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Street Outreach Program Learning Lab

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

According to the King County Committee to End Homelessness (CEHKC), up to 5,000 young people are homeless in King County at some point each year. The National Network for Youth reports that youth who experience homelessness face an increased risk of mental health problems, substance abuse issues, criminal activity and victimization, unsafe sex, teen pregnancy, and poor educational opportunities. Without assistance, most homeless youth are at extremely high risk of chronic or episodic homelessness, unemployment, and poverty as adults. Therefore, engagement of homeless youth and early intervention are critical.

In King County, Auburn Youth Resources (AYR), Friends of Youth, and YouthCare previously received Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) funding for street outreach. AYR had FYSB SOP funding from October 2008 – September 2011; Friends of Youth from October 2006 – October 2012; and YouthCare from October 2010 – December 2013.

In response to a county-wide loss of federal funding to support street outreach services by the end of 2013, AYR, Friends of Youth, and YouthCare sought funding from the Raikes Foundation, Ballmer Family Giving, and Thomas V. Giddens Jr. Foundation for an SOP Learning Lab. Through support from these funders, AYR, Friends of Youth, and YouthCare staff came together to share best practices, discuss challenges, and brainstorm solutions through a combination of outreach leadership meetings, collaborative trainings, and best practice seminars. The monthly outreach leadership meetings were designed to provide staff with an opportunity to expand their network of support and increase collaboration across the three agencies.

In June 2013, Cardea was engaged to implement an exploratory and descriptive, field-based evaluation of street outreach and drop-in services as part of the SOP Learning Lab. The objectives of this evaluation were to:

1. Describe street outreach and drop-in services provided by the collaborating agencies, including county-wide coordination, overall implementation and best practices
2. Develop methods and materials to better define and describe runaway and homeless youth and young adults who are engaged in outreach
3. Assess youth and young adults engaged in the continuum of services, when possible
4. Build the collaborating agencies' capacity to use data to inform program/service improvement

During this effort, Cardea conducted 15 semi-structured key informant interviews with agency staff and key stakeholders, held three focus groups with youth, analyzed retrospective data from YouthCare to examine drop-in clients' entry into the continuum of services, and worked with the three agencies to develop and pilot new standardized data collection instruments.

Key Findings — Street Outreach

Outreach staff are connecting with a wide range of youth across the region

Collectively, AYR, Friends of Youth, and YouthCare connected with more than 1,500 youth during the three-month pilot period, and more than one-third were youth who outreach staff were connecting with for the first time. Outreach staff estimated that youth ranged from adolescents to young adults and that more than one-third were between 16-20 years.

The three agencies engaged in street outreach across King County, with AYR and Friends of Youth extending outreach to geographic locations far beyond their drop-in centers. More populated outreach locations yielded higher numbers of youth overall and “new faces,” but less populated locations were an important source of “new faces.”

Please see references 1, 3 and 4 in the main report.

Youth engaged during street outreach are extremely vulnerable

Across agencies, outreach staff observed risky behaviors/situational factors and other concerns, most notably sleeping outdoors and drug and/or alcohol use. While reported less frequently, outreach staff, as well as those who participated in key informant interviews, observed violence/gang involvement and prostitution or sexual exploitation. Key informants added that drug use is one of the barriers to connecting and engaging with youth.

We see sexually exploited youth on Pac Highway or 99. Just the last couple of weeks, it's taking place now in smaller communities. More grooming of young girls is taking place, but it's not as much in your face. [We've] seen an explosion of heroin and meth use [and] very heavy gang activity now in the cities we cover.

— Outreach Staff at Auburn Youth Resources

Street outreach facilitates entry into the continuum of services

During the pilot period, outreach staff made nearly 800 referrals during street outreach. They most commonly referred youth to case management, but shelter, drop-in services, and meals were also common referrals. In addition, outreach staff linked youth directly to services such as shelters, drop-in services, and clinics/medical care.

He was here to talk to me. He was always giving me a card, a sack lunch; eventually, I came through and asked for help. Since I knew him, I took him as my case manager. I got my ID through him, drug/alcohol counselor. He's been supporting me and helping me out with everything I need....My first relationship with this organization was with street outreach. It took a lot of times, with them talking to me. I saw them a lot, I definitely hit them up.

— Friends of Youth/Redmond Service Center

Data collection during street outreach can be challenging, but is clearly feasible

Outreach staff initially indicated that data collection can compromise their relationships with youth, citing that a majority of youth they encounter distrust adults and formal processes. Yet, they were able to successfully implement the Street Outreach Encounter Summary Form, which allowed for a finer level of data and analysis than the outreach tracking forms that the agencies historically used.

Key Findings — Drop-in

Drop-in services support a diversity of youth

While demographic data were missing for a substantial number of drop-in clients across some measures during the pilot period, the retrospective analyses of YouthCare data and data from both the Drop-in Log and Meaningful Engagement Form indicated that a diverse group of youth access drop-in services. Data from the log showed that there are more male clients than clients of other genders and that these clients range in age from 10-25 years. In addition, data from the retrospective analyses of YouthCare data and data from the Meaningful Engagement Form indicated that youth of color and LGBT youth are disproportionately represented among drop-in clients.

Youth who access drop-in services face multiple challenges

Based on data from the Drop-in Log, youth accessed drop-in services to meet basic needs, including meals, a safe place to hang out, and, to a lesser extent, employment or education services. Similarly, youth who were meaningfully engaged by outreach staff most commonly reported that they experienced challenges around meeting basic needs, as well as feeling isolated/lonely and grappling with drugs and alcohol. In addition, the retrospective analyses of YouthCare data indicated that youth faced a multitude of other challenges, including long-term homelessness, history of involvement with the legal system, mental health challenges, fair/poor health status, and developmental disabilities. Outreach staff commonly distributed basic needs supplies to the youth. As key informants noted, providing basic needs items not only opened the door for engagement, but demonstrated true compassion.

Methods to streamline data collection and analysis are critical

As with street outreach, data collection during drop-in can be challenging. The three agencies were not able to systematically capture many demographic characteristics and housing status measures from all drop-in clients, and, given data completion issues, it appears that it may not be practical to track referrals during drop-in.

Key Findings — Outreach and the Continuum of Services

Outreach connects youth with services

Key informant interviews and focus groups revealed that street outreach and drop-in services help youth feel safe and accepted and gradually build relationships that facilitate transition to stability. In addition, the retrospective analyses of YouthCare data indicated that youth connect with drop-in services, shelter, case management, and other services via outreach services. Once youth have meaningfully engaged with staff through outreach, data indicate that about three-quarters of youth receive supplies and referrals to services, and more than half are directly linked to services.

Facilitating connections for youth of color, LGBT youth, and youth under 18 should continue to be a priority

The three agencies are connecting with and engaging with a diversity of youth, including youth of color, LGBT youth, and youth under 18. Data from the Meaningful Engagement Form suggested that agencies are linking youth of color to services at similar or higher rates as other youth. While data were limited, LGBT youth, and youth under 18 may be somewhat less likely to be linked to services. Therefore, facilitating connections should continue to be a priority to ensure that these youth are supported in connecting with service systems that are responsive to their cultural/developmental needs.

Considerations

One of the objectives of this evaluation was to develop methods and materials to better define and describe runaway and homeless youth and young adults who are engaged in outreach. With that in mind, Cardea worked with the three agencies to develop and pilot four new data collection instruments:

1. Street Outreach Encounter Summary Form
2. Drop-in Log
3. Meaningful Engagement Form
4. Additional retrospective questions

The three agencies were able to successfully implement the Street Outreach Encounter Summary Form and Meaningful Engagement Forms. Implementation of the Drop-in Log proved to be more challenging, but still yielded valuable information about the large number of clients served. None of the agencies were able to implement the additional retrospective questions. Overall, the data collected through these new instruments provided richer detail and allowed for a finer level of data analysis than the outreach tracking forms that the agencies historically used. Importantly, all three agencies reported that the instruments provided them with valuable information for program improvement and funding opportunities.

To address data collection and completion challenges and ensure sustainability, the following are adjustments to consider:

- Review data collection instruments and procedures for opportunities to streamline
- Invest in data systems that enhance agency capacity to track program outcomes
- Dedicate resources for routine data entry, until better data systems are available
- Routinize staff training and data monitoring/quality assurance procedures to help improve accuracy of future data collection efforts.

Conclusion

Through the SOP Learning Lab, AYR, Friends of Youth, and YouthCare continued their important work to connect and engage with youth throughout King County. In addition, the SOP Learning Lab evaluation provided a forum for these agencies to better align data collection and report the impact of their work to public and private partners.

All three agencies piloted new instruments to help them learn more about the youth they connect and engage with during street outreach and drop-in services. During the pilot period, outreach staff were able to use these instruments to collect more robust data that can inform current and future work with youth. In addition, the pilot data contributes to the knowledge base about how youth experiencing homelessness and housing instability engage in the continuum of services in King County.

The partnership among the three agencies is critical to supporting a region-wide model aimed at improving outreach and service provision for homeless and unstably housed youth. The agencies' collaborative approach to sharing best practices from the field has increased their collective capacity to engage youth and connect them with the services they need to gain greater stability and prepare for life.

Three months ago, I was shooting up meth, heroin; I am 9 days clean. They do a lot of support, not just the staff. It's also GED teachers, case managers, students, a bunch of people. It's changed my life for the better; giant family that gets bigger every time.... You find your real friends and family.

— YouthCare/Orion Center