

Defining the Nature of Families’ Goals during Participation in Maryland PROMISE

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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.

It has been long acknowledged that families play a critical role in youths’ transition from secondary school to adult activities, including employment, for youth with and without disabilities (e.g., Wandry & Pleet, 2017; and Wehman et al. 2014). Transition planning should include outreach and communication efforts to engage and create collaborative relationships with family members. However, those families who are engaged in their youth’s transition process are not the ones who need to be reached the most. There are additional stresses for families whose child receives supplemental security income (SSI). These families face significant challenges compared to their peers, including higher dropout rates, chronic

unemployment, and lack of connection to supportive education, vocational and social service programs (Hemmeter et al., 2009; Wittenburg 2011). Further, youth SSI recipients and their families often receive benefits and services from multiple state and federal systems. The “siloes” nature of these systems, where each has different eligibility criteria, varying points of entry, and disparate regulations regarding retention, creates a chaotic and frequently disruptive support pattern. Frustration often leads these families to abandon efforts to access necessary transition services.

The Promoting the Readiness of Minors in Supplemental Security Income (PROMISE), funded by the U.S. Department of Education in 2013 to Maryland’s Department of Disabilities, was intended to mitigate the barriers faced by SSI youth recipients and their families in accessing necessary services and supports to facilitate their transition to positive post-school outcomes. The five-year research effort implemented and tested a collaborative, integrated community based intervention designed to increase the likelihood that youth who receive SSI in Maryland, and their families, will experience better employment outcomes, increased earnings, and decreased public income support. The key features of the Maryland PROMISE intervention included assertive case management, work experiences, benefits counseling, financial literacy services, and information to families. The Maryland PROMISE intervention was organized through a team of professionals including a case manager, family employment specialist, and benefits specialist who worked cooperatively and intensively with youth and families to deliver the PROMISE intervention.

To implement the intervention in adherence with the proposed project model, the PROMISE leadership team identified six required program services. These services served as essential fidelity indicators to ensure the intervention was implemented as intended and consistently no matter the individual characteristics of the participants or where they lived in the state. Moreover, the PROMISE intervention was family-centric, meaning family members of participating youth were offered these same six program services related to education, employment, benefits management, and financial education. The reasoning behind this approach was if family members' self-efficacy and expectations for a better future could be improved, it would influence their youth's outcomes.

Key among the six program services was the development of a Family Plan, which was coupled with ongoing community-based case management. The Family Plan was designed to assess, coordinate, and monitor services and supports for participating youth and their family members. These plans captured the individual goals and guided supports and linkages to services to help meet the immediate and long-term needs of youth and their families while providing the opportunity to educate parents and guardians on how to effectively support their youth's education and employment goals. In addition to the development of a Family Plan, the other core interventions for Maryland PROMISE included: 1) the development of a Positive Personal Profile which served as an inventory of the participant's work preferences, work skills, and interests; 2) a Job Development Plan which guided the job search process; 3) one or more unpaid work experiences; 4) a minimum of one paid work experience; and 5) benefits counseling/financial education to help the youth and family understand work incentives and income management.

This Evaluation Brief examines the goals captured on the Family Plans for youth and their families participating in Maryland PROMISE. Specifically, this brief clarifies and describes the goal categories included on the Family Plans and assesses whether the goals aligned with the primary PROMISE objectives and the six program services to determine project fidelity.

Background

During the initial intake interview, PROMISE staff asked a series of questions to learn more about the needs and goals of youth and their families. This discussion resulted in the development of specific action steps to connect youth and their families to services and supports that would help them achieve their goals. The information was captured in the Family Plan, which was housed in the PROMISE management information system (MIS), and reviewed by the PROMISE staff's supervisor monthly or more frequently if necessary. Of the 997 youth participating in Maryland PROMISE, 94% of the participating youth had a completed Family Plan (Luecking, et al., 2019).

Method

A modified consensual qualitative research (CQR) approach (Hill, 2012) was used to identify common themes (categories) emerging from the goals included on the Family Plans. Of the 997 youth receiving PROMISE services, 100 were chosen at random for this analysis, and 94 of these youth had at least one Family Plan. Thus, emergent categories were analyzed as the percentage of cases in which they occur out of a total of 94. Table 2 shows the frequencies for the categories and subcategories. For each category, we provide example goals. Ellipses (...) are shown when

data were deleted for efficiency and clarity in presenting the results. To ensure confidentiality of the PROMISE participants, identifying quotes use labels Case 1 through Case 100 and omit mentions of the youth's name.

Description of Family Goals

PROMISE's objectives were to improve the post-secondary transition outcomes of youth with disabilities who receive SSI, with an emphasis on outcomes that were related to employment and education. For the most part, the goals defined in the Family Plans mirrored the stated PROMISE objectives (see Table 1). However, it is important to note that some goals went beyond the primary focus of PROMISE and involved topics such as behavioral management, housing, and community involvement. The variety of identified goals suggests that the needs of participating youth SSI recipients and their families were diverse and some participants pursued additional goals beyond the scope of the PROMISE objectives. Goal categories and the prevalence of each are presented below.

Educational Goals: Maryland PROMISE youth participants and their families reported educational goals in 68% of cases. These educational goals frequently related to either improving their academic supports/performance (44.7% of all cases) or successfully enrolling in and/or completing secondary school (44.7% of all cases). These goals also focused on providing extracurricular educational supports. For example, Case 23 included the goal, "[PROMISE Case Manager] and [PROMISE youth] will research programs available in the community and at her high school that will develop and strengthen her math skills." Additionally, several goals pertained to the PROMISE youth advocating for their own educational supports. For instance, Case 70 included the goal, "[PROMISE Youth] will ask for help during class, as needed, at least once a month."

Career Development Goals: Goals related to career development were present in 83% of all cases. The most common type of goals in the PROMISE Family Plans were goals related to work experience and paid employment (73.4% of cases). These goals typically related to obtaining work experiences for the youth. Case 39 stated, "[PROMISE youth] will work with her [Employment Specialist] to fill out applications to try and get a job." Many of these goals also included employment for PROMISE youth participants' family members. For instance, in Case 24 the goal was, "[Employment Specialist] will continue to help mom seek full-time employment." Further, in five of these cases, the goals related to entrepreneurship, suggesting that some of the work experiences sought in Maryland PROMISE extended beyond typical corporate work placements. Some less common career development goals related to work readiness (23.4% of all cases), career assessment/discovery (27.7% of all cases), and post-secondary counseling, exploration, and completion (36.2% of all cases). Additionally, there were some goals, which were career related, but too vague to categorize (9.6% of all cases).

Behavioral Management: Goals related to behavioral management were present in 19.1% of the 94 cases. These goals often pertained to self-regulation, communication skills, and non-school related self-advocacy. Some representative examples include Case 92's goal, "to learn to control anger to stay alive" and Case 74's goal, "[Youth] will work on respectfully communicating with

mom and others.” The presence of these goals suggest that issues related to behavioral self-regulation present notable challenges in the Maryland PROMISE youth population.

Benefits Management/Counseling: Benefits management/counseling goals were present in 12.8% of the 94 cases. These goals commonly related to the ongoing provision of information and counseling on SSA work incentives, eligibility requirements of various programs, and earnings rules. A representative goal in this category is Case 41’s “[Case Manager] will facilitate communication as needed with [Benefits Counselor] who is helping with re-application/appeal for SSI benefits for [Youth] and her brother.”

Financial Goals: Financial education and stability goals were present in 21.3% of cases. These goals were diverse as some related to getting financial counseling (e.g. Case 56’s “Make a referral for Financial Counseling”), attending financial literacy classes (e.g. Case 49’s “To attend financial literacy classes”), and budgeting/saving money (e.g. Case 30’s “[Youth]’s mom wants her to work on budgeting and managing her money”).

Housing: Housing goals were present in 10.6% of cases. Despite the poverty endured by the participants of PROMISE, these goals often related to purchasing a home such as in Case 93’s “[Youth’s Mother] would like to purchase a home within the next year.” Other goals were either vague or pertained to exploring housing options, such as Case 43’s “[Case Manager] will support family in utilizing resources to help with... housing needs” and Case 51’s “Client will review available apartment listing websites.”

Connecting Activities: Connecting activities are a broad category of goals for services/objectives that are not explicit outcomes to Maryland PROMISE’s mission, but were nevertheless important supports to help youth achieve their goals. Several types of such goals emerged from the data. Notably, goals related to transportation or obtaining a driver’s license emerged in 28.7% of cases and goals related to obtaining mental health services emerged in 12.8% of cases. Some of these goals were clear directives for the case manager to connect the Maryland PROMISE participant to a resource. For example, in Case 84, the goal was, “Staff will assist [Youth]’s mother in finding a therapist for [Youth] to see regularly.” However, in other cases, the goals appear to be intended to be participant directed. For example, in Case 9, the goals were to, “Take driver’s school... Take drivers test...Get practice hours.” Less common connecting activities were physical health related (7.4% of cases) and other (4.3% of cases; e.g. legal).

Family Dynamics: Goals related to building family relationships and healthy dynamics appeared in 19.1% of cases. Typical family goals related to improving relationships, communication between family members, and spending more time together. For example, in Case 32 the goal was to, “[Have the] family ... engage in family activities and work on communication.”

Independent Living Skills: Goals related to independent living skills were present in 6.4% of cases. These goals related to basic self-sufficiency skills (e.g. personal hygiene, money counting, and safety). One example was Case 33’s goal, “[Case Manager] and youth will discuss and research

different ways to stay safe during day to day activities. For example, looking both ways when crossing the street.”

Engagement in Project Services: Goals related to connection and cooperation with Maryland PROMISE services emerged in 25.5% of cases. This suggests that engaging the family in the Maryland PROMISE intervention itself constituted a challenge for a significant portion of participants (Crane, et al. 2019). A typical example of this type of goal would be as in Case 87’s, “[Case Manager] will continue to make all efforts to connect with family, with letters and phone calls and unscheduled home visits.” Less common engagement goals related to building relationships with Maryland PROMISE staff and learning more about the PROMISE intervention.

Social Connection/Community Involvement: Another goal category that emerged from the Family Plans was goals related to social connection and community involvement (present in 16% of cases). These goals involved engaging the youth in their community outside of a vocational or academic context. An example of a typical goal in this domain is Case 57’s goal of, “[Youth] would like to become involved in a group community activity with peers her age,” and Case 36’s goal of, “[Youth] will try to determine which summer activity they would like to participate and will enroll in activity for at least 1 day each week.”

Other/Undefined: The final category of goals for this analysis were goals that were either too unique to fit into one of the other categories (present in 28.7% of cases), aspirational statements (present in 9.6% of cases), or too vague to categorize (present in 24.5% of cases). A representative example of a defined goal, but one that could not be categorized was Case 43’s goal, “‘To live’ ... taking photographs,” while a representative example of an aspirational statement was Case 85’s statement of, “I want my children to be successful and get a good education.” The most common goal that was too vague to categorize were template statements such as, “Case management service.” Given that PROMISE goals help provide accountability for case managers in the fidelity of their service delivery, it is important to encourage providers to document sufficiently detailed goals.

Discussion

Planning for the transition from school to adulthood needs to begin early for youth recipients of SSI. Starting early is not only necessary to address youths’ education and employment needs, but also to develop social skills and positive behaviors, manage benefits, build financial independence, and foster skills for independent living. Goals related to these needs are reflected in the Family Plans of youth and their families who participated in Maryland PROMISE. This analysis revealed that most of the goals aligned with both the overall objectives of Maryland PROMISE as well as the six program services. Sixty-eight percent of the Family Plans reviewed in this analysis included goals related to improved education outcomes, while 83% of the Family Plans had goals focused on career development. Another objective of PROMISE was to decrease dependency on public benefits and improve financial independence. When combining the goal categories of Benefits Management/Counseling and Financial Management, accounting for youth who had both goal categories, a total of 32 (34.1%) of youth and their families had goals related to this Maryland PROMISE program service.

Analyzing the goals in the Family Plans also revealed themes around social skills, positive behaviors, connections to other resources and services to improve physical and mental health, as well as goals around transportation and housing. Although these goals are not explicitly Maryland PROMISE objectives or services, they are important activities that complement a youth's transition services and enable necessary supports for pursuing educational and employment goals. Maryland PROMISE allowed youth and their families to explore a broad array of services and supports to help meet their specific needs and ultimately achieve successful education, employment, and economic outcomes.

Conclusion

The transition from school to adult life can be a rocky road for youth receiving SSI and their families as they navigate the path to the adult world. They often lack enough information about or access to the full range of service options available. To address these complex needs, Maryland PROMISE implemented a coordinated, integrated, and culturally responsive approach to working with youth and their family. Using a family-centric case management approach and a Family Plan, Maryland PROMISE staff were able to empower youth and their families to identify their goals, guide the services to youth and families and connect them to community resources. This analysis revealed that most goals outlined in the Family Plans related to education, work and career-related services and supports, which were the central goals of PROMISE. However, this review also demonstrates that there is a significant need, currently not available pre or post PROMISE, to provide other ancillary services and supports to ensure youth SSI recipients and their families are able to pursue education and work preparation activities that improve their employment and economic circumstances.

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Table 1: Definitions

Category/Subcategories

Educational Goals - Educational Supports/Performance

Definition: Goals focused on educational performance including tutoring, school-based programming, and other education related services. It also includes goals related to youth communicating their educational support needs.

Educational Goals – Secondary School/GED Completion

Definition: Goals focused on completing secondary education including diploma, certificate, or General Education Diploma (GED).

Career Development Goals – Work Readiness

Definition: Formal training, workshop, or informal methods to teach work-related behaviors including communication in the workplace, hygiene, dress, and attitude. Also includes preparation for job interviews and support for completing work related paperwork (e.g., resumes, job applications, etc.).

Career Development Goals – Career Discovery and/or Assessments

Definition: Activities to explore career interests (such as arts, culinary, etc.) and informal career assessments or interest inventories designed to identify strengths, needs, interests, preferences and other relevant information for the purpose defining work goal(s) and plan.

Career Development Goals – Work Experience or Employment

Definition: Work experiences included a range of experiences in community-based workplaces such as work sampling, volunteer work, service learning, entrepreneurship, and on-going paid employment.

Career Development Goals – Post-Secondary Counseling, Exploration, and Completion

Definition: Information and guidance on a variety of post-secondary education and training opportunities. Services may include dual enrollment, college fairs, campus tours, support in completing postsecondary applications and financial forms, course enrollment. Also includes support for individuals already enrolled in post-secondary education.

Career Development Goals – Undefined Career Development Goal

Definition: A goal that is marked as being career related, but too vague to further categorize.

Behavioral Management

Definition: Supports and services to support modifying and maintaining positive behaviors including self-regulation and communication skills.

Benefits Management/Counseling

Definition: Support, information, and counseling on Supplemental Security Income (SSI) including work incentives, eligibility requirements of various programs, earnings rules and related paperwork.

Financial Management – Financial Education and Stability

Definition: Counseling, coaching, and instruction in financial topics designed to help families to identify their financial goals and become more financially self-sufficient (e.g., budgeting, saving, paying bills, etc.)

Housing

Definition: Supports and services to meet desired housing needs.

Connecting Activities – Transportation/Driving

Definition: Supports and services to meet desired transportation needs. Services may include completing a driver's education course, travel training, or other options.

Connecting Activities – Mental Health

Definition: Supports and services related to meeting desired mental health needs.

Table 1: Definitions (continued)

Category/Subcategories
<i>Connecting Activities – Physical Health</i> Definition: Supports and services related to meeting desired physical health needs.
<i>Connecting Activities – Other</i> Definition: Other community resources and services to address desired needs (e.g., recreation, respite, legal representation, etc.).
<i>Family Dynamics</i> Definition: Services and supports to improve family functioning and relationships, including supports for developing parenting skills.
<i>Independent Living Skills</i> Definition: Support and instruction on basic life skills to live a fully functional, adult-lifestyle.
<i>Engagement in PROMISE Services</i> Definition: Services and supports to engage in program services, which may include gaining additional information on available services, building rapport with program staff, or cooperating in the delivery of services.
<i>Social Connection/Community Involvement</i> Definition: Activities, supports, and services for social connection including integrating into desired community.
<i>Other/Undefined – Specific Unique Goal</i> Definition: A goal that is clear and specific, but does not fit into any of the generated categories (e.g. “Youth’s mother will learn more about youth’s disability.”).
<i>Other/Undefined-Aspirational Statements</i> Definition: A general statement of a positive outcome that has no clear steps for attainment (e.g. “Youth’s mom just wants her kid to be successful.”).
<i>Other/Undefined – Undefined</i> Definition: A goal that is too vague to categorize (e.g. “Case Management.”).

Table 2: Frequencies

Category/Subcategories <i>n=94 family plans</i>	
<i>Educational Goals</i>	64 (68%)
Educational Supports/Performance	42 (44.7%)
Secondary School/GED Completion	42 (44.7%)
Undefined Educational Goal	4 (4.3%)
<i>Career Development Goals</i>	78 (83%)
Work Readiness	22 (23.4%)
Career Assessment/Discovery	26 (27.7%)
Work Experience/Employment	69 (73.4%)
Post-Secondary Counseling, Exploration, and Completion	34 (36.2%)
Undefined Career Development Goal	9 (9.6%)
<i>Behavioral Management</i>	18 (19.1%)
<i>Benefits Management/Counseling</i>	12 (12.8%)
<i>Financial Management</i>	20 (21.3%)
<i>Housing</i>	10 (10.6%)
<i>Connecting Activities</i>	
Transportation/Driving	27 (28.7%)
Mental Health	12 (12.8%)
Physical Health	7 (7.4%)
Other	4 (4.3%)
<i>Family Dynamics</i>	18 (19.1%)
<i>Independent Living Skills</i>	6 (6.4%)
<i>Engagement in PROMISE Services</i>	24 (25.5%)
<i>Social Connection/Community Involvement</i>	15 (16.0%)
<i>Other/Undefined</i>	
Specified Unique Goals	27 (28.7%)
Aspirational Statements	9 (9.6%)
Undefined Goals	23 (24.5%)