LAYING THE FOUNDATION: THE IMPORTANCE OF DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS FOR YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

NN4Y
National Network for Youth

the Y
YMCA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As you read this paper, we hope it becomes clear that relationships are key to succeeding in all areas of life. Our brains are designed for connection, and the need to feel safe in relationships is hard-wired within us. Young people experiencing disconnection and instability first need to feel connected and safe before they can begin to embark on what is expected of them as they transition to adulthood. It is imperative that we, as service providers, policymakers, and stakeholders, do better to position youth to benefit from a life full of connection.

We know that the adversity stemming from or leading to a youth's homeless experience has a lasting impact on their health, relationships, emotional well-being, and ultimately, their economic stability and mobility. We also know that youth are resilient beyond measure, and a focus on relationships will augment the concrete services available in many social service programs.

Service provision that focuses on relationships, intuitively known in the field as relationally responsive services, is rooted in brain science, therapeutic modalities, and trauma-informed care. It is often an afterthought, but it should be the foundation of all youth services. The journey to discovering these topics has been long for the YMCA of San Diego County and not without challenges. We consistently adapt our policies, hiring and supervision practices, and staff support of our teams to fully embrace relationally responsive services.

This paper outlines the specific evidence that informs both the relational approach to our work and policy recommendations while also offering real, practical examples of how a youth-serving organization can use the power of connection to move youth from a place of chronic stress to one of fully realized potential.

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THE ISSUE OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN AMERICA

Youth homelessness is a serious national issue with 4.2 million young people 13 to 25 years old experiencing homelessness each year[1] while sleeping in their cars, on a friend's couch, on the street, or in shelters. While each homeless experience is unique, research has found that youth who endure certain circumstances are more likely to experience homelessness: youth without a high school diploma or GED had a 346% higher risk of experiencing homelessness compared to their peers who graduated, unmarried parenting youth had a 200% higher risk, youth identifying as LGBTQ+ had a 120% higher risk, and African-American youth had an 83% higher risk.[2] Among a five-county survey of 215 youth, 35% experienced the death of a parent/caregiver or other form of personal loss that led to a homeless experience.[3] Further research reveals that ongoing family conflict, stemming from cycles of abuse, addiction, or mental health issues, is the most commonly mentioned pathway to homelessness.[4]

THE IMPORTANCE OF DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

Disconnection creates barriers for youth and makes it difficult for them to navigate the transition to adulthood without the resources and relationships necessary for stability. This reality is reinforced by the 3.5 million young people between the ages of 18 and 24, and the 700,000 13 to 17 year olds, who experience homelessness nationally.[5] With nearly 50% of the chronically homeless population in Los Angeles[6] and over 40% of the chronically homeless population in Seattle[7] reporting they first became homeless at some point under the age of 25, youth homelessness presents a critical opportunity to prevent future instances of homelessness and dramatically decrease chronic adult homelessness.

Patterns of instability, including family conflict, multiple placements in the foster care system, parental rejection, and generational homelessness reduce the likelihood that a young person will have access to a sense of safety and support, such as a stable home environment[8] and emotional well-being, that developmental relationships provide during a critical period of development.

A successful transition to adulthood requires the ability to call upon self-regulation skills. Self-regulation refers to the skills necessary to manage and navigate life's challenges using optimal cognitive, behavioral, and emotional processes. Developing self-regulation involves buffering and co-regulation.[9] **Buffering** refers to protection from environmental stressors, such as housing and food instability. **Co-regulation** is a responsive interaction between a youth and a supportive adult that makes the youth feel safe while alleviating overloaded cognitive and emotional centers of the brain.[10] See Appendix A for an illustration of how stress affects the young adult brain.

BUFFERING
The process of providing resources to reduce the impact of life stressors on a person's psychological well-being. Examples include food, hygiene supplies, and relationships, among others.

CO-REGULATION
Interpersonal behaviors that have the ability to calm a person in distress.

Buffering from environmental stressors helps a young person pivot from worrying about day-to-day survival to long-term goals like increasing self-regulation skills which, like literacy or a foreign language, can be learned with practice. Co-regulation gives youth a responsive relationship with a caregiver or other supportive adult, allowing them to practice skills free of judgment if they make mistakes in navigating new or difficult decisions. Developmental relationships are often expected to take place within the family. However, developmental relationships outside the family can be a stabilizing factor that support youth, particularly those who were raised in family and/or community environments of resource and emotional scarcity, during periods of transition.[11]

The ongoing struggle to secure safe and stable housing, meaningful employment, and connections to physical and emotional resources causes the brain to overreact to normal stressors. As a result, cognitive energy is quickly depleted and **maladaptive responses** prevail instead, making it difficult to connect with others and persist at task-oriented actions like applying for a job and achieving educational goals. While the development of self-regulation skills and abilities is complex and occurs over time, it is responsive to intervention and malleable, especially during young adulthood[12] when individuals experience a stage of brain development second only to early childhood.[13]

Self-regulation, including impulse control and **distress tolerance**, is central to social interaction, and the importance of self-regulation in building strong social networks cannot be overstated. Relationships, especially healthy ones, require empathy, thoughtful planning, and interpersonal skills that are developed and maintained over time, and developmental relationships are crucial for positive psychological youth development,[14] attaining economic stability and career mobility,[15] and overall physical and mental well-being.[16 17 18]

MALADAPTIVE RESPONSES
Reactions to stressors which tend to further complicate rather than remove the stressor. Many high-risk behaviors like substance use or challenging behavior reactions can be viewed as maladaptive.

SELF-REGULATION
An individual's ability to monitor and modulate emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. Also known as executive functioning, willpower, or emotion regulation.

DISTRESS TOLERANCE
The ability to tolerate psychological stressors such as intense negative feelings.

Developmental relationships promote growth at the biological level, increasing the likelihood that maladaptive responses used in the past will be replaced with new, healthy responses to stress, which ultimately help youth succeed beyond social programs and services. Access to such relationships is often referred to as social capital, broadly defined as "the set of connections that ease a person's way through the world, providing support and inspiration and opening doors."[19] **Social capital** increases the likelihood a network of supportive individuals can replace reliance on public assistance, yet under-resourced youth need assistance to make this a reality.

A history of fractured families, disjointed education pathways, scarce financial resources, and overwhelming stress means under-resourced youth are less likely than their peers to achieve independence. To keep these risk factors from becoming predictive factors, youth must be able to build their protective factors. In the face of chronic disconnection and uncertainty, social capital is a protective factor that can unlock the door to independence and well-being.

Human beings are designed to be social and connected, and regardless of the adversity they faced growing up, all youth need relationships to thrive and become successful adults. Knowing that strong support systems and responsive relationships foster well-being has significant implications for service providers and stakeholders who are concerned with improving outcomes for youth experiencing homelessness. Service providers must **prioritize approaches that facilitate buffering and connection to ensure a youth's homeless experience is brief, rare, and non-recurring.** Policymakers and stakeholders, in turn, **must direct strategic investments toward programs, interventions, and services that help youth increase these critical internal assets.**

Brain science, self-regulation, and developmental relationships are inextricably linked. Neuro-development that has been hampered by trauma makes it difficult for an individual to develop the self-regulation skills necessary to function well in school and at work. At the same time, it impedes an individual's ability to develop healthy coping skills and social networks necessary to heal from trauma.

The following sections provide concrete, scalable actions organizations and agencies of any size can adopt to harness the power of science and connection to improve outcomes and prevent or end a youth's homeless experience.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

Good policy drives effective practices, and innovative approaches inform how policies could or should be improved. Research and practice show that improving your organization's ability to apply a neuro-informed response will improve the outcomes your organization is able to achieve for youth at-risk-of or experiencing homelessness.

This paper offers strategies that your organization can utilize at both the direct practice level and at the organizational policies, procedures, and training level. We recommend implementing changes at both levels because organizational policies, procedures, and trainings dictate how your staff serves young people and which young people they serve. Everyone at your agency must embrace the proposed paradigm shift, and this change is driven by changes in policies and practices working symbiotically.

In order for organizations to successfully increase relational competencies among both staff and youth clients, resources must work concurrently to facilitate changes at the policy and practice levels, and specific strategies across the direct service, organizational, and policy levels are described in detail in the sections that follow.

MICRO-LEVEL: DIRECT SERVICE STRATEGIES

Strategies at this level will help staff and clients decrease stress and increase the self-regulation skills that are necessary for meaningful connection. The following recommendations come from years of learning through continuous quality improvement activities, scholarly literature, recommendations from young people, and practice experience. Many recommendations can be incorporated for little or no cost to agencies of any size, with minor adjustments to implement.

Agencies can select from the menu of options that are most relevant for them to give youth opportunities to increase their relational skills and maintain social connection in order to increase social capital.

CLINICAL STAFF ON OUTREACH TEAMS AND IN HOUSING PROGRAMS

Youth with trauma have experienced physiological stressors that result in increased stress that is difficult to suppress. Additionally, 31% of youth experiencing homelessness have mental health diagnoses[20] that can go untreated for years. In order for youth to set and achieve goals for well-being in all domains, they must have the opportunity to experience positive mental health functioning. Young people who are unsheltered and come into contact with Street Outreach teams are often in need of mental health support or experience mental health crises on the streets, yet many are distrustful of systems and staff. While our presence is helpful for some, for others, we may increase stress and emotional pressure. Including a clinical support professional, a licensed therapist or intern therapist, during outreach activities has the potential to soothe a youth's heightened systems,

FIELD NOTES: "OFTEN TIMES IN MY CLINICAL WORK THE MOST IMPACTFUL SESSIONS WERE NOT IN MY OFFICE. I REMEMBER ONE TIME I WAS PLAYING A VIDEO GAME WITH A CLIENT AND A SIMPLE QUESTION OF 'HOW WAS YOUR WEEKEND?' LED TO AN INTENSE DISCUSSION ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS AND HEALTHY BOUNDARIES. THROUGHOUT MY CAREER I HAVE REALIZED THAT SOMETIMES WE HAVE TO MEET CLIENTS ACCORDING TO THEIR TERMS OR CIRCUMSTANCES, AND SOMETIMES THAT MEANS PLAYING VIDEO GAMES OR DRINKING COFFEE AT A STARBUCKS. NO MATTER WHERE MY CLINICAL SESSION WAS, IT WAS THE QUALITY OF THE DISCUSSION THAT MATTERED. PRO TIP: CLINICAL DOCUMENTATION FOR NON-TRADITIONAL SETTINGS ARE NO DIFFERENT THAN OTHER NOTES IF YOU FOCUS ON WHAT WAS BEING DISCUSSED."
-- ANDREW PALOMO, NN4Y DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY STRATEGIES AND FORMER CASE MANAGER, THERAPIST, AND SUPERVISOR FOR YOUTH SERVICES.

quickly de-escalating stressful situations and using techniques such as **joining, tracking, eliciting,** and **reframing** to offer non-judgmental and safe human connection. Such therapeutic techniques can increase the impact of brief encounters characteristic of street outreach and, over time, have the potential to develop staff-youth relationships that increase engagement in other supportive services.

Clinical staff are also invaluable in housing and shelter programs, supporting housing staff in objectively thinking about the youth and their circumstances, engaging in appropriate interactions and activities, and helping uncover a youth's motivation to direct goal-oriented behavior. Additionally, clinical staff have the opportunity to engage in more casual interactions with program participants, which highlights the humanity of therapists and removes the stigma of clinical services. Even youth with health insurance find it difficult to access mental health services in a timely manner, so partnering with clinical staff in housing programs allows youth to easily access services with highly trained clinicians who are well-versed in trauma-focused services, stress reduction techniques, and self-regulation skill development. Clinical team members should be culturally responsive and embody the qualities necessary to connect with and be considered a partner to youth.

JOINING
The initial attempt to bond/build connection which increases a client's confidence in the helping process and reduces reluctance or fear.

TRACKING
Responses that convey a therapist's observations, such as "I can tell that you put a lot of effort into cleaning your apartment" or "I can tell your sister's comment really upset you."

ELICITING
Verbal or non-verbal responses that aim to draw out additional information.

REFRAMING
Seeing a situation from a new or alternative perspective that is more positive in its orientation. Strengths-based language is an example.

MAKING IT HAPPEN: LEVERAGING MULTIPLE CONTRACTS OR FUNDING SOURCES IS ONE OPTION TO RETAIN CLINICIAN STAFF. IF YOUR ORGANIZATION HAS SEVERAL FUNDING SOURCES, A CLINICAL STAFF'S SALARY CAN BE SPREAD AMONG THOSE SOURCES TO SERVE AND SUPPORT YOUR CONTINUUM OF SERVICES. IN SOME CASES, FEDERAL FUNDS ARE LIMITED AND MAY NOT BE USED TO SUPPORT CLINICAL SERVICES, SO PRIVATE FUNDING MAY BE USEFUL. IN PENNSYLVANIA, A YOUTH SERVICE PROVIDER, VALLEY YOUTH HOUSE, HAS BEEN ABLE TO SUPPORT CLINICAL WORK BY SEEKING PRIVATE FOUNDATION FUNDING IN ORDER TO PROVIDE SUCH SERVICES. ANOTHER APPROACH INCLUDES THE ADDITION OF INTERN THERAPISTS WHO ARE WORKING TOWARD LICENSURE UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF A LICENSED THERAPIST. MANY INTERN THERAPISTS ARE LESS COSTLY THAN LICENSED THERAPISTS AND, DEPENDING ON THE AREA, MAY EVEN VOLUNTEER THEIR SERVICES IN EXCHANGE FOR SUPERVISED HOURS. CONNECTING WITH A LOCAL UNIVERSITY OR EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION THAT TRAINS CLINICIANS IS A REASONABLE PLACE TO START EXPLORING THIS OPTION.

PEER-TO-PEER APPROACH

Peers influence the development of adolescents and young adults, and the trend continues with youth experiencing homelessness. Research from Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago recently found that youth experiencing homelessness primarily turn to their peers to access formal resources such as shelter, food, employment, and housing.[21] Organizations can capitalize on this level of peer support by hiring and training youth with lived homelessness experience to fill important roles among case management, navigation, and outreach staff. These youth can relate to participants in a way that most staff cannot, building rapport and trust more quickly and offering a sense of belonging.

FIELD NOTES: "I REMEMBER A TIME WHEN I WAS WORKING WITH A LONG-TIME PARTICIPANT ON RESUME BUILDING, BUT HE SEEMED VERY DISTANT WHICH WASN'T HIS USUAL BEHAVIOR. I CHECKED IN ABOUT HOW HE WAS FEELING AND HE COULDN'T QUITE EXPRESS WHAT HE WAS EXPERIENCING. THROUGH OUR INTERACTIONS, I KNEW THAT HE ENJOYED RAPPING SO I ASKED IF HE COULD RAP ABOUT WHAT HE FELT INSIDE. WE STEPPED OUTSIDE OF THE OFFICE AND WHILE WE WALKED HE PROCEEDED TO FREESTYLE ABOUT HIS STRUGGLES WITH HOMELESSNESS DUE TO FAMILY DYSFUNCTION. IN A MATTER OF MINUTES, I LEARNED MORE ABOUT THIS PARTICIPANT THAN I HAD IN MONTHS. THIS MOMENT OF VULNERABILITY PROVIDED ME WITH INSIGHT THAT I BROUGHT BACK TO MY TEAM AND TOGETHER WE WERE ABLE TO IMPROVE OUR PARTICIPANT'S LIFE. WITHOUT THAT MOMENT OF VULNERABILITY, HE MAY HAVE CONTINUED TO SUFFER IN SILENCE." -- DAVID BAKER, LEAD SUPPORT SPECIALIST, YMCA OF SAN DIEGO COUNTY

MAKING IT HAPPEN: WITHIN THE SOCIAL SERVICE WORK AT THE YMCA OF SAN DIEGO COUNTY (YMCA), YOUTH WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE COMPRISE 10% OF OUR STAFF, AND THEY ARE PAID A LIVING WAGE FOR THE GEOGRAPHIC REGION. THEY ARE KEY MEMBERS OF INTERNAL CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT TEAMS AND CONTRIBUTE GREATLY TO DIRECT SERVICE, OUTREACH, AND RECRUITMENT BY OFFERING A UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE THAT HELPS CONSTANTLY MODIFY AND ELEVATE OUR SERVICE DELIVERY STRUCTURE.

TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE APPROACH

Trauma-informed approaches have long been recommended for all levels of staff at any youth-serving organization. It is important to think through how trauma-informed care is consistently reinforced through regular training opportunities, policies at the mezzo and macro levels, and through supervision practices and activities.

BUFFERING AND CO-REGULATION WITH STAFF

Buffering and co-regulation, discussed in more detail on page 2, are necessary to develop and implement optimal self-regulation. Providing basic needs, such as food, housing, transportation, or child care, buffers youth from environmental barriers and reduces stress. Staff who apply their internal regulation skills are employing co-regulation to show up as a reliable, self-aware ally in a youth's journey. For youth experiencing homelessness, a history of disconnection may mean that staff provide a rare opportunity for bonding. This relationship may be one of the few that a youth can call upon to reduce stress and facilitate the development of higher cognitive and emotional regulation skills. These concepts are rooted in years of theoretical research and can easily be translated into practice using the CAAVE approach that combines Compassion, Awareness, Acceptance, Validation, and Empowerment (CAAVE) in youth services.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO BE TRAUMA-INFORMED:

- REVIEW AGENCY POLICIES TO ENSURE THEY ARE NOT RETRAUMATIZING TO YOUNG PEOPLE. FOR EXAMPLE, REVIEWING INTAKE PROCEDURES AND THE NECESSITY OF CERTAIN QUESTIONS THAT MAY TRIGGER CLIENTS. BEING TRAUMA-INFORMED MAY INVOLVE ABANDONING LONG-TERM PRACTICES THAT ACTUALLY CAUSE MORE HARM TO THE YOUNG PEOPLE YOU ARE SERVING.
- AVOID PUNITIVE CONSEQUENCES AS RELATED TO THE RULES AND EXPECTATIONS OF PROGRAM PARTICIPATION. RULES ARE BASED ON THE NEED FOR SAFETY IN PROGRAMS, WHILE EXPECTATIONS ARE GUIDING PRINCIPLES ENACTED BY A PROGRAM. THE CONSEQUENCES FOR NOT FOLLOWING THE RULES OR EXPECTATIONS NEED TO BE EVALUATED TO REDUCE THE LIKELIHOOD YOUTH ARE EXPOSED TO ADDITIONAL STRESSORS ASSOCIATED WITH PUNISHMENT.

MAKING IT HAPPEN: THE YMCA DEVELOPED A TRAINING AND ACCOMPANYING MANUAL TO HELP ORGANIZATIONS AND STAFF UNDERSTAND THE QUALITIES NECESSARY TO BEST SERVE YOUTH. COMPASSION, AWARENESS, ACCEPTANCE, VALIDATION, AND EMPOWERMENT (CAAVE) WERE IDENTIFIED THROUGH A DEMONSTRATION PROJECT AS BEING THE MOST ESSENTIAL QUALITIES STAFF MUST EMBODY TO BEST ENGAGE WITH AND SERVE YOUTH EXPERIENCING TRAUMA AND DISCONNECTION.

FIELD NOTES: "THESE DAYS, IT'S EASIER FOR ME TO NOTICE THE RARE INSTANCES WHEN THE CAAVE APPROACH ISN'T BEING USED. I RECENTLY WORKED WITH A CASE MANAGER WHO HAD TROUBLE GETTING A PARTICIPANT IN OUR HOUSING PROGRAM TO CLEAN THEIR ROOM. DURING A REGULAR CLEANLINESS CHECK, THE CASE MANAGER EXPRESSED NOTICEABLE DISAPPOINTMENT IN THE SITUATION, TELLING ME THEY WERE FRUSTRATED BY ALL THE UNDONE LAUNDRY IN THE YOUTH'S ROOM AND THAT THEY FELT SLIGHTED WHEN THE YOUTH FAILED TO MAKE EYE CONTACT. I HAD TO STEP IN AND COURSE-CORRECT, REMINDING THE CASE MANAGER THAT A CAAVE-DRIVEN INTERACTION WOULD ACCOUNT FOR THE FACT THAT THE YOUTH MAY HAVE NEVER LEARNED HOW TO DO LAUNDRY AND THAT AVOIDING EYE CONTACT WAS A NORMAL RESPONSE WHEN WE'RE EXPERIENCING NEGATIVE EMOTIONS. THIS SHIFT IN THINKING KEEPS STAFF FROM FEELING BURNED OUT WHILE INCREASING THEIR ABILITY TO CONNECT WITH PARTICIPANTS AND ACHIEVE BETTER OUTCOMES." -- KRISTINA HALMAI, CLINICAL INNOVATION CONSULTANT, YMCA OF SAN DIEGO COUNTY

FAMILY FINDING AND REUNIFICATION APPROACH

Prevention and diversion from a homeless experience should include Family Finding and reunification interventions for youth, where safe and appropriate. Youth frequently cite chronic family conflict as a leading cause of a homeless experience, so interventions that engage family members in developing healthy interactions with youth, when safe and appropriate, can prevent a homeless experience. Additionally, Family Finding approaches, long used in the Child Welfare System, may be another strategy to identify other supportive adults that wish to support a young person experiencing instability. More information on family finding and reunification are included in Appendix C.

MAKING IT HAPPEN: THE YMCA SECURED FUNDING WITH THE LOCAL CONTINUUM OF CARE TO CONDUCT FAMILY FINDING AND ENGAGEMENT WORK AMONG YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS. EVIDENCE OF FAMILY FINDING'S EFFICACY FROM THE CHILD WELFARE FIELD HELPED SUPPORT THE CASE TO THINK BEYOND TRADITIONAL OUTREACH AND BASIC NEEDS MODELS AND EXPAND PREVENTION AND DIVERSION TO INCLUDE CONNECTION-BUILDING FOR YOUTH.

SELF-REGULATION DEVELOPMENT APPROACHES

Developing self-regulation skills can increase protective factors that give youth the tools to respond to adversity and stressful situations. The ability to regulate thoughts, emotions, and behavior lays the foundation of functioning well in diverse and complex settings, such as in the workplace and in social networks. Self-regulation skills also reduce the chances a young person will attempt to alleviate stressors using high-risk behaviors like substance misuse. Self-regulation, like literacy and other skills that increase with practice, is extremely responsive to intervention, and interventions based on stress reduction and stress tolerance can help increase self-regulation skill development.

MAKING IT HAPPEN: THE YMCA TESTED AN ADAPTED VERSION OF DIALECTICAL BEHAVIOR THERAPY (DBT) AND FOUND SIGNIFICANT INCREASES IN SELF-REGULATION SKILLS AMONG YOUTH INVOLVED IN THE STUDY. DBT HAS ORIGINS IN BEHAVIOR THERAPY AND EASTERN MINDFULNESS PRACTICES, AND IT AIMS TO DECREASE A PERSON'S EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY WHILE INCREASING THEIR ABILITY TO SELF-REGULATE AND RESPOND SKILLFULLY. ADDITIONAL RESEARCH IS NECESSARY TO EXPLORE OTHER OPTIONS, BUT RESULTS FROM INITIAL PROJECTS, SUCH AS THE YMCA CONNECTIONS PROJECT, ARE PROMISING.
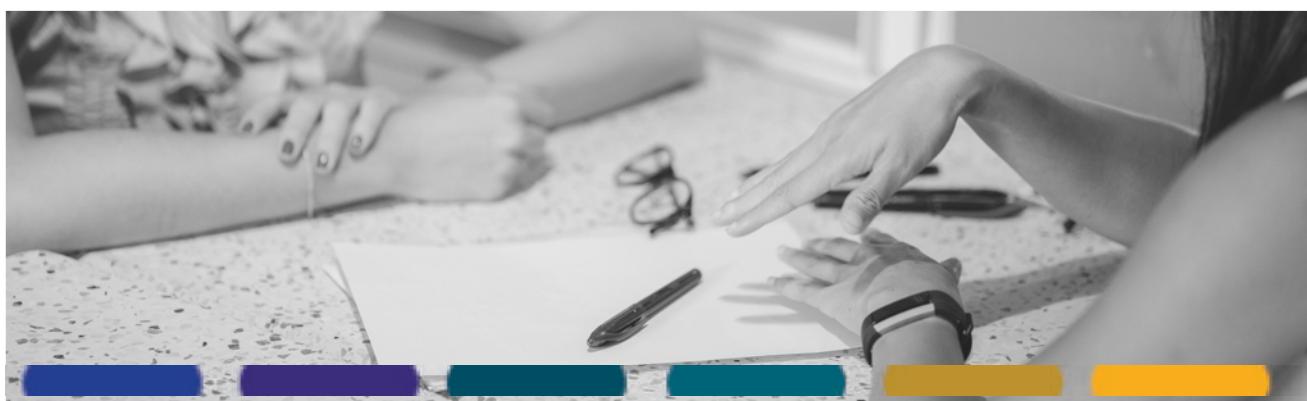
MEZZO: ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES

Implementing any direct-service strategies explained above will require training all staff, from finance staff to office administrators to all direct service staff, to incorporate the strategies into their day-to-day work. Some of the recommendations are associated with relationally responsive service provision, a practice rooted in connection. Connection refers to the formation and dynamics of interpersonal relationships, driven by how an individual responds to their environment and/or the emotions of others. The YMCA has adopted this approach in all youth-serving programs and spaces to ensure that staff and clients can practice developing skills in a safe and supportive environment. Relationally responsive service provision also includes a focus on physical spaces; they should be clean, uncluttered, and dignified. Additionally, staff are trained extensively in several modalities and approaches that emphasize healthy connection, self-regulation, relationships, co-regulation, and buffering to reduce stress among clients and capitalize on engagement opportunities.

MIRROR ADOPTION OF TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE PRINCIPLES (SHORT-TERM STRATEGY)

Building a relationally responsive environment requires staff at all levels of the organization understand the importance of connection. Providing consistent training and learning opportunities for all staff to learn and practice relationally responsive services, including co-regulation, buffering, and a focus on self-regulation, will benefit youth who are already overloaded with toxic stress. When staff realize that they are

responsible for co-regulation, their ability to facilitate healthy connections, rather than frustrate the process, will increase. Compassion and validation are simple, cost-free practices that will reduce stress for staff and youth alike.

MAKING IT HAPPEN: FOR EXAMPLE, WHEN A YOUNG PERSON VISITS AN AGENCY DROP-IN CENTER TO INQUIRE ABOUT BASIC NEEDS ASSISTANCE, STAFF SHOULD BE WELCOMING, CALM, FRIENDLY, AND COMPASSIONATE WITH THE CLIENT AT ALL TIMES. ALTHOUGH THIS MAY SEEM LIKE A COMMON SENSE PRACTICE, WE UNDERSTAND FROM YOUTH FEEDBACK THAT STAFF OFTEN APPEAR STRESSED, ALOOF, INATTENTIVE, AND QUICK TO DISMISS THEIR REQUEST IF SOMETHING MORE IMPORTANT IS OCCURRING WITHIN THE AGENCY.

INCORPORATE INTO ADMINISTRATIVE/ REGULATORY POLICIES (MEDIUM-TERM STRATEGY)

Policies at the organizational level should clearly articulate the expectations of relationally responsive service provision for staff and leadership. Leadership positions should leverage the influence of their positions to set the cultural tone of the workplace, explicitly setting clear expectations and modeling the practices expected of staff at every level. In turn, direct managers reinforce the tone through supervision practices and interpersonal interactions with their staff. Organizations can start communicating the importance of relationships during the hiring process by using questions to identify candidates who share that vision and reinforcing that message with an intentional onboarding process. Sample policies and language are available in Appendix B.

INFUSE INTO ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE (LONG-TERM STRATEGY)

Organizational values should reflect the collective desire to create and maintain relationally responsive environments for all clients. Agency-wide adoption of trauma-informed care, CAAVE, and other foundational approaches supplies the language and practices that can be included in performance appraisals, employee recognition and awards, and supervision activities. Leadership should conduct themselves in a way that mirrors the way clients should be treated, making time to connect with their staff teams and help co-regulate and buffer stressors for their teams. Staff should be held accountable for their role in engaging youth in a meaningful way, ensuring that the relationship is of utmost importance. Assessing additional client outcomes focused on relationship development can also articulate the importance of such an approach.

MAKING IT HAPPEN: THE YMCA TAKES PRIDE IN CULTIVATING A RELATIONALLY DRIVEN WORKPLACE AMONG STAFF AND BETWEEN STAFF AND PARTICIPANTS. NEW EMPLOYEES RECEIVE AN ONBOARDING MANUAL THAT OUTLINES THE RELATIONALLY DRIVEN IDEOLOGY OF THE WORKPLACE AND ARE ENCOURAGED TO SHADOW STAFF FROM DIFFERENT PROGRAMS TO BUILD THEIR TOOLBOX OF TECHNIQUES FOR CONNECTION-BASED DIRECT SERVICE PROVISION. WORKPLACE PEERS COACH THEM ON COMMUNICATING WITH PARTICIPANTS IN A WAY THAT EMBODIES CAAVE, IMPARTS DIGNITY, AND BUILDS CONNECTION BETWEEN STAFF AND YOUTH. SUPERVISORS FOLLOW A FIDELITY CHECKLIST TO ENSURE THE ONBOARDING PROCESS REMAINS CONSISTENT AND CONTINUE TO PRACTICE SCENARIOS THROUGHOUT EMPLOYMENT TO IDENTIFY CHALLENGES AND COACH TECHNIQUES FOR RELATIONALLY RESPONSIVE SERVICE PROVISION.

MACRO: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AT LOCAL, STATE AND FEDERAL LEVELS

Widespread adoption of relationally focused services will pay dividends as communities realize the benefits and impact of relationships on outcomes for youth. Systems can reinforce the importance of this concept by:

1

REQUIRING YOUTH SERVICE PROVIDERS TO INCLUDE SPECIFIC ELEMENTS IN CONTRACTS AND FUNDING PROPOSALS, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO:
- USING A CLINICAL, THERAPEUTIC APPROACH TO ADDRESS FAMILY-BASED AND INTERPERSONAL TRAUMA AND LOSS
- PLACING GREATER EMPHASIS ON INTERVENTIONS AND SERVICES THAT INCREASE A YOUTH'S ABILITY TO BUILD RELATIONAL SKILLS TO NAVIGATE COMPLEX SOCIAL SETTINGS
- MEASURING THE QUALITY AND QUANTITY OF A YOUTH'S RELATIONSHIPS TO MAXIMIZE SOCIAL CAPITAL.

2

PROVIDING FUNDING FOR TRAINING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE SO THAT SERVICE PROVIDERS ARE TRAINED TO EXECUTE THE REQUIREMENTS DISCUSSED IN THIS PAPER. FUNDING TO FACILITATE THIS SHIFT IN OPERATIONS WILL INCREASE A SERVICE PROVIDER'S READINESS TO ADOPT NEW TACTICS AND REMOVE ANY CAPACITY-RELATED BARRIERS FOR ORGANIZATIONS THAT ALREADY FACE SCARCE RESOURCES.

3

DIRECT FUNDING TO SERVICE PROVIDERS TO BUILD STAFF CAPACITY AND HIRE QUALIFIED STAFF. RELATIONALLY FOCUSED SERVICES BENEFIT FROM HAVING CLINICAL STAFF WHO ARE FORMALLY TRAINED AND HAVE ACQUIRED ADVANCED DEGREES. STAFF WITH THESE SPECIALIZATIONS REQUIRE WAGES THAT MATCH THEIR QUALIFICATIONS. EMPLOYEES WITH LIVED HOMELESS EXPERIENCE ALSO BRING A UNIQUE LEVEL OF EXPERTISE TO SERVICES AND MUST BE PAID A LIVING WAGE THAT HONORS THE VALUE OF THEIR EXPERIENCE. COMPETITIVE COMPENSATION ALSO INCREASES RETENTION, ALLOWING STAFF AND YOUTH TO BUILD STRONGER RELATIONSHIPS AND IMPROVE OUTCOMES.

CONCLUSION

Recent research allows policymakers and social service agencies to benefit from increased knowledge about using relationships to heal from trauma while simultaneously expanding their understanding of the challenges impacting youth facing housing instability. This powerful combination is an inflection point that allows entities to apply theoretical findings to infuse direct services and focus on connection and relationships for youth who have experienced trauma that led to or resulted from a homeless experience. The approach can be scaled across levels in the following ways:

- **Direct service level**: adopting specific practices that reduce client stress, foster soothing environments, and build staff capacity to focus on relationally focused service provision.
- **Organizational level:** establishing clear expectations and organizational policies that emphasize the importance of trauma-informed service and relationships among all staff.
- **Policy level:** requiring service providers to adopt relationally focused activities and providing the funding and support to facilitate that work.

Applying this lens to the micro, mezzo, and macro levels breathes new life into the fields of social service and policy to catalyze solutions that strengthen our community as a whole.

THIS ISSUE BRIEF IS A COLLABORATION BETWEEN THE NATIONAL NETWORK FOR YOUTH AND THE YMCA OF SAN DIEGO COUNTY, YOUTH & FAMILY SERVICES. THE PROJECT TEAM INCLUDES: DARLA BARDINE, KRYSTA ESQUIVEL, KRISTINA HALMAI, LUISA MONTES, JO ANN PAANIO, AND ANDREW PALOMO. FOR QUESTIONS, PLEASE CONTACT DARLA BARDINE (DARLA.BARDINE@NN4YOUTH.ORG) OR KRYSTA ESQUIVEL (KESQUIVEL@YMCA.ORG).

ENDNOTES

1 Chapin Hall at The University of Chicago. "Missed opportunities: Youth homelessness in America national estimates" (November 2017). Available at: http://voicesofyouthcount.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/ChapinHall_VoYC_NationalReport_Final.pdf; also see Morton, M. H., et al. "Prevalence and correlates of youth homelessness in the United States," Journal of Adolescent Health (2017).

2 Morton, M.H., Dworsky, A., & Samuels, G.M. (2017). Missed opportunities: Youth homelessness in America. National estimates. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago

3 Samuels, G. M., Cerven, C., Curry, S., Robinson, S. R., & Patel, S. (2019). Missed opportunities in youth pathways through homelessness. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: STRESS AND THE YOUNG ADULT BRAIN

Click on the graphic below for more information on the impact of stress on the young adult brain, as explained by the UNICEF Office of Research.
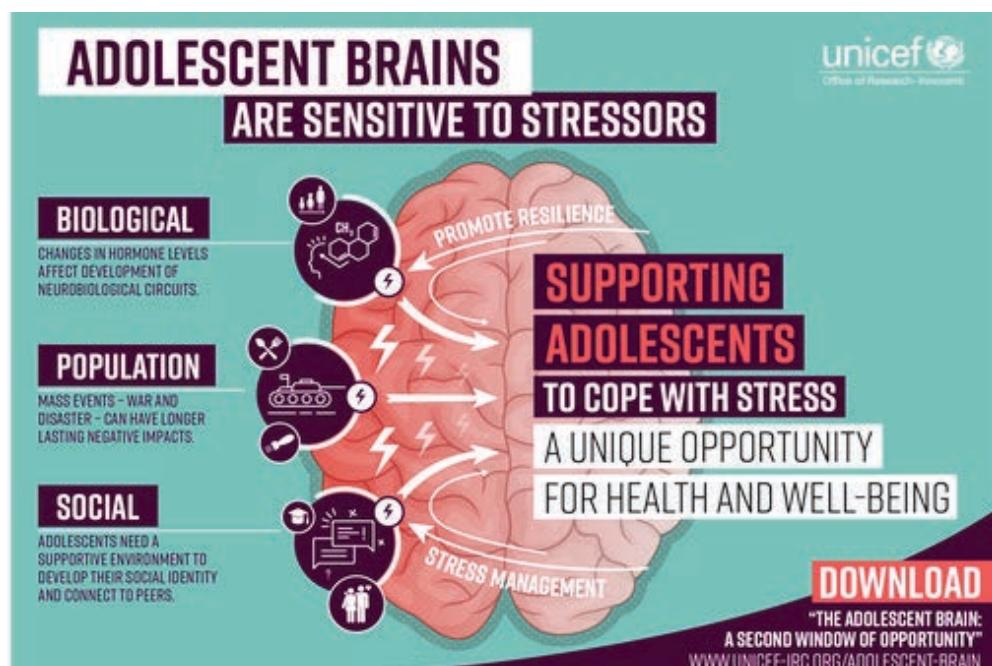
APPENDIX B: RELATIONALLY RESPONSIVE SERVICES: SAMPLE ONBOARDING LANGUAGE

Click here for sample onboarding language your organization can use to emphasize the importance of relationally responsive services.

APPENDIX C: FAMILY FINDING RESOURCES

The National Institute for Permanent Family Connectedness has resources available for those interested in learning more about Family Finding:
- www.familyfinding.org/index.html
- www.familyfinding.org/resourcesandpublications.html