



# YouForward:

## The Massachusetts Healthy Transitions Program

**T**ransition-aged youth and young adults with mental health challenges are often derailed from completing school, engaging in work, and establishing adult roles. Because services specific to the needs of young people are often lacking or are poorly coordinated across child- and adult-serving programs, young adults with mental health challenges often “fall through the cracks” in the system at this critical stage of life.<sup>1</sup> The Massachusetts (MA) Now-is-the-Time Healthy Transitions project, *YouForward* ([www.youforward.org](http://www.youforward.org)), began serving young adults in two diverse communities in northeastern MA in late 2015. Managed by the MA Department of Mental Health in partnership with both child- and adult-serving agencies, *YouForward* represents an innovative model that bridges the child and adult systems. *YouForward* staff represent the local communities, which have large Latinx populations. Through strong relationships with other community youth-serving organizations, *YouForward* engages vulnerable, hard-to-reach young adults by offering low-barrier pathways into services and supports. Specific outreach efforts have brought a number of young adults who identify as LGBTQ, as well as those without stable housing, into the program.

Two *Drop-in Centers* (DICs) that opened in late 2016 are key to *YouForward*’s low-barrier approach. DICs are available to young adults without any requirement to participate in other services. There are no screening or enrollment processes to enter the DICs; young adults

are encouraged to “just walk right in.” DICs provide basic amenities such as food and showers, offering young adults a place to meet basic needs and a portal to community resources. DICs also offer young adults an opportunity to join a community, build positive relationships, be inspired by peers, share their voice, and assume leadership roles. For many young adults, DICs are the gateway to other *YouForward* services.

*YouForward*’s *core services* include team-based Wraparound services enhanced with the Achieve My Plan (AMP) approach,<sup>2</sup> the Transition to Independence Process (TIP),<sup>3</sup> Gathering and Inspiring Future Talent (GIFT; a resiliency-focused job training for people with mental health challenges), and access to young adult Peer Mentors.<sup>4</sup> *YouForward* also offers *expedited pathways* to quickly and easily connect young adults to housing, education, employment, health care, and other services and supports in the community.

### YOUFORWARD PARTICIPANTS

To date, *YouForward* has served over 200 young adults, ages 16 to 25; 53% male, 45% female and 2% non-binary. A number of *YouForward* young adults identify as LGBTQ. In addition, young parents have found their way to the program. Almost 60% of the young adults identify their race/ethnicity as Latino, 24% as White, and 7% as Black/African American. About one-quarter of young adults are bilingual English/Spanish; 64% speak only English, and 11% speak only Spanish.



## Services Make a Difference

“What they do is they sit down and talk about your goal, they talk about what they can do for you, and then you set up a plan.”

“The biggest thing that my Peer Mentor did was help me get out of what was borderline homelessness.”

“My TIP Facilitator has helped me with like everything. I got my GED... I attended the program, they helped me learn what I needed to, I took the test. I got my permit... was able to schedule my road test.”

“I had a terrible relationship with my family... it was bad... my TIP Facilitator and Peer Mentor would give me advice... my relationship with my family has gotten a lot better since starting YouForward.”

## ASSESSING YOUFORWARD IMPACTS

We use a mixed-method approach to assess YouForward’s impacts, including tracking outcomes achieved by young adults in important areas and conducting focus groups with young adults to understand their perceptions of the program.

### *Tracking Young Adult Outcomes*

Beginning in 2017, we used REDCap,<sup>5</sup> a secure web-based application, to build an easy-to-use tracking tool to capture young adults’ baseline status and quarterly outcomes in key areas, including education, employment and housing. Data for those enrolled in core services are recorded quarterly in regularly scheduled team meetings.

To date, baseline and outcome data on 68 young adults show gains in education, employment, and housing. At baseline, 43% of young adults were enrolled in school and the majority (81%) had an education goal; typical goals were to complete school or a GED. As of the most recent quarter, 42% of young adults with an education goal had completed it. Also, at baseline, 38% of young adults were working or in a volunteer job; 71% had an employment-related goal. As of the most recent quarter, 51% were working or volunteering. Finally, at baseline, while 68% lived in secure housing, primarily with family, 32% of young adults were living in insecure or temporary housing, and thus were either homeless or at risk for homelessness. At the most recent quarter, 50% of young adults in insecure/temporary housing at baseline had moved into secure housing.

### *Young Adult Focus Groups*

To give voice to their perspectives of the program, two focus groups were conducted with YouForward young adults. Groups took place at one DIC and were facilitated by young adults with lived experience of mental health services; no YouForward staff were present. Twenty-one young adults participated in the groups; 75% had been involved with YouForward for 6 months or more.

During the focus groups, the facilitators emphasized the voluntary and confidential nature of the discussion. Facilitators asked the participating young adults to share their perceptions of the DICs, core services/other activities, and the program overall, and encouraged them to share their opinions openly. Groups were audio-recorded and each young adult received \$25 to thank them

for participating. Audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim and transcripts were analyzed thematically. Data from the focus groups clustered into five core themes illuminating young adults' perceptions of YouForward: *Services Make a Difference*; *YouForward Has Changed Our Lives*; *The Staff Care About and Teach Us*; *I'm Accepted for Who I Am*; and *I'm Treated with Respect and My Input Matters*.

### CONCLUSION

Programs like YouForward that offer a flexible, low-barrier approach can help young adults struggling with mental health conditions who otherwise have not engaged in services to access the supports they need. The youth-driven practices offered by YouForward and other Healthy Transitions programs allow young adults to make real gains in important areas, such as education, employment, and housing. Such programs provide an opportunity to intervene early during a critical stage and can offer young adults a platform for successful transition to adult life.

### REFERENCES

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## YouForward Has Changed Our Lives

“It’s gotten us out of ... risk, troubles, like dangerous persons, and it’s gotten us to do good risks. Like achieve our goals and everything. It’s scary but we do it.”

If YouForward wasn’t around:

“We’d all be in trouble;” “I feel like I would be super depressed... at home, doing nothing;” “I’d probably be dead, like I probably would have committed suicide;” “I’d be in jail.”

## The Staff Care About and Teach Us

“The other thing about the staff here, they don’t see it like a job.”

“It’s almost as if they want it as bad as we, like they want our success as bad as we do.”

“They’re like... our temple... the more that we see the staff handle our situations, maturity and everything... we can learn from it. Unconsciously, but we end up changing our habits.”



## I'm Accepted for Who I Am

"[DIC] is a really comfortable area where I can just be... myself and hang out with everybody. And can talk to people casually and not be nervous about it."

"[DIC] itself makes you kind of realize that you're not the only one, going through the same issues like everybody else."

"YouForward is so... open and willing to start an LGBT group... I fell in love with this place, just because they were able to provide me with a safe place to talk to people who are like me."

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***"They sit down and talk about your goal, they talk about what they can do for you, and then you set up a plan."***

## I'm Treated with Respect and My Input Matters

"The thing is... with YouForward and the DIC they have patience with us. Other people... they don't have that patience."

"Here they're very understanding... rather than freak-out they'd be like 'calm yourself down and let's talk about it.' They don't bring in security guards."

"...when you have to go through a process of signing papers and stuff like that, you realize this is a professional relationship... these people don't actually have an interest in me. Places like [DIC] gives you... a sense of... importance because we have a big part in everything."

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