these site visits, a collection of common design features emerged, which are described in detail in Part II of this report, Addressing Individual Barriers: What Works at Service Delivery. The highlighted design features address commonly cited challenges to successful transition by youth with mental health needs, including the stigma of traditional mental health therapy; feelings of low self-esteem and lack of self-worth; a lack of ownership by youth over their own life plans; low expectations by society on the ability of youth to succeed; traditional work-exposure and employment models that do not maximize individual strengths; and a lack of appropriate transitional housing in the community. The features addressing these challenges that were common across programs in the study include the following: (1) Program locations that are distinct and separate from adult service program locations; (2) Staffing choices that promote engagement of youth and young adults; (3) Individualized mental health interventions that are youth-friendly and innovative, assisting youth/young adults in managing their conditions, engaging in social relationships, identifying life goals, and understanding their choices for achieving those goals; (4) Assessment and service planning processes that facilitate the identification of individual strengths, talents, and skills that can lead to education and career goals; (5) Exposure to the world of work and career options, including individualized support by program staff to identify training, work-based experiences, and jobs that are most appropriate and rewarding for individual clients; and (6) Access to a range of transitional housing options in the commu-

nity that fit the individual's readiness to live independently.

Part III of the report, Systems Factors that Affect Program Design and Sustainability, presents systems-level factors that affect success at the service delivery and individual outcome levels. Three themes emerged from the programs in this research.

First, successful programs actively seek out partnerships with service agencies and organizations in their community to provide the comprehensive array of services needed by youth and young adults with mental health needs. These partnerships can be informal, but are most successful when formalized by memoranda of understanding and supported by formal community governance structures (e.g., advisory bodies). Formalized partnerships address service gaps, allow collaborative identification of appropriate services, and create the possibility of seamless care.

The second theme is the ability of programs to identify, access, and leverage funding streams to enhance and expand program services. This includes private funding sources and "reimagined" public funding sources from local, state, and Federal levels. Finally, the third theme that emerged is state-level capacity to promote systems change to the benefit of the population of transition-age youth with mental health needs. States have the authority to pass legislation, target funding, more effectively utilize Medicaid funding and service options, and develop statewide coordination plans that seek to improve connections to schools and other delivery systems that help prepare youth for the world of work.

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appropriate services, and create the possibility of seamless care.

The service delivery and systems-level themes highlighted in this report are intended to add to the growing body of knowledge about what can be done to assist transitioning youth and young adults with mental health needs in becoming self-sufficient adults who live independently and experience work and career success. Toward that goal, Part IV of the report includes recommendations for programs, staff members, and policymakers.

Recommendations for Programs and Staff

- Incorporate youth “voices” into the development and implementation of program service and policy to improve client engagement, participation, and individual ability to utilize the learning, services, and opportunities offered.
- Utilize a successful process that identifies individual strengths or “gifts” as the stepping stone to the development of education, career, and life goals, and the gateway to discovery and hope.
- Invest the time and resources required to build partnerships across relevant services and systems in the community.
- Incorporate on-site and “non-traditional” approaches to mental health interventions that work with youth and young adults at their own pace and in a highly individualized, youth friendly way.
- Train all program staff (not just the career developers) how to individualize exposure to the world of work and to incorporate activities that meet youth and young adults “where they’re at” across all phases of employment, including training and preparing for work, getting hired, retaining jobs, and advancing to better jobs and careers.

- Cultivate relationships with employers in the program’s community to assist them in seeing the benefits of hiring program clients and create open lines of communication between program staff, the client, and the employer.

- Be the mentor, family member, parent, teacher, or other positive influence that may be missing from the life of the youth/young adult client by teaching independent living skills and positive social engagement in daily activities.

- Understand the Federal and state laws and regulations that affect the program’s services and funding. It’s important to find out whether information that is accepted as “common knowledge” is an actual Federal or state requirement or simply information that’s been passed on anecdotally.

- Tailor and test Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) and Systems of Care models that target youth with mental health needs.

Recommendations for State and Federal Policy Makers

- Scale up staff capacity in workforce development, including those in the K-16 education system, to effectively work with all youth and young adults, including those with mental health needs.

- Design and fund more pilot and demonstration projects that implement and evaluate promising practices to support youth and young adults with mental health needs in their transitions into work, industry-relevant education, fulfilling careers, and independent living.

- Create a task force to explore and address the linkages between significant, but currently disconnected, policy issues impacting youth in their transition to adulthood and the world of work.

- Explore state codification of models for serving youth and young adults with mental health needs.

- Create model Medicaid waivers for states to use that will cover an array of services for youth and young adults with mental health need

PART II

Addressing Individual Barriers: What Works at Service Delivery

Among the many barriers to overcome during the transition to independent living, the commonly cited challenges across the programs in this study included the following: (1) Mistrust by youth of organized programs, especially if perceived to be driven by a public system or adults; (2) The stigma attached to traditional mental health therapy; (3) Low-self esteem and self-worth; (4) Low societal expectations on the ability of youth to succeed; (5) Traditional employment models that do not maximize individual strengths; and (6) A lack of appropriate transitional housing in the community. The design features described below represent common operational principles exhibited by the five contributing programs which address these barriers. Although the sites use different strategies to address these design features, they consider them critical elements for their program’s success. It should be noted that because this study consisted of only five sites, these design features should not be accepted as evidence-based practices. Within the limits of this study, they simply codify operations across the five sites. Nonetheless, their alignment with existing research (including Clark and Davis, the *Guideposts for Success*, Marrone and Boeltzig) should not be overlooked.

Design Feature 1: A Place to Call Their Own

A powerful message emerged during interviews with youth at the site visit to the TAY program in California: youth felt strongly that co-location with adult mental health services, and therefore with adults with severe mental illness, prematurely exposed them to their own possibly depressing and un-inspiring futures. In other words, youth felt that they were seeing themselves in years to come and were discouraged. This honest articulation of their experience with adults with severe mental health illness confirmed a primary feature of four of the five programs: a distinct, physical program location separate from adult mental health service programs. In all programs except TCTT in Ohio, a separate location is considered critical to effective youth engagement.

COMMON DESIGN FEATURE

A distinct program identity, including a separate physical location, promotes attachment and engagement of youth.

The first challenge that any program serving youth must overcome is engagement. For programs serving youth and young adults with mental health conditions, this endeavor becomes enormous. This population typically is weary of adults telling them what to do and mistrustful that adults actually know what is best. One staff member best summarized this by saying “[t]hese kids are stigmatized and systematized. They have heard ‘we are here to help’ all their lives. They will test you to the nth degree, and frankly they have a right to.” Assuming this observation is true, programs may get only one chance to engage an individual in services, making the appeal and attractiveness of the program site to the young person a critical

factor. All four of the sites operating in a location separate from adult mental health services serve as drop-in centers, with access to computers, phones, comfortable couches, and recreation. The top floor of Options, for example, is a youth-only recreation room. Adults may enter only upon invitation by a youth client. Three of the four sites with separate service locations also highlighted some authority by youth to select the décor of the program site as a way to further engage and transfer ownership to clients.

According to the sites, a youth-friendly, separate service location from adult services is a critical factor for at least two reasons: (1) Youth do not want to feel that they are transitioning into the adult mental health system, rather than the adult world of living independently; and (2) Youth feel a sense of ownership of the program, and therefore a sense of belonging. This translates to longer engagement and, therefore, greater chances of positive outcomes.

Design Feature 2: Staffing Choices that Maximize Engagement

Facilitating service delivery to maximize opportunities for early and on-going engagement of youth clients depends on the right mix of staff. The sites in this study identified at least three elements of the “right mix” – age, cultural competence, and experience with individuals who have mental health needs. Across the sites, staff members brought strong backgrounds in social work and related fields.

Interviews at all sites emphasized the value of on-site mental health professionals for peer learning about the mental health needs of their clients.

COMMON DESIGN FEATURE

Staff patterns should reflect a blend of knowledge of mental health and work development strategies that are appropriate to different ages and developmental stages.

Staffing choices should reflect a balance between the expertise and guidance that adults can provide with the peer support and sense of youth ownership that youth can provide.

Professional development of all staff is essential and should include gaining knowledge of community resources youth need to become successful adults.

All five sites include and value a mix of staff, with diversity of age (including some staff who are older and some who are closer in age to the clients) and race/ethnicity, cultural competency, and knowledge of mental health. This mix improves engagement of youth and young adults upon entrance into the program and during their participation.

The Transitional Community Treatment Team program in Ohio illustrates the effect of staff cultural competence on the level of comfort, and therefore engagement, of participating youth. TCTT offers diverse staff trainings, including *Serving Persons with Appalachian Backgrounds* and *Islam 101*. The site also makes efforts to hire staff under the age of 30. Similar in intent, at the TAY program in Long Beach, two student aides are a unique addition to the staff because they are former clients of the program and are responsible for motivating and guiding current clients. They also play a key role in advising on improvements to the program. YouthSource in Renton, Washington has clients provide customer service in the reception area.

Clients and staff members of Options in Vancouver, Washington agree that staff closer in age to clients are highly beneficial, but also specifically highlighted clear benefits of older staff – they exhibit lower turnover rates, possess the needed level of life experience that young staff typically do not possess, and tend to not burn out as quickly. Characteristics more important than age are being young at heart and being respectful of youth culture.

Traditional job descriptions found in many clinical settings are also altered. At YouthSource, the on-site mental health professional is more than a friendly, non-traditional mental health counselor – she also serves as an “integrator” of the mental health and the workforce development systems. Because she understands both, she acts as a bridge between otherwise separate “service tunnels.” In this role, she educates staff from each service system about the other, and creates connections for youth that may not have existed before.

Design Feature 3: Mental Health Intervention without the Stigma

The type and severity of mental health conditions varied widely across the client populations of the five programs in this study, and even within single programs. Many youth were diagnosed with serious emotional disturbances at an early age, and have spent their lives in and out of traditional mental health treatment, with less than positive outcomes and experiences. Others have experienced high rates of academic and social failure in their lives, but have never known why. In both cases, opportunities to manage their conditions have been missed, with tough consequences as they transition to adulthood.

Across the sites, the presence of on-site psychiatrists and/or mental health professionals was a critical component of care. More importantly, staff and youth clients alike praised the non-traditional approach to mental health treatment utilized by programs. A youth at the TAY program in California described the approach as “[n]o more therapy, no more file reading. I get individualized attention, goal setting, and support in whatever I need but with guidance and a push to do it myself.” The five sites agreed that non-traditional approaches to mental health treatment incorporate the following:

- A personalized approach that allows a meaningful trust relationship between professionals and clients;
- Honest discussions between professionals and clients that allow the clients to initiate self exploration; and,
- “Anywhere, anytime” treatment, i.e., counseling and mental illness management that is integrated into daily activities, such as talking over coffee or lunch, during tutoring, at the grocery store, or while playing pool.

During the site visits, interviewees further asserted that building trust between youth and the on-site mental health professional *during* other activities and *before* attempting one-on-one sessions are important to success.

All five programs place a strong emphasis on outreach and continuous follow-up with clients as part of the therapeutic process. Care coordinators and case managers make home visits if a client misses several appointments. This often involves looking for youth “on the street” and re-engaging them.

COMMON DESIGN FEATURE
Effective strategies for serving transition— age youth with mental health needs in-

clude providing access to mental health treatment without the stigma of traditional therapy, and outreach and follow-up to keep the youth engaged or to re-engage them if needed.

Design Feature 4: Assessment and Service Planning Processes that Build on Individual Strengths

All five programs use assessment instruments to identify the current status of youth clients across the domains of employment, housing, education, and community life. Other domains, depending on the site, include clinical recovery, health and wellness, family and natural supports, social networks, cultural and spiritual aspects, and personal empowerment. As part of the assessment and service planning process, programs work to varying degrees with clients to develop future improvements or goals within each domain. This is part of each client’s individualized service plan/strategy, treatment plan, *Vision Quest* process (TAY), or “Success Plan” (Options).

Across the sites, program staff emphasize the need to develop assessments and individualized service plans that are rooted in the individual’s strengths and interests. This is a keystone of the *Transition to Independence* (TIP) system,²⁶ which the TAY and Options programs use as a central feature of their services. The TIP system offers seven guiding principles that build on the premise of individualized, strength-based services:

- Engage young people through relationship development, person-centered planning, and a focus on their futures;
- Tailor services and supports to be accessible, coordinated, developmentally appropriate, and built on strengths to enable the

young people to pursue their goals in all transition domains;

- Acknowledge and develop personal choice and social responsibility with young people;
- Ensure that a safety-net of support is provided by a young person's team, parents, and other natural supports;
- Enhance a young person's competencies to assist them in achieving greater self-sufficiency and confidence;
- Maintain an outcome focus in the TIP system at the individual young person, program, and system levels; and,
- Involve young people, parents, and other community partners in the TIP system at the practice, program, and community levels.

To assess clients, the TAY and Options programs use an interview method called *Core Gifts Identification*.²⁷ The Options Program Manual describes this intervention as a way for staff to help youth identify personal strengths and gain positive insight into themselves at a critical juncture in their lives. The *Core Gifts* philosophy discerns between skills (what you have learned to do, although you may not feel joy in doing them); talents (what you have an innate capacity to do, but may not choose to engage or develop); and gifts (the talents that you feel the deepest connection to, most compelled to learn about, and eager to give). YouthSource uses the *Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths-Mental Health* (CANS-MH) tool, an "information integration tool" designed to support individual case planning.

COMMON DESIGN FEATURE

Utilization of a specific assessment and service planning process assists clients in addressing their current status and future goals across multiple life domains.

DESIGN FEATURE 5: EMPLOYMENT — PREPARING FOR IT, FINDING IT, KEEPING IT

Four of the five sites place employment and training at the forefront of their goals and activities, citing career preparation and skills development as "cornerstones" and "the main focus." All five programs utilize some form of individualized exposure to work and employment and, in cases where the youth or young adult is ready, program staff create opportunities for work-based learning, abiding by the philosophy of "place and train" instead of "train and place." For some youth, this means placement in competitive employment in the community with minimal support. For youth with severe conditions, this might mean work experience with an employer that is on-site, with active involvement by a supervisor. To be successful, some youth need reasonable accommodations in the workplace, such as flexible schedules or a mentor coworker. Program staff at the sites also identified the following employment-related activities as important:

- Identifying and building on the young adult's strengths and interests;
- Exposing clients to jobs and career paths;
- Teaching clients that all individuals must set career goals and design step-by-step processes to get there; and,
- In the meantime, providing opportunities for temporary work experiences and immediate income to those clients who are ready. Program staff across at least three of the sites recognized that most youth are unaware of the diverse jobs and careers available in their community, and that exposure to these jobs, their pay scales, and the steps needed to obtain them can play a big role in a young person's motivation to pursue employment. For youth to

choose career pathways based on informed decisions, their individual strengths and interests must be identified and acknowledged. Staff support and capacity, therefore, must be sufficient to assess skills, readiness, and interests, and then customize a unique employment opportunity.

COMMON DESIGN FEATURE

Individualized exposure to work and employment pathways is critical for all youth, regardless of the severity of their condition. Meeting youth "where they're at" increases the chances of employment success.

One story from Options illustrates the value of building on a client's strengths and interests. In this case, a young adult was re-arrested for a parole violation (of an original conviction of car theft) on the first day of his new job as a car mechanic. With help from program staff, upon release he was able to return to the job. Despite the fact that the young man's interest was initially manifested through stealing cars, he was able to turn a previously misguided interest into a skilled vocation. There are two important features in these programs that have been used with success in workforce development programs for other "at-risk" youth. The first is exposing youth to the value of work. Incentives in the form of cash or other equally tangible rewards can be a powerful mechanism to keep youth engaged in working toward their goals and can teach them about the value of work. This is highlighted by incentive systems at the TAY and YouthSource programs. Both offer cash incentives for participation and completion in certain activities, including weekly classes attainment of GEDs, and other achievements.

The second important feature focuses on supporting employers. Finding employers will-

ing to become engaged in working with youth involved in these programs can be challenging. Designing and implementing a “win-win” situation for employers and youth clients can result in meaningful work experience or a paid job for clients, and a good employee for a company. YouthSource’s employer engagement strategy illustrates what is possible with local companies when employers see what they stand to gain by placing a YouthSource client in their ranks: 160 hours of subsidized wages by the program; a one month no-cost employee trial period; and the opportunity to give back to the community in a tangible way. YouthSource works with over 130 local employers and staff stay with the youth through the trial period to assist both the young person and the employer.

The Options example of the young car mechanic also illustrates the importance of establishing a relationship with employers. Because of the employer’s relationship with Options and his understanding of the goals of the program, the employer reserved the job for the young man while he served his time. As a result, today the employer has a competent and loyal employee who has worked for him for two years.

Design Feature 6: Housing as a Critical Part of the Service Mix for Older Youth

All five sites view the shortage of suitable and affordable transitional housing for this population as one of the greatest challenges to individual success, particularly for older youth who are most likely to be unattached to family or other support networks. Because many clients arrive to the programs in a state of homelessness or at-risk of becoming homeless, housing is

a critical issue. The shortage of housing in most communities is an obvious barrier to the goal of living independently. Programs must rely on existing options in the community (e.g., homeless shelters, subsidized housing waiting lists, and SoberLiving programs), which do not always fit the needs of individual youth.

COMMON DESIGN FEATURE

Housing is an important part of the service mix for older youth.

Three of the programs prefer to operate their own transitional housing units to increase the quantity of suitable housing for youth and to also manage the circumstances of the use of the housing, depending on the greatest needs of their client population and available options in the wider community. Other approaches used are to establish partnerships in the community for the use of transitional housing units and to utilize Federal or other grants (either directly or through community partners) to subsidize the expense.

The Options and TAY programs operate their own transitional housing units and TCTT will begin doing so in the near future. Options owns an apartment triplex for youth in need of transitional, supported independent living. The triplex serves three clients at a time, and is strictly barred from being utilized as a temporary shelter in emergency situations, even if a unit is available. This is part of the program’s commitment to non-duplication of services that are otherwise available in the community.

For youth to choose career pathways based on informed decisions, their individual strengths and interests must be identified and acknowledged.

The previous arrangement called for on-site, around-the-clock staffing, which proved too

expensive and time consuming to sustain. The new complex will support 12 youth living independently. The program will pay a property manager to loosely monitor activity, and will hire two housing specialists to provide on-site supervision in the evenings and on weekends.

Our Town, which does not operate its own apartments, utilizes memoranda of agreement with community-based organizations for its clients to be able to access apartment units in the same building as the program’s offices, and 10 additional off-site apartments are currently under construction. These units, in addition to rental assistance for youth, are paid for through a “Shelter-Plus-Care” grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

PART IV

Recommendations: Putting the Pieces Together

The intent of this research is two-fold: (1) to share common design features of programs that are integrating service to youth with mental health needs and exposure to work experience and career development; and (2) to identify systems-level features that positively influence service delivery. The recommendations below illustrate the points of intersection between these, and suggest areas for further study.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAMS AND THEIR STAFF MEMBERS

- Incorporate youth voices into the development and implementation of program services and policies. This will improve client engagement, participation, and individual ability to utilize the learning, services, and opportunities offered. Programs should consider how the youth are utilized through at least three filters: (1) Youth involvement in daily program activities; (2) Youth guidance and input on

program policies and services; and (3) Youth direction on decisions that directly affects services and policies.

- Utilize a successful process that identifies individual strengths or “gifts” as the stepping stone to the development of education, career, and life goals, and the gateway to discovery and hope. Staff members and youth clients across the five programs emphasized the value of utilizing a tool or instrument that assists youth and young adults in identifying their individual strengths.

- Invest the time and resources required to build partnerships across relevant services and systems in the community. The intensive and individualized case management approaches that work for the programs in this research rely on partnerships so that individual clients have access to the comprehensive array of services available in a community, which no single program can offer alone. Partnerships with the child welfare, juvenile justice, education and training, and housing systems are particularly critical. Partnerships take time and effort, but the rewards/benefits for youth and young adults with mental health needs are significant.

- Incorporate on-site and non-traditional approaches to mental health interventions, working with youth and young adults at their own pace and in a highly individualized, youth friendly way. Across the sites, the presence of on-site psychiatrists and/or mental health professionals was a critical component of care, although not based on prior approaches. Staff and clients alike lauded the non-traditional approaches to mental health treatment utilized by programs. Therapy and file reading are replaced by relationship-building, fun, and determination of each youth’s “core gifts.”

- Train all program staff (not just the career developers) how to individualize exposure to the world of work and to incorporate activities that meet youth and young adults “where they’re at” across all phases of employment, including training and preparing for work, getting hired, retaining jobs, and advancing to better jobs and careers. Programs in this research utilized a combination of exposure to jobs/careers, job readiness guidance, work-based learning, and customized employment.

- Cultivate relationships with employers in the community, assist them in seeing the benefits of hiring program clients, and create open lines of communication between program staff, clients, and employers that can be accessed on an on-going basis. All of the programs in this study achieve this to varying levels, but for at least one the payoff of making employer engagement a priority is clear (i.e., 130 actively engaged employers).

- Be the mentor, family member, parent, teacher, or other positive influence that may be missing from the life of the youth or young adult client by teaching independent living skills and positive social engagement in daily activities. All programs in this research heavily emphasize the staff time dedicated to assisting clients in making appointments, accessing public transportation, setting up bank accounts, managing finances, building healthy relationships, doing laundry, going grocery shopping, and cooking for themselves.

- Understand the Federal and state laws and regulations that affect the program’s services and funding. It’s important to find out whether information that is accepted as “common knowledge” is an actual Federal or state requirement or simply in-

formation that’s been passed on anecdotally. Regulations and policy guidance, particularly for complex funding sources like Medicaid, may be misunderstood or misinterpreted, resulting in missed opportunities for eligibility or additional funding.

- Tailor and test Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) and Systems of Care models that target youth and young adults with mental health needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE AND FEDERAL POLICY MAKERS

The overarching recommendation for policy makers is to eliminate the “tunnels and cliffs” caused by legislation and regulations that generate barriers among the core systems serving youth and young adults. To do this will require that policy makers explore and meaningfully address the linkages between policy issues (e.g., industry skill shortages and large populations of youth unprepared for further education or employment, homelessness and un-managed mental illness, and mental illness and incidents of juvenile delinquency). In addition, state and Federal policy makers should take the following steps:

- Scale up staff capacity in the workforce development field, including secondary education institutions, to effectively work with all youth and young adults, including those with mental health needs. It is important to note that none of the programs incorporated substantive strategies to work with school districts in their programs, in spite of the fact that mental health issues are often first identified in school settings. Currently, many of the youth mental health practitioners who are effectively finding and expanding outreach and engagement strategies for youth and young adults with mental health needs do not have expertise in work and career preparation specifically. Career

educators and workforce development professionals have that expertise, but do not have the specific knowledge of engaging young people with mental health needs. This is a classic situation of disconnection and could be addressed through demonstration projects.

- Design and fund pilot demonstrations that develop and evaluate promising practices to transition youth and young adults with mental health needs of all severities into work, industry relevant education, and fulfilling careers. Gather input into the design of such pilots (including requirements for multi-agency coordination and funding commitments) from effective programs. Multiple Federal agencies should fund and implement these pilot demonstrations to promote/support state level initiatives. The design features identified in this research should be key features of the demonstrations. Demonstrations should additionally encourage (1) Innovative approaches to the major barriers of cross-system collaboration, including sharing information across agencies and organizations; (2) Implementation strategies that clarify and incorporate the youth voice across the continuum of empowerment — youth driven, youth directed, and youth guided; (3) Connections that support transitional housing; and (4) Relationships with schools that create opportunities for earlier intervention to prevent the downward spiral of too many youth.

- Create a task force to explore and address the linkages between significant, but currently disconnected, policy issues impacting youth in their transition to adulthood and the world of work.

- Explore state codification of models for serving youth and young adults with mental health needs.

- Create model Medicaid waivers for states to use that will cover an array of services for youth and young adults with mental health needs.

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PART V

Conclusion

Transition is an awkward period of life for any young adult. Many youth with diagnosed mental health needs experience poor transition outcomes and are among this country’s least understood and most vulnerable youth. This report presents the findings from case studies of five promising program sites and identifies program design features that appear to improve transition outcomes, incorporate a holistic approach to meeting youth needs, and incorporate strong career preparation and employment components. Additionally, the report presents systems-level factors that affect success at the service delivery and individual outcome levels.

This case study research demonstrates that no one government agency, state entity, local organization, program or project, or individual can do this hard work alone. Families, programs, and governmental entities must all work together, across silos and boundaries, if there is any hope of improving the outcomes of youth with men-

tal health needs. Policymakers at all levels of government must tap the expertise of youth with mental health needs, programs and service providers, researchers, and practitioners to improve the likelihood of successful transition outcomes. Youth service professionals who work with youth with mental health needs across systems will be more successful if apprised of the policy directions, promising practices, and the views of youth and families. Successful programs must actively seek out partnerships with service agencies and organizations in their community to provide the comprehensive array of services needed by youth and young adults with mental health needs.

There is much we know, and yet so much more that we need to learn, about supporting these youth as they move from the difficult adolescent years toward independence, adulthood, work, and self sufficiency. The service delivery and systems-level themes highlighted in this report are intended to add to the growing body of knowledge about what can be done to assist transitioning youth and young adults with mental health needs in becoming self-sufficient adults who experience personal and employment success.

Policy makers at all levels of government must tap the expertise of youth with mental health needs, programs and service providers, researchers, and practitioners to improve the likelihood of successful transition outcomes.

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For information on the Collaborative, see <http://www.ncwd-youth.info>. For information on the Office of Disability Employment Policy, see <http://www.dol.gov/odep>.

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