



QUALITY IMPROVEMENT CENTER
ON ENGAGING YOUTH IN
FINDING PERMANENCY

Program Implementation Primer

**Montana: Foster Care Orientation
and Permanency-Focused,
Youth-Centered Meetings Program**

Program Implementation Primer

Foster Care Orientation and Permanency-Focused, Youth-Centered Meetings Program

The Quality Improvement Center on Engaging Youth in Finding Permanency (QIC-EY) Program Implementation Primer introduces the Foster Care Orientation and Permanency-Focused, Youth-Centered Meetings Program 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

Youth engagement in permanency planning is strengthened when young people understand the child welfare system, their rights within it and the options available to them for achieving legal and relational permanence. Yet many youths in the foster care system lack clear, consistent information about why they are in care, the roles of the professionals working with them, and how they can participate meaningfully in decisions that affect their lives.

The *Foster Care Orientation and Permanency-Focused, Youth-Centered Meetings Program* addresses these challenges by offering youths structured opportunities to understand the foster care process and to engage actively in their own permanency planning. This program equips youths with the knowledge, self-confidence and support they need to take an informed, active role in decisions about their relational and legal permanence.

The program includes two key elements. First, youths participate in a foster care orientation conducted by agency staff who explain permanency options, youth rights and expectations within the child welfare system. Second, the youths engage in permanency-focused meetings centered on themselves. These meetings focus on strengthening youths' connections with supportive adults and developing youth-driven plans for permanency.

Through these combined elements, youths gain more clarity about their situations plus opportunities to share their voices and preferences in permanency planning and court processes. The program supports ongoing follow-up between youths and their caseworkers to reinforce youth understanding of these processes and to promote progress toward achieving each youth's permanency goals.

This program is designed to support youths in identifying supportive adult connections and actively participating in developing plans for their legal permanence. It builds upon Youth-Centered Meeting (YCM) (Policy Management - Health and Human Services, 2026) practices for youths ages 14 and older. It is informed further by the QIC-EY initiative and aligned with the *Transforming Engagement: Keeping Children and Youth at the Center of Our Work* (QIC-EY, 2025) training for child welfare professionals. By strengthening the focus on permanency within existing child welfare practice, the program aims to establish a foundation for meaningful engagement of youths in planning and decision-making.



“Most of my kids like the (Permanency focused) Youth Centered Meetings...they get to say what they want and also we don’t talk about treatment or behaviors. We talk about ‘What are you going to need?’ And I think they like that approach.”

- caseworker

2. Program Goals

Research results indicate that youths who receive support to understand the child welfare system, their cases and their permanency options are more likely to share their perspectives, to identify their supportive connections and to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect their lives.

Youths are more likely to produce permanency plans that reflect their own goals and preferences and to carry out those plans successfully when they have the support of adults whom they can trust, including child welfare professionals.

Child welfare practice that includes enhanced communication and collaboration with youths is critical to supporting successful transition and permanency planning (Scannapieco et al., 2007). Young persons who have developed trusted relationships and social capital have a greater likelihood than other youths in care of achieving not only legal permanence but also success and satisfaction with their lives after they leave foster care (White et al., 2015).

For youths who have been in care for several years, particularly those older than 16, child welfare practitioners often de-emphasize permanency planning and concentrate on teaching independent-living skills. Research results demonstrate that older youths who maintain their connections with supportive adults experience enhanced well-being and resilience. They also are less likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors (Munson & McMillen, 2009).

The *Foster Care Orientation and Permanency-Focused, Youth-Centered Meetings Program* is designed specifically to strengthen youth understanding of and participation in permanency planning as well as to promote self-advocacy. The program also aims to support child welfare agencies in developing more consistent, youth-centered permanency practices and embedding

them into agency culture. Through structured orientation, follow-up with caseworkers and Youth-Centered Meetings, the program provides youths with opportunities to increase their understanding of the permanency planning process, to build relationships with supportive adults and to participate meaningfully in planning for their legal permanency.



“I enjoyed that time that I was spending with that youth. Just even those conversations, and having the time, carving out the time to have the conversations. And it was really just a fulfilling feeling to feel like you’re doing what you should be doing as a caseworker for youth in care.”

- caseworker

AS A RESULT OF IMPLEMENTING THE PROGRAM, AGENCIES WILL

- increase meaningful youth engagement in permanency planning, ensuring that youths become active partners in decisions affecting their lives;
- instill knowledge, self-confidence and self-advocacy skills in youths to support their informed participation in the child welfare system's permanency planning process;
- strengthen connections between youths and their supportive adults by helping the youths learn how to identify and to formalize long-term, committed relationships with these individuals;
- improve the quality of permanency plans by ensuring that each youth's plan aligns with the young person's own goals, preferences and network of support; and
- promote collaborative, youth-centered, child welfare practices so that caseworkers consistently use strategies and tools focused on youth engagement in achieving permanency outcomes and that their supervisors support them in sustaining this focus.

SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES

As a result of participating in the program, youths will gain

- a better understanding of the child welfare system, the permanency planning process and their own cases;
- a sense of empowerment and increased confidence in their role within this process, including ideas for ways to participate;
- improved self-advocacy skills;
- improved relationships with their caseworkers;
- increased satisfaction with child welfare services, relational casework and each youth's level of engagement in permanency planning;
- active partnership in developing their own permanency plans with their caseworkers; and
- a Permanency Pact for each youth with at least one supportive adult.

LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

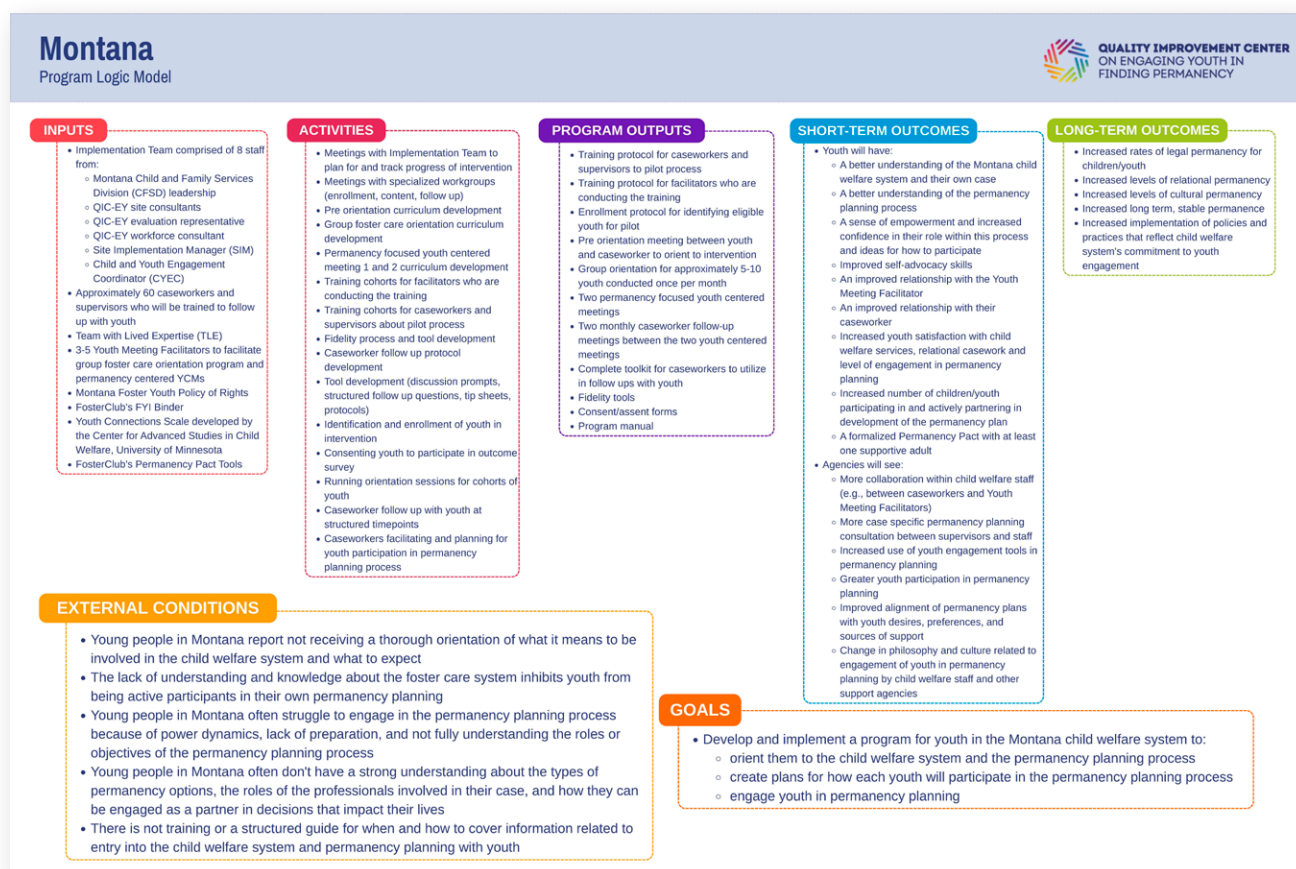
The program also aims to contribute over time to increases in each of the following:

- rates of legal permanency for children and youth
- presence and quality of relational and cultural permanency
- implementation of policies and practices that reflect the commitment of child welfare systems to practices that encourage youth engagement
- number of children and youth who participate in planning their own permanency
- 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 *Foster Care Orientation and Permanency-Focused, Youth-Centered Meetings Program* include the following:

Relationship-Centered Support Through Caseworkers

This component ensures that each youth has a designated support person — typically the youth’s caseworker — who provides consistent, relationship-based guidance through all six stages of the program. Through intentional, recurring contacts, the caseworker builds trust, helps the youth understand what to expect in upcoming meetings and offers emotional and informational scaffolding. The caseworker’s ongoing support during pre-orientation, follow-up visits and preparation for Youth-Centered Meetings helps the youth to process information, to track progress toward goals and to refine the plan for the young person’s permanency. This structured relationship serves as the primary mechanism for strengthening engagement, continuity and safety to enable the youth to ask questions, to process information and to make informed decisions about supportive connections and involvement in the foster care system. Without this structured support, youths are less likely to participate meaningfully in the system’s processes. Lack of youth engagement would limit the program’s ability to achieve its goal of well-informed youths who have developed long-term, stable connections with trusted adults.

Foster Care Orientation

Youths in the program participate as a group in an orientation structured to build their understanding of the foster care system, youth rights and options for participating in permanency planning and decision-making. The orientation introduces foundational concepts and tools for youth engagement. Gaining this critical knowledge helps youths to understand how to use their own voices to engage with adults involved in their care. By normalizing the concept of active participation, the orientation prepares youths to take an informed role in the Youth-Centered Meetings that follow the orientation. Without this orientation, youths may feel unprepared or disempowered, which can reduce their engagement and limit the effectiveness of subsequent program activities.

Relationship Mapping and Connection Tools

This component focuses on helping youths to identify their meaningful, supportive relationships with caring adults. During one-on-one meetings with their caseworkers, youths learn to use tools — including the Youth Connections Scale (Frey et al., 2008) — structured to help them consider the persons in their lives who provide them with guidance, support and trust. This prompts them to engage in conversations about their existing and potential connections. Youths continue to

explore these connections during their first Youth-Centered Meeting, when they confirm the adults they have identified as connections and decide which potential connections to develop further. Over time, these activities lay the foundation for youths and their supportive adults to formalize their relationships in agreements called “Permanency Pacts,” (FosterClub, 2006) which can lead to long-term, stable connections for the youths. Without this structured exploration, youths may struggle to recognize and to build relationships that can support their well-being and, eventually, successful permanency outcomes.

Youth-Driven Engagement in Permanency Planning

In Youth-Centered Meetings, youths actively set goals, identify their desired supports and express their preferences. Each of these meetings includes a youth, the youth’s caseworker, other persons on the youth’s support team and a facilitator. The facilitator guides the discussion to help the youth articulate goals and to ensure that action steps in the young person’s permanency plan align with the youth’s priorities. This component moves youths from passive involvement to active participation. It connects their relationship mapping and lessons learned about youth engagement to actual decision-making. Absence of youth-driven engagement would diminish the program’s potential to promote youth agency and empowerment and to achieve positive outcomes.

Sequential Program Design

The program’s six stages — pre-orientation, group orientation, caseworker follow-up, first Youth-Centered Meeting, additional follow-up visits and second Youth-Centered Meeting — progress sequentially to reinforce learning, to build relationships and to maximize youth engagement. This linear sequence ensures that youths receive preparation to engage in permanency planning plus opportunities for practice and reflection at each stage. The program’s structure supports each youth’s full comprehension and self-confidence in participating in the foster care system and developing connections with supportive adults. Without this structured progression, continuity and engagement are at risk, limiting youth understanding and the effectiveness of activities to build supportive relationships.



STAGE 1: PRE-ORIENTATION WITH CASEWORKER

Each youth meets one-on-one with an assigned caseworker. Together, they review the youth's case, develop an understanding of the adults involved in the case and discuss the upcoming orientation. The caseworker introduces tools such as the Youth Connections Scale and sets the stage for the youth's participation in the program. A copy of the FosterClub's FYI Binder is given to each youth for storing important documents, including a copy of the youth's case plan.

STAGE 2: FOSTER CARE ORIENTATION

The youth participates in a structured group session with other youths in foster care that builds on their pre-orientation discussions. This session introduces fundamental information about the foster care system, youth rights and opportunities for youths to engage in decision-making. During this orientation, each youth also learns about tools for exploring supportive relationships with adults.

STAGE 3: CASEWORKER FOLLOW-UP

The caseworker guides the youth in using relationship mapping tools, reflecting on supportive adults and preparing for the first Youth-Centered Meeting.

STAGE 4: FIRST YOUTH-CENTERED MEETING (YCM)

In this facilitator-led meeting, the youth has the opportunity to identify supportive adults and to develop actionable steps toward building meaningful connections with them.

STAGE 5: CASEWORKER FOLLOW-UP DURING MONTHLY VISITS

The caseworker continues to support the youth in carrying out the action steps developed during the first Youth-Centered Meeting. This may occur through multiple caseworker-youth contacts. Together, they review the youth's progress in forming meaningful connections and prepare for the second Youth-Centered Meeting.

STAGE 6: SECOND YOUTH-CENTERED MEETING

In this meeting, also led by a facilitator, the youth reviews progress with the caseworker and other support team members, finalizes agreements (Permanency Pacts) with supportive adults and solidifies youth-driven plans for sustaining long-term connections with these adults.



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5. Program Delivery (Intensity and Duration)

The *Foster Care Orientation and Permanency-Focused, Youth-Centered Meetings Program* is designed for delivery over a seven-month time frame. It can be integrated into previously scheduled touchpoints with youths, such as routine monthly home visits with caseworkers or comparable, regular contacts with other designated support persons. As each stage builds on the one immediately preceding it, youths develop an understanding of the permanency planning process and build self-confidence and agency while exploring their supportive adult connections and participating in Youth-Centered Meetings. The pace of delivery minimizes the need for additional meetings beyond regularly scheduled contacts while ensuring that youths have sufficient time to prepare, to engage and to reflect on their experiences in the program.

The program consists of six structured stages, delivered primarily through in-person meetings. It includes one foster care orientation attended virtually by a group of youths.

The overall delivery plan includes the following:

- Each youth attends three types of meetings with an assigned caseworker. These meetings include pre-orientation, follow-up and planning for Youth-Centered Meetings. All three may be integrated into routine monthly home visits.
- The foster care orientation, a group session attended virtually, introduces fundamental information about the foster care system, youth rights and tools for exploring supportive relationships with adults.

- A designated facilitator leads two Youth-Centered Meetings. These focus on getting each youth to explore supportive relationships, to identify supportive adults and to determine actionable steps toward achieving long-term connections and relational permanency with them.

Estimated Total Contact Time:

- **Caseworker-Youth Meetings:** approximately 3 to 4.5 hours across pre-orientation, follow-up and planning sessions
- **Foster Care Orientation:** 1 hour
- **Youth-Centered Meetings:** two meetings, approximately 1 hour each (Length may vary depending on the amount of youth participation and discussion of supportive connections.)

Program Timeline

STAGE	ACTIVITY	ESTIMATED DURATION	FREQUENCY	TYPICAL TIMING
1	Pre-Orientation With Caseworker	45–60 minutes	One time	Month 1
2	Foster Care Orientation	60 minutes	One time	Month 2
3	Caseworker Follow-Up	45–60 minutes	At least two visits	Months 2 and 3
4	First Youth-Centered Meeting (YCM)	60 minutes	One time	Month 3
5	Caseworker Follow-Up During Monthly Visits	45–60 minutes	Two visits	Months 4 and 5
6	Second Youth-Centered Meeting (YCM)	45–60 minutes	One time	Month 6 or 7

The program framework covers a limited period of time. However, ongoing reinforcement of youth voice and continuing engagement are essential to retain the skills, confidence and habits developed during the structured program. Caseworkers and supervisors play key roles in this. These child welfare professionals need to establish clear expectations from the outset that youth voice will not be a time-limited activity but rather a foundational approach to case planning and relationship development. Integration of each youth's participation goals into ongoing

case planning discussions, including goals for connections with supportive adults, needs to continue after the formal program ends. Additional Youth-Centered Meetings beyond the two in the program design also may occur, as appropriate. All of this will reinforce that the program's purpose extends beyond the orientation and Youth-Centered Meetings and will help to embed youth engagement as a lasting, normalized practice within the child welfare agency's culture.

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.

Caseworkers currently on staff who are responsible for active cases of youths in out-of-home care implement the *Foster Care Orientation and Permanency-Focused, Youth-Centered Meetings Program*. Each youth's assigned caseworker provides consistent guidance and supports the youth's participation in activities throughout the program. Caseworkers in this role typically hold entry-level positions and, at a minimum, possess a bachelor's degree in social work or a closely related field, such as psychology, sociology or human services.

The program also includes a meeting facilitator role to support permanency planning, to conduct the Youth-Centered Meetings and to ensure that youth engagement strategies are employed. The meeting facilitator partners with caseworkers to prepare youths for participation, guides structured conversations during meetings and supports discussions that help youths to identify and to strengthen their connections with supportive adults. The facilitator's role helps to ensure that permanency planning for each youth reflects the youth's voice and preferences. Individuals in this role typically have experience in

facilitation, youth engagement and child welfare practice. They typically possess, at a minimum, a bachelor's degree in social work or a closely related field, such as psychology, sociology or human services.

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.

Staff members attend a half-day training focused on the components and stages of the program model. Brief, scenario-based coaching can help caseworkers to build their confidence for engaging with youths in challenging situations. During training, the caseworkers learn simple talking points and sample language to support consistent communication with youths and caregivers. "Micro-learning" refreshers can help staff members to revisit youth engagement concepts and to reinforce relationship-centered practices over time.

Staff members may need additional training to ensure that they have the knowledge and skills to support effective engagement. 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.

In addition to foundational training, staff members benefit from targeted instruction showing them how to use the program's tools that support youth engagement and permanency planning. This includes guidance for introducing and applying tools such as the Youth Connections Scale to help youths identify, assess and strengthen their relationships with supportive adults. Training needs to include opportunities to practice using these tools in realistic scenarios. Staff also need to practice interpreting youth responses and translating the information gathered from each youth into actionable steps to include in the youth's permanency plan. Ongoing coaching and supervision reinforce consistent use of these tools to prepare youths for Youth-Centered Meetings and to inform permanency planning discussions.

Supervisors trained in the program model provide coaching and support as their staff members navigate through each program component. Supervisors also respond to staff questions and address challenges that arise during implementation. Their ongoing support helps to maintain continuity, especially in dealing with complex cases and during periods of staff turnover. Tools that supplement the training – such as infographics, tip sheets and QIC-EY coaching guides aligned with the *Transforming Engagement* training – can be embedded into routine supervision and case staffing to ensure their consistent use.

Facilitators of Youth-Centered Meetings benefit from training that focuses on strategies for preparing youths and other program participants for meetings, along with techniques for guiding

discussions in a way that centers on youth voice. Facilitator training also needs to include tips for navigating challenging or emotionally complex situations. During training, facilitators receive instruction explaining how to lead conversations that help youths to identify and to strengthen their connections with supportive adults. This includes learning how to support the development of Permanency Pacts. Training on the use of program tools, such as the Youth Connections Scale, needs to focus on how to incorporate information gathered from youths into meeting facilitation and 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.

Child welfare policies typically support engagement with youth, identification of their supportive connections and inclusion of youth in permanency planning. However, some policies and procedures may need to be established or modified to implement this program and to support its ongoing delivery. Activities aligned with the stages of the program model could

integrate seamlessly into existing agency requirements. These include sharing policies regarding the rights of youth in foster care; reviewing case plans with youths; and conducting permanency-focused, Youth-Centered Meetings that build on the Youth Connections Scale used during monthly visits. Embedding these activities into required documentation, supervisory checklists and fidelity tracking ensures consistent execution of the program while reinforcing policy expectations. Quick-reference scripts can help caseworkers to integrate these conversations naturally into their home visits without adding significantly to their preparation time.

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.

Quick-reference checklists and core task trackers for supervisors help to verify the completion of foundational tasks as intended. For example, these include giving each youth during pre-orientation a copy of the FosterClub's *FYI Binder* for storing important documents, to include a copy of the youth's case plan. Fidelity tracking allows supervisors to identify gaps in implementation, to provide targeted coaching and to reinforce consistent application of the program model. These fidelity tools also help to support continuous 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 to capture about delivery of the program's core components include the interactions of youths with their designated caseworkers plus their participation in the orientation, Youth-Centered Meetings and follow-up activities identified during these meetings. Data that track program impact – such as youth understanding of permanency planning processes, satisfaction with participation and progress toward permanency goals – also are important to record.

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 *Foster Care Orientation and Permanency-Focused, Youth-Centered Meetings Program* in Montana, please contact Courtney A. Callaghan, Recruitment, Retention and Training Bureau Chief, Child and Family Services Division, Department of Public Health and Human Services, at CCallaghan@mt.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.

Placement providers, including parents who are fostering plus operators of group homes and similar placement facilities, need to receive consistent, standard information about the program during the placement process. To ensure that these providers remain informed and engaged, they need regular reinforcement of expectations that they will support youth participation. Their support will help each youth in their care to get the consistent message that youth participation in the permanency planning process is important and that youth input in decision-making is valuable.

Other Resources (Meeting Space, Materials, etc.)

Implementation of a program requires access to tangible resources, including space for orientation sessions and other meetings, materials and supplies for activities, plus technology for virtual or hybrid delivery. Additional considerations may include travel expenses, meals or snacks for participants and help with logistics that contribute to a welcoming and functional environment for staff and youth. Availability of these resources is essential for smooth program operation and participant engagement.

To deliver this program effectively, staff will need resources such as *FYI Binders*, policies related to youth rights and other tools that support permanency planning and exploration of youths' important connections. Staff also will need meeting space for virtual or in-person orientation sessions. Facilitators may conduct their sessions in offices or conference rooms. Agencies may want to allocate funds for travel, meals or snacks that support youth participation.

7. Evaluation

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

Among youth aged 13 and older in the Montana child welfare system, does exposure to the Foster Care Orientation Program for Youth and Permanency-Focused, Youth-Centered Meetings Program improve their odds of experiencing increased, stable permanence (legal and relational) when compared with youth who received services as usual?

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 conducted 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 *Foster Care Orientation and Permanency-Focused, Youth-Centered Meetings Program* 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
- 2. Stage-Specific Lessons Learned and Tips:** practical guidance for implementing each stage of the program, from pre-orientation through follow-up after Youth-Centered 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 (including treatment providers in residential settings)
- 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 among child welfare agency staff as well as their external partners, including caseworkers, supervisors and placement providers.
- Individuals who have lived experience provide critical insights about meaningful engagement with youth.
- Placement and other service providers (e.g., parents who are fostering, service providers in residential settings) play critical roles in supporting youth participation. However, in many cases, there are challenges to keeping them consistently informed or engaged.

Tips

- Identify and engage with all potential partners early. These include the following:
 - Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)
 - caseworkers, supervisors and agency leaders
 - Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) staff
 - placement and other service providers
- When possible, involve youths currently or formerly in foster care to inform program design and implementation.
- Clearly define each partner's role in supporting youth participation and program activities to avoid gaps in communication and follow-through.

PLAN FOR PROGRAM OPERATIONS AND LOGISTICS

Lessons Learned

- Embedding program activities into existing casework practice is essential. Implementation may become inconsistent if these are treated as separate tasks.
- Clear processes and defined accountability minimize missed steps and support consistent follow-through.
- Consistent documentation and information sharing help to maintain continuity when changes in a youth's placement and staff turnover occur.
- Youth outreach and enrollment need to include establishment of eligibility criteria, notification of acceptance into the program and tracking of progress.
- Staff assumptions about youth readiness may influence youth participation. Clear expectations support youth inclusion, even when a youth is transitioning from one placement to another.

Tips

- Develop a structured process for enrollment, including clear eligibility criteria and ongoing tracking of youths to ensure their timely participation in program activities.
- Provide clear guidance that supports youth inclusion, emphasizing that youth participation needs to continue even during periods of transition and instability.
- Ensure that placement staff and other service providers receive timely information about the program and their roles in supporting youth participation, including expectations related to scheduling and communication.
- Integrate program activities into existing casework processes (e.g., home visits, case planning, permanency-focused meetings) rather than treating them as separate tasks. This will support consistency and sustainability of the program.
- Establish clear roles, ownership in the program and timelines for documentation and other communications to ensure accountability and consistent follow-through by staff, including during transitions.

Core Component-Specific Lessons Learned and Tips

CORE COMPONENT: RELATIONSHIP-CENTERED SUPPORT THROUGH CASEWORKERS

Lessons Learned

- Competing demands on caseworkers can result in staff giving lower priority to program-related tasks, which could interrupt continuity and limit opportunities to build trusting relationships with youths.
- Youths may not be receiving the materials intended for them (such as case plans and FYI Binders) consistently. Documentation does not always reflect whether they actually received these materials.
- Lack of clarity about task ownership and lack of verification of task completion can contribute to incomplete implementation of relationship-centered, support activities.
- Inconsistency in supervision and coaching limits reinforcement of expectations related to follow-through and fidelity in program implementation.

Tips

- Embed into routine supervision and case staffing the review of tasks involving direct contacts with youths to ensure task completion. Verify completion with youths themselves.
- Use a brief, supervisory checklist or core task tracker to ensure that foundational conversations between youths and their caseworkers have occurred and that youths have received the materials intended for them.
- Integrate supplemental tools (such as infographics and tip sheets) into supervision and team meetings to normalize their use.
- Offer targeted refreshers and micro-learning sessions to reinforce relationship-centered practices. Keep them brief to avoid making training burdensome.

CORE COMPONENT: FOSTER CARE ORIENTATION

Lessons Learned

- Staff members vary in their comfort and skill levels when facilitating meetings via virtual platforms. This can cause inconsistency in how youths experience orientations delivered virtually.
- Some staff members may experience challenges engaging with youths during virtual orientations. Others may struggle with the mechanics of screen sharing, video playback and pacing, which can affect delivery of content.
- A prerecorded, video orientation that a caseworker can share with each youth individually allows the flexibility to view it during a regularly scheduled home visit. It also enables the caseworker to pause the video, as needed, to accommodate each youth's particular learning style and information processing needs. Viewing the orientation individually avoids the scheduling challenges that trying to arrange a group orientation may entail.

Tips

- Provide facilitators with clear guidance about youth engagement strategies and with tips for troubleshooting common challenges that can arise during orientations delivered virtually.
- Frame the orientation as a shared experience of youths with their caseworkers to encourage their dialogue and relationship building.
- Promote interactions between youths and their caseworkers by prompting youths to pause, to write down questions and to discuss them with their caseworkers during or after viewing the video.
- Produce a video-recorded, foster care orientation that youths can watch with their caseworkers to ensure consistent delivery of core content.

CORE COMPONENT: RELATIONSHIP MAPPING AND CONNECTION TOOLS

Lessons Learned

- Caseworkers may not introduce or revisit relationship mapping tools consistently. This can limit opportunities for youths to identify and to strengthen their supportive connections.
- Program tools such as the Youth Connections Scale are designed for use in all six stages. Not using them throughout the program can reduce continuity and impair efforts to explore deeply youths' supportive connections and preferences about permanency.
- Missed or delayed delivery of foundational materials to youths can weaken structured conversations between youths and their caseworkers about relationships and permanency.

Tips

- During supervisory and case staffing discussions, reinforce the use of relationship mapping tools and the Youth Connections Scale to support their consistent application as ongoing processes rather than one-time activities.
- Provide caseworkers with visual aids, sample language and troubleshooting strategies to support their meaningful conversations with youths.
- Make tools available in multiple formats (PDF and JPEG) so they can be accessed on various devices and in different work environments.

CORE COMPONENT: YOUTH-DRIVEN ENGAGEMENT IN PERMANENCY PLANNING

Lessons Learned

- Staff preconceptions about youth readiness can limit youth participation in permanency planning.
- Emotional distress, placement instability and family conflict commonly occur among youths in foster care. Caseworkers mistakenly may view these experiences as reasons to postpone or to limit youth engagement, even though they are often the very circumstances in which meaningful, youth-centered engagement is most critical.
- Staff members who lack sufficient confidence and skill engaging with youths during complex or emotionally charged situations can reduce opportunities for youth-driven participation.
- Without ongoing coaching and supervision focused on the program's sequential implementation, staff members dealing with case complexity may tend to avoid or to give low priority to youth engagement.

Tips

- Use clear, consistent messages to reinforce that youth participation is appropriate even during placement changes and emotional transitions.
- Provide scenario-based training and coaching to build the self-confidence of staff members that they are capable of engaging with youths during common disruptions in the young persons' lives.
- Develop concise tip sheets about youth engagement that use sample language, provide talking points and offer guidance for troubleshooting challenging situations.
- Reinforce skill development and application of strategies for youth engagement by embedding discussions about such engagement into routine supervision, case staffing and team meetings.

CORE COMPONENT: SEQUENTIAL PROGRAM DESIGN

Lessons Learned

- Core components may be skipped, delayed or implemented out of sequence due to caseworkers' competing priorities and decisions left to their discretion.
- Misunderstandings about task completion and fidelity of implementation can disrupt youth engagement and the flow of the program.
- Deviations from the program's linear sequence may reduce opportunities for youth preparation, reflection and reinforcement of learning.

Tips

- Establish well-defined criteria for determining youth eligibility for the program and for deciding when each eligible youth is ready for the orientation. This will reduce ambiguity and support consistent implementation.
- Use simple tracking tools to monitor each youth's progression through the six program stages.
- During supervisory meetings and routine case reviews, reinforce the importance of implementing the program's stages in proper sequence while also allowing flexibility to adapt the pace of implementation, when needed..



9. Additional Program Materials

Find program materials that
support implementation here:

SCAN HERE



CLICK HERE



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