

Starting Points for Communities Developing New Transition Programs

*for Young People with
Mental Health Difficulties*



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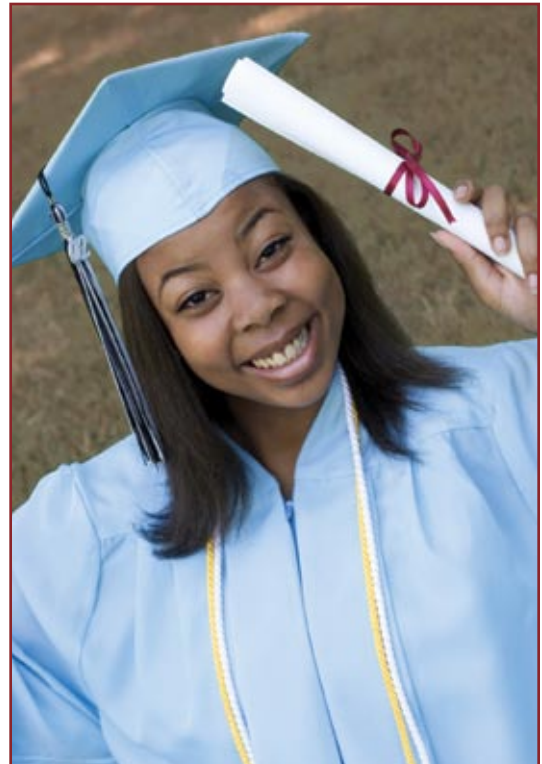
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Introduction

There is a growing interest in many communities in developing more comprehensive approaches and enhanced services for transition-age young people with mental health difficulties. Based on literature, research with young people aged 16-24 and families, and evaluations completed with several transition programs for young people with mental health difficulties, we have learned that there are many challenges in developing effective transition services. Here we present a synthesis of lessons learned and advice gained from young people, families, and transition service providers.



1) Positive Philosophy

Being clear on program philosophy seems to be key to success. Examples of program philosophies associated with positive transitions are:

- a. Treating young people as emerging adults.
- b. Partnering with youth in developing and implementing their individual success plan.
- c. Individualized planning focused on each young person's unique needs, strengths, and preferences. This planning should also be focused on their strengths.
- d. Belief in recovery—that young people will go on to lead productive lives.
- e. High expectations—belief that young people can be successful in careers, college, vocational training, and jobs of their choice.

2) Flexibility

Effective transition programs need:

- a. Flexible developmentally appropriate programming, adapted to meet young people's evolving needs and to take advantage of "teachable moments."
- b. Flexible services that use a variety of approaches, including supportive counseling, mentoring, therapeutic groups, and activity-oriented therapies.
- c. Multiple options to prepare for employment, depending on young people's skills, interests, and levels of preparedness, including portfolio and resume preparation, contact with mentors, job shadowing, practice interviewing, apprenticeships, and supported employment.

3) Respected and Experienced Staff

In addition to communicating effectively with young people, it is advantageous for staff to have the respect of other service providers. This is particularly important if the transition program is housed alongside more structured child treatment programs, so that child treatment staff will appreciate the less structured transition approach.

4) Youth and Family Voice

High levels of youth and family leadership are recommended in transition program planning and in developing individual treatment plans. The balance between family voice and young people's leadership is likely to vary from one program to another depending on young people's needs and preferences. This may be an area for negotiation because young people's judgment may be affected by their mental health condition, level of maturity, and other factors. Family members may be a source of needed support, regardless of the age of legal responsibility in the jurisdiction.

5) Transition Program Activities

Transition staff who are clear about what they are doing, why, and what outcomes they expect appear to communicate most effectively with young people, families, and funders. If interventions are clearly defined, linked with a coherent program philosophy, and communicated, then expectations will be realistic and outcomes can be evaluated.

6) Transition Program Eligibility

If transition program staff are clear about who is eligible and who they expect to serve most effectively, then young people who are most likely to benefit will be able to participate. Age, level of disability, level of substance abuse, and goals of young people are useful eligibility criteria to consider.



7) Community Partnerships

When transition programs partner with other programs in the community, young people gain access to a wide variety of services, supports, and opportunities. Young people need to learn how to get supports in community and how to navigate other resources. Collaboration needs to be community wide, based on a shared mission and philosophy, and extend beyond mental health services to include contacts with vocational, housing, health, and disability services.

8) Whatever it Takes

Young people need staff who are willing to persevere, even when young people seem unappreciative or when their progress seems to have stalled. Young people who go through a difficult stage because of substance abuse, relapse, or pregnancy will benefit from continuing support. These young people can learn from natural consequences, especially if program staff are committed to continue to try new strategies and new approaches.

9) Building on Young People's Strengths

Staff who believe in young people's abilities and respect their goals will be more likely to build on their strengths. Young people benefit from staff's commitment to providing pro-social activities and connections to opportunities for volunteering, internships, and work on community projects, so that youth learn that they can make positive contributions to society.



10) Continuity of Staff

Staff retention is especially important. Young people benefit from staff committing to the work for the long haul because commitment is essential and young people need to be able to engage with someone who will be there over a period of time—possibly several years. This is challenging work and effective programs will need to build in funding for ongoing support and access to continuing education and professional development.

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