



Designing and Implementing Drop-in Centers for Youth of Transition Age: Lessons Learned from the Field

The purpose of this information brief is to share implementation considerations and lessons learned from three Healthy Transitions grantees that are leading the way in developing youth-driven drop-in centers to serve youth and young adults of transition age experiencing behavioral health challenges. A key focus in this brief is to share examples and lessons learned from the field across the various stages of drop-in center implementation, from early exploration and planning to full operation and sustainability.

The Role of Drop-In Centers in Healthy Transitions

Drop-in centers emerged from the consumer mental health movement, with the goal of creating a safe and welcoming space where mental health consumers could interact with their peers and learn about available community supports. Many of these drop-in centers were designed and operated by consumers, were not age specific, and did not include formal mental health services. Over time, drop-in centers have evolved to offer peer supports and other mental health services. Several Healthy Transitions grantees have adopted and expanded the drop-in center approach, using the centers as tools for local behavioral health agencies to engage youth and young adults experiencing

“[A drop-in center is] a place where young people can get services and supports when they want without having to wait or jump through hoops.”

- Stephanie Sikes
Youth Coordinator, TAYLRD

behavioral health challenges. These drop-in centers are designed to provide easy access to behavioral health services and supports. This brief captures lessons learned from Healthy Transitions communities in the third year of implementation, with information gathered via interviews.

The services and supports available in drop-in centers differ across Healthy Transitions sites depending on needs, staffing, and community partnerships. Some of the services grantee sites have provided include:

- Youth Peer Support
- Case management
- Supported Employment
- Access to a prescriber and/or clinician on-site (both physical and mental health)
- Information about and access to available community resources and services
- Participation in community events and community service opportunities
- Skill-building trainings and services (e.g., parenting groups, social and life skills training, cooking classes, tutoring services)
- Leadership and advocacy opportunities

Stages of Implementation

Operation and Sustainability

Initial Implementation

Exploration and Planning

- Resources such as transportation, showers, laundry facilities, and kitchen facilities
- Engagement tools such as video games, board games, and pool tables
- Social and recreational activities and events

Early Exploration and Planning for a Drop-In Center

Is a drop-in center the right approach for us? Drop-in centers offer many benefits, providing youth and young adults with a safe space within their community to connect with peers and access appropriate resources and supports. The development of a drop-in center also requires a lot of time, planning, and high levels of community support and readiness. Interviewees suggest that a drop-in center may not be the only, or even best, approach for every community. Communities have different needs, levels of buy-in and readiness, and available resources, which may or may not fit with a drop-in center design. Community members, including youth and young adults, know what their needs are. If a drop-in center is identified as an appropriate approach to meet these needs, efforts to build readiness and buy-in will be important.

How do we build community readiness and buy-in?

The grantee informants emphasize the importance of establishing strong partnerships with key community stakeholders and leaders before moving forward. Working to understand the community and population served also informs later implementation activities. Spend time building your community’s capacity around youth and young adult voice. Community members and agencies need to see value in youth engagement and understand how to authentically and effectively engage youth before a youth-driven approach, such as a drop-in center, can be implemented.

What other preparation activities should we consider?

Interviewed grantees recommend that you define the purpose and functions of your drop-in center and begin to develop

Common Features of Drop-in Centers Across Healthy Transitions Sites

- Youth and young adults drive the process of drop-in center development, implementation, and operation.
- Services and supports are low barrier and voluntary.
- Locations are easily accessible within the community.
- Approaches are strengths-based.

an implementation plan before getting started. Although your plan may look different across sites and will need to be adjusted over time, an implementation plan will help keep your team organized as you enter the next stage of development. This plan can include information such as important tasks, roles and responsibilities of your team members, anticipated challenges and facilitators, and timelines.

Initial Implementation of a Drop-In Center

How do we choose the best location for a drop-in center?

There are many considerations that the interviewees indicate are important when selecting a location for a drop-in center:

- Get feedback from the youth and young adults within your community.
- The “reputation” of a location should be considered. Select a space that has a positive perception among youth and young adults.
- Consider resources already available within your community. Find a location to serve youth and young adults in high-need and low-resource areas.
- Avoid using existing adult spaces.
- Look for a corner location for greater center visibility.
- Consider areas with heavy youth and young adult foot traffic.
- Find an area accessible by public transportation.
- If your location is not easily accessible by public transportation (e.g., located in a rural area), find a way

Connecticut: CT Strong

The Connecticut drop-in center model (AXS Center) is well established in the state, with centers receiving funding from the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS). CT STRONG operates two centers and collaborates with one existing center.

Kentucky: TAYLRD

Kentucky’s Transition Age Youth Launching Realized Dreams (TAYLRD) began with four pilot sites operating centers for youth and young adults as part of Healthy Transitions. Using lessons learned from their pilot sites, TAYLRD is now assisting five expansion sites, each containing three drop-in centers.

Massachusetts: YouForward

YouForward implements drop-in centers using different approaches to match the diversity and unique needs of local communities. Drop-in centers gained prominence in YouForward as young people identified the need for these services.



to help with transportation to and from the center. Transportation costs may need to be a line item in your drop-in center budget.

- The physical layout of the drop-in center space should be considered when selecting a location. Think about the types of resources you would like to offer (e.g., shower area, washer and dryer, kitchen, conference rooms, office space).

How do we select and train drop-in center staff? Drop-in center staffing structure can be organized in different ways, depending on how your particular drop-in center operates and the types of services and supports that are offered. When hiring staff, informant grantees recommend some of the following tips:

- Include youth and young adults on hiring committees and get youth and young adult input when creating job descriptions.
- Consider staff who understand, respect, and appreciate youth and young adult culture.
- Hire staff who reflect the diversity of your youth and young adult community. For example, you might want to consider staff who speak other languages prevalent within your community, who are racially and ethnically diverse, and who are able to communicate easily with youth and young adults.
- Create hiring guidelines and a hiring rubric for drop-in center use.

Gradual and continuous training and coaching of drop-in center staff is needed to build competencies and lessen the impact of turnover. Some examples of trainings offered to drop-in center staff within Healthy Transitions sites include the following:

- Suicide prevention
- Motivational Interviewing
- Outreach and social marketing
- Cultural and linguistic competency
- Training and coaching based on the drop-in center model (e.g., TAYLRD 101 training in Kentucky)
- Youth Mental Health First Aid

- Youth and family engagement (basic and advanced trainings)
- Intervention-specific training and coaching, such as Transition to Independence Process (TIP) model, Achieve My Plan (AMP), and Wraparound
- Peer mentoring (e.g., GIFT Training in Massachusetts)

What types of activities should take place during initial implementation? Work should be done to develop your drop-in center’s organizational infrastructure, conduct community outreach, develop plans and processes for monitoring implementation, and collect and incorporate drop-in center feedback. One major theme during the initial implementation phase is collaboration and communication. Interviewed grantees report that frequent leadership and management meetings are needed during start-up to work through and address emerging issues. Continued work to build and strengthen formal and informal partnerships within your community is also important. Initial outreach activities and events with your community partners will help bring youth and young adults into the drop-in center.

Youth and young adult input will be critical during the initial implementation phase. Grantee informants offer these examples of ways to gather input from youth and young adults:

- Include youth and young adults in leadership and management team meetings.
- Form a young adult advisory group.
- Continuously collect feedback using surveys and focus groups from youth and young adults engaged with the drop-in center.
- Host monthly town hall meetings with youth and young adults to obtain feedback and identify problems to address.
- Let youth and young adults select and schedule drop-in center events and activities.
- Engage youth and young adults in the design of the drop-in center, from furnishing and wall color to location and hours of operation.

“[Youth and young adults] want an informal structure...There are not a lot of restrictions or parameters about their participation in the centers. They don’t lose opportunities to focus on social and relationships skills, because they are built naturally into the [drop-in center] community.”

- Betsy Edes
Project Director, YouForward

What else should we consider during initial implementation? The interviewees shared that a drop-in center involves a new way of doing business for many organizations. This work may also be a culture shift, requiring strong leaders within your organization to support drop-in center efforts. Some organizational processes and policies may need to be examined and adjusted. You will also experience implementation glitches that you were not planning for or anticipating. Be flexible.

Operation and Sustainability of a Drop-In Center

What daily operation considerations should we make to maintain our drop-in center? Operating a drop-in center requires flexibility as the needs of youth and young adults participating in the center will vary from day to day. When engaging youth in the daily operations of a drop-in center, consider the following tips from the interviewed Healthy Transitions grantees:

- Provide opportunities for youth and young adults participating in the center to choose and lead activities, help maintain cleanliness of the space, provide center tours to other youth, conduct community assessments, and lead social marketing efforts.
- Entrust decision-making power to youth leaders (e.g., youth advisory council) on key programmatic activities, including budget management and planning of center activities.
- Maintain a continuous feedback loop to ensure drop-in center services and supports are meeting the needs of youth and young adults in community.

How do we plan for the sustainability of our drop-in center? The informant grantees regard many of the activities mentioned above as continuing to be important for drop-in center sustainability. This includes providing further training and coaching opportunities for workforce development, maintaining open and frequent lines of communication with staff, nurturing positive relationships with partners, and integrating youth voice into all aspects of program implementation. Community and leadership buy-in of youth engagement and the drop-in center are also powerful motivators for achieving sustainability.

Consider your implementation plan a living document that you regularly revisit to track best practices and lessons learned. As you work to develop a sustainability plan, you will want to anticipate the costs to sustain the center, identify key components of the model to sustain, and explore potential funding streams (e.g., Medicaid funding, working with partner agencies).

Grantee Spotlights

TAYLRD: The Kentucky Partnership for Families & Children provides state-level oversight of their four pilot drop-in center sites. Local behavioral health organizations are responsible for the hiring, management, and supervision of drop-in center staff. Each drop-in center includes one full-time local Program Manager and one full-time Youth Coordinator. Additional staff members who support drop-in center operations for TAYLRD include: Youth Peer Support Specialists, Individual Placement and Support Model Employment and Education Specialists, transportation coordinators, director service providers, and trainers/coaches. TAYLRD originally collaborated with Youth M.O.V.E. Oregon to help plan for their pilot sites and provide initial training and consultation. The TAYLRD expansion sites have also found value in using the original pilot sites as examples as they begin this work.

CT STRONG is in a unique position to engage youth and young adults in low barrier services and supports through an informal partnership established with an existing AXS center in New London, a Healthy Transitions Local Laboratory. The New London AXS Center is located within the state adult mental health system and primarily serves young adults ages 18 to 26 years old. The center employs a Healthy Transitions Coordinator whose role is to maintain linkages with CT STRONG. Because of this collaborative partnership, CT STRONG is able to establish referral pathways between the child and adult mental health systems within the New London community, as well as create a bridge for youth transitioning to the adult system of care.

YouForward found value in having a director with experience working across their various drop-in centers. This person can share their knowledge and expertise across sites to facilitate information exchange.

“The system needs to be built upon the fact that there will be high levels of staff turnover. Working with young people leads to higher rates of turnover and the system cannot break down because an employee has left. Training needs to be continuous.”

- Kate Tilton
Project Director, TAYLRD

Stages of Implementation with Key Considerations Identified by Grantees

Early Exploration and Planning

1. Find ways to **gather young adult and community feedback** prior to selecting a drop-in center approach. Consider some of the approaches recommended by the interviewed grantees:
 - Conduct surveys and focus groups with youth and young adults.
 - Meet with existing youth and community groups.
 - Talk to your young adult and family peer providers.
2. Explore opportunities for **building community interest and buy-in** for a drop-in center. Attend community meetings and make members part of the planning process. Identify community leaders who can later serve as program champions.
3. Create ways to build community readiness for a drop-in center. Offer trainings on young adult voice and youth-adult partnership to community members. Start to identify and foster youth and young adult leaders.
4. Planning for a drop-in center **takes time**. Do not rush to the implementation phase, but take the time needed to understand your community's needs and assess and build their capacities.
5. Create an **implementation plan** to help get things started.

Initial Implementation

1. **Select a location** within your community that is easily accessible and can reach a wide array of youth and young adults. Consider the reputation of your space and avoid using existing adult consumer spaces. Think about how the layout of your space will align with the resources and services you would like to offer.
2. Although your staffing structure may vary, **be strategic in who you hire** for drop-in center positions. Whenever possible, include positions for youth and young adults and select staff who value their voice. Include youth and young adults on hiring committees and listen to their feedback.
3. Provide **continuous training and coaching opportunities** to drop-in center staff.
4. Meet with your drop-in center **leadership and management team(s)** frequently to address challenges and brainstorm solutions.
5. Continue to build community **buy-in and support**.
6. **Engage youth and young adults** in all decision-making. Collect and incorporate feedback from youth and young adults on drop-in center implementation. Continue to disseminate surveys and conduct focus groups. Include youth and young adults on workgroups and teams.

Operation and Sustainability

1. Provide ongoing opportunities for **youth and young adult engagement** in all aspects of program implementation and continuous quality improvement (CQI) activities. Some example strategies from grantees include:
 - Involving youth and young adults in selecting and leading center activities
 - Supporting the hiring of young staff who were previously recipients of service
2. Regularly **obtain feedback** from youth and young adults using multiple strategies such as word of mouth, feedback forms, focus groups, and service outcomes data.
3. Develop a **sustainability plan** that can also **demonstrate cost-saving benefits** of the drop-in centers. Collect data to show drop-in center impact.
4. Continue to **educate the community and leadership** on the value of youth and young adult engagement.

Resources to Explore

1. Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth. (2008). **Preventing Youth Disengagement and Promoting Engagement**.
<https://www.aracy.org.au/publications-resources/area?command=record&id=85>
2. Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development. (2005). **Reflect and Improve: A Toolkit for Engaging Youth and Adults as Partners in Program Evaluation**.
<http://www.theinnovationcenter.org/store/84>
3. National Implementation Research Network. (2013). **Implementation Stages Action Plan**.
<http://implementation.fpg.unc.edu/resources/implementation-stages-action-plan>
4. National Resource Center for Youth Development (NRCYD). (2012). **Youth Leadership Toolkit**.
<https://www.fosterclub.com/article/youth-leadership-toolkit>
5. Youth Leadership Institute. (2005). **Inventory of Adult Attitudes and Behaviors**. <http://northwoodscoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Chapter-5-Inventory-of-Adult-Attitudes-and-Behavior.pdf>



“Be flexible and always expect the unexpected; young adults will make it into what it needs to be to serve the area.”

- Tonya Steskla
Rm4 Program Director, CT STRONG

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http://www.abhct.com/Programs_Services/CT-STRONG

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