

Achieving Cross-System Collaboration to Support Young People in the Transition Years:



A Tip Sheet for Service Providers

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What Is Cross-System Collaboration to Serve Youth?

Cross-system collaboration can be defined as reaching across fragmented services and systems to build constructive working relationships to assist young people to achieve their goals. Cross-system collaboration on behalf of individual youth can also be a basis for building frameworks to meet the needs of groups of youth.

Why Is Cross-System Collaboration Needed?

- Gaps in services for young people are a major concern, especially in rural areas.
- Young people with mental health disorders have a wide range of needs related to health, education, employment, and safe housing.
- They may be served by several systems such as child welfare, juvenile justice, and vocational rehabilitation that may or may not communicate and coordinate services.
- Young people may also have needs that are not specific to any system, such as learning skills in budgeting, self-care, and managing interpersonal relationships, to successfully transition to adulthood.
- A holistic approach is therefore ideal.
- To support young people to meet their needs across life domains, you need to be familiar with local, state, and federal supports and their requirements and eligibility rules.

Fragmentation Is a Problem in Systems Serving Young People

- Each system serving youth and/or young adults has different goals. Typically, staff have received different training and have developed different cultures that include values, beliefs, attitudes, customs, problem-solving approaches, and jargon.
- Increasing specialization has led to even stronger immersion in the knowledge and culture of their own group, making teamwork difficult (Hall, 2005; Kapp et al., 2013).
- Service providers may be reluctant to collaborate because of confidentiality rules.
- There are gaps in services due to:
 - » separation between youth and adult-serving systems,
 - » age-based eligibility policies and criteria, and
 - » preferences by some groups of young people, such as youth of color and LGBTQIA2-S youth and young adults, to be served by culturally-specific agencies or programs focused on their specific needs.



“There won’t be any effective change or help to youth if one system is hogging information or is unwilling to work with other systems.”

– [young adult consultant]

Supports for Collaboration and Teamwork to Better Serve Young People

Ideally, organizations serving youth and young adults have in place policies, procedures, and structures to support collaboration, such as:

- agency-level representatives or teams meeting regularly to resolve any tensions that arise between providers;
- written interagency agreements and practice guidelines in place to coordinate referral and service delivery across systems;
- clearly defined roles;
- clear agreements about confidentiality;
- release of information forms to allow information flow across relevant systems;
- liaisons or coordination specialists assigned to service users;
- regular cross-training of staff to clarify expectations; and
- reduced caseloads to allow time for collaboration (Darlington & Feeney, 2008; Kapp et al., 2013; U.S. GAO Report, 2008).

Making Collaboration Happen

Even where there are no formal inter-agency systems and supports in place, individual staff can develop attitudes, knowledge, skills, and relationships to facilitate collaboration.

- Start by defining the needs of a specific young person and clearly specify roles and leadership.
- Include providers from both the youth and adult systems as well as from housing and homeless services, vocational rehabilitation, child welfare, juvenile or adult criminal justice, or other relevant systems.
- Gain informed consent from youth and family to share information.
- Communicate and share information with staff in other systems involved with the same youth and families.
- Decide how to share responsibilities and goals for youth based on the idea that youth don't "belong" to one system but are served by all relevant systems.
- Arrange joint case conferences or Wraparound-type meetings, negotiating confidentiality and sharing information.
- Take time to clarify roles, resolve boundary issues, and identify a lead agency to meet youth and family needs more effectively.
- Practice demonstrating mutual respect for each other's knowledge, skills, and roles.
- Maintain regular contact.
- Respond to messages and requests in a timely manner, follow through with commitments, and be friendly, interested, attentive, and open to suggestions (Darlington & Feeney, 2008; Kapp et al., 2013).



What Are the Skills Needed for Collaboration and Teamwork?

Effective collaboration can happen when service providers create a clear collective goal and commit to the implementation of plans. Demonstrating patience, understanding, responsiveness, and good humor will show commitment to successful outcomes (Lee et al., 2012). Additionally, we encourage service providers to practice the following activities:

- **Cooperation:** Acknowledging and respecting other opinions while being willing to examine and change your personal beliefs and perspectives
- **Responsibility:** Accepting and sharing responsibilities when participating in group decision-making and planning

- **Communication:** Clearly sharing important information and exchanging and discussing ideas
- **Autonomy:** Being able to work independently
- **Coordination:** Coordinating group tasks and assignments
- **Leadership skills:** These include recognizing group dynamics and respecting the different cultures of members of different groups, such as psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and peer support providers

Finally, reflecting on the process of working together and sharing feedback can strengthen collaborative relationships and effectiveness (Bronstein, 2003).

“Some skills are needed for effective collaboration with other service providers; the first thing is patience. We have to be patient when we’re doing this kind of collaboration work. We also have to be very thoughtful about it.”

– Don Schweitzer, Associate Professor, Pacific University



“We need to understand, just as we would working with a young person, what are these people’s needs and what are their concerns and what are their fears, and making sure we understand that as we are working and trying to build a system of care together.”

– Don Schweitzer, Associate Professor, Pacific University

Engaging Young People in Collaboration

To encourage youth and young adults to engage in their own cross-system service planning, providers can support young people to navigate systems by:

- assisting youth to identify their goals across life domains and to find welcoming settings that will provide opportunities to achieve those goals;
- developing relationships with providers in agencies you refer youth to, so you understand each other’s roles and approaches and you know that youth will be treated with respect;
- cultivating relationships with culturally-specific agencies so that you are confident that young people’s cultural preferences will be addressed;
- coaching youth in skills to advocate on their own behalf in reaching out to new providers, teachers, or employers, and when preparing for team-based goal setting;
- accompanying youth (if they wish) to visit new agencies and meet new providers; and
- promoting an organizational culture where youth participation is valued and a safe environment is provided where youth have meaningful engagement and participation in decisions (Walker et al., 2007; Youth M.O.V.E. National, 2014).



Moving from Youth Advocacy to System Level Collaboration

We recommend that agencies and organizations develop a continuum of empowerment so that as young people progress in their recovery and gain confidence and skills in advocacy from individual-level to system-level, they can be active participants in making systems more responsive to young people's needs (Jennings et al., 2006).

- If you are engaging youth and young adults in system level collaboration, it's important to pay them for their time.
- Having at least two youth advocates at the table in collaborative planning allows for mutual support and reduces the power imbalance between youth and service providers.
- When inviting a young person to engage in planning and/or decision making, consider the level of youth participation you and your organization will encourage and achieve realistically. We support Youth M.O.V.E. National and its state chapters' efforts to promote meaningful involvement of young adults in developing policies and aligning supports for youth with mental health difficulties.

“If I could say one thing to service providers, and it’s a really simple thing that they can do to radically change the effectiveness of their overall system, is to bring young adults and near peers (people who have just gone through their system), bring them onto the decision-making Boards.”

– Martin Rafferty, Executive Director, Youth M.O.V.E. Oregon

“Most providers do not take youth seriously and mutual respect is a huge issue. I know a huge reason I do not reach out for certain services is because I know I will not always be taken as seriously as I need to be.”

– [young adult consultant]

Support for Youth Disclosure

Talking about their experiences in public settings may be an emotionally distressing or traumatic experience for many youth. As a service provider, you will need to support youth to prepare to disclose and provide follow up support. Be prepared to provide trauma-informed support to young people

before, during, and after they deal with the potentially traumatic effects of sharing difficult personal experiences. This could include creating a support plan in case a young person becomes distressed during participation and debriefing afterwards (Cady & Lulow, 2015).

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