



QUALITY IMPROVEMENT CENTER
ON ENGAGING YOUTH IN
FINDING PERMANENCY

Program Implementation Primer

Michigan: Youth Advocacy Project

Program Implementation Primer

Youth Advocacy Project

The Quality Improvement Center on Engaging Youth in Finding Permanency (QIC-EY) Program Implementation Primer introduces the *Youth Advocacy Project* (YAP) and serves as a comprehensive guide for child welfare agencies considering its implementation. Designed for agencies ready to make a meaningful impact, this guide goes beyond a simple overview. It shares the insights and tools needed to assess interest, to ensure infrastructure readiness and to navigate implementation with confidence. It includes the following:

- **Logic Model:** a framework that illustrates how program resources and activities lead to intended outcomes
- **Core Components:** the essential functions and practices that need to be delivered consistently and with fidelity to ensure effectiveness
- **Program Delivery:** the amount and intensity of participant engagement necessary for achieving program success
- **Implementation Supports:** foundational resources that enable high-quality delivery (such as staffing, training, policies, supervision, partnerships and data systems)
- **Evaluation:** systematic measurement of fidelity in program delivery and of outcomes, performed to monitor progress and to demonstrate program impact
- **Implementation Lessons Learned and Tips:** common barriers to implementation and practical strategies for overcoming them
- **Additional Program Materials:** practical aids — program manuals, logic models, fidelity checklists, scripts and other resources — that support consistent and effective delivery

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1. Program Overview

Decisions made in court hearings and case planning meetings directly impact youth in foster care. However, child welfare systems do not consistently encourage or support these young people to participate meaningfully in these processes. Research demonstrates that youths who engage in their own permanency planning gain decision-making skills, develop a sense of agency and become more likely to share information about their relationships and preferences that can support achieving permanency (Augsberger, 2014). Despite this evidence, youth participation in court hearings and permanency-related meetings remains inconsistent across child welfare systems.

Implementing a framework that promotes youth engagement through all stages of a child welfare case supports the youth in understanding system processes, developing self-advocacy skills and building the self-confidence to participate in decisions affecting the young person's life. Youth participation also benefits judges, caseworkers

and other professionals by providing critical insights into each youth's experiences, needs and permanency goals. These benefits can improve outcomes by leading to well-informed, appropriate decision-making.

The *Youth Advocacy Project* pairs youth age 12 and older in the child welfare system with "youth champions," who are trained professionals with lived experience in foster care. Youth champions provide consistent, relationship-based support. They work one-on-one with their assigned youths to increase each young person's participation in permanency planning meetings and court hearings in ways appropriate for the youth's developmental stage. Youth champions do not provide legal advice, advocate directly on behalf of youth or assume decision-making authority. Instead, they complement the roles of caseworkers, attorneys and caregivers by focusing specifically on youth voice, preparation and engagement in permanency-related processes.



"The YAP has been able to help [me] engage the youth in advocating for her... I know that she really enjoys having that youth champion as part of her team."

- caseworker

The YAP provides structured, individualized support to help youth build the knowledge, skills and self-confidence needed to engage effectively with the child welfare and court systems. Youths participating in the YAP receive

- education about state and federal child welfare laws, policies and youth rights;
- preparation for court hearings and permanency planning meetings, including explanations of court processes, hearing types and the roles of legal and child welfare professionals;
- support before, during and after permanency planning meetings and court hearings;
- education about permanency options and transition planning;
- skill-building focused on youth voice, self-advocacy and communication; and
- mentorship and support for clearly stating permanency goals and sharing those goals with caseworkers, attorneys, judges and other decision-makers.

Participation in the YAP is voluntary. Throughout the program, youths themselves choose their level of engagement in it. Caseworkers, court personnel and other designated partners of a child welfare system may refer youths to the YAP. Eligibility and referral practices are designed to ensure that youths approaching or already at key points of decision-making about permanency have access to consistent, relationship-based support for their self-advocacy.

The YAP builds on concepts initially developed through the Michigan Court Improvement Program (CIP). The YAP is informed further by the QIC-EY initiative and aligned with *Transforming Engagement: Keeping Children and Youth at the Center of Our Work* training for child welfare professionals (QIC-EY, 2025). Together, these approaches provide youths, caseworkers and court partners with a shared foundation for meaningful participation by youth in permanency planning and decision-making.



“Trying to find a permanent placement and knowing what I can do to help that and tell the court what I wanted... Yeah, that goal was accomplished.”

- youth program participant

2. Program Goals

Youths who understand the permanency planning and court processes are more likely to share their perspectives, to participate meaningfully in these processes that will impact their futures, and to identify their supportive connections—all of which will increase their likelihood of achieving lasting legal and relational permanency (Farmer, 2008; Friend, 2009; Welte et al., 2021). By providing a structure of ongoing preparation, individualized support and follow-up, the YAP strengthens youth engagement in decision-making and improves permanency outcomes.

THIS PROGRAM AIMS TO:

- equip youth with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence to participate in permanency planning and court processes through individualized support from a youth champion;
- strengthen relationships between youths and their caseworkers by supporting preparation, coordinated participation, plus follow-up after court hearings and case planning meetings;
- promote youth-driven decision-making by supporting youth to voice their preferences, goals and desired levels of participation in planning meetings and court settings;
- establish consistent, structured practices that integrate youth preparation, participation and follow-up into child welfare and court processes; and
- increase collaboration among youth, their designated youth champions, caseworkers and court personnel to support informed decision-making and improved permanency outcomes.

SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES

Results for youths participating in the program include

- increased attendance (virtually or physically) in court hearings;
- increased voice shared in court hearings and case planning meetings;
- increased knowledge of child welfare, child and youth rights, federal and state child welfare laws, advocacy skills and resources;
- more opportunities to speak for themselves during hearings and meetings impacting their futures;
- increased attendance during court hearings and case planning meetings in which changes in goals or permanency plans are discussed;
- reduced rates of placement changes; and
- an improved, informal support system.

LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

The program also aims over time to increase all of the following:

- rates of legal permanency
- presence and quality of relational and cultural permanency
- thoughtful judicial decisions in dependency cases
- stable permanence

3. Logic Model

A logic model illustrates how to achieve expected outputs and outcomes of a program through implementation of its core components and activities. A logic model needs to explain clearly how specific activities and services are expected to produce or to influence their associated short- and long-term outcomes.

Agency resources, goals and other factors will impact the logic model. The Additional Program Materials section of this primer includes an example of a logic model, which can be modified to fit a particular agency's specific approach to implementation.



4. Core Components

Core components are critical to the identity and the aim of each program. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) (Education Development Center, 2018), “Core components are the most essential and indispensable components of an intervention practice or program.” The core components of the YAP include the following:

Relationship-Based, Individualized Support and Skill Development for Youth

Each participating youth receives consistent, individualized support – appropriate for the young person’s developmental stage – from a trained youth champion with lived experience in foster care. This relationship forms the foundation for trust, engagement and psychological safety, allowing the youth to feel understood, supported and empowered. Through ongoing contacts, the youth champion provides information and emotional support; reinforces the youth’s self-advocacy, communication and practical skills; and helps the young person to navigate the child welfare system, education, employment, health, housing and interpersonal relationships. This individualized support is central to building each youth’s self-confidence, transferable advocacy skills and other life skills, as well as meaningful participation in permanency planning and court-related decision-making.

Preparation for Participation in Permanency Planning Meetings and Court Hearings

Youths receive developmental-stage appropriate preparation to understand permanency planning and court processes. This includes explaining the purposes of meetings and hearings as well as clarifying the roles of key decision-makers. It also includes guiding youths as they learn to use

planning tools to help them articulate their goals, preferences and choices of participation options. Structured preparation reduces confusion and anxiety, strengthens readiness and ensures that each youth can engage confidently in ways that feel comfortable.

Support for Youth Participation, Voice and Reflection

Youths participate in case planning meetings and court hearings in ways that reflect their comfort levels, developmental readiness and personal preferences. Youth champions help youths to clarify personal priorities, to identify desired outcomes and to determine how to communicate their perspectives. Development of these skills ensures intentional, authentic youth voice grounded in each young person’s own goals. After each permanency planning meeting and court hearing, youth champions facilitate structured reflection and debriefing to help youths process experiences, understand outcomes and identify next steps. This component reinforces learning, sustains youth engagement over time and ensures that youth participation remains part of ongoing permanency planning.

Adherence to Structured Stages

Adherence to the structured stages of the *Youth Advocacy Project* ensures that youths receive consistent, developmental-stage appropriate support and preparation throughout their engagements in permanency planning and court processes. Completing the YAP stages in sequence is essential because each stage builds on the skills, knowledge and self-confidence developed during the previous one. This progression helps each youth to understand expectations, to clarify goals and to plan how to include one's own viewpoint in meetings and hearings. Sequencing promotes continuity, reinforces learning and ensures that each youth is equipped and supported to participate confidently and meaningfully. Summaries of the nine YAP stages follow. The program manual includes additional details about each stage.

STAGE 1: INITIAL COORDINATION WITH CASEWORKER

Before engaging directly with a youth, the youth champion connects with the young person's assigned caseworker. The youth champion gathers information from the caseworker to understand the context of the youth's case and current permanency goals, to learn the schedule for upcoming meetings and hearings, to find out the youth's identified supports and to become aware of concerns. This coordination supports alignment across roles and ensures that engagement with the youth will be well-informed and purposeful.

STAGE 2: YOUTH INTAKE AND ENGAGEMENT

Youth participation in the YAP begins with the youth champion facilitating a standardized intake process during which the youth champion explains the purpose, scope and expectations of the program and clarifies that the youth's participation is voluntary. Intake may involve multiple contacts to support relationship-building and to allow the youth to get questions answered in order to make an informed decision about participating. Factors such as the youth's

developmental age, degree of trust in forming new relationships, individual learning style and information processing abilities may influence the number of contacts needed to complete intake.

STAGE 3: ONGOING ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN YOUTH AND YOUTH CHAMPION

Throughout the program, the youth champion maintains regular contacts with the youth to provide continuity and to continue building their relationship. Engagement is youth-driven. Contacts include a combination of in-depth meetings and brief check-ins, using methods appropriate to the youth's needs and preferences. Content of these contacts takes into account current case activity (e.g., changes in placement, permanency goals, upcoming meetings or hearings) plus sufficient time for preparation and reflection.

STAGE 4: STRUCTURED LEARNING AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT OF YOUTH

The youth participates in a series of formal learning sessions designed to increase understanding of the child welfare system, court processes and the young person's role in advocating for oneself. Learning activities focus on building knowledge, self-confidence and practical, self-advocacy skills. The youth champion reinforces these through ongoing interactions with the youth.

In addition to these formal sessions, the youth champion uses regularly scheduled, face-to-face meetings and weekly touchpoints to reinforce learning and to support developmental-stage appropriate skill-building between the youth's preparations for court hearings and case planning meetings. These conversations may include discussions about meeting educational needs and achieving success in school, building and maintaining healthy relationships, navigating peer conflict or bullying, identifying positive outlets for emotions and exploring hopes and goals for the future. The youth champion also supports ongoing permanency conversations and helps the youth to begin preparing for next steps that will reinforce continuity and sustained self-advocacy after the formal YAP program concludes.

STAGE 5: PREPARATION FOR COURT HEARINGS AND CASE PLANNING MEETINGS

Before each court hearing and case planning meeting, the youth champion works with the youth to prepare for participation. This includes discussing the purpose of the session, reviewing what to expect and supporting the youth in identifying goals, concerns and preferences. The youth champion employs planning tools, such as the *Youth Desired Outcomes Worksheet* (YDOW), to guide these conversations and to help the youth determine how to ensure that the young person's perspective will be represented in each session.

STAGE 6: REVIEW IN COORDINATION WITH CASEWORKER AND LEGAL PARTNERS

Before each court hearing and case planning meeting, the youth champion, the youth, the caseworker and, when applicable, legal partners review together the youth's goals and preferences. This coordination ensures their shared understanding of how the youth's voice will be elevated during these sessions. Coordination also supports consistency in communication during formal decision-making processes.

STAGE 7: YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN COURT HEARINGS AND CASE PLANNING MEETINGS

The youth participates in court hearings and case planning meetings in ways that reflect the young person's comfort level, readiness and preferences. Participation may take the form of speaking, attending to observe without speaking, or submitting written input. The youth champion helps the youth to prepare and provides support to promote confidence and emotional safety before and during the formal session.

STAGE 8: DEBRIEFING AND ACTION PLANNING AFTER THE HEARING OR MEETING

Following each court hearing and case planning meeting, the youth champion debriefs with the youth to reflect on the experience, to discuss

outcomes and to identify next steps. If the youth is not immediately ready to debrief, the youth champion ensures that the young person has appropriate supports and follows up within a defined time frame. Debriefing helps the youth to process experiences and reinforces ongoing engagement.

STAGE 9: FOLLOW-UP AND COORDINATION WITH CASEWORKER

After debriefing with the youth, the youth champion debriefs with the caseworker to discuss outcomes, to share the youth's perspectives and to agree on actions to take next. Together, they decide how to share information with the youth and how to integrate the youth's voice into ongoing case planning. This debriefing reinforces continuity and accountability.



5. Program Delivery (Intensity and Duration)

The YAP is designed for delivery over six months to provide youths with consistent, relationship-based support as they prepare for and participate in permanency-related decision-making. Program delivery emphasizes continuity, flexibility and responsiveness to the context of each youth's case while maintaining core expectations for youth engagement and participation. The six-month time frame allows for relationship-building between each youth and youth champion, structured preparation for court hearings and case planning meetings, plus follow-up support after those sessions. The youth completes the YAP program after meeting identified goals and after preparing for and participating in at least one court hearing and, when available, at least one case planning meeting. Participation in the YAP may conclude earlier or extend longer than six months, depending on the needs and case timelines of each youth.

The YAP may be delivered in person, virtually or through a hybrid approach, depending on geographic considerations, organizational capacity and each youth's needs.

Estimated Total Contact Time:

- **Weekly engagement between the youth champion and the youth:** approximately 10 to 12 hours of engagement from intake through weekly touchpoints, planning for court hearings and case planning meetings, debriefing and follow-up support
- **Structured learning sessions for youth:** 3 hours
- **Youth participation in court hearings and case planning meetings:** variable, depending on each youth's chosen method of participation

Delivery of the YAP is structured intentionally to allow its components to overlap and to reinforce one another. Youth engagement, learning, preparation, participation and follow-up are not discrete or linear activities. Instead, they are integrated throughout the six-month period, based on each youth's readiness and the context of the case. The timeline below illustrates a typical sequence for delivering the YAP. It is intended to guide implementation while allowing flexibility to respond to the needs and case timelines of individual youths.

Program Timeline

STAGE	ACTIVITY	ESTIMATED DURATION	FREQUENCY	TYPICAL TIMING
1	Initial Coordination With Caseworker	30 minutes	One time	Month 1
2	Youth Intake and Engagement	1 hour	One time	Month 1
3	Ongoing Youth Champion-Youth Engagement	15-60 minutes	Weekly	Months 1-6
4	Structured Learning and Skill Development of Youth	~3 hours total	Multiple sessions	Month 2
5	Preparation for Court Hearings and Case Planning Meetings	1.5 hours	Variable	As needed, when meetings and hearings are scheduled (typically Months 2–5)
6	Review in Coordination With Caseworker and Legal Partners	30-60 minutes	Variable	As needed, aligned with meetings and hearings (typically Months 2–5)
7	Youth Participation in Court Hearings and Case Planning Meetings	60 minutes each	Variable	As scheduled (typically Months 2–6)
8	Debriefing and Action Planning After Meetings and Hearings	30 minutes each	Variable	Immediately after meetings and hearings, as needed (typically Months 2–6)
9	Follow-up and Coordination With Caseworker	15-30 minutes	Variable	As needed, following meetings and hearings (typically Months 2–6)

After the YAP's formal program concludes, ongoing reinforcement of youth voice and continued youth engagement are essential to sustaining the skills, self-confidence and self-advocacy practices that each young person developed during the program. Caseworkers, supervisors, court professionals and other child welfare professionals play critical roles in this continuation. They need to establish clear expectations from the outset that youth engagement will not be a time-limited activity but rather a foundational approach to permanency planning and decision-making. They need to continue integrating youth goals and preferences into ongoing case planning and court-related discussions. This will reinforce that the program's purpose extends beyond the formal period of youth champion involvement; and it will embed youth engagement as a lasting, normalized core practice within the child welfare system.



6. Implementation Supports

Staffing

Effective program delivery requires qualified administrative and program staff who have the skills to support youth engagement, to facilitate orientation activities and to manage logistics. To implement this program effectively, child welfare agencies need to determine the necessary number of staff members, to consider staff-to-youth ratios and to plan for recruitment and retention. They also need to anticipate potential barriers to implementation, such as turnover, limited expertise and competing responsibilities.

Effective implementation of the YAP requires a dedicated youth champion role and designated supervisory support. Youth champions may be employed as staff or as personnel under contract. Each youth champion needs the skills and experience to engage authentically with youth and to support youth voice in complex, decision-making environments. At a minimum, the role of youth champion requires relevant education, experience, or both, in human services or a related field. It also requires lived experience in the foster care system plus demonstrated advocacy for youth or experience with youth engagement. Duties of designated supervisors include overseeing and coaching youth champions and monitoring program delivery.

Each youth champion typically carries a caseload of 12 to 15 youths. Caseload size depends on program intensity and factors such as each youth's developmental needs. Many of the youngest youths need more than average one-on-one time and support. Local geography, including the distance between youths in a caseload, can affect caseload size. Caseloads may be smaller in rural counties than in urban ones. However,

smaller caseloads also may result when multiple youths living in close proximity all need extensive, in-person support. Ideally, the design of each caseload will allow sufficient time for relationship-building, youth preparation, coordination and follow-up. This will ensure consistency of engagement between each youth and the young person's youth champion.

Training and Coaching

Effective implementation of a program requires both training and coaching to ensure program fidelity and optimal quality. Plans for training need to describe the program's curriculum and to detail who will be trained, who will conduct the training, the length of the initial training and any booster sessions, plus certification requirements that may apply. Coaching and supervision provide support for staff members as they apply the model in practice; they also maintain adherence to program standards. Coaching may include individual or group sessions scheduled at regular intervals. These sessions need clearly defined start and end times. Agency leaders need to determine the structure and frequency of coaching sessions to ensure that their staff members receive support consistently while delivering the program as intended.

Training and coaching are critical to ensure that legal partners, youth champions and other child welfare professionals understand the program model and can deliver its core components with high quality and consistency.

Youth champions complete structured, pre-service training before receiving their assignments to youths. This orientation to the YAP prepares them

to engage authentically with youths, to promote youth voice and to support youth self-advocacy in permanency planning and court processes. Training typically covers strategies for youth engagement, child welfare and court processes, role clarity, ethics and use of program tools. This training equips youth champions with the knowledge and resources they will need to help youths serve as active participants in decisions affecting the young persons' lives.

Ongoing coaching and supervision of youth champions supports high-quality implementation and fidelity of the YAP program. Youth champions participate in regularly scheduled sessions of individual supervision and periodic group supervision. Designated supervisors and program leaders who have the capacity and the training to support persons in roles requiring lived experience facilitate these sessions. Coaching supports problem-solving, skill development and reflection on practice while also addressing the emotional demands of the role. Because youth champions bring lived experience to their role, supervisors need to know how to recognize the potential for youth champions to experience secondary trauma and role-related triggers. They also need to provide support for youth champions to maintain professional boundaries and personal well-being.

Caseworkers and legal partners may receive role-specific orientation and training in the YAP program. These sessions clarify expectations, describe how to elevate youth voice and reinforce collaborative practices. A program-specific training for key program staff members focuses on reviewing core components and building confidence for implementing the YAP. Training content also is specific to the particular implementing jurisdiction. Participating caseworkers may receive coaching or consultation to support their collaboration with youth champions and to reinforce practices for youth engagement. Caseworker supervisors trained in the YAP model provide ongoing coaching and support. Meanwhile, caseworkers work alongside youth champions to encourage the elevation

of youth voice. Supervisors also respond to questions and help to address challenges that arise during implementation.

Youth champions and caseworkers may need additional training to ensure that they possess the knowledge and skills to support effective engagement with youth. For example, the QIC-EY's *Transforming Engagement: Keeping Children and Youth at the Center of Our Work* (QIC-EY, 2025) training provides practical strategies for achieving authentic engagement with youth. It equips caseworkers and other staff to support youth participation in permanency planning and decision-making. The *QIC-EY Child and Youth Engagement Online Training for Legal Professionals* (QIC-EY, 2025) aims to strengthen the capacity of judges and attorneys to engage meaningfully with youth in court processes and legal decision-making.

Policies and Procedures

Clear policies and procedures are essential to support implementation of a program and to ensure fidelity in its delivery. This includes documentation of any adaptations required to integrate the model into existing agency practices. It also includes identification of potential barriers that could hinder implementation. Establishing formal guidance helps staff members to understand expectations, promotes consistency across the intervention group and supports successful delivery of the selected model.

The program must be supported and integrated within the agency's overall policies and practice expectations. It is important to consider whether policy modifications or additions are needed to administer this program.

Detailed procedural guidance for the program can be found in the Program Manual, located in the Additional Program Materials section of this primer. Some general considerations are noted below.

Some policies and procedures may need to be established or modified to implement the YAP

program and to support its ongoing delivery. For example, policies related to information sharing, documentation and collaboration between youth champions and caseworkers may need to be established or clarified.

Written procedures need to define how to enroll youths into the program and how to assign them to youth champions. They need to outline the role and responsibilities of youth champions. They also need to describe how to document and to integrate into case planning and court processes the information gathered through youth engagement. Clear guidance regarding what information can be shared with youths — and how to communicate their preferences and participation goals to legal partners and caseworkers — promotes consistency, transparency and fidelity to the model.

Fidelity

To ensure implementation of this program as intended, fidelity measurements and protocols are used to assess whether practitioners are delivering the core components of the model. Fidelity tracking needs to include forms to capture key details about each session and meeting, such as start and end times, who delivered the program, the delivery format (in person, virtual, hybrid) and the time spent preparing for and following up after the session.

Fidelity monitoring supports consistent implementation of the YAP and helps to ensure that participating youths receive the intended experience from the program. Fidelity tools, such as component-specific checklists and standardized documentation forms, may be needed to record the delivery of core components and to maintain fidelity throughout the program's nine stages.

Examples of information captured through fidelity tools include

- youth champion–youth engagement that occurred and the primary focus of each engagement (e.g., relationship-building, preparation, skill development);

- activities to prepare youths for their court hearings and case planning meetings, including discussion of participation options and youth preferences;
- youth participation in court hearings and the form of participation selected by each youth;
- debriefing after each hearing and meeting, including the next steps identified during debriefing; and
- coordination between youth champions, caseworkers and legal partners to support integration of youth voice into ongoing case planning and court processes.

Fidelity tools also may capture basic contextual information, such as mode of delivery or approximate time spent. Supervisors and program leaders can review this data to inform their coaching, to identify challenges to implementation and to guide continuous quality improvement.

Data Systems

Data systems are necessary to support program implementation and to ensure accurate monitoring of fidelity and outcomes. Effective data systems require clear processes for collecting and managing information about the delivery of core components as well as indicators of program impact and satisfaction. Necessary modifications to hardware, software and data format should be identified early, along with potential barriers to timely implementation (e.g., limitations of system flexibility or competing priorities of information technology staff). Well-defined expectations and technological tools promote consistent data collection, strengthen accountability and support continuous evaluation of the selected model.

Data systems need to support the collection of data about program implementation and its fidelity, including

- assignment of youths to their youth champions and the dates of their meetings and touchpoints;

- frequency and type of contacts between youth champions and their assigned youths;
- completion of core program components (e.g., youth intake, learning activities, preparation for and participation in court hearings and case planning meetings, debriefing); and
- case planning meetings, including the form of participation selected by each youth.

Data systems also can support collection of data about short-term outcomes. For example, this can include youth-reported understanding of court and case planning processes, degree of confidence in self-advocacy and perceptions of youth voice being heard in decision-making. Youth-reported data may be collected through surveys or tools structured for feedback and administered in a manner appropriate for each youth's developmental stage. Some youths may need assistance using these tools.

Long-term outcomes related to permanency may be tracked by using child welfare data recorded by administrators or tools that document case review findings. These data may include indicators of progress toward legal permanency and stability. Typically, caseworkers and program staff collaborate to collect such data. This data can be used not only to monitor fidelity and outcomes but also to support supervision, program refinement and continuous quality improvement.

Program Experts

Each program expert brings specialized knowledge, experience or both in the design, implementation and ongoing delivery of the program. Experts may include the model developer, the model purveyor and other individuals who can provide guidance regarding program fidelity, best practices and effective strategies for implementation. Experts also may support adaptation of the program to fit local contexts, including cultural considerations and relational permanency practices. Experts help to ensure that the program is delivered as intended and that the needs of youth and their families are met.

For more information about implementation of the YAP in Michigan, please contact Sarah Goad, MSW, Manager, Foster Care, Older Youth and Education Program Office, Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, at GoadS@michigan.gov.

Partner Systems and Community Linkages

Successful implementation of a program by child welfare agencies relies on strong partnerships with external systems and collaborators, such as mental health providers, educational institutions, courts, substance use treatment providers and other relevant organizations. Child welfare agencies need to identify partners already engaged with them as well as those to be brought on board. Agency staff also need to determine the strategies, resources and support necessary to engage effectively with these partners. Strong collaboration ensures coordinated services, expands program reach and supports positive outcomes for youth and their families.

Effective implementation of the YAP depends on collaboration among child welfare agencies, courts and key partners of the child welfare system who support youth involvement in permanency planning and court processes. Strong partnerships ensure consistent support for youth participation and meaningful integration of youth perspectives into decision-making.

Legal partners, including attorneys and other legal representatives for youth as well as Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), play critical roles supporting youth participation in court proceedings. Collaboration with legal partners helps to align efforts to prepare youths for their participation, to clarify expectations for youth involvement and to elevate youth voice in ways that are developmental-stage appropriate and responsive to court practices. The Court Improvement Program (CIP) is an important partner in implementation of the YAP. Involvement of CIP personnel supports alignment with broader efforts to achieve

court improvement and youth engagement, strengthens coordination between child welfare agencies and courts, and helps to embed practices supporting youth voice within existing structures of the court system. Engagement with CIP personnel also may enhance training, communication and continuous improvement related to youth participation.

Caregivers, including parents who are fostering and other placement providers, are essential partners supporting youth participation. Caregivers need to receive information proactively about the purpose of the YAP and the benefits of youth participation. These benefits include increased understanding of case processes, strengthened self-advocacy skills and improved engagement in permanency planning. Clear communication with caregivers enhances logistical coordination, reinforces youth participation and helps to produce a supportive environment for youth engagement.

Other Resources (Meeting Space, Materials, etc.)

Implementation of a program often requires access to tangible resources, including meeting space, materials and supplies for activities, plus technology for virtual or hybrid delivery. Additional considerations may include travel expenses for youth champions. Availability of these resources is essential for smooth program operation and participant engagement.

Implementation of the YAP requires access to basic resources and materials to support the program's delivery and to reinforce youth engagement across the court and child welfare systems. These resources may include educational materials for youths that build their understanding of court processes, case planning and youth rights. Among the structured tools for youth preparation is the *Youth Desired Outcomes Worksheet* (YDOW). The YDOW helps youths to identify their goals, preferences and desired levels of participation in court hearings and case planning meetings, ensuring that youth voice

will be communicated clearly and consistently to caseworkers and legal partners. The YAP program manual provides detailed guidance about the use of program tools, including the YDOW.

Other resources may include informational materials for caregivers and placement providers to increase their awareness of the program and the benefits of youth participation, reference materials for court and legal partners to support consistent expectations for youth engagement, plus communication tools to help these partners stay informed about program goals and progress. Youth champions also need access to current, relevant, informational resources (e.g., about education, employment and health) to assist youths with referrals and service navigation as needs arise. Engagement supports — such as transportation assistance, access to technology and other practical accommodations — may be necessary to reduce barriers to youth participation. Together, these resources complement the core components of the program and support consistent, youth-centered implementation.



7. Evaluation

This program was implemented and rigorously evaluated in Michigan, based on a logic model, a theory of change and the following question:

For youth in Michigan 12-18 years of age currently in the child welfare system in selected counties, what is the effect of the Youth Advocacy Project intervention compared with youth receiving service as usual on their ability to advocate and to engage effectively in case planning efforts and judicial decision-making to advance the attainment of permanency?

To answer this question, a research team carried out a study with a quasi-experimental design in which an intervention group received implementation of the program model and a comparison group received services as usual. The team collected fidelity data from workers in the intervention group to measure and to understand better the delivery of the model. Baseline and follow-up surveys of youth outcomes, case review forms and administrative data were collected from both groups to learn how the program impacted actual outcomes. The research team also performed youth focus groups to get open-ended feedback from youths about their experiences in the program. Finally, a cost evaluation was performed to understand the cost of implementing and delivering the program. Highlights of the evaluation results can be found on the QIC-EY website: www.qic-ey.org.

8. Implementation Lessons Learned and Tips

Successful implementation of the Youth Advocacy Project requires thoughtful planning, coordination and clear communication. The following guidance is organized into two parts:

- 1. Program Planning and Preparation:** overarching lessons learned related to setting up the program and its youth preparation and engagement components
- 2. Stage-Specific Lessons Learned and Tips:** practical guidance for implementing each stage of the program, from youth intake through follow-up and debriefing after court hearings and case planning meetings

Program Planning and Preparation

Begin by establishing a strong foundation to ensure smooth execution of the program.

FORMATION OF A PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION TEAM

Lessons Learned

- A cross-disciplinary planning team strengthens coordination and produces a sense of shared ownership among team members.
- Early relationship building with internal and external partners supports buy-in and alignment of partners with agency staff.
- Clearly defined roles for logistics, content development, youth engagement and evaluation are important.

Tips

- Form a planning team that includes the following:
 - » court partners
 - » child welfare professionals
 - » individuals who have lived experience
 - » agency leaders
 - » placement providers
- Clarify responsibilities early to streamline communication and decision-making.
- Schedule regular check-ins for monitoring progress, troubleshooting challenges and supporting team members' alignment.

IDENTIFICATION OF KEY PARTNERS

Lessons Learned

- Program success depends on collaboration with a range of court personnel and child welfare partners, including parents who are fostering and other placement providers.
- Individuals who have lived experience provide critical insights about meaningful engagement with youth.

Tips

- Identify and engage with all potential partners early. These include the following:
 - » Court Improvement Programs (CIP)
 - » Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)
 - » judges and advocacy organizations
 - » caseworkers, supervisors, agency leaders and Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) staff
 - » parents who are fostering and other placement providers
- Involve individuals with lived experience, whether currently or formerly in foster care, to inform program design and implementation.

PLAN FOR PROGRAM OPERATIONS AND LOGISTICS

Lessons Learned

- Staffing stability is essential. During implementation planning is the best time to address proactively challenges related to recruitment, onboarding and turnover that may affect program capacity.
- Although initial training is critical, it does not prepare youth champions fully for the emotional intensity, communication demands and cross-system coordination required by their role.
- Youth champions with lived experience benefit from structured onboarding that balances technical instruction with reflective and trauma-informed supports. Onboarding needs to establish expectations for ongoing coaching and supervision.
- Youth champions benefit from ongoing support from their supervisors, who provide guidance regarding program processes, clarify next steps and answer questions that arise during complex case or court-related activities.
- Supervisors need specialized preparation to support youth champions in lived-experience roles effectively. Supervisors need to understand trauma exposure, role-related triggers and the importance of keeping their communications with youth champions reflective and trauma-focused.

Tips

- Prepare a logistics plan that includes
 - » staffing structure, caseload expectations and supervisory coverage for youth champions;
 - » a budget for youth champion staffing, training, supervision and supports for youth engagement;
 - » timelines for recruitment, onboarding and contracting or hiring; and
 - » consideration of geographic factors such as court locations and travel time for youth champions.
- Ensure ongoing supervision and support structures by
 - » providing regular supervision and emotional support, beginning during onboarding;
 - » monitoring workload and emotional demands to support staff retention and to prevent burnout; and
 - » providing opportunities for youth champions to ask questions and to receive real-time, practical guidance.

PLAN FOR PROGRAM OPERATIONS AND LOGISTICS (CONT...)

Lessons Learned

- Clear role expectations and early clarification of boundaries, along with opportunities to process the emotional impact of the work, all help to prevent role confusion, to support healthy professional boundaries and to reduce turnover.
- Clear, efficient enrollment processes are critical to avoid delays and missed opportunities for youth participation, particularly for youths placed in congregate care.
- Logistical factors influence youth participation. These include transportation, access to technology, YAP-informed placement providers and youth readiness, all of which require proactive planning.
- Consistent documentation and processes for sharing information between youth champions and caseworkers support continuity and reduce barriers to implementation.
- Timely communications – such as regular updates, briefings and informational materials – help to ensure that partners and placement providers understand program goals, expectations and progress. Clear points of contact and consistent messages support transparency, coordination and sustained collaboration between the court and child welfare systems.

Tips

- Strengthen supervisory practices by
 - » preparing supervisors to use an approach to coaching that is trauma-informed and reflective;
 - » recognizing and responding to the impact of lived experience on youth champions' work; and
 - » providing check-ins focused on navigating the steps in the program, problem-solving to address challenges and reinforcing the correct implementation of core components.
- Establish workflow for enrollment that clearly defines
 - » youth eligibility and referral sources,
 - » roles and responsibilities for connecting youths with their assigned youth champions, and
 - » mechanisms for tracking enrollment progress and identifying barriers.
- Coordinate proactively with court personnel, other legal partners and placement providers to
 - » ensure consistent application of practices to support youth participation; and
 - » develop a consistent rhythm for communications with key partners (e.g., brief updates, points of contact, regularly scheduled check-ins) to support shared understanding of program status, expectations and adjustments.
- Enhance coordination and collaboration by
 - » ensuring that placement providers and caregivers receive timely information about the program and their roles in supporting youth participation, including expectations related to scheduling, attendance, and communication;
 - » building flexibility into scheduling; and
 - » staggering enrollment of youths during initial implementation to allow time for youth champions to establish relationships as well as for program staff to refine coordination processes and to make adjustments that accommodate the schedules of court hearings and case planning meetings.

Core Component-Specific Lessons Learned and Tips

COMPONENT 1: RELATIONSHIP-BASED SUPPORT AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT FOR EACH YOUTH

Lessons Learned

- The structured, six-month program depends on early coordination with caseworkers to establish a foundation for collaboration and sustained engagement with youth.
- Lack of role clarity between youth champions and caseworkers can delay youth enrollment and reduce overall program effectiveness.
- Consistent, predictable, one-on-one engagement is the primary driver of trust and sustained youth participation.
- Youths who clearly understand that their participation in the YAP is voluntary and youth-driven engage most actively in the program.
- Youth self-confidence, understanding and retention increase when learning is paced appropriately, connected with each young person's own case experiences and reinforced through one-on-one support.
- Youths benefit from support that includes discussions about self-identity, relationships, goals and overall well-being along with preparation to participate in meetings and hearings.
- Placement changes and case disruptions can interrupt youth engagement. Resuming engagement requires renewed outreach, coordination and relationship-building.

Tips

- Provide training for caseworkers to clarify the youth champion role, expectations for that role and processes for coordinating with partners in the YAP program.
- Initiate early communication between youth champions and caseworkers to align their timelines, upcoming court hearings and case planning meetings and preferred methods of communicating with each other.
- Reinforce that youth champions complement – not replace – existing professional roles in child welfare.
- Maintain consistent contacts with each youth, including brief, weekly touchpoints and periodic, in-depth meetings to support relationship-building and the young person's skill development.
- Deliver learning in manageable, step-by-step segments focused on court processes, permanency planning and self-advocacy.
- Reinforce learning during one-on-one conversations by connecting the lessons to each youth's real-life experiences and case context.
- Adapt engagement and learning approaches to accommodate different learning styles, preferences and accessibility.
- Through ongoing engagement with each youth, reinforce self-advocacy and communication skills, explore the youth's interests and goals, and respond to emerging needs.
- While maintaining overall consistency of contacts, adjust their frequency, format and intensity based upon each youth's readiness, preferences and circumstances.
- Anticipate placement changes and disruptions. Proactively re-establish connections with youths to maintain continuity of support.
- Reaffirm each youth's autonomy and right to make one's own choices throughout the program, especially during transitions and periods of disruption.
- Monitor workloads and emotional demands on youth champions to support their effectiveness and to reduce the risk of burnout.

COMPONENT 2: PREPARATION FOR PERMANENCY PLANNING MEETINGS AND COURT HEARINGS

Lessons Learned

- Without adequate preparation, youths may feel overwhelmed, anxious or disengaged during court hearings and case planning meetings.
- Participation by youths improves when preparation addresses their emotional readiness as well as their understanding of information given to them about roles, processes and subjects of hearings and meetings.
- When legal partners and caseworkers share a clear, coordinated approach to preparing youths for court hearings and case planning meetings, youth voice is strengthened. Without this alignment, even well-prepared youths may feel unsupported or uncertain about their roles.

Tips

- Begin preparation early in program implementation. Use structured tools to help youths identify their goals and preferred methods of participation in court hearings and permanency planning meetings. Prompt youths to consider questions they want to ask during these sessions.
- Clearly explain expectations for meetings, including their purposes, the roles of participants and the potential outcomes.
- Tailor the intensity, pace and depth of preparation to fit each youth's readiness, prior experiences and degree of comfort with participation.

COMPONENT 3: SUPPORT FOR YOUTH VOICE, PARTICIPATION AND REFLECTION

Lessons Learned

- Youths benefit from having meaningful control in choosing how they will participate, whether in person, virtually or through alternative methods.
- Support before and during meetings increases self-confidence of youths and reduces their anxiety.
- Some youths may need help processing their case outcomes and emotional responses following meetings or hearings.
- Balancing words of encouragement with realistic expectations about court hearing results and case planning outcomes is important.
- Follow-up communication with each youth's caseworker supports continuity and reinforces youth engagement after court hearings and case planning meetings.
- The formal program concludes after six months, but efforts to elevate youth voice need to continue as part of standard child welfare practice.

COMPONENT 3: SUPPORT FOR YOUTH VOICE, PARTICIPATION AND REFLECTION (CONT...)

Tips

- Support youths when they select their preferred levels and methods of participation.
- Maintain contact with youths before and on the days of their permanency planning meetings and court hearings to ensure that they feel prepared and supported.
- Coordinate logistics with placement providers and other partners to reduce barriers to youth participation
- Debrief after meetings and hearings as soon as appropriate while staying responsive to each youth's emotional readiness.
- Balance encouragement with realistic discussion of outcomes and next steps.
- To support continuity, promptly share relevant outcomes and next action steps with caseworkers.
- Confirm how to communicate the outcomes of planning meetings and court hearings to each youth and how to let these results inform ongoing case planning.
- Reinforce continuity of youth voice throughout each youth's participation in the YAP and after the formal program ends.
- Clarify who assumes responsibility for ongoing youth engagement after program completion. This is important to ensure continuity of youth voice when youths are no longer meeting with their youth champions.

COMPONENT 4: COORDINATION OF SUPPORT WITH CASEWORKERS AND LEGAL PARTNERS

Lessons Learned

- Misalignment among youth champions, caseworkers and legal partners may result in inconsistent or unclear communication of youth preferences.
- Clear, intentional coordination processes strengthen shared accountability for supporting and elevating youth voice.

Tips

- Schedule brief touchpoints with youth champions, caseworkers and legal partners before permanency planning meetings and court hearings to ensure alignment regarding youth goals, preferences and plans for participation.
- Clarify how to communicate youth perspectives, including who will share this information, with whom to share it and in what format.
- Maintain a consistent rhythm of communication with partners to support transparency, alignment and shared understanding of each other's roles.

9. Additional Program Materials

Find program materials that
support implementation here:

SCAN HERE



CLICK HERE



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QUALITY IMPROVEMENT CENTER
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