Approach

The Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs (IWGYP) hosted a series of listening sessions at youth-focused conferences across the country to gather input from stakeholders and to inform the development of an overarching strategic plan for federal youth policy. The conferences included: the Big Tent Conference; the Safe Schools Healthy Students Project Director Consortia; the National Runaway and Homeless Youth Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) Grantee Conference; the Annual American School Health Association (ASHA) School Health Conference; the Pathways to Adulthood National Independent Living/Transitional Living Conference; the Children, Youth and Families at Risk (CYFAR) Conference; and the National Federation for Families for Children's Mental Health Conference. Sessions lasted one to two hours and were led by an experienced facilitator.

Participants

Participants attending the conferences varied based on the focus of the conference.

- Participants at the Big Tent Conference represented a cross-section of national youth-serving organizations and schools including teachers, youth workers, volunteers, parent educators, mayors, ministers, nurses, counselors, principals, superintendents, prevention specialists, county agency staff, police officers, parents, and youth.
- Participants at the Safe Schools Healthy Students (SS/HS) Project Director Consortia included project directors from three cohorts of SS/HS grantee sites.
- Participants at the National Runaway and Homeless Youth FYSB Grantee Conference included FYSB grantees from across the country who work with runaway and homeless youth in Basic Center Programs, Street Outreach Programs, Transitional Living Programs, Maternity Group Homes, and Rural Host Homes.
- Participants at the Annual ASHA School Health Conference included health professionals, professors, and school counselors.
- Participants at the Pathways to Adulthood National Independent Living/Transitional Living Conference included professionals focused on independent living and transitional living programs and services.
- Participants at the CYFAR Conference included CYFAR staff and collaborating partners, youth and family professionals from land-grant institutions and other organizations, and partners in military youth and family programs.
- Participants at the National Federations for Families for Children's Mental Health Conference included professionals focused on children and youth with emotional, behavioral, and mental health challenges and their families, and the supports and services provided from a family and youth-driven approach.

Summaries of participants' responses follow each of the questions below. While common themes were seen across sessions, some responses varied by the specific interests of those participating. Responses from the National Federation for Families for Children's Mental Health conference are summarized separately because participants responded to different questions.

Questions and Responses from the Big Tent Conference, the Safe Schools Healthy Students Project Director Consortia, the National Runaway and Homeless Youth FYSB Grantee Conference, the Annual ASHA School Health Conference, the Pathways to Adulthood National Independent Living/Transitional Living Conference, and the CYFAR Conference:

What is the single most important thing youth need to be successful?

- To have their **basic needs met** (health, stable housing, food, shelter, clothing, cognitive stimulation, social and emotional support).
- **Safety**, but with an awareness of differences in the cultural acceptance of violence.
- **Emotional health** and overcoming past traumas. There is a lack of focus in the education system on emotional health skills.
- A job.
- A high school diploma.
- Access to **quality education** which includes courses beyond the core subjects (e.g. drama, art)
- **Student centered** schools
- Constructive involvement in activities.
- **Positive role models.**
- A safe, loving, and supportive community.
- A **support system** of positive, caring relationships with adults, including families, and peers.
- Support for families and parent to ensure their success.
- Healthy **diverse relationships.**
- Exposure to new environments.
- Opportunities to develop, set goals, and succeed.
- Hope and perseverance.
- Acceptance and a sense of belonging.
- A sense of identity, efficacy, and self-worth.
- Self-determination.
- To be listened to and their input and have their opinions valued.
- A growth mindset (Carol Dweck's research).
- Permanency in a broad context (e.g. housing and people).
- The current focus is on surviving more often than thriving. How do we get to thriving?
- Focusing on **prevention** rather than waiting until the worst case scenario occurs.
- **Empowering youth** to overcome failure.
- Relevant measures of success for their culture and recognition of successes
- The overlapping youth development needs detailed in the 4-H "essential elements" and Search Institutes "developmental assets."

What programs really make a difference in the lives of youth?

Program Structure, Policies, Approaches
- Effective programs are dependent on the outcomes being sought.
- It is not about the specific program but the quality of training of the staff, how well staff are able to connect with youth, and how committed the staff is.
- Programs that are **continuously learning, reflecting, and evaluating** their program, and connecting themselves to larger systems.

- Programs that focus on **continuity, consistency and sustainability.**
- Collaborations where organizations work to support each other, fill in expertise, and hold each other accountable.
- Evidence-based programs.
- Programs that support upper administration not just staff that work directly with youth.
- Programs that are **tied to needs** of the community
- Programs that **involve youth perspective and culture** in order to provide a sense of ownership and buy-in for youth.
- Programs with **wrap around services** and a **holistic approach.**
- Programs with a **systemic approach** (ex. Safe Schools Healthy Students model of continuous movement).
- Programs that allow youth to move in a positive trajectory and recognize that they might not be able to address all developmental indicators (12 in California), but can help youth move forward.

Types of Programs
- Programs focused on **positive youth development.**
- Programs that include **community service** and **service learning** opportunities to foster **community engagement** (e.g. 4H, Americorp).
- After school and summer programs.
- Teacher training programs.
- Programs that include character building, life skills training, spiritual growth, independence, belonging exercise, homework assistance, (e.g. Boys and Girls).
- Peer assistance leadership which helps youth to take on **leadership roles** as well as reach out to other youth in a meaningful way.
- Programs focused on **school climate, behavior, and emotion** (e.g. PBIS; Safe school ambassadors).
- Programs targeted at homeless youth (e.g. National Safe Place).
- Strong **one-on-one mentoring relationships** including those where the mentee is viewed as an individual not just as another kid in the program.
- Job shadowing, internship opportunities, athletics.
- Programs that focus on getting youth out of crisis mode.
- Kiwanis international which focuses on developing service leadership programs and incorporating youth within the Kiwanis family.
- Programs that **support family relationships and communication.**
- Programs that encourage **long lasting relationships** with people that really care about youth (e.g. siblings/group home siblings).
- Programs that **involve families** and reach youth and families early on (e.g. parenting classes, child care).
- Programs that focus on increasing young people's world view and cultural knowledge through travel and meeting people from different cultures.

How do you know what programs really make a difference in the lives of youth?
- Often rely on anecdotal evidence to know what works, but there must be an understanding that what works in one place might not work in another location.
- Youth are **active and engaged**, return to the program and bring other youth to be involved.

- Can see the **tangible projects created by youth** in service learning and the changes in the way they treat one and other.

What are the barriers that exist at the federal, state, and local level to collaborating on youth outcomes?
- Barriers and solutions vary based on who you work for, what your goals are and what you believe is most important.
- Lack of **transparency.**
- Lack of **relationships**. Programs must do more than just deliver a "program" to the community they must build relationships in a community.
- **Funding restrictions** limit access for some youth and services based on definitions.
- Funding is often for short intervals leading to **inconsistency of resources.**
- **Overwhelming funds** cause lack of capacity building and focus on spending money instead.
- Time - only have so much time available to assist youth and much of it spent with records and reports. Collaborations take time.
- Competition for scarce resources.
- **Conflicting perspectives**, politics, legislation, agendas, and policy (silos) from different agencies and failure to recognize commonalities.
- **Different outcomes** valued by different agencies.
- Huge bureaucracies that **lack flexibility** to deal with needs of young people and are agency driven not youth focused.
- **Skill deficits** among leaders. Specifically a lack of skills around collaboration.
- Lack of data for youth 18-24 because there is no specific data source.
- Lack of **universal data system and methodology** for data sharing. Everyone has different record keeping practices.
- Ineffective communication between youth and adults.
- **Inconsistent vocabulary and definitions**. Different definitions (e.g. different definitions of youth, evidence based, homeless) and definitions which are too narrow.
- Assumption that everyone is speaking the same language.
- A barrier is the Juvenile Justice system, as youth are going from juvenile justice system to the street.
- Schools are focused on passing tests and lack an understanding of how mental health issues influence education.
- Not being able to serve snacks or use food as an incentive to engage youth and families
- A lack of role/purpose for youth or national youth identity.

How can these barriers be removed? What are potential solutions?
- **Remove politics** from youth initiatives.
- A solution to funding barriers is having **universal service.**
- A solution to limited time is minimizing the amount of time spent on paperwork and record keeping and maximizing time spent with youth.
- A recommendation on how to enhance cross county collaboration is to engage community interaction.
- A possible solutions to increase knowledge about mental health issues and education is to increase the focus on this through **social marketing** at the federal level.

- Work toward **common vocabulary** including age (who is a youth) and homeless (who is defined as homeless) as well as what is evidence based practice.
- Interagency working groups or utilizing a third party that helps to **streamline initiatives**, eliminate overlaps and see the whole picture.
- Grants that demand collaboration.
- Solution to schools focusing too much on testing is to include evaluations on developmental assets in addition to academics.
- **Increase transparency** in order to limit competition.
- **Technical assistance** to help support and facilitate collaborations.
- Creation of **one guiding philosophy** for youth.
- Solutions related to too much funding include: starting with a planning grant and providing a continuous stream over time, providing more flexibility, and working to develop capacity.
- Agencies need to have staff that respond to direct community needs.
- Encourage the idea of volunteering, service learning, active involvement in community to help youth develop a role/purpose.
- **Streamlining data sources** and surveys to limit time taken away from education or programming.

What types of federal initiatives could promote collaboration and improve outcomes for youth?

- A possible example to look at is the **Younger Americans Act**.
- Supporting programs with a **logic model approach** with a clear delineation between needs, goals, and outcomes for the community.
- Developing **incentives** for school districts to try new approaches.
- Providing incentives for collaboration.
- **Mandating collaboration** at the management team level.
- Minimizing competition between states and agencies and limiting silos.
- Ensuring there are people involved that **understand system change**.
- Creating a **continuum of funding** on a non-competitive basis.
- Having a **high level of flexibility** with tremendous support and a high level of accountability.
- Developing **visibility and promoting programs** through disseminating best practice/models not just case studies.
- Providing **models of collaborations**.
- Dealing with areas that are unprepared to write grants through training and skill development
- Enhancing communication and awareness.
- **Extending time** to develop partnerships and plan prior to grant submissions.
- Providing learning sessions.
- Including **intermediary outcomes** in measurement and evaluation of programs not just major outcomes.
- Developing one **consistent reporting mechanism** across agencies.
- Increasing **tax incentives** to support young people.
- Monitoring how much money is spent on youth programs at the city level and providing a minimum standard around what is spent.
- Partnering with or including businesses.

- **Including youth** and viewing them as a resource as they have a deep understanding of the community and what youth are facing.
- Holding regional events (Road Show) to get input and speak with young people.

What can be done for all youth (not just those directly benefiting from programs) in order to use resources effectively?

- Working with other youth to reach their peers.
- Technology and social media (e.g. Facebook, Texting, MySpace).
- Disseminating information where youth spend their time to let them know there are programs available
- Working with schools. Though schools are limited by the students in their jurisdiction they have a high concentration of youth.
- Developing a clearer understanding of the key issues for youth.
- Having more student/youth designed programs where youth participate in planning.
- Formal and informal youth engagement structures. Agreement and commitment by adults that youth need to be involved.

What are your ideas for federal policy to improve the coordination, effectiveness, and efficiency of programs affecting youth?

- Requiring **local partnerships**
- Developing **national school climate standards**.
- Developing explicit accountability measures that are **data driven**.
- Establishing flexibility around unions.
- Expanding learning time in schools, though another response suggested additional time is unnecessary.
- Looking at FERPA and HIPPA policies and how they restrict information sharing.
- Focusing on who is being served (youth), involving youth voice and engaging youth.
- Generating support from higher levels (white house, legislature).
- Involving **local input** from those working with youth, such as practitioners, but practitioners also have to work on being vocal.
- Focusing on **not reinventing the wheel**. Instead looking at past efforts and initiatives.
- Regional offices help states understanding laws and policy and how to respond to federal legislation. The key is for regional offices to connect with all partners, including the local community.
- Providing opportunities to do **research with youth** to discover needs and evidence based practices and best practices.
- Developing a clear understanding of what each department brings to the table. Look at the outcomes for initiatives at different agencies.
- Signing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Clarifying the length of stay in State for runaway and homeless youth.
- Expanding the age for youth to receive service (specifically runaway and homeless youth) and supporting any age expansion with additional resources.
- Focusing on a **strength based model** rather than being punitive.
- Encouraging the providers to be paperless. It is audits that make it impossible.
- Looking outside the box, be creative, and push boundaries on issues related to youth.

- Connecting policy, research and practice (e.g. research informed practice, practice informed research, policy informed by research and practice).
- Ensuring the continuity of research informed programs and practices to ensure follow through and longer time work with communities.
- **Recognizing context** (e.g. New England school age youth differ from Kansas school age youth). One size fits all models are not appropriate.
- Recognition from agencies that youth are important for all agencies.
- Ensuring **communication** between different federal agency programs.
- Clarifying information about what opportunities are available for youth.
- Balancing reporting and risk about non-compliance (e.g. Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program).
- Establishing commitment to youth from birth-adulthood (e.g. Place-based investment).
- Providing **assistance to states** for coordinating efforts.
- Providing evidence of **efficiency of spending** at the Federal level. If they expect programs and grantee's to be efficient in how they spend resources.
- Providing assistance for **educating the public**.

What are the best ways to engage youth in this process?

- Connecting with youth through those involved in the listening session and other service providers.
- Involving youth advisory board.
- Holding focus groups with youth.
- Through community support.
- By Changing the stigma and stereotype that kids are bad.
- By changing times for the events (e.g. 5-8).
- By going to where the youth are (e.g. music shows), but recognizing that youth are diverse and may have different interests.
- By providing food, money, favorite people (e.g. rappers) or other incentives.
- Through using online media and looking at websites (e.g. Foster Club, http://www.fosterclub.com/).
- Through the education system which has the highest concentration of youth.
- By establishing dialogue and ensuring youth know they have an impact.

Questions and Responses from the National Federation for Families for Children's Mental Health[1]

What does transition mean? What does successful transition mean?

- Movement from one place to another or one sphere to another (e.g. childhood to adulthood; youth serving system to adult serving system).
- Self-sufficiency

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[1] Responses from the National Federation for Families for Children's Mental Health Conference are summarized separately because participants were asked to respond to different questions. Two sessions were held at this conference.

- **Career development** and success.
- Youth assume they have **freedom and responsibilities**.
- Understanding the **consequences of failure.**
- **Self-efficacy** and ability to advocate for oneself
- Being able to **bounce back**.
- There are two phase, both a **cognitive phase and an activation phase** with recognition in between.
- Transition is **culturally bound** (e.g. there are different definitions of transition in tribal communities).
- Everybody transitions!
- A youth's mental health problems are managed, but hard to define measures of successful transitions
- Transition is a **process** not a sudden shift.

What is necessary to support successful transition?
- Support for **relationships shifting** (e.g. changes to family relationship)
- **Flexibility** to adapt to situations and environments
- **Cultivating skills** developed from childhood (e.g. resiliency skills) help youth process transitions which can feel traumatic
- Support, guidance, and **relationships with adults** including families.
- Having place, community, social network, belonging
- Supports need to **focus on entire family**.
- Support for general **life skills**

Are there transition challenges specific to youth with mental health challenges? What supports are needed?
Challenges
- Youth have **feeling of inadequacy**
- **Large gap in service and different criteria** in youth and adult systems.
- There is a **need to develop a new support system and relationships** because the system is different for older youth.
- Parents, caregivers, and providers **don't fully know how youth feel** and understand them.
- Youth experience fear and stress based on an **overwhelming sense of expectations**.
- **Lack preparation for the real world** including setting unrealistic goals.
- Families have **difficulty defining success**.
- **Inaccurate information is available** so must ensure that information that is used is reliable.
- A need to incorporate youth voice before youth turns 18.
- **Lack of support**, nurturing and preparation from family.
- **Lack of access** to Chafee funds.
- Service providers focus on housing and employment without **addressing mental health issues**.
- **Lack of knowledge of how to self-advocate** including lack of hard skills and lack of understanding of the process for advocating for themselves.
- **Lack of soft skills** related to life skills (e.g. self-regulation) and problem solving skills.
- **Stigma** can cause a barrier to.
- **Inconsistency** in when youth age out of systems.

- **Lack of quality** in mental health services (e.g. delivered in restrictive settings such as Juvenile Justice System, Residential Treatment; over-reliance on medical model and medicine)
- Changes or loss of health insurance.
- **Systems force youth to transition before they might be ready to transition** and train youth to be reliant on them rather than themselves or their community.
- Over-reliance and lack of training on how to deal with families who might not be there to support the youth.
- Services available **don't meet the needs of youth**.

Supports
- Vocational rehab.
- Ensuring that there are **supports in place before youth transition**.
- Services that allow youth to feel that they are **part of a community and include their voice**.
- Environments where youth feel **good and safe**.
- **Inter-agency collaboration** (e.g. schools and providers)
- Maintain **positive relationships** that have benefited the youth.

What services or shifts within the system are necessary to support diverse youth as they transition?
Shifts within the system
- Recognition that **youth is a culture.**
- Service providers should learn how to **work simultaneously with youth and community** so that communities can learn about transitioning youth.
- **Youth need to have an active role** in their transition plan.
- Get rid of "one size fits all" programs.
- Service provides need to provide answers to questions and **share experiences and vulnerabilities** with youth instead of just asking questions.
- Efforts should be tailored to specific populations that are most at-risk (e.g. young men of color).
- There should be a **focus on cultural competence for youth in transition** as well as youth in child serving systems.

What services or shifts within the system are necessary to support foster youth as they transition?
Services
- Support for youth and families as they transition back to their families so that the youth don't become responsible for their families along with themselves.

Shifts within the system
- Recognition that youth have family and that **family is a continuous part of their lives**.
- The system teaches youth to cultivate skills and rely on others while in the system which continues once they leave system.
- Helping youth to develop a sense of belonging in the community through a youth led, youth driven process.

How should we be thinking about culturally competent transition supports and services?
- Youth need to be **seen as individuals** with individual strengths.
- Provide families and youth with **support in identifying their own culture** and becoming self-aware.
- Need to **focus on acceptance** and non-biased respect as humans.

- Service providers need to **understand how systems can marginalize groups** and the dominate culture can act as a barrier.
- Recognition that **youth culture can differ from family culture.**
- **Culture is part of resiliency** and can serve as a part of protection and identity.
- Culture should **not be used as a category or excuse**.
- Being culturally competent means **stepping outside of your comfort zone** and embracing something you don't know.
- Policies are currently based on age- need to rethink **how age is one size fits all**.

Other suggestions about what to do
- Change policies based on what we know.
- **Add mental health check-ups** to the mandated check-ups for youth ageing out of the system.
- End mandates that **require participation in certain services instead of choosing to be a part** of them.
- Include a **focus on earlier levels of development**.
- Adapt services to **promote independence** building activities.
- **Change regulations that force providers to cut-off contact** with youth once services are over.
- Ensure that youth are able to **surround themselves with other youth** not just adult service providers.