

Engaging Youth in Transition Services

Kelli Crane, Ph. D., Paul B. Gold, Ph. D., & Ellen Fabian, Ph.D.

Center for Transition and Career Innovation, University of Maryland, College Park

Dana Hackey, LCSW Way Station, Inc.

The Promoting the Readiness of Minors in Supplemental Security Income (PROMISE) project is a 5-year, two-group, randomized controlled trial funded by the U.S. Department of Education in October 2013. Six sites were awarded funding to test the effectiveness of a multicomponent experimental intervention for improving academic, career, and financial outcomes for youth with disabilities receiving supplemental security income (SSI) benefits and their families. Awardees include Arkansas, ASPIRE (a consortium of six western states), California, Maryland, New York, and Wisconsin.

Introduction

Youth with disabilities face many well-documented challenges as they transition to adulthood. However, for youth who rely on public benefits through Supplemental Security Income (SSI) these challenges can be even more complex. Not only do these youth have low rates of high school completion, post-secondary attendance, and adult employment (Rangarajan et. al, 2009; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2005), they face unique challenges related to living in low-income households. Often these families find themselves consumed with fulfilling basic needs while moving from crisis to crisis. Typical 9 to 5 services provided in agency settings with strict rules

to meet eligibility for services can be a barrier for access to needed transition services for this population. For these reasons, it can be difficult to consistently engage youth recipients of SSI and their families in much-needed transition services. Despite these challenges, research demonstrates this population does benefit from services and supports that promote linkages between education, career exploration and work-based learning experiences (e.g., Honeycutt, et. al. 2018; Mamun 2017; and Wittenburg & Loprest, 2007).

Maryland PROMISE, a statewide project in Maryland, made concentrated efforts to engage youth recipients of SSI and their families in education and employment services designed to improve their long-term career outcomes. This *Brief* examines the strategies used by Maryland PROMISE to maximize engagement in project services. It also provide a descriptive account of the overall effectiveness of these strategies on increasing service engagement and provide implications to consider in the delivery of transition services to this hard-to-reach population.

Background

Maryland PROMISE was a community-based intervention focused on delivering assertive case management and employment services to increase the likelihood that youth who receive SSI, and their families, will experience better employment outcomes, increased earnings, and decreased public support. The five-year federally funded project involved a rigorous evaluation through a randomized assignment of youth and their families to either a treatment group, which received the intervention, or to a control group which received those services ordinarily available. Just over 2000 youth were enrolled in Maryland PROMISE with 997 randomized into the treatment condition and eligible to receive the Maryland PROMISE core program services: (a) assertive case management; (b) career and work-based learning experiences; and (c) benefits counseling and financial literacy services.

Maryland PROMISE categorized youth level of engagement in program services into three types : (1) engaged - youth continuously engaged in PROMISE program services; (2) disengaged – youth who had not had any contact (e.g., phone, text, email, face-to-face) with PROMISE staff for 60 days or more; and (3) reengaged – youth who returned to PROMISE program services after being disengaged. PROMISE youth level of engagement was recorded and tracked in the project’s Management Information System, (MIS). Two years into the five year project period, data showed that 386 (39%) of the 997 youth enrolled in PROMISE services fell into the category of disengaged. This finding signaled the need to re-structure the approach to engage youth in project services.

Intervention

To address this attrition rate in program services, Maryland PROMISE created a new position, called Specialized Case Manager (SCM), to focus exclusively on locating and reengaging youth identified as disengaged in program services. Five SCMs were hired, one for each of the service regions in the state. The types of strategies used by SCMs to reengage youth in program services were recorded in the project’s MIS each time SCMs contacted the youth and family. These strategies included letters, emails, text messages, telephone calls, and in-person contacts and were tracked from the date the SCMs were hired, in the summer 2016, through the end of project services, September, 2018.

Method

To assess the effectiveness of the strategies used to engage youth in program services, we extracted data from the project’s MIS. We analyzed the data for frequency of strategies used and subsequent re-engagement of participants in project services. We also conducted semi-structured interviews with SCMs to elicit their perspectives on engagement strategies. The interviews used open-ended questions (e.g., What was your primary role as a SCM?; What personal traits or behaviors do you feel helped you engage youth?) with prompts to encourage explanation on all answers. Each interview was one hour in length and audio-recorded.

Results

The SCMs made more than seven thousand (7,103) contacts, ranging from low-intensity efforts (letters, emails, phone calls, text

messages) to high-intensity (in-person contacts) to reengage youth and families in PROMISE services. As highlighted in Table 1, phone calls (36%) were the most commonly

used engagement method followed by in-person contacts (27%), text messages (22%), mailed letters (10%), and emails (5%).

Table 1: *Engagement Strategies*

| Strategy | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Letter | 712 | 10% |
| Email | 351 | 5% |
| Text Message | 1529 | 22% |
| Phone call | 2577 | 36% |
| Personal contact | 1934 | 27% |
| Total | 7103 | 100% |

Source: PROMISE MIS

The follow-up interviews with SCMs revealed three common attributes: persistence, flexibility, and trustworthiness. Each SCM shared they needed to be persistent. They reported that on average it took three to four contacts over a couple of months to engage youth. This information is consistent with the number of service contact tracking data presented in Table 1. Additionally the SCMs made engagement into program services convenient for the youth and families by meeting with them in their homes or public places in their neighborhood. Also, SCMs reported flexing their time so they could meet during evening and weekend hours when it was more convenient for the youth and family. The interviews found that the SCMs used an individualized approach with each youth in order to build trust. SCMs built trust with youth by involving them in developing their service plan, and by following up on actions outlined in that plan.

Findings

Maryland PROMISE final engagement rate of youth in program services was 80% (793 of the 997 youth enrolled in enhanced services), a marked improvement over the 61% engagement rate prior to the project implementing targeted strategies to engage youth in services. This also is a considerably higher rate of engagement compared to those reported for many field-based randomized controlled trials (e.g., Gupta et al., 2005; Ingoldsby, 2010). Maryland PROMISE demonstrated that youth traditionally defined as hard-to-reach in fact could be engaged in services designed to improve their education and employment outcomes.

Implications

While Maryland PROMISE had resources available to allocate to targeted engagement activities, we learned that it

also required thoughtful planning, perseverance, flexibility, and frequent outreach, especially face-to-face interactions, to connect with youth. More personalized approaches allowed Maryland PROMSIE staff to gain trust with youth and keep them engaged. Below we offer strategies to consider when engaging youth in transition services.

Proactively plan for engagement and track progress. Development of a process or protocol for how to contact and engage youth in services helps maintain focus for outreach efforts. Maryland PROMISE developed a protocol outlining the frequency of contact with youth and how to contact them. For example, the expectation was to contact youth bi-weekly. Typically, staff would first call or send a text message and then follow up with a home visit. In addition to having a plan for engagement, it is important to track contact attempts, both the “when” and the “how.” A tracking system can help plan outreach and adjustments to maximize outcomes.

Focus on youth and family motivation and goals. Trust is established when youth and families drive the planning process. By listening actively to the youth’s motivation, needs, interests, goals, and barriers to participation, staff found that youth could be more readily engaged in program services.

Make engagement convenient for the youth. The Maryland PROMISE project had success when meeting youth in their homes during evening and weekend hours. Other places to meet youth include the school, libraries, or coffee shops. It was important for staff to have the flexibility to meet youth and their

families when and where it is most convenient for them. This also means that it is necessary for staff to have the tools to work in the community, such as cellphones with a mobile hotspot to allow for internet connection, laptops, and scanners.

Maintain contact and follow-through. Families will engage when they are ready or have a specific need. Frequent and consistent contact will be necessary. Many youth and families have numerous service professionals coming in and out of their lives, and as result, they can be hesitant and mistrustful. By focusing on the immediate needs of the youth and family and following up on the actions promised, staff can build trust and increase engagement.

Conclusion

Young people with disabilities, particularly those living in poverty, face unique challenges which impact their ability to consistently and effectively engage in needed transition services and supports. They often live in households struggling to meet basic needs, lack transportation, and in some cases may have had few positive experiences in accessing services. Policies and practices such as office hours being limited to traditional 9-5 Monday through Friday, complex applications procedures, and closing cases without efforts to proactively engage are a few examples of the systemic barriers that exist and negatively impact service engagement for this population. These factors, among others, can work against attempts to form relationships, build trust and engage youth with disabilities and their families in services and supports to improve their educational, employment and financial outcomes. The Maryland PROMISE approach to

engagement suggests that an intensive focus on positive, proactive engagement strategies can forestall dis-engagement, facilitate re-engagement, and increase the proportion of youth who are continuously engaged with program services. Providing

consistent, flexible and personalized approaches to working with youth can overcome some of the challenges for transition age youth with disabilities and ensure engagement in critical services.

References

- Gupta, A., Calfas, K. J., Marshall, S. J., Robinson, T. N., Rock, C. L., Huang, J. S., ... Patrick, K. (2015). Clinical trial management of participant recruitment, enrollment, engagement, and retention in the SMART study using a Marketing and Information Technology (MARKIT) model. *Contemporary Clinical Trials*, 42, 185–195. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cct.2015.04.002>
- Honeycutt, T., Wittenburg, D. Luecking, R. Crane, K. & Mann D. R. (September 2018). The Transition to Employment: Better Data Needed to Identify Best Practices for Youth SSI Recipients. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research
- Ingoldsby, E. M. (2010). Review of interventions to improve family engagement and retention in parent and child mental health programs. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 19(5), 629–645. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-009-9350-2>
- Mamun, A. A., Carter, E. W., Fraker, T. M., & Timmins, L. L. (2018). Impact of Early Work Experiences on Subsequent Paid Employment for Young Adults With Disabilities. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*, 41(4), 212–222.
- Rangarajan, A., Fraker, T., Honeycutt, T., Mamun, A., Martinez, J., O'Day, B., & Wittenburg, D. (2009). *The Social Security Administration's Youth Transition Demonstration Projects: Evaluation Design Report*. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research.
- Wagner, M., Newman, L., Cameto, R., Garza, N., & Levine, P. (2005). *After High School: A First Look at the Postschool Experiences of Youth with Disabilities. A Report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)* Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.
- Wittenburg, D.C., and Loprest, P.J. (2007). Early transition experiences of transition-age child SSI recipients: New evidence from the National Survey of Children and Families. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 18 (3), 176-187.